

The parking lot to Bernat's Gun is busier than I expect, which is a concern and an opportunity. More people mean it is easier for me to go unnoticed. But why the increase in customers? Jofre's shop is located on the west side of Phoenix, in a disuse strip mall where he is the sole business remaining. He isn't obscure as a reseller, but also not popular, which is why I picked him as my primary provider, along with the debt he owes me.

Did those behind the trafficking ring uncover the link between us and these people are in their employ? Waiting for my arrival?

Silencing the box that holds my paranoia is harder than it should be. It, and all the others, is cracked and constantly in need of attention. I should take the time to recuperate, isolate myself so I can properly rebuild all the boxes and the chains holding them shut. But that would mean giving the trafficking ring time to strengthen its defenses. And Alex wouldn't let me cut myself from him.

I don't want to cut myself from him.

Want is where this started. Wanting him. Wanting what might have passed as normal for men like us.

I shouldn't want.

That is how I survived. I did not want; I did what was needed.

In wanting, I set myself up for being shaken. I understand that unless I go back to not wanting, there are no guarantees that I will ever regain control.

But I want Alex. I want to keep him, and I want to keep Emil.

Boxes shudder as I think of him. What might have been run before my mind's eye. What could have been. Potential futures that were derailed because I couldn't keep from wanting.

I exert my will on the boxes and, while reluctant, they quiet. I made my choices. I will adapt to the consequences.

When I scan the parking lot, it is no longer a place fueled by my fears. They are cars and customers. Families out shopping, just as I am. When I exit the Silverado, I partially zip up the windbreaker to hide the Desert Eagle in the shoulder holster.

Few of the people coming and going pay me any attention. The most attentive stare comes from a child with awe in his eyes as I walk by her and her parents. In this part of the city, the feature that sets me apart from the others is my height, rather than the color of my skin. Black isn't the predominant one, but neither is white.

Inside, the large gun shop is as busy as outside. I identify Jofre's daughter behind the counter speaking with a pair of men, one of which is looking over an assault rifle. She recognizes me and stiffens. I head for the other end of the counter, where a harried young man with hair buzzed to his skull and Aztec design tattooed on its left side asks me to wait while he finishes closing a sale.

"I need to speak with Jofre," I tell him when he moves to me. "He knows I'm here." I tell him when he opens his mouth to protest. I nod to the camera behind the counter. "Tell him I'm here to do business."

Instead of running to the door leading to the back, he places a call before helping another customer.

When he steps into the storefront, Jofre is wary; as he always is when he has to deal with me. He knows the kind of monster I am, and what I might demand of him when it comes

time to repay his debt.

“Business?” he asks.

“A full case of .50 caliber ammo and one of 9 mil. I need all the unmarked guns you’ve accumulated that can use those two calibers. If there are ATXs and Desert Eagles, put them on top.”

He frowns. “Are you arming an army?”

“Only restocking my supplies.”

“9 mill isn’t you usually get.”

I still boxes, and stare at him. He doesn’t need explanations.

“How are you going to be paying?” he finally says.

I hand him a card. He scans it.

“How do you want me to give you the change?” There is worry in his voice. There is far more on the card than what is needed. This could be an attempt on my part to launder money.

“I don’t.”

When he looks at me, there’s fear in his eyes. “I can’t take this. Not from you. I don’t want to owe you anymore.”

“This isn’t something you will owe me for. It’s a question of practicality. Any method used in returning me the difference creates a point that can be used to track me. If I’d had the time to arrange it, there would be less money on the card. If you need something to assuage your fears, think of this as me opening a tab, and the excess to be applied against my further purchases.”

He relaxes. People can make anything palatable, if given the right reason.

I don’t know why I left all that money on the card. While the boxes are quiet now, they weren’t when I prepared to come. With the laptop and the card reader, I could have moved it off and onto another one. But it didn’t feel...right.

This has the potential of putting him and his daughter in danger. I do not care, now. But then I couldn’t stop considering what it might mean for them if the people behind the trafficking ring connect them to me.

It isn’t like that money will help them, but it was the only thing that would calm the boxes.

“I can have the ammo out here in ten; I just have to move the open crates out of the way. Getting those guns ready will take a couple of hours. They aren’t stored with the idea of moving them in bulk.”

“I can be back in three hours. I’ll pick up everything at the back.”

I leave the gun shop and move on to another of the errand I have to do today.

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“I’m here to pick up the order for the Brock Veterinary Clinic,” I tell the woman on the other side of the counter, smiling, then give her the order number Asyr provided me. This is the third supplier I visited in the last hour. The only way to avoid drawing attention to the quantities I am acquiring was to split them among multiple orders at different locations.

It is also easier to acquire high-level pain killer when they believe animals will be the recipient. Alex doesn’t have my tolerance to pain, even if it is surprisingly high.

Antibiotics and other necessities to tend injuries are included, and I had those three

boxes to those already in the Silverado.

Then I move on to food and clothing. Both made more complicated by Alex's insistence on making meals for himself instead of eating pemmican, and by his need to go into the office for work. His office's dress code is lax, but not so much that he could go with ripped and bloody shirts or pants, and he will soon be reduced to that the way the fights have been taking their toll on our clothes.

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I add sets of clothing I bought to the caches on the way back to Jofre's shop, and take cases of Pemmican from a few and put that next to the groceries. Most are canned and dried foods. With as fewer additives as I could manage. When this is over, I need to find a place to source preserved meats and vegetables that don't rely on soaking them in chemical to accomplish it.

The door to the back of the shop opens as I bring the Silverado to a stop, and Jofre steps out. He pulls a cart with four crates on it as I step out and go to the back, pulling the tarp off the bed before lowering the tailgate.

"I never took you for a fancy dresser," he says, pointing to a set of clothing on top of the bag holding the rest of the clothing after we've put the crates in the truck's bed.

"I'm not." I close the tailgate.

"You have a brother who does then? Cause that's going to hang over anyone who isn't built like you."

I take the step in his direction before I can bring the boxes to heel. In that moment, I am ready to break his neck for asking after Justin. For trying to get information that might endanger my brother.

It's terror in his eyes when I regain control, and he's pawing the wall, searching for the door's handle.

"I have a special occasion I am attending tonight. It requires that I am dressed in something more than this." I secure the tarp in place and leave to hide most of the weapons and ammo throughout the city before returning to Alex.

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