

“Come on.”

I type with one hand as I grope the couch’s side table for the cup of coffee. Then I’m typing fast, trying to keep the firewall from closing on me. I was sure that I’d cracked its encryption, but seems this laptop didn’t process the data fast enough.

I hate this military grade piece of crap.

It might be the best thing in existence, for what it is, since Tristan wouldn’t get anything but the best, but come on. Didn’t these people ever head of cyber warfare? How did they plan on winning anything with this thing?

The connection shuts me out and I slam the laptop on the coffee table and look for the actual coffee. I spit out the cold stuff in surprise, then drink the whole thing and head for the kitchenette as fast as my aching body lets me. What I wouldn’t give to drive into the office and use my station to get some serious hacking done.

What I really want is my rig, but while investigation reports didn’t show those who placed the explosives knew there was a basement. They placed enough the explosion turned the floor into concrete and rebar shrapnel that tore my precious computers apart.

As for the office, Tristan won’t let me. It’s the weekend, so this is rest and relaxation time. I’d have argued that going to the office to hack was relaxing, but last night’s long hot bath we shared, as well as a night in a comfortable bed, meant that I woke up with sore. All the fights from the week that I’d ignored to keep applying the pressure on the traffickers caught up to me, again.

Every weekend is the same.

Probably why, even while respecting the rules, Tristan always makes sure Saturdays are spent in a comfortable place. A hotel this time; last weekend it was a bed-and-breakfast. Before that was a surprisingly well-kept house, for it to be condemned.

The coffee that comes with the room is drinkable, and since that’s all I have access to unless I want to brave the outside in my state, and then Tristan’s wrath, I enjoy it. At least Tristan didn’t make sure the hotel only sent me decaf.

I stretch while another pot brews and winces from protesting muscles. You’d think that with all the stretching exercises Tristan puts me through I wouldn’t get so stiff. So what if only certain parts of me really get stretched. It happens enough, the rest of me should learn from that.

And they do help part of me get stiff.

I can’t wait for him to return from the supply run.

Next weekend, I don’t care what he says, I’m going with him.

Hot coffee in hand, I’m back on the couch, then the laptop’s on my lap and I’m going over the list of sites I compiled over the week’s hack I didn’t have the time to get to while at work. It responds as if I hadn’t roughed it up. With the reinforced casing, I’m not surprised. But I’d sacrifice some of that to more processing power.

I make my way into Lawyer Sever Number Ten, or is it Twenty? There’s a point where it’s impossible to keep track anymore. I find a handful of cases setting up businesses in line with the too many we’ve been taking apart and add the information to the list so I can confirm if they are part of the network when I’m at the office.

While I’m wiping my traces from that server, I get a notification on a bulletin board for old computer animated shows. Yes, bulletin boards are still a thing. It’s not all instant

messenger and social sites, you know.

Someone posted an update for a rare cell shaded film print I've started looking for a few weeks ago. I follow the link after making sure, well as sure as this laptop will let me, that there is no malware waiting for me, and the article leads me to another site, another confirmation it's safe, and that site bounces me to a cloud server where Asyr left the result of their investigations.

What? Computer animation doesn't use film, never has. Anyone who knows anything knows that. Of course, I knew it was from them.

Doesn't mean I'm eager to make use of what's there.

Tristan might trust Asyr because he pays them, but where money talks, the one with the most of it talks loudest, and however much money Tristan has secreted throughout the banking systems, we can't be confident the people we're after don't have more than that to throw at people like Asyr.

Or at Asyr directly.

The one security we have is that it's highly unlikely that the people behind the trafficking ring know Asyr is taking Tristan's money.

Note I said unlikely, not impossible.

And I don't have a way to ensure Asyr can't be turned against us unless I want to go to war with them. Even when I had my rig, I couldn't be certain of the kind of collateral damage that would cause.

Or if I'd emerged unscathed.

I can't deny that they are good. Nearly on my level good.

I transfer the compressed files directly to a thumb drive, then erase the information from the server before crashing the server itself. It's used exclusively by an Arab oil baron. I'm sure he won't mind.

I scrub the thumb drive, then go through the information, correlating it with my own finds. With it, I confirm a handful of property involved in the ring, people in a position of authority on their payroll, three within social services—we've been looking harder into that after what the PIs revealed to us—that I'll personally destroy as soon as I'm back at the office.

Then, it's back to cursing this laptop as I stick to lesser secured sites in the process of looking for the head of the trafficking serpent.

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