

I suspect Ralf did something to the engine we have not been billed for. Reaching the interstate, once we entered Illinois, allowed me to test the RV's acceleration, and it is still in line with what it had been before our stop at his garage, even with the added weight of the plating to the walls.

"How long until we get to put this new armor to the test?" Alex asked.

"Really, Pop?" Emil exclaims from his bunk above us. "You're in that much of a hurry to get into another firefight?"

"No," he protests. "But the further away we are, the harder it's going to be to get him to fix things if it doesn't hold up."

"It will hold up," I state. "Ralf wouldn't have let us go if the work wasn't finished."

"Ryan seemed in a hurry to have you out of there," Alex replies.

"It wouldn't have mattered. Ralf is incapable of doing subpar work."

"Even if Ryan told him to wrap it up?"

"Ryan doesn't order him around," Emil says.

"I remember him ordering him to keep on task," Alex counters.

"That was him keeping Ralf from getting sidetracked. People tend to cause him to do that."

"Speaking from experience?" Alex asks.

"Yes. I was there when you both distracted him with questions that had nothing to do with the work he was doing."

"I was just trying to get to know him," Alex protests and Emil snorts. Alex looks at him.

"I didn't realize asking about the work he intended to do would lead to him offering more."

"At least he didn't offer to do surgery on you."

Boxes light up and I'm staring at Alex before I have them under control and return my attention to the road.

"Not me, and I couldn't find evidence he went through with performing it, but by the way Ryan ran out of his room with just a bunched up towel to cover the nice bits, he certainly was worried about what Ralf might do."

How extensive Ralf's knowledge isn't a surprise. The documentaries are not there as a facade. That it is deep enough he could perform surgery is. I have studied enough about the body to break it apart pieces by pieces, but I expect that to learn to stitch damage back together beyond field repairs would require years of study. Years added to those required to master mechanics to the level he has. He and Ryan look to be a decade younger than I am. How much more deep knowledge has he amassed in those years?

"Earth to Tristan. Never thought I'd ask you that, but are you still with us?"

"I am reevaluating how much of a threat Ralf might have ended up being if they had decided to take us on."

"I don't see a gear-head like him being that much of a threat unless you let him have access to his tools."

Only Ralf was in his overalls the entire times we saw him, while Ryan made sure we noticed how much of a threat he was. It is, in a way, what I do with Alex. I look and act like the threat that I am while his leaner physique and 'I'm not taking anything

serious' attitude cause people to dismiss him as one until he is killing them.

"There's a truck stop ten miles ahead—"

"No."

"I need a pit stop."

"The RV had a toilet."

"Emil could—"

"Don't bring me in to this!"

"This would be easier on you if you hadn't over indulged while we waited for the RV to be repaired."

"I didn't year you telling me to stop."

I smile at him. "That is because I knew that once we were on the road again, the only coffee you would have is what I have agreed you could have."

"I didn't over indulged," Alex muttered, going back to looking outside and checking the mirror for anyone following us.

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"I'm making myself a sandwich," Emil calls, dropping from his bunk. "You want one, Pop? How about you Dad, you want a bar of pemmican?"

"Half of one," I answer and get a mock horrified look from Alex.

"Hold up, Emil, you might have to take over the driving." He places a hand on my forehead. "You don't feel sick."

A box shudders and I roll my eyes. "I am fine. I am simply taking into account how much I have left and when we will reach Raleigh, so I can resupply."

"I'll have one," Alex tells Emil, dropping back in the passenger seat. "Can you even survive on just half bars?"

"Rationing myself now ensures I will have enough should my exertion levels increase."

Alex gives me a knowing smile. "So I just have to make sure you exert yourself until you're out, so you can know the torture you're inflicting on me."

I return the smile. "You are welcome to attempt it."

"Just wait until he's not driving," Emil says, handing Alex a plate and placing a cut half of pemmican on the dash. "We just got the RV fixed up."

"I was going to wait," Alex protests and Emil snorts.

As I reach for the bar, my phone beeps to inform me a text has arrived. I exchange a look with Alex. There are three people outside of those in the RV with the number, and only two have a reason to use it, but only if they couldn't reach Alex first.

The text doesn't have an originating number and simply reads 'I'm about to call'.

I place it on the dash, wondering why Asyr needs to contact me. When it rings, I put it on speaker and they remain silent.

"You initiated contact," I say. "Therefore, you want something."

"I..." the digitized voice turns to static as they trail off. "I think we caused a problem."

We, meaning something I paid them to do. It's a long list. "I need you to elaborate."

“It’s about the Walkers.”

“You told me you weren’t able to find anything of note about them.”

“That’s right, I didn’t.”

I dislike how I have to prompt them for details. It is unlike them.

“How about you just tell us what you found, then?” Alex asks.

“It isn’t what I found, but what noticed us looking.”

“Ah, the great Asyr didn’t hide their tracks as well as they thought!”

“The same people saw you too, Alex.”

“I was working with an old military laptop on a public Wi-Fi,” he replies curtly.
“What’s your excuse?”

“They weren’t looking for us, or at us. They had sniffers around a few of the areas we both looked into. Primarily sites about Vitiligo, and repository of knowledge.”

“Why would anyone have programs waiting in those?” Emil asks.

“Based on the information I pulled from the program I was able to dissect, they were set to react to very specific parameters. Descriptions of people with Vitiligo matching the patterns you had me research.”

“Were you compromise?” I ask.

“No.”

Before I can ask why they bothered contacting us then, Alex asks, “Did you trace the programs to their origin point?”

“The trail ended at a US army reserve center in Culpepper, Virginia.”

Alex is typing on his phone. “There is no way they’re hosting the kind of computer power needed for this extensive of a project. Where does it go from there?”

“I don’t know.”

Alex stared at the phone. “Are you kidding me? You don’t know? There’s someone out there able to pull a node out from under you?”

Alex’s tone isn’t mocking, but worried.

“Get your head out of your ass,” they reply. “Neither one of us is so good a team can’t be put together to beat us. And if there’s one group who is going to have that kind of team, it’s the military.”

“Why would there be a team of military hackers keeping tabs on people with Vitiligo matching that of the Walkers?” I ask.

“I don’t know. But why ever they are doing it, a deployment order to Novinger was sent to the National guard out of Jefferson City.”

“How the fuck did they get Novinger from your search?” Alex demands.

“They didn’t. They traced your public Wi-Fi.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Thank you for letting me know.” I reach to end the call.

“Wait! You have to go help them!”

“No. I don’t.”

“They found out about them because you had me do searches on them, and it’s Alex that got them where they are living.”

“So?” Alex asks.

“Don’t you care it’s your fault the military’s going to go after them?”

“It’s not like I set out to alert them.”

“You—” they are cut off abruptly enough I get the sense a headset was pulled off. I can’t make out anything from the phone over the engine’s noise. “I’ll return the money you paid me for the search if you go help them.”

Alex gives me a disbelieving look. Even he has worked out the money drives Asyr. Refunds are not something they offer.

I put that along with the earlier hesitation, the sense the headset was pulled off their heads and reach a conclusion that frustrate me because it never occurred to me to establish a procedure for them to tell me if they were being coerced.

“I am not for hire,” I tell them while trying to work out questions I can ask that will let them provide detail of their situation.

“Oh, come on! How many times has someone come to your doorstep crying about something happening to—”

“You are not on my doorstep,” I reply, tone harsh. Whoever holds them is pushing too hard. Or Asyr is purposely mentioning things they know don’t apply here to ensure I know they are being coerced into getting me to turn around.

“Tristan, you owe me for all the—”

“I’m going to handle this,” Emil says, then terminates the call. “We’re turning around.”

“When did you become the man of the house?” Alex asks.

“Dad, you can’t let the army hurt them.”

“It isn’t the army,” I reply. “Most likely it’s a black ops group within the government using the army.”

“Whatever,” Emil says. “Pop and Asyr caused this. It’s on us to fix it.”

“No, it isn’t,” Alex says.

“Are you that heartless?” Emil snaps and Alex rolls his eyes.

“It is a trap,” I state.

“No, it isn’t,” he snaps again.

“Emil, we are wanted by the US law enforcement. It is clear that they somehow located Asyr and are forcing them to have us return to Novinger, so they will be in a position to capture us.”

“How the fuck did you come to that conclusion?”

“Okay, watch the tone, Emil,” Alex warns. “Tristan deserves more respect than you’re showing.”

“Asyr would never offer to give back money I have paid. There have been failures on their part before and they did not return the money. That they would offer it was their way of letting me know they contacted us under duress. Someone was feeding them what to say initially. Then they pulled the headset off their head, possibly so they could reinforce how important is it Asyr convince me to head back to Novinger.”

“How about Asyr hesitated initially because they were embarrassed they were responsible for what happened? That they offered to pay you because that had more hope to work than appealing to your good nature? And that they pulled out the fucking headset so they could scream the frustration I’m feeling right now!”

“Emil, I understand that this is difficult, but you can’t let your emotions control you. That is how people like those who got to Asyr manipulate others.”

“And you,” Alex adds and I shoot him an angry look. Now is not the time for his smart ass remarks.

“Fine,” Emil snarls. “Then let me bring this to something your paranoid mind’s going to be able to work with. Why would they bother getting us to turn around? If they have Asyr, they know where we are, right? They are good enough to get around whatever Pop added to your phone so it couldn’t be traced, right?”

“No, they aren’t,” Alex scoffed.

“Why not just set up an ambush somewhere ahead?”

Is that their plan? Get us to continue by making me think the danger is behind us?
“Alex, find us alternate routes.”

“That isn’t the point I’m making!”

“I am still listening, Emil.”

He takes a few breaths to calm himself. “Okay. If we don’t do anything and the army tries to catch Ralf and Ryan, what happens?”

“They get caught,” Alex replies without looking up from his phone.

“Dad?”

“They might get caught, but it isn’t assured. Ryan will defend Ralf without caring for the consequence and he has extensive training. The combination means that unless the unit that is deployed has been informed of the type of threat they are going against, they will escape, but it won’t be a clean exit.”

“So Ralf and Ryan get hurt in the process,” Emil says. “Pop, you saw Ralf’s rig. How long after he rebuilds one until he works out how the military found them?”

“Not long,” he replies dismissively.

“What is Ryan going to do when he finds out who gave away their location?”

“How should I—” Alex goes silent, staring at me.

There is no way Ryan won’t believe this wasn’t me breaking our agreement.

“Ryan will declare war on us,” I say with only one box making itself heard.

A box I can count on one hand has slipped my control.

The box containing fear.