

“Hold on!” Alex yells, and I grab the back of Emil’s jacket before the sharp turn sends him tumbling out of the window. The RV’s tips to the right slightly as the sound of machine gun comes, and I pull myself to the left window, lean out and aim the Desert Eagle at the Miata’s engine. One shot and the hood goes up from the vaporized gas in the engine block exploding.

“Any left behind us?” Alex asks as the RV drops back to four wheels on the ground.

“No,” Emil replies, “I shot the tires out of the last one before you tried to send me flying out the window.”

I lean out to confirm the Miata isn’t turning to follow. The driver is out, firing in our direction, but we’re already too far. In the distance behind it, the Forester is on its side and the Sierra is further behind, only a dot in the distance. By the time the passenger deals with her injury and her dead driver, we’ll be far enough not to have to expect to encounter her again.

“Are either of you just getting fed up with these bounty hunters constantly showing up out of nowhere?” Alex demands as I secure the window shut. “This is what? The umptieth such ambush since we started our vacation?”

“How can you still think of this as a vacation?” Emil asks, securing his side’s window. “Every time we turn on one of these back roads, it’s like there’s another herd of them waiting.”

“I just think of them as mosquitoes,” he replies. “They’re always there to be a nuisance, so you bring repellent.”

“Let me guess, that’s what you’re calling the bullets.”

Alex looks over his shoulder and grins. “They are getting rid of them, aren’t they?”

“Eyes front,” I remind him.

“But seriously,” he says, looking ahead.

Emil snorts.

“What is up with all of them? I mean, I get that with the FBI and other law enforcement wanting us, there were going to be bounty hunters trying to get in on it, but this is excessive.”

He’s right. Which is why I ask Asyr to look into it. I take out my phone as I sit in the passenger seat. Alex is displeased as I put it to my ear, but resigned at letting them do the work until we are able to establish a secure base of operation where he can build a computer for his hacking.

“Hello Tristan,” their digitized voice answers, also sounding displeased. Getting them to take multiple calls from the same phone was a struggle only ended when Alex challenged Asyr to get through the encryption he wrote for them. They managed it, but it must have been enough. Because we have been using the same phone since.

“Do you have an update?” I ask, then put her on speaker.

“Hey Asyr,” Emil greets them. “What’s shaking?”

The sigh causes distortion. Then they proceed as if Emil hadn’t spoken. “I do, but it is only preliminary.” They have yet to voice their feelings about my son, but their reactions make it clear they don’t approve. “The chatter over the dark web indicates that there is a substantially large amount of money for both your heads. More than anything law enforcement would ever offer.”

“Someone else connected to Aleman’s organization?” Alex asks. “I didn’t think we left anyone in authority alive.”

“Not as far as I’ve been able to determine,” Asyr answers. “It also isn’t from his family.”

“They were just cover,” Alex states.

“Agreed. His wife had no knowledge of his criminal endeavors. She is currently mourning the senseless murder of a loving husband and father to her two children.”

“How about the children?” I ask. Well aware of what even children can be motivated to do.

“There isn’t any indication they knew more than their mother.”

“The boy’s nine,” Alex says with derision, “and his sister’s twelve. You really think one of them could have been involved?”

“I was hunting down Tristan by the time I was twelve,” Emil says.

“You were looking for your protector, Emil,” Alex replies. “Not exactly the same thing.”

“But a demonstration that age is only a mitigating factor, not a negating one,” I say. “Asyr, have you worked out how the bounty hunters are keeping on top of the bounty?” The handful of times I took bounty hunting work in my early days, before I had accumulated my own wealth, there was an office handling them and a number to call to find out about changes. The internet changes some of that, but there still needs to be a contact point.

“Maybe,” Asyr replies.

“That doesn’t sound like you,” Alex says, concern in his tone.

“I thought I had it three times, but the site was gone by the time I traced it back to the original IP. The next time I heard of it surfacing, it was with a different IP, and again, by the time I traced the origin, it was gone.”

“So leave a program to monitor the origin point,” Alex says.

“They weren’t the same.”

“Are you sure?”

Asyr doesn’t answer.

“Okay, that might be a problem,” he admits. “The third time?”

“Also gone, and the origin point was also different.”

“Any commonalities?”

“The active window isn’t larger than five minutes each time,” they answer.

“And?”

“Nothing else.”

“That can’t be right.”

“You’re welcome to confirm what I found for yourself...once you have a computer you trust with that kind of hacking.”

“What is the issue?” I ask.

When Asyr doesn’t answer, Alex sighs. “Okay, you know how every computer has an internet address, right?”

“Assigned by their providers,” Emil adds.

“Not always, but that won’t matter. Well, that address is linked to the account, and

that will get me information on the person behind the hack. Only this stupidest of amateur let that be anything close to who they are, but there are things that can't be changed. The provider knows where the IPs are located in a geographical area. It's not as true as it used to be, but just like your phone's area code, it's still common enough to be used as a reference point. Then there's which of the local office the IP originates from. Still following?" He looks at me, but Emil answers.

"Meaning that even if he uses multiple providers, they'd be in a close-by area."

"The local office, but close enough. If this board doesn't have even that, and as reluctant as I am to admit this, I trust that Asyr hasn't been fooled into thinking a bounce was the origin point."

"Thank you." The dryness comes through the distortion.

"That means the board is being set up in completely different locations each time."

"How difficult is it to arrange?"

"I'm not sure. Asyr, were you able to work out the how much bandwidth they used in that short time?"

"They were on a T1 line."

"Any indication of a giant file being sent out before they vanished?"

They sigh in annoyance.

"That's a no, I take it."

"I would have traced that," they say.

"Okay. So a board, bounty hunter or otherwise, is just data. Programs to manage the information it contains and work out what to do with it. How much someone is worth, who has the contract if it isn't open, what's needed to prove the contract had been completed."

"Wouldn't that be just bringing the person in?" Emil asks.

"If it's put out by the law, yes, but this isn't. Asyr, any indication if we need to be alive for the bounty to be claimed?"

"We don't," I state. "They wouldn't be firing with abandon if we needed to be alive. It's too easy to cause us to crash and end up killed in the process."

"Nothing I've come across contradicts Tristan," they say.

"So," Alex muses. "All you really need is a hard drive." He snorts. "Fuck, these days, a flash drive is probable enough, and not a big one at that. Unless that board deals with millions of contracts, I could fit that in my wallet."

"So all we have to do is find that drive and we can end this?" Emil asks hopefully.

"Basically," Alex replies. "But it's not going to be easy. Unless they're stupid enough to reuse the same locations, we have no way to trace the drive's movements."

"How smart does someone have to be to set something like this up?" I ask.

"The programming is easy. There's plenty of bulletin board programs out there that wouldn't need much work to do something like this. The really clever part is how they move it. I wouldn't have thought about it."

"We're looking for someone older," I state, putting together what would be needed for someone to be able to think of a solution that incorporates analogue and digital methods. "Probably male, due to the prevalence of men within the early computer environment. Intellectual, will most likely have held a position of leadership within the computer industry, but will have gotten his starting experience outside of it. Possibly

something relating to the transportation industry.”

“No, we aren’t,” Asyr says and Alex shakes his head.

“You’re probably right about that person being who thought of the system, but they won’t be who we’re looking for when it comes to finding the drive. I doubt the courier will know what they have. You’re skilled enough at picking a pocket that you could slip it into someone heading in the direction you need the drive to go. Then you call someone along the way to get it from them and they pass it along to another and so on.”

“What we need to find,” Asyr says, “is the physical location where the site will be hosted for the duration.”

“How likely is it you can find it?” I ask.

“The likelihood goes up the longer I am allowed to work on it,” they respond.

Meaning that I need to be able to afford them for the duration. The wealth I have taken from all the men I killed is vast, but not without limit.

“I’ll cover it if it comes to that,” Alex says. “Asyr, keep working the problem. If Tristan runs out before we have the location, I’ll create a bunch of accounts with however much money’s needed.” He chuckles. “It’s not like Dear Old Dad’s accountants will ever notice a dozen more among the thousands of thousands they are juggling.”

“Don’t they have to balance the books at the end of the day?” Emil asks.

“End of the quarter,” Alex corrects, “but while Dear Old Dad will never break the fucking law, he will make sure every loophole in it are being exploited, that means there is a lot of creative accounting being used in his businesses.” He grins, “and I can be very creative.”

Emil sighs. “What it means is that this ‘vacation’ isn’t going to end anytime soon, is it?”

“Nope,” Alex says joyfully. “We are going to be driving the back roads of America for a long time to come.”

The RV shudders. The engine stutters, coughs, and then dies, smoke coming out the side of the hood.

“I believe you just jinxed us, pop,” Emil says as Alex uses the momentum to get us to the shoulder.