

“You know,” Emil says as we leave the diner, “I thought the plan was to not attract attention while we are here.” Breakfast was much the same as yesterday, other than Alex not insisting I order food since I ate three bars of pemmican on the way.

“I am heading back to the motel,” I reply. “To sleep.”

“It’s what you’ll do when you get up, dad, I’m worried about. Skulking about town doesn’t sound like ‘not attracting attention’ to me.”

“That’s only if he gets caught,” Alex says.

“Or if something ends up blowing up,” Emil counters.

Alex looks at me.

“I have no plan on blowing up anything; this is only investigative work.”

“There you go.”

Emil rolls his eyes. “Have you thought about asking them whatever it is you’re curious about?”

“This avoids having to untangle whatever lies I’d be told.” We reach Missouri Avenue. “If they ask why I’m not there, just say I’m not feeling well.”

“The food didn’t agree with him,” Alex adds, “since, you know, it had flavors.”

“Ralf’s not going to ask,” Emil replies.

“Ryan, then.”

Emil considers this, then shrugs. “I think just going to be happy you aren’t there. He doesn’t like having you around Ralf for some reason.”

Emil is perceptive in ways I, or Alex, aren’t. He is better with people, more honest, and because of that, he sees nuances about them I cannot.

He and Alex head toward the garage. Alex will head for the bar after escorting our son there, since it is in the same area.

Once in the motel room, I unroll a foam pad on the floor, lie down on it, and sleep.

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I come into view of the garage as Emil and Alex exit it. I asked him to not be at the bar tonight since I want to observe Ryan without distraction. Alex teased me by saying he should put a price on his cooperation while we showered, but I reminded him of who was in charge.

The clothes I wear are dark, brown and gray, but not suspiciously so. If Ryan notices me as he closes the door behind them, all he has a reason to think is that I am late in joining them. Alex kisses me as we cross path and whispers.

“Be careful, okay?”

I nod, and go down Oakland until I’m far enough I can use the trees that divide this property from the field behind it to approach the garage unnoticed.

The window on the side of the garage shows me Ryan at the stove. Moving so I can see the dining table shows Ralf looking at a tablet. He only stops after Ryan taps his shoulder and points to the plate he placed on the table. I can’t make out the details of what their meal consists at this distance, and it is consumed without the banter the meals I share with Alex and Emil always contain.

Ryan does the dishes while Ralf goes back to his tablet, then they both exit back within the garage. I don’t have line of sight on the garage or their rooms on the second floor. Only one light is turned on there. Most likely Ryan’s room, since he needs to get

ready for his job at the bar. I expect Ralf is in watching a documentary, but that as soon as Ryan has left, he will go back to work.

I get a sense of many of Ralf's behaviors are dependent on being supervised, or having the expectation supervision is possible.

The light in the room turns off, and five minutes later, Ryan exits the garage, locking up behind him. Whatever Ralf will do while he is absent, Ryan doesn't trust him to keep someone from entering the house.

That is an odd behavior, considering how friendly the people here are.

He wears light gray cargo pants with none of the pockets bulging or pulling. The shirt is white and looks to be loose. Instead of shoes, he wears construction boots. An attire that probably doesn't attract much attention at the bar, but also lets him move with ease if he needs to fight. The boots are an extra weapon should he find himself in need of subduing someone quickly.

I let Ryan almost vanish in the distance along Oakland before following. I only need to be able to make him out in case tonight his destination isn't the bar, but he follows as the road turns left, then makes the right on Frankford that will take him to the bar. I watch him from across the empty lot until the small bar's building hides him, then hurry to cover the distance.

Through the open door, I see him talking with the woman Alex said owns the bar. The body language I see from both of them is at ease. I hear greetings, and Ryan waves to people I can't see, smiling and replies with a smile. He speaks with the owner again, laughs at something she says, then takes a stool to the door and plops it down, and drops on it, suddenly all business.

Over the next two hours, he doesn't crack a smile. The closest to one he gives is a curt nod when someone tries to engage him in conversation before her companion pulls her inside with what might be an apology to Ryan.

My phone vibrates, and I glance at the display before I think better of it. A reflex having Alex and Emil in my life has created. It's neither, but the number, the digits one through nine, then zero, tells me I shouldn't ignore it.

"Asyr," I greet them, stepping back to be harder to notice while keeping line of sight on Ryan. "Any development?"

"I have eliminated sixteen possible locations as points where the bounty board will surface based on the previous ones I fed within my predictive algorithm." Even through the electronic distortion they used to hide their identity, I hear the annoyance.

"Can you use a distraction?" something about how significant the shift in attitude is bothers me. While it is possible for people to go totally serious when a situation calls for it, maintaining it for two hours as part of a job that consist in nothing more than sitting on a stool so those in the bar will know they will be dealt with if they cause trouble doesn't quite fit that.

"Did you find some other criminal enterprise to take down in the middle of... okay, really nowhere?"

Their question makes me consider the possibility, but there is little to support that conclusion. "No, more of an...anomaly. Possibly nothing, but—"

"You know my rates."

“Caucasian male, blond hair, green eyes, six one, dense musculature. Two defining characteristics. Vitiligo discoloring the right side of his face, progressing to his right shoulder and arm. On his left leg is a tattoo starting at the ankle, moving up to the knee. Black ink, thorny vines, leaves, no flower. Name, Ryan Walker.”

“Is the name real?”

“Undetermined at this time.”

“Anything else of note?”

I stop myself from saying no, as Ryan and Ralf’s situation strikes me as relevant. “Shares a house with another man, African American, blue eyes, defining characteristic is vitiligo manifesting in a discolored mask around his eyes, and white hair. Mechanical skill, most probably self taught. Name, Ralf Walker.”

“Are they related?”

“That is undetermined at this time.”

“Shouldn’t be too long to get something on them, with all those details.”

“Thank you.”

As I disconnect the call, Ryan steps inside after raised voices. He exits dragging an angry man. He doesn’t react to the expletives the man yells at him, but reacts instantly to the attempted punch. He deflects it, grabs the man by the back of the neck and slams his face into the brick wall. There is no wasted motion in the act, and no emotion on his face as the man falls to his knees, whimpering and holding his bleeding face.

Ryan sits back down without looking at him as the man moves back before getting to his feet and hurrying away.

The atmosphere is subdued for fifteen minutes, then the volume within the bar is up again.

That is the only incident requiring his intervention. The one time someone called his name, the man responsible for the trouble ran out of the bar before Ryan entered.

At one in the morning, people leave, and at one-thirty, the bar closes. Ten minutes later, Ryan leaves, but instead of heading north, he runs south on Frankford and I almost give chase, wondering if he spotted me, and why he’d feel the need to flee.

When I follow, it’s again at a good distance, and again, I consider he is fleeing, except that he sticks to the sidewalk and never looks back. Considering how visually healthy he is, keeping up with him feels like something that pushed his endurance. He does this for a circuit around the town, always sticking to the street, which puts the length at something above two miles. He then slows to a jog for another circuit before picking up speed and doing it again, and three more times.

When he ends his run, instead of being at the garage, he’s at a building off a gravel road south of the bar. He unlocks the door, then enters. The sign by the door indicates this is the town’s community center.

The lights come up and by the time I make it to the back, where there are windows at ground height, Ryan is already lying back on a weight bench, pulling down an unseen amount of them. He exercises for an hour, then vanishes deeper in the center, shutting down the lights.

He exits the center twenty minutes later and walks to the town’s country store. It’s past six AM, and it is opened.

He pulls the cashier into a hug across the counter, and they laugh. I can't hear, but as Ryan disappears among the shelves, the cashier keeps speaking and pausing for responses. When he returns with bread, milk, eggs and other items I can't see, he leans against the counter as the cashier rings the items in. When they exchange money, the touch lingers, and the man blushes as Ryan smiles.

I expect an attempt at changing the price, but Ryan takes the change as its handed back, again, holding the hand longer than needed, and I realize the two of them share a sexual relationship, taking advantage of the early hour to flirt and—

Ryan leaves with his purchases, leaving behind a flustered man, but not a confused one. This is part of how things go for them. Arousal and denial until a later time.

At the garage, Ryan prepares breakfast, then gets Ralf into the kitchen to eat. Once they are done, and dishes made, Ryan steps out of the dining room. When the light upstairs comes on, I figure he is heading to bed, so I head to the diner to join my family for breakfast and figure out the next step in this investigation.