

COLLIN LONGORIA'S

THE CHECKPOINT



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The van's radio buzzed to life, hissing static as it caught the signal of nearby radio towers. The station that played was in the middle of a news segment. "... with light showers in the Donvask region until the end of the night on Tuesday. Be sure to carry an umbrella!" With his attention caught, the driver glanced down at the radio, then toward the scrawny man sitting in the back of the car.

"Hey Two-shot, did'ya remember to pack the umbrellas?" The driver asked. Two-shot looked up at the rear-view mirror, showing the scars on his face from where he was shot. Twice.

"No Bob, I didn't pack any umbrellas," he said in his thick Slavic accent, "How the fuck could I have known it was going to rain?"

"Ya know boss, I told him to pack the umbrellas. Dunno what's wrong with him." The blonde man in the passenger seat added. Bob turned his head to look directly at him.

"Shut up, Tucker. Stop tryn'a kiss my ass. It's weird and it ain't gonna work.

Tucker threw up a firm salute, "Aye aye captain!" Both men chuckled. Two-shot stayed silent, focusing his attention to the radio, which had transitioned from the weather segment to breaking news.

"... confirmed reports that there has been an explosion near the northern checkpoint, at the border with Krovistan. Early reports suggest a large vehicle sped into the checkpoint, ramming into a building before exploding, possibly from a bomb inside the vehicle. At this time, officials are saying it was an intentional attack by the terrorist group known as the People's Front. We will update you as the story develops-" Bob turned the radio off.

"Well shoot." He spoke. "That'll make things a little more difficult, huh?"

"I don't know," Tucker replied, "maybe we should just turn back? If they tighten security, there is absolutely no way we are gonna make it through."

Bob scoffed. "I've done this shit a hundred times, Tuck. Maybe more. My friend on the inside planned all of this. So long as we keep our story

straight, ain't nothing gon' happen. 'Sides, I need the money and the revolutionaries need their guns." Tucker didn't respond, giving no sign of reassurance.

With every passing second, the checkpoint drew closer. Once the group was only a kilometer out, they could manage to make out the amount of people at the checkpoint. There had to be at least thirty cars at each of the checkpoint's twelve stations. Military trucks were swarming the area, all flashing their siren lights. Just an estimating glance told of two hundred guards on foot, at least. The guards were armed like soldiers, carrying military-issue rifles and wearing full combat gear.

They arrived at the long lines of cars waiting to get into the city. A thin vestige of smoke permeated the area from all the cheap jalopies and half-broken mini vans trying to get into the city. Bob turned the wheel and drove all the way to the far end of the lines, towards line number one, which was currently the emptiest – though by a difference of only a car or two. Rain started to pick up, hitting the roof of the car with a light pitter-patter.

"There's a guard coming this way." Bob pointed out the windshield to a car two spots in front of them. Two heavily armored officers, carrying a large Terrier dog on a leash, were yanking people out of the car and yelling at them. They let the dog sniff the people one by one. "They must be searching for drugs. Nobody has any drugs on them, right?" Bob asked. Two-Shot and Tucker both shook their heads.

Time passed slower as the three waited inside the van for the officers to reach them. The full pouring rain provided a white noise for Tucker and Two-Shot, who both sat facing the window, watching the commotion outside. Bob, however, could not focus on the mundane. He had been a gun runner for six years at this point, his nerves were usually sound. But there was something off about today that burdened him with a growing sense of dread.

Finally, after what felt like forever, the guards arrived at the van and tapped the driver- side window, signaling Bob to pull it down. He complied.

“имя?” The guard asked. He was freakishly tall, and had a thick black beard the size of a small infant. None of these traits helped Bob understand him.

“English.” He replied. The guard grumbled and signaled the other guard to come over. They said something to each other that Bob couldn’t make out and then the other guard, a more normal sized man, reached his head through the window and scanned the inside of the van. “Your name, please.”

“Robert Cutler.”

“How many travelers are with you today?”

“Three.” Bob answered. The guard decided this was correct.

“Everyone needs to exit the vehicle so we can perform a drug test.”

All three men got out of the van and placed their backs on it. The small guard signaled to the other guard, who was holding the drug dog’s leash. The dog trotted past Tucker, who was sweating through his shirt. It then walked past Two-Shot without any issue, but just before reaching Bob, it started to bark.

“Shit.” Bob cursed.

The guard grabbed the dog by the handle on its vest and pulled it away. The other guard grabbed Tucker and spun him around, placing handcuffs on his arms and dropping him to his knees. He proceeded to do the same to Two-Shot and Bob.

“We are going to need to search this vehicle” The guard said. He swung the van open, revealing to the world the dozens of crates full of foreign firearms and cheap ammunition, clearly labeled.

All three men were blindfolded and sent through a maze of hallways. Before they knew it, the three men were in a brightly lit interrogation room. The walls were a boring gray and there was no window in sight.

A new guard walked in the room. He was tall and lanky, with pale skin and a sunken face. There wasn’t a hair on top his head, and his five o’clock shadow lost its volume three hours ago. The guard loomed over the table, his hands spanning the entire width of the metal surface. “Each

of you will be brought to a private room to be interrogated and give your testimonies. You are all being charged with possession of illegal weaponry, smuggling, and drug possession. At this time, you are guilty.”

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” Bob asked. The guard, without warning, punched Bob hard across his face. The wind left his lungs, and his head flew to the side.

“Do not speak unless spoken to. We will ask the questions.”

He re-blindfolded and pulled Two-Shot out first. When the door closed, Bob turned to Tucker and saw he was as pale as a ghost.

“Scared, buddy?” Bob asked, blood still dripping from his mouth.

“Absolutely sir.” Tucker replied.

“Well, do you want to live?” Bob asked. “I have a plan.”

“What plan.” Tucker whispered. He didn’t even have the strength to turn towards Bob.

“Think about it, man. We’re American, Two-Shot ain’t. He’s from around here. So all we gotta do is tell them that...” Bob thought for a second. “... We were both part of a tour group in Radistan when we were kidnapped by Two-Shot and forced to smuggle weapons for him. That’s all we gotta say, then we get out.”

The plan intrigued Tucker enough, he turned his head to look at Bob in horror. “We’d be throwing Two-Shot under the bus. We’d be killing him.”

“We are all dead if we don’t. ‘Sides, the dog sniffed drugs on him. He lied to us.”

Tucker didn’t seem convinced but didn’t say another word. Bob noticed his hands were shaking. For the first time in a long time, he was nervous.

The two sat in silence, nothing but the sound of the fluorescent lights buzzing above them.

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All three men had completed their interrogations. The bald guard sat on the other side of the table from them.

“You all really need to be a lot more careful.” The guard said. He pointed at Tucker and Bob. “You two said you were kidnapped by Ivan in Radistan, but that is our neighbor to the west. You are at the eastern checkpoint. Did he give you the scenic tour around our country before making it here?”

Tucker looked at Bob, cheeks flushed red with anger. Bob slumped into his seat.

“Not that it matters,” he continued, “because Ivan tried to do the same thing to you two, claiming you all forced him to do this.”

“How dare you?” Tucker snapped.

“You literally did the same to me.” Two-Shot said.

“Your real name is Ivan?” Bob asked Two-Shot, who ignored him.

“All of you shut up!” The guard commanded. “Let me tell you what is going to happen now. All three of you have committed a grave sin against New Baklovia. We do not take kindly to those who empower terrorists. You will come with me to the back of the building, and you will be executed by firing squad.”

Bob’s heart sank. He wasn’t half as clever as he thought he was. Or needed to be.

The guard escorted the men through the building. The endless maze of hallways gave them plenty of time to come to terms with their impending deaths.

They arrived at the exit door and pushed through it, at once getting soaked from the heavy downpour outside. There was no firing squad to be found, or even any signs that others had been executed there. Instead, a few meters away, was their van. At once, the three men turned back around in surprise to see the bald guard still standing at the doorway, inside and comfortably dry.

“Long live the revolution!” The bald guard said. “You all were lucky I was here. Wait a few weeks before trying to leave the city and get new papers.” He shut the door, leaving the men to their freedom.

The three stood in silence, looking at each other as the torrential downpour soaked their bodies.

“So that’s where I knew him from. Wait, why the fuck did he punch me so hard?” Bob said. The other two stared at him, mortified. “See? I told y’all we’d be fine.” He gave a nervous laugh.

“Disloyal assholes.” Two-Shot shoved past Bob and made his way toward the van. Tucker and Bob shortly followed.

Bob reached into a secret pocket in the lining of his jacket, one the guards had missed during the pat-down. Looking for the keys to the van, he felt plastic instead of metal against his fingers. Confused, he pulled the mystery item out. He found the baggie of cocaine the dog had smelled. The one he swore he left in the van.

He was saving it for a rainy day.