

Storyboard-9

The basement was one of the reasons I bought the garage. It's larger than anything needs to be, with the utilities in the far corner, the oil change thing under the repair bay and, on this side, is my very own corner, with my rig. The goose bumps aren't because I'm looking at the amazing thing that it is, but the hardon might be, or it's at the memory of what me and Tristan have been up to.

This is its maiden voyage. It's been slow reconstructing it because, on top of not letting Tristan do the work, I had to wait for the new parts to arrive. There's nothing like moving and having to break down your state-of-the-art hacking computers. Yes, plural. Anyone who hacks with only one computer is a hack, to turn it into an even more state-of-the-art system.

I have three, plus one that's not connected to anything. I have more money invested in these than the garage cost me. And unlike ohhh, all the posers out there telling you how much their system, which they barely know how to turn on, cost, I make full use of mine's capability.

And, the way things have been going, I'm going to need all its capabilities to make headway in getting to the head of who is behind the Mexico stuff. They have been way too clever at this point.

But first, fuel.

I open the chassis of the fifth computer case, the one next to the main workstation, then stop and listen. No sound of Tristan working on a car, or in the kitchen. Definitely not on the stair; those metal things creak loud enough to wake the dead two states over. He was heading to his workshop and, by the lack of sound, that's where he is.

I turn the coffee machine hiding inside the case on. That's one of the reason I didn't let Tristan build this system. The other is that as competent as he is with just about everything he does. Electronics are not one of those. It's one of the reason why he has a contract of the mysterious Locksmith. Of course I know of them. There isn't one criminal in Phoenix who doesn't. Even those who can't afford him, or don't need his services, have heard stories.

Stories go that if you give them enough information about the lock you need to get into, no matter how sophisticated or advanced it is, they will build you something that can get through it. No one knows who they are, or where they are. They go through blinds that use blinds who use a few blinds themselves to get what they've made to you.

I drop in my seat and immediately stand. That thing's freezing. I have no idea how Tristan managed that little miracle, but the basement is just this side of my breath fogging as I exhale. When I sit again, it's more carefully so the fabric will warm. By the time the goosebumps are down, the coffee machine light turns green and I take the insulated mug from it and place an empty one in.

I understand Tristan's belief that he's helping me with his insistence I cut down on my coffee intake. I'm not an idiot, I know quite well that too much of the stuff is bad for people. It's why I no longer argue with him about only having one cup in the morning, one with dinner and one after that... when I don't have to work.

What I wish he'd get is that no matter what scientist say, everyone's different, and I am not overdoing the coffee intake. I know what I can take and I take it willingly.

I look down at my growing erection as I remember what I took from Tristan. Oh yeah, definitely took that willingly.

But I'm not hacking dry.

I sip the mug while the system boots up. It's not a fast process. My operating system puts safety over speed when it comes to making sure it's uncompromised. You have no idea how easy it is to have a virus waiting at your virtual door to slip in with that initial internet check every OS out there does. You know, the one that calls to that anti-virus company you pay too much money for to tell you that yes, you are fully protected.

If you knew the load of bullshit that was. Take it from someone who sifts through their database on a regular basis to make sure they aren't cluing in on what I'm doing. They know nothing about internet security.

When I exchange my empty mug for the now full one, my screen's blank with just a flashing cursor to indicate it's done. None of that fancy interface for me, thank you very much. I'm a minimalist.

I pull the pad of paper from the drawer, the pen, then I'm typing. I access the cloud drive I have hidden. From there, I get the randomized IP address of another drive. Today, it's within the NSA's server room, fifteen minutes, and I'm through their security. In that drive is an encrypted file. That takes another fifteen minutes to decode and finally I have the address of the drive where I keep the important stuff.

Every so often, I'm annoyed at the work I put myself through just to get to the files I need to take down the people I go up against. Then I remember how easily I get into those expertly hidden drive they are paranoid

anyone will fine and I appreciate that's one thing I don't take for granted.

I have so many places to start from in my search for whoever is behind the trafficking ring that I just grab the first one and start there. Some middleman whose only been dealing with other middlemen in this ever widening net that was supposed to catch me someone important, not a bunch of minnows.

The one good thing about all these minnows's systems I go through is that I've learned the language. Those posies one of them is talking about that might interest that horticulturist another one has on his list. That's code for a Caucasian woman. This one's petals are a nice amber, so she's blond, picked at the prime of its bloom. In her early twenties. Seedling is their code for under the legal age, and I see that one in there way too often.

If I think too much about it, I'm going to scorch every one of the computers I see it in, but that's going to clue in those in charge and I'm going to look the one, which seems infinite at this point, possible way to get to the top of this.

So I swallow my bile and keep working.

But fuck! How is it there's so many perverts? I thought that when me and Tristan took down Liaison, we'd shattered the supply line. Made it so none of those wealthy perverts could easily get their fix. And right there, that was one of those middle-assholes looking for someone who had a client that would be interested in the seedling he was in working to acquire.

That's just insane. How are they—

Wait, what?

I erase my tracks and reenter that computer to make sure that one; I interpreted that correctly, and that two; this isn't a trap.

Blah, blah, blah, seedling a few years from bloom. More blahs, some details about where they'll get her from. Fuck, can't they get to the interesting part faster? What's with all this talk of nothing important when what I need is—

Yes! Acquiring the paperwork to legitimize the transplanting of the seedling to more fertile soil. And thank you so very fucking more for finally giving me something I can use. The email address of the person who'll put get him the papers.

Email address gets me an IP, that's obfuscated as fuck, but I excel at obfuscation. They do take me across the world. Nigeria again. We like that place way too much. But that's what they get with all their internet scams. I bounce around Australia a surprising number of time. Someone's doesn't like the Down Under, it seems. Then I'm at an international IP in the Philippines and that gets me to something in Delaware, but with also an address in Phoenix. One I've seen before. One of those hundred of law firms sharing an office in a building downtown.

They might not actually be downtown, but at least, since we're online, they're right next doors to me, and in I go, carefully. Now is not the time to get ahead of myself and trip an alarm.

Things look too good for my liking. As far as I can tell, this is a legitimate law firm. You know, if you ignore that all the cases on file are three years old, and have been reused half a dozen times over the last six months, with only the dates being updated. Of course, they idiots forgot to alter that creation date. The one that should match when the paperwork claims to have been created. If they'd done that, all I'd have to go by to know this was fake was the number of identical files within these folders.

"Well, hello there." That code doesn't belong in here. Who was sloppy enough to leave that behind? Where did it go?

Oh, you have go to be kidding me. Do you guys have someone in here cleaning up? Come on, where are you? You can't hide from me. What are you—there you are.

Okay, so you're just browsing. Stay busy so I can look at that code. I've seen something like this before. Good syntax, no errors, you are not a lucky amateur, in fact you—

Oh shit.

I'm about to a hard shut down when it registers they only touched my firewall then left. Not a 'I'm scare,' leaving. A 'just notice me and I'm gone,' leaving.

Fuck! I'm going to have to—

<incoming call>

I have my phone forwarding them to my rig. You try keeping your phone on you when you're naked. I'm not running upstairs and trying to find it.

I'm also unsure if I should answer.

I put the headset on and enter the command.

Silence.

"You're the one who called me, Asyr." The only reason I'm not tracing where the call comes from is out

of respect for Tristan.

“The wall is beautiful.” The voice is digitized. On their side, not mine. The audio is clean here.

“Err, thanks. If you don’t mind me asking, since you started with a compliment, where did you learn your syntax? Never came across it before.”

“You’re fishing for information.”

“And you’re paranoid.”

“You threatened to trace me and destroy my system.”

“And Tristan made it clear I wasn’t to do that.” Okay, so this isn’t what I thought it was going to be. I go back to hacking. I have no intention of letting them distract me from finding what I need. “So, what are you looking for in there?” or you know, letting them find it first.

“And have you erase it? I don’t think so.”

There’s something. “Okay, then I’ll leave you to it.” A court case with too many of the codes that match the middle-assholes’ language. I’m out of there and into the Phoenix’s judicial system. From there I can—

“Was that what you were looking for?” The file’s gone. As is any evidence it was ever there. No, not quite.

“You really think you’re clever, don’t you?”

And this is why I have more than one system. I open a new window as I trace the file. VPN into my other system and get back into the law firm where Asyr is still looking. For what? Well, let’s see what parameters they have going and... I believe the term is ‘yoink’.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did you have a use for this?” I encrypt it and file it in the cloud. That should keep them busy while I find where they hid my— there you are. And the winner is—

“Oh?” they say, and even through the digitalization, I hear their smirk. “Can you not read invisible ink?”

“Very funny. How are you liking your spaghettied file?”

“I wasn’t hungry.”

There’s the trail. And this time I got the right file. I triple check to ensure Asyr hasn’t changed anything, and the information leads me, no surprise there, into the child care database where—

“What are you doing in here?” I demand. “This is starting to feel like harassment.”

“You are the one getting in my way.”

“I’m working, here.”

“I am too.”

Oh, you have got to be kidding me. “Did Tristan hire you to find who is behind the trafficking ring?” I swear, if he went to them, when he knows damned well I am looking into this, I am going to... well, okay, not that, but we are going to have a serious talk about trust and confidence.

“He did not.”

“So it’s just a coincidence you’re in here with me?”

“It is not.”

“You are tracking me.” They did make their way to my firewall without me noticing. So they are good. That they didn’t try to tear it down says... something. Not sure what.

“You are stealing one of my client.”

“Stealing implies I’m charging him for the work.”

“You are not?”

I laugh. “What did you think me being married to Tristan meant? Would you charge whoever you’re in a relationship with for the work you do?”

That they don’t answer is telling, and I almost call them out on it, but who am I to judge how someone else lives their lives? Including charging the person they love for service rendered?

“We have an agreement,” they finally say.

So, did you mean to reveal you had someone in your life?

“Do you—” we say at the same time as a file appears within the database.

Not gets inserted, appears. I have a copy and know this is what I was looking for. I grin.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

“Race you!” and I’m off after that other hacker who has just made my night.