

Alex heads south on his search for Wi-Fi, and more coffee, I expect. While Emil and I head north to Missouri Ave, then west and south on Oakland until we reach the garage. I hear the grinder going before I pull the door open.

Ralf has a half inch sheet of steel on sawhorse that he is shaping. Part of the RV's side leans against the wall, with a tarp over the open RV. He stops, lifts his head, and raises the blackout goggles, before I announce us.

"I should have this attached to the paneling, then on the RV in a few hours," he says.

"Thanks for recommending Family's," Emil says. "The food was pretty good."

"It always is." Ralf puts the goggles back on and goes back to grinding the sides of the steel sheet to fit the panel.

Emil sprawls on the couch looking at his phone. I take the chair next to it that lets me watch Ralf work.

A little over twenty minutes after we arrive, at ten AM sharp, according to the digital clock on the wall, Ryan exits from the door on the left wall. The one he came from earlier holding a sudsy plate. By the sheen of sweat on his bare chest and arms, along with the kitchen, there is an exercise room.

As with our arrival, Ralf stops his work before Ryan says anything, but he doesn't remove the goggles.

"I'm off to bed," he says. "Remember what I said. No more than what they are paying for." He levels a look at me as if he will hold me responsible for any deviation in the work Ralf does. Then, as he tenses to turn to the spiral stairs, quizzicalness fills his eyes. Then he is heading for them, and disappears up to the second floor.

Ralf is already back to the grinding.

When he sets the grinder on the shelf of tools, Emil sits up. "Where did you learn the mechanic stuff?"

"Taught myself," Ralf answers, taking a portable drill press to the sheet. It has an added component to its side, something well made, but clearly not part of the intended design.

"Online video?"

Ralf pauses, drawer open and his expression goes...odd. Neutral. Then he's interested again. "Documentaries following mechanical workers. Online videos don't come with established provenance and can't be counted on to be accurate." He takes a drill bit out of the drawer.

"How much did you learn by taking cars apart? My dad learned just about everything he knows by systematically taking stuff apart."

"Only as part of following along with the work being performed, there is too much wasted time with simply taking something apart and figuring out how it should be working. Experts have already done all that work, so I find it more efficient to learn from them."

Emil looked at me in surprise, mixed with indignation. He thinks Ralf has insulted me. He is right, learning under someone else's expertise is faster. Unfortunately, my first teacher had an agenda, as did everyone after. While I have been able to make use of what they wanted to get what I needed out of them. I find it simpler to not bother with people when it comes to learning.

"And do you use the printers to make all the parts you need?" Emil asks as Ralf turns

the drill on.

“Only those I can’t order, or don’t have the time to order. Or for specialty models.”

Emil’s next question is made inaudible by Ralf lowering the drill bit into the steel. The function of the addition to the drill becomes apparent; instead of flying off, the steel shavings are sucked into the opening at the base of the drill. He proceeds slowly, raising the bit often to let it cool, but Emil has stepped back to let him work.

He gives me an apologetical look as he sits.

“It’s okay,” I say, raising my voice so it will carry over the shrill of the drill. “Your question was reasonable. That he learned differently than I did doesn’t matter, nor what his opinions of other methods are.”

Emil isn’t entirely happy. I am still an idealized representation to him, and each time it gets chipped, he needs to adjust to accepting the reality of the man I am. The flawed man, I am. That he caused this to happen makes it harder for him to accept.

Ralf works methodically, but cautiously. He regularly empties the reservoir of its accumulated steel shaving and replaces the bit five times in the process of drilling the anchoring holes. Once done, he returns the drill press to its place on the shelf.

“Do you print the bits yourself?” Emil asks.

“The process is too intensive to be worth the expense of making a new printer.”

“So you’d make the printer? Did you make the ones you’ll use to print the suspension?”

“Two of them.”

“You needed the first one to be able to make the others,” Emil completes.

“Yes.” Ralf’s expression flickers to neutral while Emil struggles to come up with another question. “If you are interested,” he says, once he’s engaged again, “there is a DVD documenting the process of printing metal parts in the library.” He motions to the door in the left wall before grabbing the motorized pulley controls. “Among others.”

“DVD?” Emil asks in surprise.

“It’s a more stable storage method than tape, magnetic hard drive, or SATA drives.”

“Can I go with him?” I ask while Emil gets over his surprise. In part because I’m uncomfortable letting Emil out of my sight within a building I haven’t scouted. Ralf and Ryan tell me they are the only ones living here, but I haven’t confirmed it. I am also curious as to what other documentaries are in his library.

“Sure.”

I follow Emil through the door, and we are in a smaller space than I expect. The library Ralf referred to is on the left, a bookcase covering the length of the wall. A plush seat faces a fifty-inch plasma screen with a DVD player underneath.

On the other side is a set of weight machines that I expect Ralf built for Ryan. By the number of plates, Ryan is as strong as he looks.

A dining table divides the space with the kitchen on the other side.

The collection of DVDs is eclectic. The expected car maintenance documentaries are next to plumbing ones, which are next to roofing, and electrical work. Emil chuckles and shows me the cover for a big game hunting DVD and a fishing one.

“Is this okay?” He asks, showing a documentary on the Vietnam War.

“If you feel you can handle the gruesome images I expect will be depicted, it’s fine.”

As you like to remind those who don't know you. You are an adult. You can decide what you want to watch."

"You think he's hiding porn in here?"

"No. If he has pornographic documentaries, they won't be hidden. I don't think Ralf sets out to hide things." Unlike Ryan. I settle the boxes my paranoia triggered. Keeping secrets doesn't mean someone is out to cause me trouble.

"Don't go rummaging through their cabinets. If you get hungry, you can go to the diner."

"I'll be okay." He puts the DVD into the player and sits.

I return to the garage as Ralf lines up the sheet with the RV panel. He then bolts them together and welds the bolts.

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Ryan comes down the stairs at six PM sharp and tells Ralf the day's done, and to get ready for dinner, and for us to leave.

Emil has been back for half an hour. His day has been spent between watching documentaries and looking over the tools in the garage, purposely keeping his hands away from them.

"Will you be okay to make it to the motel on your own?" I ask Emil as we walk along the street, away from the garage.

"I'm confident I can avoid getting lost." He gives me a side glance. "I thought this place didn't need securing a perimeter."

"I just want to check on something." The box containing my paranoia vibrates, but my curiosity isn't reacting to that.

"Don't get caught," Emil says. "As nice as people are here, I don't think they'll take well of a stranger peeping into someone's house." He pauses. "Actually, don't get caught because I'd rather now have to leave right now since..." He trails off.

"Don't worry, we aren't leaving until the RV is ready."

He looks at me, smiles, and shakes his head. "That's good. Just so you know, if I'm not in my room when you and pop get to it, it's because I don't want to have to listen to the two of you again."

"Don't get in trouble," I warn, and he gives me a disbelieving look.

"I'm not the one who's going to be hiding in bushes, dad. I'm just heading to the motel."

"I won't be hiding in bushes. There aren't any with a line of sight to the windows in their home."