

Breach

Deep in the woods, the wind rustled in the needles of the pine trees above the five as they crouched; the perfect eerie lonely noise, Rowan thought to himself. The moon was half full and covered with thin clouds, shedding enough light for them to see by - but hopefully not enough that the enemy could see their dark forms in the night. There weren't any crickets around making noise in the early spring air, another thing Rowan was grateful for. If crickets were disturbed, they'd stop making noise, potentially alerting the enemy holed up in the nearby cabin.

The situation was right, thank god. Hopefully this would be easy with minimal losses on their part. Rowan glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, also hunkered down in the bushes, were three other men and a woman. Rowan gave them a quick nod and they pulled the rifles on their backs down in front of them, checking their ammo and switching off the safety on their rifles. When they were finished, the soldiers carried the rifles at the ready and glanced up at him. Rowan turned back to the structure they were about to breach.

A two story behemoth set deep in the woods, a dirt road the only road leading to the log cabin. On the front face, a wide covered porch broke up the log wall with sturdy steps leading up to the thick oak door. There were windows set into the log wall, a sloped roof above them, and a chimney with a thin plume of smoke in the second story roof, but of the windows only one was lit on the upper story. Curtains were drawn, but they were merely a formality this deep into the woods.

Behind the curtains, Rowan could see two men. One leaned towards the window, peering outside presumably, then turned towards the other man. As the two of them walked away from the window, a woman leaned into view. Her arms were drawn behind her and from the way she hopped into sight, Rowan guessed her legs were bound. One of the men must have yelled at her for she quickly disappeared again.

Rowan grit his teeth. His unit had comprised of five soldiers not so long ago, until the terrorists had ambushed them and dragged Sofia away. It had happened so fast. Rowan turned his mind to the present swiftly and turned his back on the cabin. "Alright," he said, "You know the plan, hit hard and fast. Leave no time for retaliation. Sebastian, Connor, take the front. Clear the front yard and the bottom floor, then hold the stairs." Two of the men nodded at him. Sebastian leaned into Connor, who rested his head on Sebastian's for a second.

"Jack and Julia, take the back. Clear the woods a good distance away from the house, your judgment on distance. Clear the shed and then head in through the back. Help clear the bottom floor and then hold the stairs." Jack and Julia gave each other a quiet high-five that lapsed into their secret little handshake.

Rowan let them finish and then said, "Once we're all at the stairs, we'll push up and sweep the upper floor. There are six terrorists and from our intel, they'll probably keep two with Sofia. That leaves four in unknown locations." His soldiers nodded at him, Jack checking his rifle one last time and Sebastian making sure his long hair was tied up in its bun.

His soldiers hot on his heels, Rowan rose and raced swiftly through the shadows, his own rifle raised. As they worked their way around the cabin, just on the edge of the tree line, Connor and Sebastian split off. Connor bolted across the open lawn to flatten himself against the lattice of the porch, working towards the porch steps. Sebastian kept to the tree line, moving away from the unit as he cleared the woods.

Rowan halted for a moment, Jack and Julia racing past him. He watched carefully for another ambush now, waiting for enemies to pounce the moment his unit split. When no attack came, he turned and followed Jack and Julia. Jack had already reached the small shed. He kicked in the door while Julia disappeared into the woods beyond.

Taking the steps in twos, Rowan ran up to the back door. His foot had scarcely reached the back decking when a loud BANG rent the night, rippling out from the front yard. Rowan flung himself to the decking, crawling into the doorframe and out of sight of the windows above. In the

woods, Julia's shadowy form dropped behind a ridge in the land and Jack stepped into the shed and closed the door.

Tense seconds passed, Rowan's heartbeat pounding in his ears. More shots broke the stillness from the front, each resounding CRACK twisting in his heart. Finally, silence fell. Rowan glanced over at the shed and the woods. Julia still hadn't gotten up but Jack had opened the door slightly. Rowan met his eyes and nodded. Jack gave a nod in return and turned back to the inside of the shed. Rising, Rowan vaulted over the porch railing and tore around the side of the cabin, keeping low to the ground and up against the siding.

As he rounded first the corner and then came upon the lattice, Rowan sunk still lower and slowed to a crawl, wary of being shot. Still nothing but silence, silence and a strange grunting from inside the house that quickly stopped. Slowly, Rowan lifted his head above the lattice to see an empty porch.

Relieved, he rounded the corner of the porch to spot a man, sprawled on the front path. From the corner of the porch and in the dark, he couldn't see the man's features and panic shot up in his belly. Throwing aside caution, Rowan dashed to the man's side. The man's gun was a ways off, and the man was dead, still and lifeless. It wasn't Connor or Sebastian and Rowan sighed gratefully.

What had happened here? A terrorist down, five left somewhere in the building, and no sign of his men. Rowan headed back to the porch and up onto the porch decking. Now he saw the wide open front door, just beyond the large living room to the right and the doorway to the kitchen on the left. Rowan leaned up against the left wall, peering into the living room. Nothing moved, but there was a rifle cast off to the side.

That wasn't good. No soldier would lose his gun in a firefight, terrorist or otherwise, so a discarded rifle meant- Rowan didn't finish that thought. He couldn't fail another friend. Lost in his thoughts, Rowan was startled by a bullet flying past his sight and vanishing into the grass beyond the porch. It had come from the kitchen, thus not for him, but then for who?

He ducked carefully around the front door and up against the left wall, uncaring that he was visible from the stairs and the upper floor. Rowan could see someone crouching behind the kitchen cabinets and watched as they rose, firing a return rapport back into the dining room. Another person yelled in pain as the bullet found its target. As the man ducked back down, Rowan spotted his bun.

The man glanced up and nodded at him as he waited for the return shot. When there wasn't one, Sebastian peered back over the countertops. A swift CRACK rippled through the air and Sebastian staggered back, dropping his gun as he sank against the wall of the kitchen. Another thud came from the dining room. Rowan crouched down and dashed into the room by Sebastian's side, dropping his rifle.

Sebastian let go of his neck and grabbed Rowan's shoulder. "They have him!" he urged, breaking off into a low cough, "You've got to-" Sebastian's voice trailed off into quiet, shuddering gasps. Rowan shook his head and grabbed Sebastian's neck himself. Sebastian pushed him away.

"Tell him 'I love you' for me," he whispered and Rowan nodded.

"I'll save him," Rowan promised, "I'll win this for us."

Sebastian gave him a weak smile before closing his eyes. Rowan rose and moved away from his friend, snarling quietly, "I'll make 'em pay." He stalked past the long dining table with plenty of chairs and turned towards the doorway into the side hallway. Here, an enemy soldier had collapsed. She was holding her side and on seeing him walking up to her, reached out for her pistol.

Rowan didn't give her the chance, firing first. She slumped over again and he stepped into the doorway, peering back towards the living room. When he wasn't shot at immediately, he made his way down the hallway and back into the main corridor, hooking a swift left into the back passageway and past the stairs. As he stalked down the hall towards the back door, he

gave the few rooms he passed a swift check, enough to guarantee his safe passage for now. He knew he had to get back to Jack and Julia and then clear the first floor with their help.

As he paced down the hall, a door off to his right moved slightly. Immediately, he paced over and kicked it open, rifle aimed at the individual there. Just as his finger moved on the trigger, the figure snapped, "Stop! It's me, Rowan! Jesus, it's me!" Julia! Rowan lifted his rifle and stepped into the room with her, closing the door most of the way.

As he watched the hallway through the gap, he said roughly, "Sorry. Jack?"

Julia was silent for a moment and Rowan's heart sank. "Damn jerks either planned the ambush or waited for an ideal moment," Julia swore, "The moment you left, they jumped us. Probably figured they couldn't take three of us but knew you'd go to help Sebastian and Connor when they were getting shot at. One of them came up behind me and while the two of us were trying to use the land for cover in a bloody firefight, I heard gunfire in the shed. Well, the terrorist I was against was a shitty sharpshooter. As soon as I dropped him, I raced for the shed. I was too late. The man that came out wasn't Jack. No clue where the bastard hid, but he shot Jack in the spine. I repaid the favor."

Rowan closed his eyes and sighed. Quietly, he rued himself for jinxing it. No mission was ever *that* easy. He could feel her eyes on him and knew the question she was about to ask. "Sebastian's down. Still alive but-" Rowan stopped, took a deep breath, and forged on, "He said Connor got captured. I saw his rifle in the living room. There's three of them left, Julia."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "It's been the two of us before," she said firmly.

He looked up at her. "Like last time then," he nodded.

She gave a devilish grin that quickly faded. "We'll make them pay, we'll get Sofia and Connor back, and then-" Julia stopped and blinked, then shrugged. Her knuckles were white as she gripped her rifle. Rowan put a hand on her arm, slowing her down for just a moment. She took a deep breath and then nodded at him. "I'm with you."

“Good,” Rowan replied, turning his attention back to the hallway. “They’ve got to all be upstairs. It’ll be a trap.”

“Good thing we know it’s a trap then,” Julia snarled quietly. She leaned forwards but Rowan decisively took the lead. Neither of them bothered checking the side rooms. As they reached the stairs, Rowan stepped aside. Julia wasn’t that accurate for all her earlier claims, but she was insanely quick on the draw. Given how lacking in cover the stairs were, her speed might just save them if they were ambushed now.

But they weren’t. No shots came and they reached the top of the stairs without seeing even a shifting shadow. There was a room off to the right and a hallway to the left. Down the left hallway, the nearer door was ajar, light spilling into the hallway. Still, Rowan glanced at the right door and Julia ducked inside. It’d do their friends no good to be ambushed now. Rowan kneeled at the top of the stairs, rifle trained on the open door and bit his lip. Yes, it had been him and Julia before, but not in so tight a situation. Never with such little certainty of success.

He focused on the bumps and divots in his rifle, grounding himself. Slowly, his heartbeat quieted and voices from the lit room reached him.

Connor was speaking, “-you’ll win this stand-off? Hah! You don’t know my unit then!”

“Oh, you poor thing. You haven’t heard then,” a voice sneered, “Jack is dead. Shot right in the back. Looked so surprised too, musn’t have been a good soldier. And as for your sweetheart, well-”

Connor growled and sounds of a small scuffle erupted from the room, ending with a swift thud. A woman chuckled and the sneering man purred, “Such a brave little soldier, and so loyal too! But I’m growing tired of your spunk. I hope your field officer fights back, just so I can lay you beside your sweetheart.”

Rowan heard Julia step up behind him. Her face was set, teeth clenched. She’d heard it too, but she didn’t wait for Rowan. Pushing forwards, she darted swiftly across the open doorway, leaning up against the far wall. Rowan followed, keeping on his side of the door. He

tapped his gun softly, once, twice, three times. On three, he rose and kicked in the door. Julia immediately fired twice. A woman collapsed and the other, now favoring her shoulder, pointed her weapon at Julia, only for Julia to fire twice more.

Only the sneering man was left standing. Behind him, a window on the outer wall with bunk beds against the left side. On the lower bunk, Sofia was beginning to sit up right. Connor was kneeling on the ground before the sneering man, his hands interlaced on the back of his head. A small cut on his cheek was bleeding slightly. He glanced at Julia and gave her a small nod. The sneering man warned, "I wouldn't."

"Watch me!" Julia retorted sharply.

Both guns fired simultaneously.

The sneering man staggered back against the desk and grabbed his chest. Connor bobbed forwards as the bullet bounced off his head, but he began to cheer, "YES!"

Julia crowed, "In your face!" as she thrust her rifle into the air with both hands. Then she turned to Connor, fussing over his cut.

He batted her away with a chuckle, "I just tripped on the steps."

From downstairs, Sebastian called out, "It's over!"

Jack's voice, distant and faint from the shed, queried, "Did we win?"

Sebastian replied, "Yeah!"

As the people outside began to head indoors, Julia started to dance victoriously, but sneering man, Mark, cut her off. He was still rubbing his chest from where Julia's NERF bullet had struck him. "You haven't won yet," he laughed, "We won the last game, you won this game. One last round to see who has to buy cookies."