

Compliments

The questions all hit at once. How did these crates get here? What's in them, and whose are they? And where is this exactly? We're eight-hundred feet up a steep rock-face in the middle of nowhere, just another couple hundred feet from the summit. Nothing should be out here for miles.

I hang back at the mouth of the tunnel and watch Erik venture deeper in, using his phone to light his way through the darkness. It was his idea to come out here in the first place, which now feels like a mistake. I'd told him that it seemed like a bad idea at the outset, but then here I am. I guess I've only got myself to blame.

Bright lights click on in a flash, pouring in from all directions. A man's voice warbles its way down the tunnel, but it takes me a moment to process what he's saying. "Put your hands up!"

Erik throws his hands overhead and smashes his knuckles against the low ceiling. He cries out in pain and the sound echoes, amplifies, and rattles inside my skull. I can feel it in my teeth.

I panic and drop to my knees, then scramble down the cliffside, awkwardly gripping the rock as I anchor my position just out of their sight. I dangle there and listen as the mouth of the tunnel projects the man's voice. "Hands behind your head," it commands.

I can't see Erik, but I can picture what he must look like: tearful, bloodied, sunburnt, anxious. His tough guy bullshit aside, he's prone to breaking down when he doesn't have control of a situation.

"Turn around," the tunnel demands. "Move."

"Forward. Faster."

"Stop."

I'm hugging the cliff, my fingers mere inches from the heel of Erik's shoe, and I look up, wincing against the midday sun. I can sort of make out his face. He's sobbing.

"Are you alone?" the man asks him, his voice now clear.

Erik clearly considers lying because he pauses for a beat before answering. "No," he finally says, his hesitation palpable. The man steps to

the edge of the tunnel and looks down at me, and we make direct eye-contact. Then he shoves Erik over the side.

Erik's anguished scream reverberates its one discordant note; piercing at first, but then gradually losing its edge, its intensity, its volume, until it's just an echo left ringing between my ears. I shake my head to try and escape it, but it's useless.

The barrel of a rifle jabs twice at my forehead. "Get up," I'm told, but I'm too detached to process the order. Then the rifle strikes again, this time breaking skin. The fresh wound throbs as blood begins to trickle down between my eyes, alongside my nose, lips, and chin. I can taste it in the corner of my mouth.

"Now."

My muscles fight me all the way, but I climb to my feet. My knees shake and knock together.

"Turn around," he says, so I do, facing out over the valley far below, Erik's scream still fresh in my mind. My wrists are zip-tied together behind my back. I don't resist.

"Are you a spy?" he asks.

"What?" I stammer, my voice weaker than I'd like it to be, "No."

"What about your buddy?"

"No. We're nobodies. Just climbers."

There's a pause, and I want to turn around and see what he's doing. I want to ask who he is, who he works for, why he murdered Erik, what's in the crates, and whether or not he's going to kill me; but I'm too scared to speak out of turn. I shut my eyes.

He begins to pat me down and pulls out my phone. "What's your passcode?" he asks. I tell him. I tell him my name, my address, my birthdate, my social security number. I give him passwords and answer any question asked, no matter how frivolous. I list pets and school mascots; my mother's maiden name; favorite foods, movies, and books; celebrity crushes. Eventually he says, "You've made some pretty impressive climbs."

"What?" I ask. I turn my head slowly and peek over my shoulder, and I glimpse his thumb swiping through my phone.

"Your pictures, bro. These are amazing. So you two were just out here climbing?"

I don't know what to make of his sudden shift of tone. Are we friends now? Do we share an interest so suddenly we're *bro's*?

“Yes,” I answer severely, keeping things professional. “We thought we were alone.”

He continues to poke around my phone for another minute in silence, then slaps a strip of masking tape on the screen and writes down the passcode. He tucks it into his vest pocket and tells me to turn around to face him.

“Okay,” he says, his tone businesslike again, “come with me.”

So, I do.

I follow him down the tunnel, walking between crates loaded onto pallets and deactivated industrial fans. He’s dressed in desert camouflage, a rifle slung at his side, and I can scarcely make out a voice relaying him orders through an earpiece. I notice cameras along the ceiling as the tunnel expands the deeper it runs.

“I’m really impressed with how you guys made it this far,” he says, as we approach a freight elevator. He opens the gate and escorts me onto the lift. “I’m a bit of a climber myself,” he continues, “not like extreme free-climbing or whatever—not like you guys—but bouldering mostly. I’m a member at a climbing gym back home, and I do some climbs in my downtime when I’m out here too. So, look, I get what you guys go through. Like I said, I’m really impressed.” He shuts the gate behind us and presses his fingers to his earpiece while listening to new orders.

There’s something about the friendliness of his tone that sets me at ease, and for a moment I forget all about his having murdered Erik just minutes ago. Maybe we *are* bros. Maybe he’s taking me to a helicopter and he’ll ask that there be no hard feelings between us. Sorry about Erik, he’ll say, that was just a misunderstanding. My bad, he might admit, like bros sometimes do.

I study his outfit, looking for an insignia, or flag—anything to identify who he is and who he works for—but there’s nothing to go on. Finally, I just ask, “Who are you with?”

He sighs.

“Man. I really wish you hadn’t asked me that,” he says. He presses his finger to his earpiece. “Yes, sir,” he responds in a low voice, not intended for me, “Got it.” He adjusts the controls on the elevator and we begin our ascent. I want to ask him where he’s taking me, but I also don’t really want to find out; so I just keep my mouth shut, fearful of making my situation worse.

“Does anyone know that y’all are out here?” he asks.

“No,” I say.

“Are you wearing a GPS?”

“No.”

“What about your friend?”

“No.”

“And you’re sure?”

“I think so.”

“But you’re not sure.”

The elevator comes to a stop and I can hear chirping in the man’s ear. I can’t make out a word of it, but the tone doesn’t sound promising for me.

I look through the slats of the gate to the lift, and I can see that we’re atop the summit. I can’t check my watch to be sure, but I’m *pretty* sure that I’m actually here ahead of schedule. Too bad Erik wasn’t so lucky.

The man opens the gate and takes a step forward. “Okay, follow me,” he says, then leads me outside. There’s a hum of drones hovering overhead, their cameras trained on us as I walk toward the edge of the cliff, the sun bearing down in full force.

“You know,” he says, “any other day and we’d have turbines blowing out of that tunnel to keep anyone from nosing around, so it’s just some real shit luck that you guys happen to be out here today of all days.” His tone is pleasant again, friendly and familiar, like a bro having a heart-to-heart, but his words all jumble together and I can’t concentrate. “Let me tell you,” he goes on, “it’s been a hell of a day for us too, but you probably don’t care. See, we had this gas leak downstairs...”

But he’s right, I don’t care. He tells me something about how they needed to relocate crates full of explosives, and he complains about having worked a thirteen-hour shift already, as if I’m supposed to relate to his misery on some level, what with my own *shit luck* as it were. What an asshole. He’s going to kill me any second now, I’m sure of it, but first I have to listen to his bullshit? Fuck this guy. I should say something.

“Really, though, your climbing, your photography—it’s very impressive stuff,” he says, abruptly shifting gears again, and I’m caught off-guard and lose my nerve to speak. “It’s just that y’all’ve got this shit luck is all,” he adds, apologetic. “You wound up in the wrong place at the wrong time. And, if you really think about it, y’all having such shit luck like that and being out here where it’s just so unsafe already, you were bound to have an accident sooner or later. A loose rock or a slick grip. It’s really just your shit luck to blame, like you were destined to die out here.”

He pulls my phone out, unlocks it, and holds it up to my face for a fraudulent selfie. I wince at my reflection in the screen, staring at the bloodied gash across my forehead as the picture is snapped.

“What’s your buddy’s name?” he asks.

“What?” Again, caught off-guard.

“The other guy. What’s his name?”

“Erik,” I say, but why did I answer him? Fuck this guy.

“With a C?”

“No, K,” I say. Goddamnit. Am I helping him now? Goddamnit!

He rolls his eyes, judging the K-spelling as if he’s an ‘Eric’ and has a right to an opinion on the matter. I mean, maybe he is. I don’t know this guy’s name, but I also don’t fucking care. I hate this guy, and I need to tell him that before I die.

Oh, god, I’m going to die.

He types and pokes at my phone, and I figure that he must have sent the picture and a message off somewhere, but what’s it say? If my last words are out there for the world to see, then I should have a right to know what they are at least. Fuck this guy, tell me what it says!

I resolve to do it—I’m going to tell him to go fuck himself; go out with some fight.

But then, “Seriously, bro,” he says, “your climbing portfolio is sick. You should be really proud of that. That’s your legacy.” And he’s right, I *am* proud of what I accomplished in my life, and that pride distracts me from making my final bold declaration to his face; my sneering fuck you to death itself.

He tucks my phone back into my pocket, spins me around to stare into oblivion, and cuts the zip-tie from my wrists; and by the time I work up the defiance to finally tell him how I really feel, I find myself in a free-fall, toppling end-over-end, mimicking Erik’s scream.