

Storyboard-19

Waking up is harder than it should be. My body and my minds aren't responding well to my orders and one box is far too loud.

Of course. Withdrawal kicking in early, in the middle of an attack and—

Bart.

Another box adds to the cacophony that my mind has become.

Enough!

The quiet doesn't return as quickly as I'd like, nor fully, but I can think again. Bart rescued me. I needed rescuing. That will have to be remedied. But Bart came to my rescue. After how I treated him, how angry he is at the treatment he still—I small a hand on his box. He came to my rescue. That is all that matters. The reasons are irrelevant. I will deal with his expected recompense when he demands it.

I force my body to move. Swivel over the side of the bed. Feet on the floor, push myself up—that is where my body protests, and I sit back down. I am not rested. I will need an extended period before I am back to where I should be. The shakiness is minimal. The need for the drug is strong, but it isn't within reach, so there is nothing more it can do to me.

The box protests, sounds, and lights leaking further than they should and other boxes react to them and I need to take time bringing them all back under control before I can continue. I can not allow them the freedom they demand until I am back at my house, where I will be certain of my safety.

When they are all as quiet as I can make them, I return to assessing my situation. I am sore and tired. There are pads attached to my body. I open my eyes to see what has been done to me. I am naked and bandaged. None of the wounds feel as if they will interfere with normal operations.

I study my surroundings.

A bedroom with the air of disuse; the smell of dust, the empty closet, the remains of a package of bed linens.

How long?

Too long is the immediate response, but I need more details. The explosion will have destroyed all evidence I have been there, but not killed everyone. Which means that the person behind Liaison knows I am not dead.

Bart.

His box attempts to make me feel something, but I have control of it now.

I stand.

Vertigo tries to bring me down, but that is only a reaction of my body, and I am in control of that again. I exit the bedroom and have to go slower. Being in control of my body doesn't mean I can push it beyond what it's capable; not unless I want to worsen my situation more. The short hallway had two other doors. Another bedroom, and a bathroom. I make use

of that without bothering to turn on the light.

The only light is the living room, where Bart sits on the couch, typing on a laptop. On the coffee table are enough travel mugs of coffee, by the smell, to make it earn its name, along with a box for the laptop, Lenovo, one for an Asus router, two external Western Digital hard drives, and packaging for sixty-four GB ram. I can't read the name on the package from where I stand.

"One of them still has coffee," Bart says, without looking up from the screen, "I think."

"Where are we?" I asked with a French accent and I see the shiver course through him. I can't tell if he's trying to divert my attention or expects me to be someone who drinks it.

"Nowhere anyone looking will find us."

"Bart, I need—"

"We're safe." There is hurt and anger in his voice. "Tristan."

I can't stop his box in time to prevent the small cascade of reactions. Dismay that he worked it out. Pride that he is good enough to have made it past the safeties Asir added to my work. Fear of what he intends to do with that information. Terror that he's going to force me to kill him.

He looks away from the screen to glance at me, and it turns into a slow look up and down. I debate, giving him a reaction. I can play on his attraction to me to regain control.

His box rattles hard.

I don't want to.

I want to give myself over to him. Let him do whatever he wants to me. I want to—

No.

I don't want. Not him, not anything. Wanting gives others control. Needing makes you vulnerable. That is not something I will be.

I don't react to the want in his eyes. I don't play him, but I don't let him play me either. Once this is over, we will have our reckoning, and I hope he will survive it.

"We don't have the time to deal with that right now," I say, dropping the accent. "What is the situation?"

His disappointment is palpable. He likes the accent. "As far as anyone looking for us can tell, this house has been lived in for the last six years. Not that the registration of my car was in my name, but I changed that too because I don't want to have to deal with that person either. I was going to scrub the surveillance around the explosion and the very circuitous route I took to get what I needed on the way here, but someone beat me to it. Only thing I can tell you for sure right now is that it isn't the people behind the thugs, since they'd be here already."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Thirteen hours."

Two hours before—no, I'm already in the middle of the withdrawal.

"Where is the Chevelle?"

Bart looks at me quizzically, then shrugs. "In the garage. It's not in any condition to

be left outside. The door's through the kitchen."

On the kitchen table are a dozen partially eaten Chinese food containers. On the counter are two coffee machines, their boxes on the floor, each with a travel mug under the dispenser. An open bag of coffee grounds is between them.

The Chevelle is in rough condition, and a box reacts to it. Anger that they damaged it, that Bart probably ruined the transmission with this amateurish shifting. I run my hand along the side and smile. Jacoby is going to be pissed to see it in this condition.

I lift the back seat and take a box of pemmican. I look at the car again before returning to the kitchen. Bart leans against the counter, drinking from a mug and sighing as if he has achieved release after six months of abstinence.

"You want to explain how they managed to drug you to the point you were a babbling idiot?" the anger in his voice is controlled, and not directed at me. He has anger for me, but this is for the people he thinks did this to me.

"I was not an idiot," I answer, then consider playing him. Stoking his anger can turn him into someone even more dangerous than he is, and once I know who to aim him at, he—his box whines.

"No one drugged me." I chain the thing.

"You're going to tell me you drugged yourself?" he asks in disbelief.

There is no easy way to spin what I let slip back to the people who attacked me. "Yes. Time was short to get to Denita if I wanted any chance of finding her alive. I promised her father I would try, so I needed to ensure sleep wouldn't get in my way."

"How often to do you take it?"

"It was the third time in ten years."

"Bullshit. What you had was the kind of symptoms only those deeply addicted to a drug have."

"I am. The addiction rate for this drug is one hundred percent on first use. The survival rate is close enough to zero not to be worth giving exactly." The fear in his eyes is for me, for what will happen to me, and if I planned on using him, I would love it. "I have the situation under control."

"Is what every addict says."

"The drug is in a safe of my design. I can only get in it if I am at my peak, which means I have to be in enough control of myself not to give in to the need. Any failed attempt to open the safe will destroy the content."

Bart doesn't look convinced, which is his problem to deal with. I don't owe him an explanation. "I'm fine, Bart. The cravings are manageable, and in a couple of weeks, I won't even notice them anymore." I glare at that box, which turns dark again.

"Your hand's shaking," he points out, tone forcefully neutral.

"I'm not at my best, but even that's enough to deal with these people."

"Then you're leaving."

"Then I am leaving." This time his box stays quiet, defeated.

"I—" he lets out a breath. "We deal with this, then we have a talk; before you leave. I saved your life, so you owe me at least that."

I owe him nothing. His box shudders. "Alright."

He nods. "Then there's still the issue of finding them, and getting the kind of armament we'll need to take them on. I have resources, but I can't tap my normal provider for something like this. She's going to want to know why I need to arm an army."

"Neither is a problem. So long as we have a way to travel without attracting attention, I have the solutions."

"And that, I have the solution for." He motions for me to follow, and in the living room, he pulls the curtains away. In the streetlamp's light, before the house, sits a midnight blue Lexus LC.

I stare at him. "We need to talk about what not attracting attention means."