

Storyboard-9

“Someone tell me you got them!” a voice yells. “I wanna go home!”

“Working on it!” someone answers.

“Work faster!”

“Why don’t you come here and tell me to—”

“Focus people!” Kat’s voices comes over the sound of keystrokes and complaining.

This doesn’t happen often. The raised voices—unless it’s Kat—the all of us working on the same project, trying to catch one group of hackers, well, the client thinks it’s a group. We’ve decided it’s one person. Really good, and with the best equipment money can buy.

Really, if I wasn’t sitting here, doing my damndest to stop this hacker, I’d think I’m the one behind the attack. Well, that and the fact I’d never bother going after a country wide corporation. What do I want with all that money?

This only happened once before, five months after I started. We lost that client because we let the hacker slip through our fingers. We weren’t this well-oiled machine that understands that success sometimes means putting our needs after does of other people.

Of course, it had to happen tonight, of all nights. The one night I know Tristan isn’t going to be home since he texted me to inform me he had to go into work and might be at it all night.

I love him, but this was my chance at some me time, and now, this I don’t stop this bastard soon enough. The fucking stores are going to be closed and there will go my chance to—

“There you are, you son of a bitch.” Maybe the hacker’s a girl, but daughter of a bitch doesn’t have the same ring to it. You know what, just fucking sue me. I’m kind of busy here. Unlike the rest, I’m not at this for the good of the company. Kat will survive losing this client. I’m here because of the glare she gave me when I stood at one minute to five, ready to leave.

It’s now fifteen past seven.

I am not, I repeat, not going to be here when seven-thirty hits. If you make me work past that, asshole, I am going to make an exception to my ‘I only go after perverts’ rule and I will track you down and bring knives to whatever basement you are hiding in. And no, your mother isn’t going to talk me down.

“57 Harkbury Avenue, Houston, Texas!” I yell. “The IP’s on the chat. Someone keep them busy, I’m hacking the local police to send them—”

“The client will deal with them,” Kat says.

Okay, this is interesting. I wish I had more time, because usually she’s all about doing things legally. “They have twelve minutes to get there,” I reply. “Because I’m not staying here staying past seven thirty.”

“What happened to the Bart who was always the last to leave?” someone demands.

“It’s Alex!” I yell.

“He got married,” Kat says, and I am amazed at the dedication to work of my fellow

office workers because not one of them stops typing at that revelation.

“How does he score a wife and I’m still single?” another voice asks.

“The fact you never realized he’s gay probably means you never bother getting to know anyone well enough for them to want to go further with you.”

“No guy that good looking’s gay!”

“And your bigotry explains the rest.”

The connection to the computer I’m in dies.

“Boss, tell us that was the client and not the hacker bolting!” someone demands.

When she doesn’t answer, I stand, becoming one with my standing coworkers, looking at our boss with her phone to her ear.

As soon as she smiles, I’m down and going through the shutting down process.

“They have her,” she says and cheers go up. They are ready to party after that victory.

“See you tomorrow,” I tell Kat as I head for the exit. One stop after this, and I am going home.

* * * * *

The Maxima Tristan took out of storage as part of his role as security expert I married isn’t in the garage. That’s a good sign.

I love him. I really do. That’s why I’m not putting this being a trick beyond him. His obsession with getting me to quit coffee isn’t healthy. It’s like he expects me to manage without oxygen.

Maybe I should have him quit that pemmican and see how he likes it.

I check the home gym. The door to his workroom is closed. A walk around the house only reveals Emil in his bedroom, working on schoolwork. We’ve agreed his workroom door remains open when he’s in there. He can get lost in his project and I’d rather not put to the test the door security measures he’s added trying to get him to come down for dinner.

Confident he isn’t home, I go back to my car and take the Coyote Coffee bag out of trunk. I should have put it in another bag, just in case, but that would have meant another stop somewhere and there have been enough delays.

I head to the cellar and open the computer parts cabinet. Unfortunately, I can’t set this up in the open. It means no direct connection to the waterline, but that’s a small price to pay for nirvana.

Well, non-sex related nirvana.

The real problem is the beans. I love their aroma, but that’s something Tristan can smell. If he smells them, he’ll find them and there goes them and the machine. There’s no way he’ll believe I just bought the beans.

And to punish me, he’ll probably stop the training for a while. Which means he won’t hurt me, and then fuck me and...

Maybe I should just give in and give up coffee?

Holy fuck, what has that man done to me?

Other than the stuff I still have bruises from, I mean.

I can’t seriously be considering that, right?

No, of course not.

I grind the beans, put them in the machine, add the water and pace while it works.

Why does it have to be so fucking slow?

My old machine didn't take this long.

Of course, that's all gone now. Second things Tristan did when we arrived. First one was deposit me in bed. Well, maybe he didn't do that right after, all I know is that all the coffee machines in the house, except for the one in the kitchen, were gone when I was able to move about, and that one was under lock and key. His lock and his key.

This will be my little secret.

Which I'll only be able to enjoy when he isn't home.

The first sip is worth the burned tongue.

All is good in the world again.

Well, my world.

I set it to fill another mug and turn on my rig.

I nearly choke on the next swallow as color explodes on the screen. I'm well enough trained that even as I'm coughing, I'm typing, trying to determine where the attack is from. Only for the colors to resolve themselves into a bright image of trees and mountains, people in armor fighting monsters.

I know what I'm looking at before the name of the game appears.

That doesn't comfort me. First, I confirm my system's still secure, then I look at the history and trace the path the installer took. It's so easy for a hacker to slip in malicious code into those that'll give them access. Then I see where Emil downloaded the installer from.

At least he remembered the lessons I gave him. The site's as secure as those can be. Their security could be increased, and if Emil's going to be using them for other games, it might be worth me doing it for them, for my own peace of mind.

I'll have to check that with him, as well as remind him not to leave the game up when he's done. Giving me a heart attack isn't how a son treats his father.

Well...

If I could have given Dear Old Dad one, I would have.

But Emil doesn't have that kind of relationship with me.

Maybe I need to build him his own computer, instead of letting him use mine is I hardly ever can anymore.

Alright, this crisis averted, I need to deal with the other one.

I get a refill.

Now that's dealt with, time to settle down for some research.

Mexico's isn't dead.

That means someone took over after we ended Fernan. Who isn't that important at his junction. Fernan's death, in conjunction with the destruction of Liaison and the waystation, should hamper their operations long enough for me to put the virtual nail in their very real coffins.

I just have to track down their bank accounts, easy enough to do, and trace the transaction until I have all those spread around the world and make them mine...

That's interesting.

Why is the money flowing into Mexico? They were the center of the operation.

Yes, money has to flow that way too, since the profits from places like Liaison belong to them. But that isn't what I'm seeing. These are lifeline transaction.

I think over the meaning as I wait for my mug to fill.

An emergency account in case Mexico took a hard enough hit?

Possible, but nothing I've seen of how Fernan works led me to think that was a thing. He was secured in his position. He basically owned the law as far as what it could do to him. Even had his hand deep enough in the pocket of certain government representative to jerk them off.

No, Fernan never considered he could fall.

Someone else in his organization? Some second in command with better planning skills? Less ego?

Only I've looked through the list of employees Fernan kept. Not one of them showed that kind of skills, or self-awareness. He'd consider them too much of a threat to his leadership. Oh, Fernan surrounded himself with competent people well enough, but only that. Competent.

I sit down and stare at the screen while I enjoy the nectar of the gods.

What I'm seeing isn't good.

But it might explain something I hadn't made fit yet.

Those PIs who followed us back. My initial thought had been they worked for Mexico. We had already caused enough of a ruckus Fernan would want to find out who we were, but I couldn't trace any transaction that connected them to Mexico.

What if Fernan wasn't who had hired them?

What if there was another player involved in this whole Liaison mess?

And, if what I'm looking at is correct, what if Fernan hadn't been the one ultimately in charge? What if, whoever they were, were keeping Mexico going through the troubles we caused there?

That would mean—

A scream in the house.

It's so unexpected I sit there, staring at the screen. I note it's past two in the morning. I'm about to put it out of my mind when another one sounds, and it registers as Emil's voice.

I'm out of my chair and up the stairs.

When I make it to his bedroom, he's tossing, fighting the covers. I hesitate.

Tristan makes it look so easy. A few words, holding him. When he's here, being there, comforting Emil seems simple. I'm on my own now. I have to be the one to smooth his fears away.

I am so not equipped for this.

But if I was going to let them stop me, I'd never have become a father.

Wait, I wasn't given a choice.

I get in the bed and pull Emil to me. I ignore his punches and he fights. He's nowhere near as strong as Tristan, but he's not wimp either. I'm going to feel does in the morning.

Who am I kidding? I'm feeling them right now.

"It's okay, Emil. You're safe." I don't have the same effect Tristan has.

I am so glad these attacks don't come as often anymore. Since they moved in, he only had a handful and I had a broken leg keeping me to rush to his aid, so Tristan was who calmed him. Things were usually quiet by the time I hobbled in.

I tried to find a middle point between holding him tenderly and securely. "Emil, you have to wake up. It's a nightmare. You're safe."

He tenses, his eyes snap open, he looks around. When he sees me, he tries to bolt, and that hurts more than the punches. He recognizes me, then hugs me tightly as he sobs.

"It's okay. It was just a nightmare. Those people can't hurt you anymore."

And I'm going to make fucking sure that you can deal with whoever tries next.