

“Do you have anything else?” Tristan’s way too calm about this. He’s driving way too casually for my liking. There are lives at stakes this time.

“Nothing I can confirm,” Asyr’s voice comes from the phone resting against the dash.

The call came in as I was getting ready for work and had me call in sick. Kat didn’t even argue. She told me to take care and hung up. I was expecting to leave a message, considering it was still an hour before she usually came in.

Asyr had intercepted a series of communications that they had decoded to be about the transportation of new trainees to be formed for their new employment. Meaning, people to be trained into pleasuring their future owners or whoever those people lent them to, that they were looking for that training or not. The destination was an address that had come up a time or two in my investigation. A residence in Builtmore I hadn’t looked too deep into because it had raised the least number of flags.

It looked like it was simply another property the traffickers held to hide their money with. They have so many of those across the greater Phoenix area we could spend years going through them. If what Asyr’s information implied was right, we might want to. Destroying a property just to wipe away its value isn’t particularly useful to what we’re trying to do. If we’re removing training center? That’s an entirely different thing.

“The number is between twelve and thirty,” they said. “Nothing in what I intercepted indicated the age range, but my confidence is high this group only includes women.”

“Or girls,” I add as I pull up the address on my phone and look at the property. “The younger they are, the easier they are to mold. Too old and you end up with someone like me.”

“You were rescued before they could break you completely,” Tristan points out.

The property sits on a relatively large lot with lots of trees. That would provide a lot of cover from nosy neighbors, not that those around them have fewer trees. I can make out a structure attached to the house, probably a garage. Large enough for five large SUVs.

I wonder if the pool is used by the trainers.

“Any information on how many guards we can expect?” Tristan asks, ever the strategist.

Asyr snorts. “Considering how you’ve been going through their people, I’m surprise they can find anyone willing to risk working for them. But they talked about being fully staffed, so... two dozen? More if they are worried you know about the location.”

“If they’ve kept tracks of what we’ve already hit,” I say, “they’re bound to have worked out what servers we’ve hit to get the information. They’d be idiots not to think we got everything in there.”

“Then you should double the numbers.”

“Unless they think that because we haven’t hit any similar properties yet, they believe we haven’t worked you their proper value,” Tristan points out

“Which I hadn’t,” I grumble.

“We know now,” Tristan says in a comforting tone. “After this one, you can reevaluate all other properties of this type.”

“How are we doing this?” I ask.

He grins. “We surprise them.”

“The driveway from the gate to the house is a third of the property. It’s going to give them ample time to notice us as we make our way there.”

His grin widens. “That’s why I’m going to use your method.”

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The pickup accelerates until we’re doing at least four times the limit. It can’t be more than fifteen miles an hour in a neighborhood like this. The property is at the next intersection, with the gate on Colter, not even ten feet away from it.

Tristan is not slowing us down as it approaches and he is no longer the only one grinning. I didn’t realize what he meant until now. He drifts into the intersection and gets lined up with the gate, and before the sound of crashing registers behind us, the gate flies over us. Then we’re speeding up again, heading for the front of the house, and the only thing that keeps up from driving nose first through the doors is that Tristan takes the steps leading up to it on the left wheel and it sends us careening sideways into it.

No idea if that was the plan or not, but we take out the doors, as well as the wall on each side and I’m shaken around more than a can of paint in a mixer. I’m glad he reminded me to buckle up.

When we aren’t shaking anymore, the detonation of his desert eagle confirms there were people in here. I’m out and firing, using the pickup for cover. I hit a few of them, stagger them, but they don’t fall, the way they do from Tristan’s shots. Maybe he has a point; higher caliber certainly goes through body armor better.

I change my aim and fire. Half a face vanishes.

But they’ve yet to find ways to armor head directly.

The large entry way clears and I shoot at back of heads. Dropping a few more. I run up the stairs. Women scream in fear. A door open, a man wearing only pants steps out, and I shoot him. I’m not bothering with wondering if any men here are innocent. The only thing that’ll get me to hesitate is if a woman steps out from one of these rooms.

Down the hall, a door open and I fire into it and the man stepping out until my magazine is empty. As I’m putting another on it, the man, as well as another, exit, shielding a third.

I’ve seen the maneuver often enough from Gramps’ crew protecting Dear Old Dad, that I recognize trained bodyguards in action. Which means that the man they are keeping me from shooting is important.

“Tristan! Valuable asset up here!”

I shoot, but they’re smart enough to hunch down so their heads are protected. As I run after them I see a very expensive salmon suit between the black ones, that’s gone before I can line a shot, silver hair, a glance of a hazel eye, and shoes that are worth more than the pickup Tristan totaled getting us inside.

A door opens and nearly hits me. The gun is around the door and I drop as it fires. I slide past it, shot the man wearing only his used to be white skivvies, then I’m on my feet. I swear that shooting him in the crotch was not the plan, just that my aim was off.

Not that I care. He deserved to lose that for what he had to be doing to the girl in that room.

I’m on my feet and on the chase as they enter a room. I shoot the bodyguard as he’s closing the door, and he falls back, but doesn’t let go of the handle, so it’s close by the time

I reach it.

And locked.

With a curse, I aim my gun at the lock, then think better of it.

“Tristan!” His gun has better chance of blowing that lock apart. A door opens, and a man steps out. His head explodes before I can fire, then Tristan steps around the body.

“Locked door.”

He holsters his gun and takes out picks.

“Are you seriously going to pick that lock? It would be faster to—” He pulled the door open. “—shoot it.”

The picks are back in his pocket and the gun in his hand and we’re inside a large, and very well appointed office. The only thing out of place is the open bookshelf against the wall and the metal door behind it, with a large electronic lock.

“Can you deal with it?” Tristan asks.

“I didn’t bring any tools for this.”

“Cover the door.” He holsters his gun again, and this time takes out a leather case with tools.

I take position by the desk and tap the keys on the keyboard. The monitor doesn’t turn on. Not that it matters, considering that someone important just trapped himself in their panic room. With them, we are going to get all the information we need to go directly for the head of this snake. They might think they’re safe in there. After all, panic rooms are built to be impossible to get in once they are locked.

But impossible has never dealt with Tristan before.

I shoot three men by the time he had the cover to the lock off. The next one takes longer to risk it. Then, it’s low voices; worried low voices.

Could it be? Have we finally reached the point where the thugs have enough brain cells to know when they’re in a hopeless situation and run?

They do run, but toward the door.

“I swear,” I grumble as I fire at the first, then the second. The third gets a shot out, but missed because those behind him jostle him. Then there is a hole in his head that is all the vogue among thugs since me and Tristan had been dealing with them.

Then, someone smartens up and runs.

I’d chase, but Tristan lets out a grunt of effort as he pulled the massive door open.

Told you impossible had nothing on my man.

The doorway’s vacated, so I change magazine and get ready to stop the panic room, take down the remaining bodyguard and finally start making actual headway toward ending this.

I’m in the instant the gap is large enough, and scan the space. It’s larger than I expected. Dear Old Dad’s barely larger than a closet. This is a bedroom, with a kitchenet stocked with expensive shelf stable meals. The toilet only had a curtain for privacy. No shower.

And no persons either.

I’m still scanning the room, trying to understand how this is possible, as Tristan steps around me. There was no window in the office, not other doors. He goes to the wooden wardrobe against the wall, grabs it and rips it off, exposing a passage.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me. This place is a decoy?” I’m in right after him. The passage is narrow, barely wide enough for him. Women screaming and sniffing can be heard through the wall. Then we’re going down stairs, along another passage, and I make out lights around his form.

We exit in the garage as a car pulls out, and I fire at it, screaming. I keep doing it well past the magazine being empty and the chamber locking.

“We need to go,” Tristan says, putting his phone away.

I round on him. “Are you fucking kidding me? Do you have any idea who that was?”

“That isn’t important right now, Alex.”

“That wasn’t a customer! They wouldn’t use a place like this for that. That was someone high enough in the organization he can waltz in here and sample the good! That’s the kind of person who knows who’s in charge! We could have ended this, but he fucking got away!”

He grabs me firmly enough I can feel the pain through my anger. “Alex, we have work to do here, now, to make sure the girls leave, that we have all the information you can get from the computer, and that there remains no evidence we were here.”

“You think I fucking care!” I want to shove him away, but he’s way stronger than I am. “If we’d been faster—”

“We will get him and the head of this organization, Alex. But you need to calm down and think.”

“I am calm,” I tell him through gritted teeth.

“I can tell,” he replied flatly.

“Fine,” I snap and make to break from his grip.

And fail.

“Alex—”

“I’m trying, okay? But we were this close!” I can’t shove my hand in his face, with my fingers almost touching, to make my point.

“And we will—”

“Get them, I heard you. I don’t want to get them later. I want to have gotten that one now!”

“We have work to do so we can be certain that will happen. Can you focus on that? We will deal with everything else afterward, but we need to make sure that when we leave, this place is clean.”

I glare at him as I force my breathing to slow. When I can think better, I realize he’s right. I’m not happy about it, and I still want to go running after that car, but I can see the futility in it.

“I’m going to need your tools to pull the hard drive from the computer. There might be a server in the house and I’m going to pull those too. Once this is over, I’m building a kit I can take with us that’s going to survive something like this so I can just plug it in and let it do the work while I let off my anger on people like them.”

He smiles at me. “Then let’s get to work now, so we can have that later.” He kisses my forehead. “We will have a later,” he whispers. “I promise.”

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