

Storyboard-20

He hates me. Why else does he have me drive this thing? Sure, it's got a decent motor, and it's responsive, but it's a fucking Altima. It's... It's a normal car. It's a boring car. It's what I'd drive going to work.

My hunk, Tristan, I really need to get in the habit of thinking of him as Tristan since we're working together now. And Tristan's a good name for him, strong, solid. Memorable. Way better than Ben. He was never a good Ben. White men who are more bean poles than anything make for good Bens, not my hunk.

My hunk has been staring at the phone he picked up from a storage locker at the bus station, after he had me get this boring car.

"You're going to have to turn it on before it rings if you're waiting to receive a call." He doesn't so much startle as come to life. Like he was in sleep mode and my voice turn him on. Hmm, turning my hunk on with my voice, would that be more or less exciting than doing it with my fists? I guess that so long as he brings the violence, who cares how I get it started?

He turns it on and taps the only contact there.

"Did you hack the cameras?" he asked without preamble. "Yes, good. No, I don't need that. Not yet."

I strain to hear the other side of the conversation, but for as quiet as the boring car is, there's still too much road noise to make out more than an indistinct digitized buzz.

"I need everything you can find on the people behind Liaison ASAP. Yes, I'll pay your rates, you know that." He gives a string of numbers and it takes me a few seconds to untangle them. A bank account. Not prefix I recognize, so something out of the country. "Just in case the other runs out before you're done." A pause while I figure the other person makes sure it's legit. "I'll check the site for updates." He disconnects, takes out the battery, SIM card, breaks the card, pockets the battery, and breaks the phone.

"I could have used that," I say, offended he didn't even ask me.

"It can be traced."

"Not after I'm through with its OS." He looks at me. "Who was that?" I ask.

"The hacker I employ."

He has a hacker? Who, how, when? Wait a minute, are they who went through the databases I did to find where the kids were held? Not exactly good if they left traces of their search. Going to have to remove them. Okay, maybe that's too harsh. It's not like he's cheating on me. At least look into them. Make sure they have my hunk's best interest in mind.

"So, you said you could get weapons?" He gives me an address in Tolleson, then closes his eyes.

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"A gun shop?" I ask as I follow Tristan inside the well-lit building in a strip mall at the edge of Tolleson and Cashion. "I mean, yeah, sure, we'll be able to find guns here, but I thought we were going to want something exotic."

“Hello,” a perky girl who can’t be out of her teens greets my hunk as she saunters close. “Welcome to Bernat’s Gun. How can I help you?”

“Get Jofre,” Tristan answers, not slowing as he heads for the counter. He isn’t even looking at the rack of gun cleaning supplies.

“I’m sorry,” the girl hurries to keep up with him, losing most of the air-head attitude she’d been working with, “but Mister Bernat doesn’t deal with customers. If you tell me what you need, I’ll be happy to service you, I mean offer you my services. I mean—”

“Stop while you’re ahead,” I cut her off, and she finally notices me. Yes, the hunk is with someone already, so stop trying to charm him.

Tristan reaches the counter, and the two men who had been behind it are nowhere to be seen. She hurries to step around, muttering under her breath the entire time.

“Sir, how can I—” she notices Tristan isn’t looking at her, but the camera, no, he’s glaring at it. She tries again to get his attention, and I look at the selection on display. My hunk has basically lost his arsenal. I can’t replace most of it, since I never got to peek into his gun locker, but I do know he likes the Desert Eagle. Maybe he’d appreciate a gift?

“I guess it was too much to hope you’d die.” The man standing in the door is older and worn. His dark skin is lined and his long black hair is streaked with gray. There’s definite native ancestry in his features, but distant enough, I can’t identify it.

“I’m sorry sir, I—”

“I’ll deal with him.”

I clear my throat.

“Who’s that?”

Tristan looks at me, and for a moment, there’s no recognition in his eyes. Just how hard is the withdrawal hitting him? “He’s helping me.”

“Fine. Come on.”

I follow Tristan around the counter, then through the door. Locked boxes and cases of ammo along with bags containing hunting jackets, safety vests, and I expect everything that’s also on display line the wall of the hall, leaving only enough space for me and Jofre to walk without problems. Tristan’s shoulder nearly snags on boxes and bags but moves just enough at the last moment to avoid them.

We enter a storage room with yet more boxes and crates and racks of hunting clothing. Jofre pushes a rack aside, then opens a panel in the wall, revealing a keypad with an optic reader.

The code’s easy to get, but the retinal print? That’s trickier. Is it stored online, or somewhere in the case itself? Neither is secure, but how to approach them will vary, and—I let out a whistle as Jofre flicks on lights. The room is half the size of the showroom and utterly filled with, well, firearms doesn’t do them justice.

“Is that an anti-tank shoulder launcher?” I ask.

“At-4, military version,” the man answers.

“What are you doing with that?” I demand as I look the room over.

“Same thing anyone selling weapons does. Wait for the right offer.”

“How have you not been raided?” I see sniper rifles, pristine military machine guns.

Something I've only seen in movies at this point, with the cartridge slotting in from the top.

"Who is that kid again?"

"Do I look like a kid?" I demand.

"You act like one, with all the questions. You taking in strays now?" he asks my hunk.

"No."

Jofre lets out an annoyed sigh. "I'm guessing if you're here, not packing, you need untraceable Desert Eagle."

"And explosives," Tristan says and I miss what he says after that as I hear music.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a knife display and I fight to keep from turning my head, taking in their beauty as the music entices me to do. So many of them, the symphony we could create with them. There would be so much—

"And the JDJ."

The music is derailed with my fingers inches from a K-bar. "What do you want that for?" I demand, stepping away.

"Killing someone."

"I'm with the kid. That's not something you use to kill someone. You obliterate them with it."

"Do you still have it?" Tristan asks.

"Of course I do. You think there's any kind of demand for something like that?"

"Why do you have one of the largest rifles in existence, if there isn't a market for it?" I ask.

"That ain't none of your business, kid." He looks at the paper in his hand. "It's going to take me a bit to pull all of that out of storage."

"I'll wait."

"Outside." Jofre points to the door. "I'll take that out to you."

Tristan leaves and I hesitate. Who is this man? What's his connection to my hunk?

"You waiting for something?"

"What's your connection to Tristan?"

A raised eyebrow. "Do I look like the information bureau to you?" He crosses his arms over his chest. "The only thing you're doing is delaying him getting what he wants."

Fine, I'll just have to get my answers my preferred way.

I join Tristan as he is typing on the store's computer. The two clerks are well away from him, and the girl is attending to a couple in the archery section.

"I can find whatever you're looking for," I tell Tristan. "Computers are kind of my thing."

"I've got this." He's no longer typing. He's reading. I can't read enough to work out what it was before he clicks on the link and a blueprint appears. A building, large, multiple floors. A mansion of some sort. He nods and moves on to another page. Did he get everything in that quick look?

"What am I," Jofre demands, "an internet cafe?" he drops a case that could house the cannon from a tank and disappears in the back. Tristan keeps reading. He clears the screen,

then the cache, the cookies, the history, before resetting the computer.

At least someone knows how to wipe his search history.

Jofre drops a duffel next to the case.

“I need another case of bullets for the JDJ.”

“You do know there isn’t going to be anything left of your target to take a second shot at. And the recoil on this thing is going to dislocate your shoulder.”

“The case.”

Jofre disappears in the back, muttering something in Spanish, maybe. I should get up on the language; if only to know how I’m being insulted.

The case of bullets is wood, a foot long, half a foot wide.

“You’re crazy if you think you can fire twenty bullets out of that thing.”

Tristan puts the case in the duffel bag, then hands the man a piece of paper.

“What’s that?”

“Payment.”

“No. Not this time.” Jofre presses it against Tristan’s chest. “The deal was that I help you and you vanish.”

“This is a transaction, not the help I require.”

“Are you ever going to let me go?” the man accuses him, and I see Tristan’s lips tremble. Whatever he’s doing is affecting him. It’s got to be the drug.

“When I call in the favor, there will be any doubt about what I’m doing.”

I reach for the APX in the holster at my back as it looks like Jofre is about to strike Tristan, but he stops with his fist half raised, turns, and storms into the back, slamming the door shut and causing everyone in the store to look in our direction.

“Well, that was certainly discreet,” I comment. Tristan hand me a pad of lined paper before grabbing the cannon case and bag, then exiting.

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I look at the pencil drawing on the page, then up at the mansion in the distance, then back at the paper. Tristan drew it in the time it took me to do into the convenience store and refill my travel mug — well, mugs. I only grabbed seven to refill before the look Tristan gave me made me consider stopping there.

So he did that in fifteen minutes.

It was busy in there, okay? You’d think no one had ever seen someone resupply for the road.

Then it was an hour’s drive to the other side of the city, Paradise valley to be exact. And they say crime doesn’t pay. Well, the bill’s about to come due. I look at the places on the drawing marked with Xs, then the duffel in the back seat. It’s open, revealing the bricks of Semtex, since Tristan had to take the crate of bullets.

I’m sorry, but it’s made of wood. That’s a crate, not a box or a case. A small crate, but still a crate.

The JDJ is still in the trunk because this is only so I can look at the building. Not where Tristan will be set up to take it down.

With my help.

“You know,” I say, starting the car. “I don’t think anyone’s ever offered for me to blow up a building before.”