

“You know,” I ask, turning away from the door. The plan had been to simply drop Emil off and go to the bar, but something occurred to me with a lot of the machines looking high-tech. “Do you guys have Wi-Fi setup here?”

Ralf gives me a momentary blank stare, like he’s trying to make sense of the question. I mean, he is a mechanic, so I shouldn’t—

“Yes.”

Okay, that shouldn’t be surprising. There are two of them here. The real question is, “How good is it?”

His shrug isn’t encouraging. “Just a two point five gigabyte satellite connection. I was aiming for—”

“Ralf,” comes the warning from up the stairs.

I’m still getting over two point five over satellite. That can’t be right. I mean the military has faster, not that they advertise it, but even Starlink doesn’t get close to one, and they are basically the best.

What? I’m a hacker. You think I haven’t looked into all the ways to do my hacks mobile well before we had to take our travel vacation?

He probably got the wrong information. He seems to be a good mechanic, but we’re talking electronics here. It’s probably twenty-five megs, and he didn’t read it right. Still, for the area that good, only slightly slower than the bar, and I get to hang out with Emil.

Who is giving me a ‘are you kidding me look’ for some reason.

“Any chance I can get on it so I can do some work?” I tap the satchel with the laptop in it.

“Sure.” Ralf turns his back on me and heads toward the back of the RV.

“Do I need a password?” It would be just like a mechanic not to bother protecting his access.

“No.”

Oh, this does not bode—

“I have to log your laptop in directly. It’s back here.”

I look at Emil and he gives me a ‘you’re the hacker, why are you looking at me to make sense of this’ look. I mean, he is right. He’s learning, but I am still the master, so I really shouldn’t be—

I catch up to Ralf as he opens a door hidden from the waiting area by a tool cabinet.

The first thing I notice is that the wall is thick, the second one is how chilly it is, then— “Oh, my god.” The back wall is racks after racks of computers. One is filled with servers, another drive bays; a mix of disk spinners and chips. There are four keyboards, six screens, and one tower that can’t be doing more than playing second fiddle to the rest of this powerhouse of a system.

I don’t know if I’m jealous or about to cum.

“So...” What the fuck am I supposed to say to this? “Ryan is into computers?”

Ralf shakes his head. “I dabble.”

“Yeah, I can—” I stare at him. “Wait, this is yours?”

“It helps with my research.”

What does a mechanic research that needs... I can't even tell how much processing power is in there. Just by the servers, if they are properly integrated, and at this point I expect they are, this should out perform my old rig three or four times. [if you think this is too much for Ralf, I can easily down grade it. The sense I have of him is that anything he sets his mind to, he beyond excels at, and the main thing keeping the world safe is a lack of interest in taking over it.(and possibly Ryan helps a bit)]

Yep, definitely feeling a jealousy orgasm about to hit.

Who the fuck is this guy?

When he asks for it, I hand the laptop over, still too stunned to think better of it until he already has it connected through the ethernet port.

Well, I am going to have to do a thorough check of the laptop before doing any sensible work. What I see of the code rolling up the screen looks okay; negotiation protocols, keys, one long ass key, actually.

And he's handling it like he does that every day.

I wonder what his handle is. He has to be a hacker with this kind of rig, and his 'research'.

He disconnects it and hands it back. "You're online." He heads for the door and I realize he isn't noticing I'm not following. How long can I stay here with this wonderful machine before he—

He clears his throat.

It was too much to hope for.

When I turn, instead of Ralf in the doorway, it's Ryan, with a mildly annoyed expression, wearing only sweat pants. His motion to leave comes with a 'don't fuck with me' look, so I exit.

I join Emil on the couch, who is watching something on a DVD player. There's a stack of them on the table next to him.

I go over the laptop first, and other than the network protocol program Ralf added, I don't find anything.

I try to convince myself it's because he's so good it's hidden somewhere I can't find, but... I can't shake the feeling he just doesn't care enough to bother. What did Tristan say? Ralf didn't come across as someone who bothered inflating the prices of his work. And he was a much better judge of people than I am.

I'm still not going to do sensitive searches on this until I've done a full wipe, but I definitely can do general searches to make sure we're still safe.

I watch Ralf as he does something to the engine he had in some sort of giant vice. He clearly knows what he's doing, and Tristan's read on him is that he is an excellent mechanic. How does one become that good of a mechanic and have the knowhow to build the rig I saw?

Tristan can do just about anything, but not all of it with the same level of excellent skill. There's a reason he loves his old tech and leaves the electronics to me.

The laptop is on the couch, and I'm standing at a safe distance from the work happening.

"Can I ask you a question?"

His response might have been a grunt that I'm choosing to interpret as a yes.

“Did you actually build the computer array?”

He nods.

“Where did you take your electronic courses?”

He gives me a frown.

“Where did you learn how to build something like that?” I have computer and programming courses under my belt, a lot of them.

He nods toward Emil.

Okay, there is no way he’s implying Emil taught him. Last I check, my son doesn’t time-travel.

“Emil, can you travel back in time?” Better make sure.

“Are you serious?” The annoyance in his response is answer enough. “He means the documentaries. Or did you think he had those just to entertain people waiting for the cars?”

“Really? You learned enough to build a powerhouse of a rig by watching documentaries?” where were they all my life?

“And reading. I read a lot when I don’t have anything to do.”

“A lot like...?”

He shrugs, still working. “Welding, surgery, wood working, genetic engineering, agriculture, programming, electrical—”

“Ralf,” Ryan said, suddenly standing on the stairs. The only thing keeping him modest is a towel he holds in one hand before his crotch. “Let me remind you that you are a mechanic. How about you stick to that and don’t go offering a triple-bypass just because you read manuals explaining the ins and outs of how to do them?”

Isn’t he supposed to be sleeping? He looks like he was sleeping, hurrying too fast to do more than grab a towel that was by the bed? Why would he have a towel by his bed? Well, he sleeps alone; I certainly know why ‘I’d’ have a towel by my bed in his situation. Does he have some alarm system that wakes him the instant someone asks questions?

“Understood.”

Ryan looks over the space as if expecting there to be an annoyance, then vanishes back up the stairs, flashing us his firm ass. And I think I’m the only one who noticed it. It’s a nice ass. Not Tristan nice, but I can see it making some guy happy—

“That only happened once,” Ralf says, and it takes me a second to figure out what he’s talking about.

“You only offered to do a triple-bypass surgery once?”

“Yes.”

“And did...” you know what? I don’t want to know the answer to that. It’s once thing to live with a monster able to kill to defend us, but I’m not sure I want to know if Ryan is sufficiently out of it to actually attempt surgery with nothing more than book learning.

I put the laptop on my lap again. I get the feeling that asking more questions will only cause Ryan to appear, and I really don’t want to interrupt his sleep.

But I do want to know more. I’m starting to see what Tristan could have noticed about them that first day. I did say he is much better at reading people than I am.

“Are you going to be okay by yourself?” I ask Emil as I put the laptop in the satchel.

“What are you going to do?” he asks in a ‘you’re up to something,’ tone.

“I’m going to get myself coffee.” It’s true, I will get coffee while I’m there.

“You can leave the laptop here until you get back,” he says.

I smile. “I’d rather not let it out of my sight.”

He sighs and glances in Ralf’s direction before mouthing, ‘Please don’t cause trouble,’ with a pleading expression.

‘I won’t,’ I mouth in return, but his expression turns suspicious. I think Tristan’s paranoia’s spreading to our son. ‘I swear,’ I add. Then head out.

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I confirm there are no monitoring programs on the laptop; it takes three excellent coffees, but I’m confident Ralf’s protocol program didn’t include anything else. So, as I start on my fourth coffee, I start diving into exactly who Ralf Walker might be. I have more information now than I did yesterday. There is no way someone as smart as he is doesn’t make waves somewhere, even before his Vitiligo kicked in.

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Okay, there is no way he is that good.

He is too odd to be able to pass unnoticed, and there is no way Ryan’s always been there to keep him out of trouble. Because someone able to offer to do a triple bypass just because he’s read books on it is going to do something else that’s going to be noticed.

Only, I’m not finding anything I can even not confidently put at Ralf’s feet. Maybe he’s gone around and tried to remove any and all prior evidence of his deeds, but it’s nearly impossible to get everything. I’m an expert at finding the stuff that’s been left behind. Trust me, it’s the rare exception of a perverted senator that stores the pictures he takes with the boys he fucks in the cloud for any hacker to find.

Nearly every man of power I took down required me scouring the worse and best corners of the internet for the crumbs their cleaners had missed.

I refuse to believe he is so good he didn’t miss something.

Of course, he has the super powered rig, and I’m stuck with this retired military grade laptop. It’s not like I have access to all the corners of the internet at the moment. I’d basically need his rig to get them all, since I don’t see myself building my own while we’re traveling.

“I never thought I’d have to say this,” Chevie says, as she fills my cup, “but I think I’m going to have to cut you off.”

“Why?” I pull the cup to me as soon as she moves the carafe away. “I can pay.”

She laughs. “I have no doubt, but at the rate you’re drinking, I’m not going to have any coffee left for my regulars until my nephew visits again.”

Oh, how strong the temptation to say they can go fuck themselves is. I am not in a sharing mood after this day of failed searches. But it’s getting close to the bar officially opening, which means Ryan arriving and it might be best I keep my distance from him after interrupting his sleep this morning.

“This is going to be my last one today.”

“And tomorrow?”

I smile at her. “Well, that will depend entirely on if the RV is repaired or not, won't it?”