

The Organ Donor

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The fuck am I doing here? ... Bobby? Where's my kid? Where is he? ...

Shit, okay Randall. What the fuck happened. Who did this? Figure out who did this... Wish I had somethin' to plug this goddamn hole in my gut. Shit, it hurts. My fuckin' blood's washin' the floors...

It felt like days, but I knew it was just a few hours when my brain finally kicked on and violently ripped me out of that shitty coma I called sleep.

I started looking around for something to bite down on. Figured chewin' an old PVC pipe would be better than sinkin' my teeth into my tongue. Guess I could have tried to squeeze through the restraints without busting up my wrists; would've eliminated the need to find a chew toy. *Yeah, right.* I wiggled from side to side, scooting my big ass body backward. *Gotta be somethin' I can use over here...* It took me a minute, but I managed to finger an old leather strap out of a corner. I tossed it to the side, about six inches away from my leg, and rolled around until I was on my knees. It tasted like shit. Better than nothing, though.

I closed my eyes, gearing up for the sickening snap I'd punished myself with one too many times before I heard a deep, soothing laugh coming from the darkness. I spit the leather out and rolled my eyes. *This guy again...*

"Jimmy..."

"Having fun? ..."

I heard him moving around the room; his footsteps echoed through the warehouse like some old warship coasting through frozen water. I couldn't see him, only hear him. By the time I'd figured out he was anywhere near me, he was crumbling the chains around my wrists like a pack of six-month-old cigarettes. *God, what I wouldn't give for a cigarette right now...* I stood up and stared in what I thought was his general direction.

"Thanks. Now, you mind gettin' me the fuck out of here so I can find the dead men who snatched my boy?"

"Have a little patience," his voice was cold.

"I think I'll pass..."

I felt like a little kid again. Big man was teaching me a life lesson, and I just didn't wanna fuckin' hear it. Don't know who would with blood caked across their eyelids. Oh, and there was the matter of the waterfall coming out of my gut. Nope, not in the mood. Not even a little bit; and he knew it, but he didn't seem to give a shit. He was lecturing me with his cold, scarred eyes. I didn't have to see them to know that I was getting chewed out for being a fuckin' idiot. I mean really, who gets caught and beaten so bad they contemplate wrecking their own wrists?

I kept to the shadows and tried to stay out of view as I crept along the cement walk, waiting for the big guy to show up. I walked for about forty-five minutes, no longer giving any sign of a single fuck, before he pulled up next to me in a beaten down, 1970 Ford pickup and signaled for me to get in. Normally, the answer would have been “fuck no”; but, considering my ankle was broken, my knee was dislocated, and twenty-two of my twenty-four ribs were cracked and shattered, I was willing to make an exception.

It took all of five seconds for me to doze off and slip into that deep comatose sleep again. The only thing I could see running through my mind at that point was my boy. And, the only thing I could think about was getting him back... But I couldn't help but feel that getting him back wouldn't end this nightmare... Hell, something told me him getting taken in the first place wasn't even close to being the damn nightmare...

.1.

I woke up the next morning in a small room. It felt like a Nicaraguan prison with its tiny bed and torn blankets draped over my broken body. I tried to move, just a little bit, but found myself strapped to the mattress. *Dickhead didn't even bother to strap my arms down... They aren't that bad, I can still – shit, no I can't.* I wiggled my fingers a bit, but that was about the only thing I could do. I was broken.

I sat up as much as I could. That gave me about ten inches of height and all of 30 seconds of vertical time. The room was painted with an old gray coat, and the shit was peeling off the walls by the pounds. There was a little table in the corner with a glass of water and a blade. I wasn't stupid enough to go for the blade. In fact, the last thing I wanted was for the Butcher to walk through that door and see me standing there with a big ass knife in my hands. Then again, the guy seemed to have his head on straight. He'd probably laugh at me, take the knife and force me back onto the bed only to chain me down with a two-ton belt made of cement. Not to mention, walking to the knife was a fucking impossible feat. Nah, I needed to be smart about this. I could just start screaming and making noise. Might actually catch someone like that, until the big man comes back and snaps their neck. *Better them than me, I guess.*

I put my head back on the old mass of twisted and gnarled cotton that they called a pillow and took a deep breath. Before I even had the chance to get that breath out of my lungs and past my lips, the Butcher was standing right in front of me. I watched him walk to the small table and pick up the water. He grabbed the knife too, but somehow, I wasn't exactly concerned that he was gonna try anything. I mean let's face it, the guy broke into a warehouse full of armed men he probably didn't know just to bust my squirrely ass out and nurse me back to health. At least, I like to think he wants to nurse me back to health. I was hoping he actually gave a damn, or something.

He reached down with the old rusted blade. There were bloodstains on the handle much older than mine. You could tell they'd been cleaned off haphazardly, and some of the blood had gotten into the nicks and dings and oxidized inside of the metal. The blade was still sharp enough to slice through steel. How did I know? Well, he used it to slice through the restraints holding me down. Then again, might've been that freakish strength...

He put the blade back on the small table. Somewhere between walking to my bed and slicing open the restraints he'd managed to put the glass of water in my hand. I tried to sit up, but the white-hot pain shooting through my trunk was enough to put Ali on his ass. I lurched back into my fully horizontal position and held the water close to me like a kid's safety blanket... with two busted arms and massive lack of lung capacity...

"You should take it easy," his voice was calm and quiet; not even a little arrogance, this time.

"All of your ribs are broken, your right shoulder has been shattered, your left arm is broken in six places, and you have a punctured lung."

“Sounds like an average day in the office, gramps.” I couldn’t help myself. I’m a smartass by nature.

“That was merely a suggestion.”

There was a loud thud just outside the door and a slew of Polish curse words I hadn’t heard since I was about six years old. I was a little confused at first. I didn’t know who was screaming or why, until I heard the thick Irish accent back up the swearing. I’m guessing my eyes were the size of saucers judging by the Butcher’s reaction – he was cracking up about as much as a big man with no sense of humor can. For some reason, I actually tried to get out of the bed and scramble to another part of the room... as far away from the door as possible. I guess that reason may have been my own instinct telling me “the next person to walk through that door is going to try to kill.” And it was right.

The door splintered at the edges right before it split down the middle and fell off of the hinges. Then he walked through with his slicked back, dark brown hair, pale skin, finely cut muscles littered with tattoos, and a glare in his bright red eyes that would paralyze anyone who didn’t share a bloodline with the guy.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Shit, he’s pissed...

“Looking for my kid?”

I just huddled in the corner and tried not to think about the razors in his mouth that were on the verge of ripping me to shreds.

“You were looking for your kid?! In a fucking warehouse, chained to a floor where you probably got every blood-borne illness known to fucking man!”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

I’m still not sure why I said that, and judging by his rising tone and popping veins I probably shouldn’t have said anything except—

“Look, Uncle Drew, I’m sorry. All right? I’m sorry. There, I even said it twice.”

He gnashed his teeth together, balled up a fist and let out some weird primal fuckin’ scream. I hadn’t heard anything like that since the last time he was ready to impale me on my own femur. Yeah, he might have been a little frustrated.

I gotta admit though, I was impressed by how quickly he got his shit together and started tending to my wounds. The Butcher had placed a crude splint here and a

crude tie there, but he was no doctor. Uncle Drew was a fuckin' pro at his job. Within seconds, I was sitting on cloud nine and numb from the neck down.

"How'd you do that?"

"Every nerve ending in your body links to your brain. Hit the right ones and you feel nothing for a good hour or so. "

Felt like heaven. No pain, no tension, no nothing. Well, there was nothing until I looked down and saw the oozing gash in my gut. I'm not talking about a slow seepage of blood "oozing". I'm talking about the beginnings of an infection and looking at the lower half of my intestines "oozing". I had no fucking idea how long I was down in that hole for. I don't even remember what those fuckers did to me. Truth be told, I didn't give a fuck. I just wanted to know where my boy was...

I never found him...*I gotta go back...* I was lying here, twisted and mangled on this table for the fucking world to see and my boy was nowhere in sight. I tried to sit up, but no sooner had I moved my hands to prop myself up was there a fist in my wounded shoulder, forcing me back down onto the bed. I was getting pissed. I could feel my blood boiling and reaching the surface. I was ready to rip into my Uncle like a rabid dog. I didn't stand a chance, but I didn't really care. All I knew was that he was stopping me from getting what I wanted.

"He's safe, Randall... Iain found him."

I stared for a few moments, disbelief easily scribbled across my face. Uncle Iain had been incarcerated and brought up on some serious murder charges in the last few months. From what I heard, the fucks had proof that he was guilty and managed to put him away. Fuckers think they know everything. The dickhead that did commit all of those murders was later found dead in his apartment with more holes than swiss-fucking-cheese. My guess is that Robert found him and "handled" it.

"Where is he? Can I see him?" I tried to move again, but Uncle Drew had a steadfast grip on my shoulder at this point. There was no getting away from this one.

"After you wake up. You know no one is touching the kid while Iain's around..."

"How the hell did he find him? I mean these fuckers were fucking professionals."

"Iain's good at what he does."

I looked down again and saw my guts being held in with a pair of forceps and an old splint made from wood and rubber bands. The swelling had gone down slightly since he'd cleared away the infection. My guess, he's just trying to make sure my insides don't fall out like fucking chum. Kinda brought a bit of a memory back to my mind. Watching myself try to keep my sanity while keeping my intestines firmly secured within the confines of my abdominal wall was a lot like the first kidney I

took. No fucking clue what the fuck I was doing, but knew that this piece of flesh was gonna fetch me a good bit of change.

I dug into the guy; my hands unsterilized and cut up from the cage. He was piss ass drunk and willing to look me in the eye and call me a fuckin' wanker. Yeah, kinda got rid of all that worry of him catching a flesh eating bacteria or something. But, watching him sleep in my bathtub made my stomach crawl a bit. Funny thing, though, I never once got nauseous or light headed as I stared at his misplaced lower half. To the contrary... I was actually intrigued.

I did call myself a fucking idiot for not figuring out which organ went where. The guy had a massive bulge in the right part of his abdomen. Tried to go back in and see what I did wrong, but I just ended up killing him. Easy enough to get rid of the body; it was Boston and forensics wasn't exactly up to par in that crapshoot. No one looked for shit on the south end, anyway; not back then. My only concern was the contractor who paid for the organ. The man seemed like a stickler for leaving people alive, for some fucked up reason. Turns out I'd fucked myself and killed the man, disregarding his number one rule. *Fuck it.*

Uncle Drew worked fast. My head had gone completely numb and I was fading in and out of consciousness. I didn't really think about the shitload of pain I'd be in when he was finished. Thought never really crossed my mind, even after I got the feeling in my body back. I just remember lying there and wishing I had my kid next to me.

He said Uncle Iain had found him. God only knows how or where. My mind started racing back and forth, trying to figure out how he would have found him without Bob making a peep. I know the kid. No matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, you're never gonna get a noise out of him – not unless he wants there to be noise. I knew he was good at what he did, but I had no idea he could find my boy. *Then again, what if they did manage to make Bob crack? What if they fuckin' hurt him? What if they made him bleed?* I could feel my pulse rising and my chest heaving. The room started to spin and turn red as I pulled against Uncle Drew and sat straight up. I felt the needle pierce my skin and go deep into my gut, but I didn't care. All I wanted was Bob... I knew shit was hitting the fan when Uncle Drew's calm and quiet demeanor was replaced by a stern yet bloodthirsty warning.

Normally, I would have heeded his warnings to lie down and relax, but something snapped in my head. I didn't give a fuck that he was trying to force me to lie back down. I wanted Bob, and Uncle Drew just looked like some mook standing in my way... The last thing I remember seeing was a fist the size of my chest hurdling towards my face... Yeah, my meat was on ice for the rest of night...

.2.

I didn't come to for a few hours. When I did, my head was pounding, my shoulders were aching, I could taste the copper metal-coated liquid oozing into my mouth, and I could feel the gut-wrenching pain searing through my intestines like a fuckin' slab of cement left in the Florida heat. In fact, the only good thing I could think of when I woke up was the fact that I was in a real fuckin' bed, in a real fuckin' room, with a real fuckin' IV hooked up to my arm. But, even that comfort was slipping.

Uncle Drew was standing at the side of the bed with a small tray next to him. He was measuring what looked like a syringe full of more unrefined pain. Even if I'd asked for some kind of pain reliever, he wouldn't give it to me; something about a history of becoming a violent shithead when I'm out of my mind - *yeah, whatever*.

I looked up at him, my hair plastered to my face as I watched. The only thing I could manage to move from the cheap pillow was my head. I opened my mouth to speak, but found a muzzle strapped around it like I'd bitten a kid or something. I didn't remember much of what happened, but something was telling me I wasn't exactly the most kosher of guests. I didn't even make a noise before he turned around and plunged the needle into my vein; my arm also strapped to the bed with some old leather restraints. Old, but damn they were tight.

"You're going to start seizing in a minute. It's normal, but try to breathe. The last thing I need is for you to suffocate. I'm not equipped for that shit here."

Uncle Drew's voice fell quiet, and his stare wasn't quite as piercing as before. The fact that the blaring red hues returned to their normal shade of deep, unsettling, pale blue was a little comforting. A little... But, as I was lying on that bed, my body beginning to betray me, just the smallest amount of comfort was enough to keep me from going into another black out. I stared at Uncle Drew, feeling a child-like plea claw its way out of my eyes. His softened slightly as he walked over to me and placed a cold wet towel on my forehead, his hand petting the top of my head like a dog.

Yeah, that's something I would normally get mad at, but at this moment, it was actually comforting.

"Just a few more seconds, kid. The worst is almost over."

I clenched my jaw and tried to breathe slowly, but my lungs began to spasm. I pulled against the restraints, my hands balled into fists so tight that my knuckles began to tear and bleed as the skin stretched over the bone like a fucking Japanese Taiko drum. I tried not to say anything, I tried to keep myself from screaming, but it was too fuckin' much. A gust of air forced itself out of my mouth like I'd been smacked in the gut with a wrecking ball.

I'm guessing something started to move, because Uncle Drew was on the other side of the room cursing like I'd never heard before. Okay, maybe that's a lie. The guy cussed all the time. But something was happening. I tried to look, but the muscles behind my eyes squeezed the balls so tight I felt the vessels rupture. Blood

was leaking into the whites; I could feel it leaking from my tear ducts, seeping from the corners of my eyes like Visine.

It was truly the worst pain I'd ever felt; and, it felt like an eternity before I even caught a glimpse of relief. Yeah, that was the moment I made the mental note to TRY to kick Uncle Drew's ass later.

He walked up to my bed side, pulling a scalpel out of his chest and what looked like forceps out of his shoulder. He glared at me as if I was supposed to know what happened, and clearly, the defiance returned to my eyes judging by the scowl on his lips.

He began to undo the restraints, starting with my muzzle and moving to my wrists, arms, neck, midsection and finally, my legs. I tried to sit up, but my back wrenched and cracked before I had a chance to get completely vertical. So, I just laid there.

"Give it a few minutes, kid."

The wound in his shoulder closed quickly.

"Thanks, I think... I *am* supposed to thank you for whatever the hell that was, right?"

"Yes, you are, despite the searing pain that will catch up to you in about 3 seconds."

Right on schedule, I felt my spine respond to my earlier request with a twang of pain that made that beautiful seizure seem like a walk in the fucking park. At least it was over a hell of a lot quicker.

"Sit up and dust yourself off," his voice was quieter now than it had been before.

"Why so quiet? What, I don't get your usual gloat after the pain you put me through?"

I thought I was being pretty clever. He didn't agree.

"Just trying not to humiliate you further in front of your son..."

I stared at him for a moment, my emotions repeatedly fluctuating between rage and shock.

"Dad?"

Bob crept through the doorway with his history book under one arm and a pen in the other. He looked a little worried, but there was something behind his eyes that didn't quite seem right. Then again, I hadn't seen the kid in months. I almost forgot what he sounded like.

"Hey kid..."

I couldn't stop myself from getting off the table and walking toward him. He looked like he'd been treated well, no marks other than small scars here and there. He looked like the pinnacle of health for a 13-year-old boy. He looked like my 13-year-old boy.

"Dad, are you alright?"

His voice was quieter than Uncle Drew's. It sounded almost as if he didn't believe that he was talking to me. It almost looked like he was talking to a ghost with the way he was standing and staring at me.

"Yeah, kid. I'm good..."

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close, burying my face in his hair to hide the bloody water running out of my eyes. He dropped his book and pen, wrapped his arms around me and started to sob into my chest. I could feel his tears saturating my skin as he heaved deeply.

"I thought they killed you, dad... I thought I was never going to see you again."

"I know, Bobby. I know and I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't help you."

Uncle Drew slinked out of the room. Guess he figured we needed a little bit of time to ourselves. Maybe, he was right. I had my kid wrapped up in my arms, and I felt myself finally breathing that long, and much needed, sigh of relief. My boy was safe...

As glad as I was that Randall found Bob, I couldn't stay. When my oh-so-happy nephew was going through that bout of pain, he managed to spear me with my own scalpel and forceps... Yes, I slipped out to give them their moment, but if I hadn't left when I did I would have killed them. The hunger isn't exactly something I can curb with a diet pill or a staunch will to keep my inner demons at bay. I'm an animal. I have instincts. Those instincts drive me, no matter what they may be...

When I got to the kitchen, my refrigerator door was wide open with half of a giant sticking out of it. The other half was stocking the shelves like he was working in a market place. I leaned against the conjoining wall, my arms crossed over my chest as I watched the big man work. He was good to us, always making sure we're stocked up on the shit we need so we don't turn into Bram Stoker fans' wet dream. He made sure that we kept ourselves quiet and didn't go out causing unnecessary problems for the others. God bless his little heart.

He tossed me a bag without agitating his position. I glanced at it as soon as the plastic hit my fingers – O positive; good mix although it had a tendency to be a little watery at times. I ripped the corner open and started to drink from it. My eyes burned as the liquid coated my throat and slid into my stomach. It was thick with a

hefty flavor, almost like sweet cream but richer. I guess most people could equate it to the fullness of a perfectly cooked Porter House trimmed in the perfect quarter of fat.

“Are you going to be alright?” His voice was silent.

I nodded and finished the bag. My eyes still burned like someone had cut them with steel wool and disinfected them with searing ocean water. The heat radiating from my sockets was carnal, something most people lose after they’ve progressed beyond infancy. The teeth in my mouth felt like lead, everything around me was loud and pulsating. But, somehow, I managed to keep it together. I tossed the bag into the garbage and stood up, massaging my twisted shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m good... Thanks.”

He finished packing the bags into the fridge, a few in the freezer, before closing the door and moved from behind the kitchen island, cracking his watermelon-sized hands.

“How’s the kid doin’?”

“Thanks to you, a few cracked ribs and a little dislocation here and there, but otherwise he’s in perfect working condition... Look,” I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Jimmy, we owe you.”

“You owe me nothing, Drew.”

“If it wasn’t for you, the kid would probably be in a ditch somewhere raging about the dirt in his eyes and Bob...”

“Bob would have been fine.”

Most people who know Jimmy would be a little shocked that we could actually carry on a civil conversation without him removing a bone or three. Guess that’s the reputation you get when you’re a seven foot eight inch behemoth with fucked up scars scattered among twisted tattoos, a peculiar blindness in both foddered eyes and a reputation for taking a fucking tank to the chest and walking away like you got smacked by a ping pong ball. But to me, he was just Jimmy. He was the man who felt that he owed our family because of some Nazi abduction in the Second World War. He keeps blaming himself for the things he couldn’t control, and now he feels that he should be forever indebted to us. We, however, feel like that’s a crock of shit.

As much as I wanted to pursue this argument, just to see how much he was willing to give me before resorting to a few of his signature verbal point, I refrained. In fact, I turned my attention back to my hot-tempered, burgundy-haired nephew. I

took a seat at the dining room table, whipped out a pen and scattered everything across the hard oak to find a napkin that didn't have my chicken scratch all over it.

"When you found Randall, did he have any track marks on him?"

I could see the look in Jimmy's lifeless eyes change from caring and compassionate to desolate and diminishing.

"No."

"Did he have any weird raises, contusions, anything under the skin?"

"No."

"Did he smell off or have any weird ticks when went in to grab him?"

"No."

"Was there anything fucking different about him, Jimmy?"

"No."

I was really hoping to hear that he was hooked up to some machine that was pumping him full of steroids and some unknown compound that gave him the ability to black out when enraged and thrash around like the fucking Hulk. Instead, I got that he was simply chained to the fucking floor, blood running down every side of his face and there was nothing wrong with him. I mean nothing... *Well, that doesn't sound right.*

I knew there was something off about that kid. He'd always been a weirdo, always been the one that no one really wanted to get involved with but everyone *had* to fuck with just to get their point across. He was the kid on the playground that you left in the corner of the sandbox because you didn't want to explain to your father where your front teeth went – and I do mean *all* of your front teeth.

Now, the kid had a runt of his own and he was more than willing to put up a fight for him, no matter who his opponent was. Just the look in his eyes and the reddened rims coating the outer layer of his pale green irises was enough to send a warning to the robo-fodder in my head where a brain used to be.

Jimmy was sitting on the other side of the table, a pitcher in his hand as he stared at the wall.

"You look a little worried, Doc..."

"Yeah... Do you think you could keep an eye on Randall and Bob for a while? I need to get a hold of my brother..."

He nodded and finished the massive pitcher of crimson liquid. There was something deep in those twisted dead eyes of his that made me feel like something else was happening. Dare I say, I was actually a little nervous....

.3.

Bob and I caught up a little while the meds wore off. He started sketching in his books, something I was unaware he ever did. Figured it was the trauma that got him going, but he was a fuckin' artist. It was almost like the kid had been going at it for years on end and just decided, "Hey, I'm gonna take a break real quick." I wonder if his mother knew about this. *She probably knew about all of it. God, if I could find her, I would tear her lungs out. Not even worth sellin' 'em on the market.*

"—And then mom kidnapped me."

Those were the words that pulled me out of my homicidal haven and back into the real world. I was hoping that I'd been hallucinating, that the meds just made me think he said what he said.

"What?" I could feel the tension in my voice evolve into a quiet fury.

"Yeah, she kidnapped me. I was walking home from school and she just picked me up."

He was so nonchalant about it. He never looked up from his sketchbook, never faltered when I asked him what he said. It was like he was just telling me that he got a new stack of playing cards; although, I was sure he would have at least gotten more pissed than he did with that last statement. Didn't really matter; I was pissed enough for the both of us.

"Your mother took you?" I tried to dial back the anger in my voice, but I couldn't. It was brimming. I knew it usually freaked the kid out, but I couldn't control it. Then again, he didn't seem to give a shit...

"Yeah, she took me to this old warehouse thing with this guy. She said he was a friend of hers, and then they sucked face for a minute and took me to my room."

"A warehouse? You were in a warehouse?"

He stopped sketching and stared at me.

"Yeah, dad. Are you okay? Did Uncle Drew muck up your ears or something?" He thought he was hilarious. It was written all over that tiny little smirk of his.

Not even his smile is the same...

I stared at him for a moment; my mind racing through every scenario that involved his mother, our relationship, everything about the two of us. Not once did she come off as the type to kidnap her own son. She was a crazy chick, but she was never really into kidnapping. That was more so my gig.

Her need to prove me wrong on every occasion by whatever means she had was something I could get over. The fact that she always had to have the last word

was another. Even the random bouts of abuse and blood spatter she'd cause during her ragers were things I could handle. But this? This was too far. She grabbed my kid, took him God knows where and kept him there. If anyone else besides Uncle Iain had gone in there, there's a good chance the kid wouldn't have made it out alive. Fuck, *they* wouldn't have made it out alive.

Just the thought of her putting him in harm's way was a fucking great way to get my adrenaline pumping. My eyes were on fire, my breathing slowed to almost nothing, and my skin was on fire. I tried to close my eyes, buy myself a little time to relax, but I couldn't seem to shake the innate need to kill something – to kill her.

It took all of five seconds before a sharp burning pain wrenched its way through my rib cage. I thought it was just a little contraction, but when I lifted my shirt, there was a weird raise in my side and a fucking mound of space from one bone to the next. I tried to push the ribs back together, but they lurched back into my body, pressing against my organs. The pain had me on my knees in an instant. I tried to bite back the scream welling up in my throat, tried to keep myself from exploding with agony, tried to keep my composure for my son, but I couldn't keep the grunts from escaping gritted teeth.

Bob had gone back to sketching something in his book. He didn't look up at me, not once. He just sat on the edge of the bed, sketching and humming to himself as if I wasn't even there. The more I cringed and grunted, the louder his song became like he didn't want to hear the added noise. *What the fuck did they do to him?*

My ribs dug deeper into my lungs before exploding into my skin and distancing themselves from one another. One set had actually managed to snag my diaphragm and pulled it so tight it began to tear. I couldn't force anything out of my mouth. I couldn't even breathe. I was lost in the pain with no fucking way out... and it was really pissing me off.

I stood to my feet, forcing myself to take short sharp gusts of breath whenever I got the chance. My arms were tightly wrapped around my midsection to prevent any more disfiguration. Bob hadn't moved, he was just sitting and sketching, despite the sound of my bones ripping through the flesh and cracking into some twisted shape resembling a kid's doodle. I tried to reach for the door. I tried to wrap my fingers around the knob, but the entirety of my arm found itself retracted and twisted in some fucking abnormal spaghetti position. I felt like I was in the middle of some twisted fucking exorcism gone wrong.

I fell against the door, trying to gather enough strength to call for Uncle Drew. I stayed that way for a few moments before throwing my body threw the splintered wooden door. Hindsight says that wasn't a good idea; however, I managed to get through and found myself lying in a pile of splinters, which had added to blood creeping out of the pores in my skin.

The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't force enough air through my lips to get them out. I was praying that he could hear me. The pain was shooting through my body, burning my skin and muscle. As soon as tears brimmed against my eyelids the water burned away leaving only salt to fill the line of my eyes. For a split moment, I felt my heart stop, my lungs exhale, and my body go limp as the

pain took complete hold of me. Only a few moments later did I find myself fully conscious and standing on both feet, completely void of any feeling what so ever.

I examined the wreckage in the hallway. From what I remember, there was only a door splintered into pieces across the floor. But, I could have sworn there were tattered walls, drying blood, torn carpet and the splintered door. I turned around to get a better visual of all the carnage, only to find a small pile of barely breathing bodies around the corner.

I walked towards them, my hands flexing in and out of fists as I got closer. Their blood was hanging heavily in the air, like freshly baked donuts at dawn. I got a little closer to examine them. Most of their bones had been broken, but their trunks had been left perfectly intact. There were no bite wounds, no stab wounds. In fact, there were no wounds at all, only mangled bodies and wrongly twisted limbs and joints.

The smell was beautiful. It painted my senses like a landscape of vast mountains, dusted with the genteel colors of the twilight hours. Before I knew what was happening, I'd plunged my finger into one of the malformed joints and pierced the skin. I felt the bone shift around my nail bed like a bucket full of snails. Without thinking, I scooped my finger outward and slipped the small bit of flesh into my mouth. It was sweet with a tart after taste and left a hint of salt on my lips. I tried to keep my instincts at bay but the taste was overpowering me. I felt something in my head snap, like someone flipped a fucking switch. Before I knew it, I was going in for thirds, lowering myself to the wound and biting into it.

"Dad?"

I barely heard him despite the fact that he was standing a couple feet away from me. I was lost in the taste of the poor bastard lying in front of me.

"Dad...?"

I felt the breeze shift as he raised his hand to place it on my shoulder. I stood up and turned to face him, wiping the blood from my face.

"Yeah, kid... I'm fine." He looked worried, concerned, like my boy again.

"Y-You look different."

I looked different? Not like he hasn't seen blood on my face before. Then again, that was my blood on my face.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Where's Drew?"

"He's sleeping. You said not to wake him up."

"Well, consider this an exception to the rule, huh?"

“Nah, you shouldn’t do that,” the voice was gruff and deep, almost like sandpaper.

A figure appeared from the hallway. Tall, tattoos scattered everywhere, shaggy brown hair and piercing blue eyes, despite their scarred milky appearance. I knew that lean massive build anywhere.

“You’s the reason he’s out like that, anyway. Not sayin’ it’s a bad thing or nothin’, just would let him sleep, y’know?”

I nodded, even though I had no idea what the hell was going on. *If I am the reason he’s out... fuck, how could I be the reason he’s out?* Bob ran over to him and hugged him.

“It’s been a while, Uncle Iain.”

“Guess it just kinda happens when it comes to stuff like incarceration and bogus murder trials.”

“Bullshit...” The voice from the shadows was quiet, cold, calculating and royally fucked up.

“Hey Robert, I take it he’s innocent.”

His eyes burned a hole straight through me. Normally, it would have sent my nerves into overdrive but not this time. This time, it made me smirk. I was almost proud to see that he was so protective over Uncle Iain, almost proud like it was something I’d intended to happen.

“It don’t matter. I’m here, everything’s good, y’know? Other’n from the bodies stacked up high in that corner over there. You know ‘em, kid?”

Heh, kid...

I stared at the bodies for a few seconds, trying to replay the incident in my head. Didn’t matter how hard I fuckin’ tried, I just couldn’t seem to get my shit together. All my memories were scattered around my head with glimpses of violence but not faces. I couldn’t remember what the fuck I did or what the fuck whoever did this did. The more I tried to remember what happened, the more my head hurt. Robert’s stone glare began to unnerve me. Uncle Iain’s childlike nature started to soften my edges. Bob worried me again. *Bob...* And that rage I felt earlier started to come back with a vengeance.

“Look, I have no idea who did this. Not that it matters, but I don’t remember anything.”

Uncle Iain always knew when shit was about to happen. He always knew when I was ready to go off. He also knew exactly how to get me to refocus on what was happening. He also knew when I was lying; except this time... This time he had no clue...*Not even a little bit...*

“From the looks of things, y’fucked ‘em up like that. And you knocked Drew out ... So, yeah... Nice a’ m sluggeh.”

I knocked Uncle Drew out? How the hell...? I sat on body pile and looked at him. He couldn’t see me, even if I was sitting three feet away from him. The guy was blind as fuck, but he always knew where everything was. Uncle Drew called him a tracker, the Butcher always said he was the best recon grunt he’s ever seen... Uncle Iain was fucking incredible.

“And, I might’ve found that ex of yours...”

That perked my interest. I tuned to look at him, my eyes burning slightly as I did so.

“Where is she...?”

.4.

I fiddled with the pen on the desk, my hair slicked back so it was out of my face as I started carving into the oak furniture. My hands were sticky from an encounter with an old acquaintance, but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. I just figured I'd drop by, say hello, see what he was up to. He never did like having people swing by without any notice. Then again, I didn't really like getting shot. Good to see that things never change.

I glanced at the clock. It read 1:14 AM. She was turning into quite the night owl. It didn't really matter much what she was turning into, because she would always end up being *that* woman. She was the type of woman that made you want to scream, call your mother on the phone and profess just how right she was about your newfound love. I'm still not sure why the fuck I shacked up her in the first place. Honestly, the only good thing that came out of it was my boy. Other than that, it was a waste of five years.

The door cracked, the switch flipped, and there was my darling Satanic bride, standing with some poor drunk sap at the front entrance, milking him for everything he was worth, which didn't look like much. Poor guy didn't know what the fuck he was in for.

She pulled him over to the bed without noticing me sitting at her desk with her "guard dog's" blood all over me. She started to straddle the poor bastard. I could watch her ruin some other schmuck's life, or I could be a nice person, step in and help the guy out. *Might as well get **some** good Karma.* I stood up and looked at the him. Drunk or not, a guy with my height, physique, and the tats all over their body stands up, you notice. The blood red hair doesn't help.

I stepped forward for a moment, letting the light hit the smears all over my face as I stared at him. His eyes got so fuckin' big I thought they were gonna fall out of his face. *Keep 'em wide, pretty boy. Those things go for a pretty penny on the market...* I've never seen anyone move so fuckin' fast. He grabbed his jacket off the bed, dropped her on the floor and ran out like a bat out of hell without buttoning his pants. Of course, the little siren started screeching at him, but he just slammed the door and kept running. I couldn't help but chuckle at that one.

She heard it and jumped to her feet, pig sticker in hand. I threw a robe at her. If there was one thing she was good at, it was getting her clothes off unnaturally fast.

"Cover up... We need to talk."

She stared at me for a moment, shock running from those blood-sucking baby blues down to that curse screaming mouth. She couldn't believe I was standing in front of her. Even more, she couldn't seem to believe the nifty little artwork I'd painted all over my face. She threw the blade at my chest. I turned and it kissed the wall with its tiny little edge. Weapons were never her forte.

"Cynthia, I'm only going to ask you once."

She pulled the robe over her body, her posture changing from overbearing to neutral and submissive. She was pretty good at hiding her intentions, though. She never really told anyone what she was planning to do, but after five years with this leech, you learn to read her.

“What are you doing here, Randall?”

That was a sound I’d never heard from her mouth. She was shaking, terrified. Her voice was staggered and her breathing was shallow. Even her heart was skipping beats, it was beating so hard. Of course, the sadist in me wanted to push this further, but the father in me forced the question.

“You took him.”

“Took who?”

My temper brimmed and my anger flared for a moment as my voice deepened and roared from my chest.

“Don’t fuck with me, Cynthia! You know exactly who the fuck I’m talking about!”

She jumped and looked at me; goose bumps multiplying over her skin. She was petrified, and for that moment, the father and the sadist merged as I closed the gap between the two of us. I cornered her, despite her incessant attempts to retreat along the king-sized bed. I refrained from smiling, although something inside of me was snapping again. It was snapping, and it felt fucking amazing.

“He’s not yours, Randall.”

“Bullshit, he’s not mine. What, did you manage to whore yourself out to someone else? Needed Bobby as a little collateral for those long cracked out nights?”

“Just because y-you managed to donate a few swimmers d-doesn’t mean he’s yours!”

“Both the courts and the families say otherwise, sweetheart.”

She reached under the pillow and pulled out a small syringe, forcing it into my gut and pumping the foul liquid straight into it. It stung; it forced a momentary lapse of seizing; it also gave her a false sense of security... As soon as my body froze, she jumped up and raced to the bedside table, pulling out a gun and aiming at my forehead. I felt my eyes burn again. She was ready to fire, and she probably could have taken me down at least for a few minutes if she hadn’t hesitated.

She squeezed the trigger and the switch in my head flipped again. I ducked to the side, forcing my body out of its temporarily paralyzed state and took one to the shoulder. She aimed and fired again but missed me completely. I’d managed to rip

the gun out of her hand, pull out the magazine and dropped each individual bullet on her head while she stared at my chest.

“You gonna answer my question? Or is this going to turn into another one of our kitchen table argument?”

She slumped backwards against the bed; her eyes still unable to blink.

“He said it would work.”

I reached into my shoulder and dug the bullet out – more like dug it out like a kid sneaking icing from their cake.

“Who said it what would work?”

“Emil said it would kill you.”

“So, you take my son then try to kill me. Wow, sweetheart, you’re really battin’ a thousand here, aren’t you?”

She pulled out another peashooter and aimed for my face, again. I pulled the gun out of her hand, aimed it at her thigh and squeezed the trigger. I knew she’s scream, but I was enjoying my evening silence and she was ruining it. I knew she wasn’t going to give me any more useful information, either. She would rather have put a couple between my eyes and walked out of the room. She wasn’t willing to give me anything other than a name. *Then again ...*

“Where’d you meet him?”

“Why the fuck would I tell you?”

“Because, if you don’t I’ll kill you. I’ll Harvest those pretty little organs of yours while you’re still fully conscious so I can ask you which one of your last fucking boyfriends you want me to swap ‘em out with. Choice is yours.”

Somewhere in her twisted, deluded mind she actually thought I wouldn’t hurt her. She’d literally conned herself into believing that she was still worth something to me, that I’d never go so far as to kill her let alone look at her wrong... She was right about that... *Once...* Maybe I was doing this to prove to myself that I didn’t need her anymore. Maybe I was doing it for the sheer and simple fact that she’d taken the one thing that means more to me than some stupid fucking feud between parents. Maybe, I was doing it because the taste of retribution for all those years of her stifling me was too sweet to resist... Maybe, I just wanted to see the witch bleed. Either way, I pulled a knife out of my pocket, dug it into her belly, careful to avoid any major organs or gushers. She bit back a cry, trying to pull the blade out.

At that moment, she knew. She knew I meant to kill her. I meant to tear her to pieces and leave them scattered around the hotel like a goddamn scavenger hunt. She knew that once the blade started moving, it wasn't going to stop until I either go what I wanted or she stopped breathing. Either way, I won...

"The Cage! I met him at the fucking cage, okay?!"

The Cage was a big scoring place for me and a few of my lesser known clients. They picked a stoolie, told me what they wanted out of them, I beat them senseless in a cage in the middle of the bar, dragged 'em out back and delivered whatever slab of meat the client ordered. Pretty lucrative business for a hot head with a blade fetish...

"Does he go there often?"

"Yes! Please stop!"

I pulled the blade out and covered the area with the dress she'd dropped on the ground.

"Thanks, *honey.*"

I wiped the blood on her robe and started to walk out. She reached for the phone. I could hear her clumsy ass fumbling over the bed to pick up the receiver. I guess it kind of sucks when you don't even get dial tone when your psycho ex-husband is standing in your hotel room.

She looked down at the phone cord before looking at me. I couldn't help it. At that fucking moment, something in me decided to smile and wave my knife around with two fingers like a fucking sociopath before walking out and slamming the door behind me. *Guess it's time for me to get back to work. So much for my fucking vacation...*

.5.

I was sitting in my booth, watching the fuckin' jackasses in the cage try to pick a fight with anything that had two fists and the stench of hard whisky on their breath. Some of us actually had a few bets going to see how long it would take those shitheads to start fighting each other. I gave it to midnight and I walked out of that bar a rich man.

Part of me wanted to walk into the steel trap and just shut those assholes up for good. Rules of the cage say they don't call for murder as long as it happened in a fight. Not like cops would actually make their way over to this part of town anyway. *Which makes it a damn good hunting ground...*

I walked outside, lit a cigarette and leaned against a wall. The thing about dumbasses is that they usually have dumbass friends willing to go out of their way to prove that they've got a bigger set of nuts than everyone else. Bodes well for me; means I get triple the supply for the hassle of one.

Wouldn't ya know it? Just like fuckin' clockwork, those idiots came stumbling around the corner looking for another "poor soul" to fight. You could hear them screaming, whooping and hollering about how much of an asshole and "Nancy" the last guy in the ring was. *Fuck, they're loud.*

I shoved my hands in my pockets and started to walk away with my back turned to them, shaking my head. The biggest of the group, the bald one with three missing teeth on the left side of his face, crude prison tattoo, and a milked out eye with scars all over his face called out to me. Naturally, I ignored the idiot. No point talkin' to stupid. Plus, the more the bait moves the more the fish wants it. Like any Neanderthal in the new era, you end up with a slew of death threats when you don't turn around and give them the fear they want. I kept walking... Until caveboy decided to chuck an empty beer bottle at the back of my head.

This is where I want to tell you that I did some crazy awesome ninja move and dodged it. If I was Uncle Drew, maybe I would have. But, I take after the big Slovak. I took the hit to the back of the head and the bottle shattered into pieces across the alleyway and my shoulders. Judging by the silence that fell over them, they expected me to fall. Nope... I stopped where I stood, brought my hand to the back of my head and gently groped over the gash. I pulled it back to the front and stared at it. My fingers were covered in blood – hot, sticky, crimson blood. It was my blood. That idiot had successfully done the one thing you don't do to a Zawadski.

I exhaled lowly and turned around after putting my hand back in my pocket. I ran my finger over the carbon infused blade cradled inside of it. My cigarette was still lit and still keeping my lips warm. I pulled my jacket off and folded it, placing it off to the side – something my grandfather taught me. *Never unload shit while dressed in your best.* I proceeded to crack my knuckles and walk towards them. The two smaller idiots stumbled backwards into the alley. Didn't take them long to figure out what was goin' on before they hauled ass. The big stupid one was screaming at them to come back. Honestly, they were the fucking smart ones.

Before he had the chance to turn around, I buried two knuckles into his right kidney. The organ ruptured inside, flattening the fucking idiot in seconds. I felt my heart skip a beat with excitement as he slammed his ripped and raw knees on the cold, dirty cement. He took a swipe at me. He was big, clumsy, fuckin' stupid, and he

would have been easy enough to dodge; but, something inside of me decided that this was the last night this fucking Neanderthal was gonna be on this green fuckin' earth.

I took the hit. He had a grin on his face, like he'd actually done damage. Watching that fall away and his eyes widen with fear was enough to get my heart moving even faster. I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins like someone just shot me full of fucking Nos and strychnine and said "survive". I felt deadly. I felt like I needed to take something from this man. *What the fuck?*

I grabbed him by his throat and lifted him off the ground with ease. He clawed at my hands, trying to get me to let him go, to put him down, to give him mercy. The blood from the gash in my head ran down the back of my neck as I stood out in the frigid air, looking at my prey. His pulse was moving so fast, I was pretty sure his heart was gonna jump out of his fucking chest. I pulled the blade out of my pocket and quickly buried it into his side. He screamed, and I tightened my grip. It just felt natural.

I held him there while I removed the kidney from his body.
"Can't have this fucker contaminating the rest of the merchandise, now can I?"

My voice sounded cold and distant. I didn't even fucking recognize it. Not like it mattered, I had my package, I had the carrier, and I had the order damn near down to completion. *Just harvest the other kidney and the lungs and leave. He's not worth it Randall...*

I went to work, pulling out pieces of the man's dilapidated kidney. Luckily, he'd passed out from the pain, shock and 20 degree weather, which just made my job just that much easier. I made a long incision up his left side to his nipple. Lungs were always tricky. They were big, cumbersome and encased in bone. Usually, I was better equipped to remove them. This time, there were no cutters, no saws, no pliers; just me, a knife and my bare brute strength.

I made a vertical incision and reached underneath the rib cage. The lungs were still intact; they didn't feel like they had any scarring or anything that would piss off a client. So, I proceeded. I grabbed the bottom rib in my hand and pulled downwards, feeling the bone as it snapped in my hands and grazed my palms. I did this up the extent of his rib cage. When I got to the top, I pried him open like a Thanksgiving turkey breast. *They're still working...*

I sat and watched for a few seconds before gently separating the lung from the rest of his innards and placing it on my folded jacket. Plucking kidneys from someone's gut is like pickin' strawberries. You gotta be delicate so you don't damage the fruit, but you can be a little rougher than you were with the lung. Doesn't mean you should go batshit and start tuggin' on the damn thing, though.

I managed to get both out with ease and snatched the one good kidney, while I was at it. I bagged all three and put them back on my jacket. The poor bastard was lying on his back with his eyes rolled into the back of his head. I chuckled and smacked his leg as I stood and reclined against the wall. Everyone knows you gotta light up after an intimate experience. Let's the other person know you're satisfied.

I took a few deep breaths, enjoying the taste of menthol as it hit the back of my throat. I looked at him again, his heart sittin' pretty, and still, in his chest. The

damn thing started looking pretty enticing for some reason. I reached in and pulled it out of him like an apple off of a tree and bit into it. *Fuck...* I couldn't stop...

Within minutes, I found myself licking my fingers and taking another drag on the cigarette. I looked back at the body, trying to hold myself together as the bile in my stomach digested the heart I'd just shoved down my gullet like a fucking burger. My stick was done, my hands were still bloody and I was thoroughly freaked out. So naturally, it seemed like a good time to dump the body off to the side and get the hell out of there. Of course, that's about the time when everyone notices something's a little off about the fuckin' idiot you just ripped up.

All of his tattoos were complete shit. All of them, except the one on his shoulder. That one looked like it was a little more thoughtful, maybe too thoughtful for our new corpse. It looked like some tribal shit – two spears, what looked like a fucked up skull, and a bearskin over it. I studied it for a minute, almost got sucked into it and felt a growing hatred for this man overtake me. I wasn't bitter about getting hit in the back of the head; occupational hazard. So, what the fuck did I care? Why was this bald fuck pissing me off so bad?

I left him in the middle of the alley; didn't think he deserved the decency of being placed anywhere else. I just picked up my jacket and the bagged organs and walked away. I didn't want to think about the taste of his blood still swirling around in my mouth or the rush I'd gotten just cutting into him like a fucking pork roast. I just wanted to leave... But there were so many fucking questions. *Something doesn't feel right.*

.6.

I sat in the diner, sipping coffee and smoking. The client was supposed to have met up with me about forty-five minutes ago. But, I wasn't complaining. At the very least, it gave me time to think about how fucked up I was. *What the fuck happened? What the fuck was that? Something's still not right...*

I took another sip of coffee when some entitled little shit sat down in front of me and pulled it out of my hand. The smugness on his face was enough to make me want to break it into tiny fucking pieces, let alone the fact that he just fucked with my goddamn coffee. That shit was like gold.

"Before you start breaking things over my head and threatening to pull out my spine, I do believe we need to talk like civilized men, first."

His accent was thick; he sounded Czech ... maybe a little bit on the Romanian side, too.

"Well *friend*, a word about civilized men – they don't take another man's coffee while he's still enjoying it and push it to the side. That's just fuckin' rude."

He laughed.

"My apologies. We do things a bit differently in my country."

"Good for you and your fucking country."

His face fell immediately as he began to straighten a napkin over his lap, folding his hands on the table and looking me straight in the eyes.

"We also don't take kindly to people killing our own in my country. Perhaps it is the old way of thinking, but we really don't like that sort of thing."

"Then you should have told your boy not to chuck an empty bottle of brew at the back of my fuckin' skull."

"I agree, it was rude on his part, but your punishment was a bit severe."

"What do you want? A fuckin' apology? Well, I'm sorry. Happy?"

I raised my coffee mug in a mock toast and drank the rest of it before slamming it down on the table and getting up to leave the asshole with the bill. I had all of my things, I had all of my reservations, I had no real reason to stick around when he spoke, but his words...

"I see she tried to use it on you. That poor woman really is a dull blade, isn't she?"

I had no visible wounds from my visit with Cynthia. I had no telling signs that I'd even stepped foot in her fucking room. And yet, this shithead sitting at my table, who'd grabbed my coffee out of my hands, was insinuating that he knew something about our earlier "altercation".

"My name is Emil... Randall, was it? Please, have a seat. We aren't done talking."

And now he was giving me an order. Did I mention this shithead took the coffee right out of my hands? He just took it. Took it and put it down like he fuckin' owned me. *This fucking asshole...*

I sat down at the booth again, staring at him with this malice that just permeated "I'm gonna kill you." He offered me a smile and reclined in the booth, getting himself all snug and comfortable. I really hated this guy. He was just... he was just fucking scum... Scum of the worst kind.

"Before you ask," his accent poured out of his mouth like a fucking vat of hot oil, "I have not been following you. Well, not this evening."

"Yeah, I wasn't really worried about you following me."

"Then the look of surprise on your face and suspicion was just something that naturally occurs there, yes?"

"Generally, when people start fucking with my coffee, my downtime, my package drops and happen to have the same name as the idiot who put the idea of kidnapping my kid in the mind of an overzealous bimbo, then yes. It's a natural fucking occurrence."

"Yes, well she was useful. At least now, we have some semblance of an idea where to go next. We are on the right path."

"And what fuckin' path is that?"

"It means we have you cornered, Peklenc. It means you have nowhere else to run, and we're closing in on you and your abominations."

"The fuck is "Pig Leg?" I don't know what you want. I have no idea why you're bothering me. I don't really care. But, I do want you to understand that I am going to kill you."

I felt the hunger from before filling my chest. I could feel my air shifting like it did in Uncle Drew's hallway. I could feel myself falling away to some twisted and primal instinct.

"I remember the first time I ran into your prototype. He was good. He was almost perfect."

“You know, pride from a dick ain’t appealing to anyone, Emil...”

“True. Which is why I am actually humbled to be sitting in your presence, enjoying a cup of coffee with you.”

He took a large swig from my mug and smiled at me like we were long-time friends. The same hatred I’d felt when looking at the Neanderthal came back in full force. Without thinking, I reached over and dug my fingers into his throat. The speed was enough to freak me the fuck out, but the satisfaction of feeling his flesh beneath my fingertips was enough to make me salivate.

The poor waitress was staring in shock. I could hear her heart pounding damn near out of her fuckin’ chest. It was enough to force my eyes into the back of my head and make my lids come down to shield them. The simple smell of her fear and the anticipation of tasting this fuckwit’s blood forced a small moan out of my mouth.

“You still have no idea what’s going on, do you?”

When he spoke, his blood oozed through the small cracks between my fingers and his flesh.

“I know that I’m starving...”

“And yet, you don’t know how to quell this hunger.”

“I could always try ‘quelling it’ with you.”

I dug my fingers in deeper. I wasn’t trying to intimidate. I just wanted to eat. I just wanted to satisfy this hunger inside of me. But now, I was drawing attention to myself. Patrons were staring from their seats; their mouths all dropping open like they were watching some outlandish zombie flick.

“You could, but something tells me you won’t.”

I retracted my fingers and kept eye contact. He smiled even as I licked the tangy sweet blood from my hands.

Within seconds, he was standing. He paid no attention to the wounds in his neck. He gathered his coat and his wallet before slipping into it and paying for the coffee, adding another to the bill.

“We will see each other soon enough, Peklenc.”

I glared at him as he walked out. The same tattoo that the Neanderthal had peaked out from the back of his coat around his neckline... *What the fuck?*

The patrons around me began to murmur. I heard one mumble something about calling the police. He caught my glare and quickly shut the fuck up. I smiled and ordered another cup of coffee, as my mind raced from one end of the evening to the other. That smile faded once I started trying to piece things together. I had no fucking clue what was going on, but something still didn't feel right.

I always knew my nephew had a problem controlling his temper, but looking at all the carnage in my fuckin' hallway was a long stretch from his normal tantrum. He'd beaten people to a bloody pulp in the past, even gone so far as to kill them in a blind fit of rage. But, all the corpses missing pieces of themselves was a whole different level of demented.

I started sifting through all of them, trying to figure out two things: one – what the fuck were they doing in my house; two – who the fuck were these guys? They all looked like they were from different walks of life than Randall dealt with. They seemed to have different styles, different tastes, different choices between weapons and no weapons, but they had to have something in common.

“They're stalkers.”

I looked over my shoulder to see Bob standing behind me with a pencil and a book in his hand. I stood up, wiping my hands off on my shirt.

“Stalkers, huh?”

He sat on the floor and looked over his drawings, the pencil now firmly placed behind his ear.

“Yeah, he said that they watch us and report. They're kinda like recon.”

“He?”

“Yeah, he's the guy that was in the warehouse. He kept talking about keeping the place clean and getting rid of filth or something like that.”

“Filth?”

“Mmhm,” he started to sketch while he spoke, “He told me that he was gonna spare me for some reason, and then he told these guys to find you and dad.”

I started to examine the bodies a little further, which entailed a strip search but something told me their modesty wasn't exactly intact anymore. I peeled their clothes off of their tattered and sticky skin. It was disgusting. Some of these fucks smelled like they hadn't showered in months while some were wearing imported Italian suits.

“Check their neck...”

I stood up, ready to light into the kid. I didn't know who he was and I didn't hear him come in, but I still had a hunch. I turned around to make sure it was who I thought it was. Low and behold, Randall was standing behind Bob with his arms

folded and blood smeared all over his face, heavily coated around his mouth. He gave me a knowing nod, and I turned around to search their necks.

“Tattoo, two spears, a skull and what looks like a bearskin...”

Three of the fuckers had tattoos on the backs of their necks that fit that description perfectly. The other two had variations of those. They looked as if the skulls had fangs and the bearskin was replaced with goatskin and horns. I tilted my head to the side to get a better look at the ink. It seemed a little familiar, like something I’d seen countless times growing up, just without all of the mindless hunter shit attached to it.

“The guy in charge of all this shit’s name is Emil. I don’t like him...”

“I take it you met him.”

“Killed one of his boys in an alleyway. Easy harvest for an easy job... Starting to think it was a setup, though... The guy caught me in the diner where I was supposed to meet the client...”

“Goddamn it, Randall! You’re still harvesting organs?!”

“You give me something better to do with this wonderful fucking skill set I’ve got, and I’d be more than happy to bow out of the organ donor business. But until you can pony up a fuckin alternative, Uncle Drew, I’m stuck.”

“Kid, I’ve offered it a million times and I’ll offer again. You can work for me. The pay’s not as good, but at least your boy won’t be under constant watch.”

“Later, I’m not in the mood to talk about my fucking moral standings.”

Ever want to grab some little run in your family by the ears and shake him until sense, or obsessive swelling, filled that head of theirs? Constantly... I heard the fight brewing between the two of us when the pile moved slightly to the left as a hand made its way from underneath the other corpses. I felt my eyes burn into the back of my skull, the slow hiss escaping my lungs and the weight of my mouth increase tenfold. One of them was still moving; clearly it was one that my dear, darling nephew missed earlier in the night.

He sat up and looked around, a massive hole decorating his abdominal region. He was also missing a few tendons, ligaments, muscles. *Guess he didn’t quite fit his appetite.* He groaned as he stood, both of his arms snapped backwards and his legs bowing out like a hurricane swept pine tree. He was fucked up and disoriented.

Randall walked towards him, and he immediately looked up at him, falling to his outturned knees and sobbing on his twisted hands. He shook with fear, though I couldn’t hear a heartbeat or a pulse.

“Please forgive me...”

Randall walked around him, stalking him. He looked like he was actually judging him and trying to decide what he should do with the broken man pleading on the floor. The man looked up, and his eyes met Randall’s cold gaze. My nephew had a temper. He was quick to hurt people and didn’t give a shit what anyone said or thought about him in the process; but, condescension was never something that I pegged him for. Never had I seen him look down on someone like they were less than a person. Never had I seen him scowl at them for daring to look him in the eyes. He usually enjoyed that shit. He was usually laughing or at least smirking at the poor bastards before he took them out.

“Forgive you? You betrayed me...”

I’d also never heard the kid use words like “betray”. Usually, his vocabulary focused around “you fucked me!” or “FUCK YOU!” He was just fuckin’ articulate like that. However, this time his vocabulary expanded enough to include “betray”. Well, suffice it to say, that threw me off. The sound of the annoyance in his voice was what put me on guard, though. He may have sounded like Randall, but something about the way he spoke completely twisted him into something else. He sounded almost like some ancient deity... Like he’d put this man here to perform a simple task and he fucked it up. *What the fuck is going on...?*

“P-please, Peklenc, I didn’t mean for it to go this far!”

The fuck is Peklenc?

“Tell me, have the others turned on me, as well? Or was this simply a solo affair?”

“They shunned me for this... They exiled me and told me never to come back...”

He laughed at the man like he found his pain amusing. He laughed like the guy’s answer made him *happy*.

“Do you remember when you asked me for that gift? How many centuries was it?”

“Three...”

“And here you are, covered in their blood, as well as your own, begging for mercy.”

“If only you’d made me like them, I wouldn’t have gone to this extreme! I just wanted—“

“Fuck what you wanted! You’re not going to be like them, like us! You were never meant to be that way!”

He reached down and grabbed the man by the head, spinning it like a top and removing it from his shoulders like the tab of a fucking soda can. He shook his head a little bit before dropping the guy's cranium on my floor and looked at me. By this time, the burning in my eyes had subsided, and my mouth returned to its normal weight.

"I'm gonna go take a shower and get some sleep, Uncle Drew... Wake me up if you need anything."

"Yeah, that's fine, kid."

I watched him leave, Bob getting up and following him to their room as I stared at the two of them. I looked back at the guy with the tattoo and no head and immediately started piecing bits of their conversation together. *Peklenc... why does that sound familiar? Fuck! There's blood all over my fucking floor. Goddamn it, Randall...*

The water felt like a fuckin' godsend as it ran down my back, through my open wounds. It stung a bit, but feeling the heat getting rid of the frostbite and the shit that was firmly planted in every cut I had was amazing. I couldn't help but sigh a little bit.

That night was a fucking clusterfuck. I felt like two different people. One minute, I'm sitting in a diner drinking coffee, being interrupted by some slender ninja-looking fuck. The next, I'm at my Uncle Drew's telling him I was taking a shower. Might have thought he flipped his shit again and went all Terminator on the guys in the hallway, but the look on his face told me that I did it. As far as I knew, I'd only killed one man. I only took one life. *Only one...*

I shook my head and tried to clear out some of the confusion, because that's how that works, right? Shake your head, kick a few thoughts out and then you're a fuckin' superstar again... Yeah, probably not really how that works.

Peklenc... Peklenc... Who the fuck is Peklenc? Again, the name sounded familiar. It sounded like something my mother used to tell me about. Maybe it was a story or something? Shit, Peklenc was....

"You are a lot like him, Randall: quick tempered, easily annoyed and expecting people to always do things the way they fuckin' say they're going to do things."

Her accent bore a thick Irish shunt and a bit of spiced Bostonian twang. The woman chosen to bear me as her son always had a knack for telling me a variety of stories as she cleaned her weaponry. Firearms were her specialty. A quick flick of the barrel, a wonderful caress of the hammer – she was a fucking artist by the standards of most humans; though, they always found her a bit unnerving. Perhaps, that is the reason she became my mother.

"Y'know, they say we come from him. Crazy fuckin' chaotic bastard..."

She seemed to have a sturdy grasp on the Zawadski lineage, despite minor discrepancies here and there. She knew of Diavol, my prized creation. She knew of my investment in this twisted little population control experiment I called the Zawadski clan, and something told me she'd known my true identity from birth. The woman was a genius, even if she did keep her knowledge under the firm wrapping of a coiled handgun.

She used to tell me when she was growing up, she had a bit of an ailment that she shared with my grandfather – they were both blood guzzling sociopaths. She knew of her condition, the price for being a member of this family. She knew she couldn't control it, and yet it didn't anger her. To the contrary, she actually embraced it. Unfortunately, I'm sure embracing it is what caused her death in the long run. Her body hadn't found its way back to its original design quite fast enough. It was hindered by the modern way of living. There were no predators or dangers for her to adapt to. She was a saint among delinquents and, if given the opportunity, I would love to place her in the appropriate body: one strong and vibrant. One that

could handle the cursed gift she and others in her line are forced to bear. *Oh well.* I actually find myself vying for her comfort.

The cascading waters remind me of her warmth, of the twins I named my sisters. The sting in my flesh brought back memories of my time amongst the dead. The way they continuously gripped my body in an attempt to drain some ounce of mercy from my veins was pathetic and rang rancid in my meat like a dozen lashes from a reed whip. Some knew how to carry themselves; they knew of the respect that a man such as myself would command. They were the ones I'd rewarded with sight, speed, stamina and a lust for balance. They were the ones who knew what was at stake, the ones I gave back to their bodies and sent on their way.

Now, as I stand underneath this manmade waterfall, I curse the day Diavol let his soul live. *Emil.* His fight was intriguing. Never had I seen a hunter make such a dent in Diavol's armor. He was the flawless hunter, capable of removing a stain from the Earth's surface without batting an eye. And yet, Emil had found a way to wound him. He'd found a way to escape my clutches and reincarnate time and time again. He was a menace. A menace that I may find some use for...

Somehow, I ended up in the room Uncle Drew had given me and Bob. I wanted to keep questioning it, but I'd had enough with the fuckin' questions, at least for tonight. I just wanted to stick my head on that fuckin' pillow and let myself drift off into sweet nothingness. Fuck, what they say about the cool side of the pillow being the mattress's beautiful mistress, yeah... it was true. As soon as my head hit that down stuffed sack, I was out. Darkness fell on my mind and I felt like I'd been frozen. It was a good frozen, though; like everything was just fuckin' peachy keen. Then, I started getting flashes. They were pretty gruesome, even by my standards. I saw a man, long black hair, burning red eyes, a weird burned in tattoo and a mouth full of knives hunched over a corpse. I thought about walking over to the weird fuck, but something kept me standing in place. He pulled off a limb, I think it was a fuckin' arm, and started to chew on it like it was just a piece of flesh you could pick up at the local BBQ joint. He bit into it and started tearing it to ribbons. Then he started nibbling on the bone. It was fucking brutal. I turned away for a second to catch my breath.

By the time I looked back up, the guy was staring at me with a half-cocked smirk on his face. He was holding the head of his dinner in his hand and tossed it over to me. I caught it out of instinct. The severed thing was looking away with ghosted eyes. I looked up at the guy, but he was gone. I was left holding someone's fuckin' head. When I looked back at it, it was staring up at me with a familiar smirk.

"Nice to finally meet you, Peklenc..."

This guy sounded exactly like that smug prick at the diner. I saw red, and before I knew what I was doing I'd turned his gourd into a nice mash of ground brain stew with a side of fuckin' headcheese. I dropped the remnants and stared at it. Then I felt him looking at me. The man with the blood fetish was staring straight at me.

I shot up out from underneath my covers and looked around, sweat pouring down my face. I tried to catch my breath and made the mistake of looking around. Wouldn't you know it? Bob was standing right by the side of my bed staring straight at me in the same fashion as the flesh eater from my dream. I jumped a little bit, ready to start swinging.

"You alright dad?" His voice was rigid and cold. He didn't sound like my boy.

"Yeah, kid. Just had a fucked up dream."

There was no banter, no nothing. He simply turned around and crawled into the other bed across the room – staring at me. I made a face and he turned over. He fell asleep immediately. Me on the other hand, yeah I wasn't heading back into that clusterfuck of a nightmare. *Fuck that...*

Peklenc was no idiot. He knew I'd stolen his son, his prodigy, his pride and joy. He knew I'd taken him, but I could tell he had some trouble figuring out why. I'm not sure if he's simply toying with me or if the human coil he's decided to bond with has actually taken its toll and ripped its way through his consciousness. Either way, something seemed to be playing out in my favor.

He doesn't remember me. He has seen my face and has no idea where I've been or why it haunts his nightmares. Before, his beloved Diavol took his toll on my body. He'd ripped me into bloody cutlets right before he feasted on my flesh and buried my bones. Diavol was my greatest opponent; thus, I could only imagine going up against the one who created him...

I recall that day fondly. There I stood before the great Peklenc. His realm wasn't one of glory and splendor. In fact, it'd been overrun with despair and anguish. He sat atop a pile of human remains mixed in with the remains of those he'd condemned to a life of ghoulish servitude. I approached him, his face solemn as he sat with his thoughts; eyes fastened shut as if they'd been carved from stone. I stood before him; blood caked on my face from the battle before. I knelt in front of him, summoning his presence with the utmost reverence. That is when he granted me my audience.

"I have waited for this since I was but a boy."

"You have lost against my creation, found yourself within my realm, and now you see fit to remove me from my present state of mind to give you an audience for this foolery that exits your lips. I should have you dismembered."

I wasn't one to give in too easily, but something about him made me feel as though he would take me and rip my bones from their meat if only to prove a rancid point. I refused to make eye contact, gluing my gaze to the ground.

"I am not here to grovel. In the end, I understand that you will do with me what you please. However, I will not falter in my requests."

"And what requests are those?"

"Face me."

His laugh carried throughout the temple. I wanted to curl into myself and die as he found humor in my plea. But, seeing as how death had already claimed me, I was forced to withstand his torturous grin.

"You would have me face you, when you couldn't hold your own against a simple creation."

I raised my head out of spite, defiance and some sickening desire to incur his wrath. His grin subsided as he peered down at me with searing red eyes.

“Your creation was designed for the simple purpose of removing humans from that realm once inhabited by you and yours. I will make no excuse as to why I lost the battle, but I will not be placed against the grain for your amusement.”

Some part of my throat sank deep into my stomach as I wished that I’d never opened my mouth. I’d hoped that all I’d said to the god was locked within the depths of my mind, but I knew that I’d opened my mouth and was blaspheming the likes no mortal had ever dared within this realm.

“Emil,” his voice was soft and deadly, “do you truly assume that I created Diavol and removed the humanity from his soul only to reclaim the Earth?”

“What other reason would you have for creating such a creature if not to remove my kind from existence?”

“You truly know nothing. Despite your heart’s ability to forge courage from the depths of nothingness and your burning desire to prove your skills, your tattered mind cannot comprehend the magnitude of my creation. He was simply designed to remove imbalance.”

Imbalance? He said it to me as if someone had thrown his world out of line. He stood before me, darkness draping over his body like a silken shawl as he reached for my shoulder. He raised me from my kneeling stance and lifted my head. Every ounce of my body was screaming to plunge some sort of pointed object into the deity’s heart, but I refrained. I’d been taught to hunt his creatures by the clan I’d aligned myself with, but I never once abandoned my respect for the gods. Nor did I ever abandon my insatiable appetite for blood. I needed to fight, to feed my inner demon, to pull myself away from the world of idiotic politicians and barbaric practices, and the only way for me to do that was to raise my fists and weapons in combat.

To this day, I wonder if he’d found something within me worthy enough to grant me my heart’s desire. To this day, I wonder if I’d done something in my past life to offend him for his lawless punishment. No matter, he has shown me exactly how to rid myself of the human annoyance that binds my wrists and ankles whilst I drool over the succulent souls buried deep within man’s flesh. *Oh, dearest Peklenc, you are now as they are... Another delicacy to feed my unbearable appetite...*

.10.

Bob seemed to be getting back to himself, even if it did take a few weeks. Uncle Drew'd finally gone back to his medical practice, helping people out of a piece of shit cardboard box-looking building, which I never understood. The man could afford to build whatever he wanted, and yet he continued to live like a pauper. Then again, my mother always mentioned how they grew up and what they never had. Old habits die hard, I guess.

The kid started homeschooling with a little help from Jimmy. Never knew the guy was a teacher, but there's a lot about him most people don't know, I guess. I felt good leaving Bob with him, though. The guy was Attila the Hun mixed with a goddamn tank; he was fucking unstoppable, which left me with enough time and sanity to figure this whole clusterfuck out.

I went back to the diner, my mind running a thousand miles a minute. The guy kept calling me Peklenc, kept referring to some deal, kept showing up in my nightmares and kept calling Bob "Diavol". I didn't fucking get it, I tried but a grunt like me ain't got so much on the intelligence scale. So, I went to the diner where that halfwit punk stole my coffee and forced me into a conversation, hoping it would lead me to some kind of resolution. I did this every day for at least three weeks, trying to pinpoint something. Turns out, I don't really have to be the one to pinpoint anything. Shit just finds me.

I sat at the same table I always sit at and ordered the same thing I always order: hot black coffee, the whole pot, and a beer. The same waitress brought it to me with the same bill I'd always had. I paid before she got a chance to ask, like I always did, and sat in silence drinking my coffee and sipping the beer. Yeah, it's sacrilege to some, but it ain't that bad. It's actually kinda good when you get the bitterness out of the way. It was kinda nice, being left alone with my thoughts, but I should've known it wasn't gonna last.

I took one sip of my coffee and some guy, ragged with his clothes draping off and desperately in need of a shower, slid into the seat across from me in the booth. He didn't make eye contact. He just sat there, stinkin' up my Wednesday morning brews.

I even sat there for a minute, waiting for him to say something, to move, to do anything. But, he just sat there, like a fucking idiot with no regard for common courtesy. I was getting angry. The poor waitress behind the counter moved to the back so quick that she almost tripped over her uniform, which would have landed her face first on the griddle. Glad she missed that. I hate everyone else on the fucking wait staff; they're idiots.

It took everything I had not to rip this guy a new one; and I do mean that literally. I wanted to tear into him. He seemed healthy enough to poach those organs, might've just made my fucking day to watch him squirm around like a fish out of water. I was about to confront him when he quietly opened his mouth and something resembling words came out of it.

"Please forgive the intrusion, my lord."

Again, here was someone else calling me a name I didn't understand. I was an organ poaching asshole, not someone's lord. And yet, this idiot sat there, fucking up my morning, and called me he his "lord".

"Look pal, I ain't anyone's 'lord', alright? Now, would you mind gettin' the fuck out of my booth before I beat the ever loving shit out of you? I'm trying to be nice..."

He squirmed nervously, and looked up. He had a shiner the size of a baseball. His nose was freshly broken and poorly reset. To make matters worse, he had swelling behind the other eye that wasn't bruised to the hilt. The guy was fucked up. He looked like he'd gone toe to toe with a fucking cinderblock and barely escaped.

I sighed and looked him in the eyes. There was something to be said for this whelp, considering he was terrified and still sat in front of me. The guy had balls.

"You hungry?"

He nodded. For some reason, I felt the need to be nice to the guy, now. I waved over the waitress, ordered the biggest fuckin' thing on the menu and another pot of coffee. I don't like to share.

"Thank you, my lord..."

"Enough with the 'my lord' shit, okay? Name's Randall."

He looked shocked.

"Randall? Was that name given to you or did you choose it?"

"You really think I would've chosen the name Randall if I could've named myself? My mother gave me that name."

"So, the rumors are true."

Yeah, I was starting to learn that anything that led with "the rumors are true" was going to cause me some form of anguish, be it physically or mentally.

"What rumors?" I was trying to give the guy a break.

"They said that your adversary had returned, but you were a mere mortal now; born from a human mother and living your life as one of us."

"'They'? The fuck are 'they'?" I was annoyed and he could tell.

"Your prophets, your followers, those who follow your legend; they proclaimed that you would return to us but as a mortal man."

“Fuck, are there really prophets and followers? And, how the fuck do they know who I am? How do you people keep finding me?! Who the fuck do they think I am, anyway? Jesus Christ?”

All of those questions came running into my skull like a raging bull goes running at the guy who slammed a spear into his side. My thoughts were angry, which was just pissing me off more. This guy sits at my damn table pissin’ off my thoughts and annoying the hell out of me. Clearly, no one got to be angrier than me; that was just a fuckin’ given.

“There is one, your adversary, who has been leading us to you. He keeps saying he wants us to watch you perish by his hand. He wants an audience, but his demands are those of a coward, master. He wishes only to fight you in your current state.”

“The guy that took my boy?”

“Emil, yes. He wishes to reconcile all differences. He’s been finding us... one by one and eradicating us.”

For some reason, that made my blood boil. I hadn’t felt this anger in weeks, and yet here it was within a few seconds and all because of someone I didn’t know and, quite frankly, found incredibly creepy. But, I wanted to protect him. I wanted to protect all of them, and I didn’t quite know why.

I felt my mind shift, the time stood still and no one seemed to move. I refocused on the man in front of me; his eyes widened as we made eye contact. He was terrified and made a quick attempt to look away, but I’d caught him before he’d gotten a chance. I felt the words flowing out of my mouth, but I couldn’t stop them.

“He wants an audience, yet he aims to make you suffer? Does he not understand his own demands?”

The man shook where he sat.

“Master, I don’t think he understands what he’s started.”

“First, he takes hold of my son, and twists him into something I’d thought long forgotten, and now he wants me. He wants to fight me.”

“Y-yes, my lord.”

My gaze was cold and barren. I felt myself scowling at the poor man.

“You continue to call me “lord”, but you have not proven that you are one of my own. Why is this?”

He gulped hard. There was now a foul smell coming from the other end of the table. It smelled like ammonia mixed with something sour. I couldn't help but smirk. The man had wet himself and was simply going to sit in it until I released him. It'd be rude of me to allow him to leave before he was given his meal, and this was so amusing.

The man rolled up his dirty sleeve and showed me his arm. There was the mark, a single fanged skull with downcast eyes. The skull was the mark of his temple, but something was off about it. There was a burned branding over it, like two tribal spears. I smiled and shook my head.

"He branded you. He branded you and allowed you to come to me with this disgusting mark."

"Please, forgive me. I..."

"You should have removed it, regained your original mark then come to me. However, I will forgive you this once."

He seemed elated as tears ran down his face. I had to chuckle to myself. I knew he was yearning for my forgiveness and now he'd been sated knowing that he'd gotten it. There was, however, a catch.

"Thank you, m..."

"However, you will do something for me. I am at a loss for memory when inside this mortal body. At times, I forget just who I am and where I came from. You must remind me."

"How?"

"I will give you the eyes to see, the nose to smell, and the instincts to track."

He looked shocked, but the smile on his face further told me that it was what he'd wanted. He wanted to be turned into my faithful hound, despite the legends. He no longer wanted to be taken advantage of as a human shell. He felt he deserved what he was getting, and yet he refused to ask for it.

The waitress brought his meal over; shunning his smell once she'd gotten there. I paid for the meal, tipping her a great deal for her service. She gave me a nervous smile and hurried away.

"When will you give me..."

"Finish your meal. You will get what I've promised soon enough. Besides, enjoying your freedom while it lasts is something you should learn to enjoy."

He nodded and finished his meal in silence. I continued to drink the swill I'd once called coffee and the tainted water people now called a decent ale. Before my earthbound mind could reawaken, I needed all of my cards to be in a perfectly stacked deck. The warfare Emil was waging was that of strategy, if only to get to the brute strength behind his wall of uncouth tactics. Before I kill him, I must applaud him for his audacity...

.11.

He stared at me for several moments. I knew what was running through his mind, and I couldn't bring myself to ask this pathetic creature what was troubling him. So, I continued to find him unsoiled garments, awaiting the moment that he got up enough courage to open his feeble mouth. We sat in silence for several moments longer.

He was showered, the water cleansing his skin so his proper hue and scars could show. His body was a mural of twisted wounds and gashes, burn marks and mutilation scars that would bring any warrior's stomach to nausea. He was fit, well defined for someone of his alleged stature. I was surprised, to say the least. I'd imagined someone like him would have seen nothing more the inside of a temple and his boring mundane day job.

Once his new robes found his flesh he gained the courage to look up and finally ask me the question that had been plaguing him. His nerves showed through his tenacious manner as he spoke.

"Master?"

Had I been in another mind set, I may have removed his head from his shoulders, but he found me in such a consciousness that I was more than willing to entertain his questioning manner.

"Yes?"

Humans have developed myriad ways in which they manifest their agitation, anger and nervousness. His preferred method involved the self-mutilating act of chewing on his lip until it bled. So many of his kind had chosen this method that it was actually fascinating to watch.

"Where have you been?"

"Here," I knew this answer was not the correct one for his query, but I didn't care. I found his courage amusing and wanted to know just how far it would go.

"I mean, where have you been in the grand scheme of things? Surely, you haven't walked the earth for millennia, have you?"

I simply chuckled and shook my head. He looked confused but questioned whether or not he should ask the question again. His hands twitched as he continued to maul his lip with his front teeth.

"No, I was not among you. I was recuperating."

"Recuperating? From what?" The shock in his voice was enough to send anyone teeming into a world of bewilderment. He had no clue what had happened to me. In fact, that was a tidbit I'd kept from all of my followers.

I took a seat on the makeshift bed in the large tattered room. He finished clothing himself and sat on the ground as a child would before his grandfather awaiting some ancient war story. I breathed deeply and began to think back to my earlier times. Everything was such a blur. It was hard for me to pinpoint the beginning of my unwanted sabbatical. Then it struck me.

“After Diavol was created, his guide mutilated and forced to walk among the shadows in hope of protecting and steering him down the right path, I found it necessary for him to have a companion of sorts.”

“But master, Diavol found his end a mere hundred years after his birth. Surely that wasn’t in your plan?”

I stared hard at him. His head hung low as if he’d deeply disappointed me. Truth be told, I simply enjoyed watching him falter from his seat of courage.

“Forgive me, my lord. I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s fine. Diavol’s death was inevitable. He had to die. His debt, as the creature he’d become, was paid in full once he found himself a suitable mate. His gift was transmuted into his child. I watched the boy in secret. I followed him throughout his life, making sure he’d found his way to his other half and to the woman who would continue our line. Despite the fact that the boy’s interests were elsewhere, he did create a family of his own, though his son had inevitably been touched by some sort of twisted hunter logic. I’d stake claim to jealousy, had I known nothing better.”

“The boy?”

“I surmise he was known as Drake. Yes.”

He shifted uncomfortably on the floor. His eyes darted from side to side as I closed mine. I could feel his mind working.

“The legend states that he had two sons...”

“Yes, Virgil and Luca. I made sure that Virgil was the one who cultivated the blood needed for Diavol’s return. I also made certain that he knew that Diavol was not his son. However, that did not seem to stop him from caring for the boy.”

“Please, excuse my insolence, but why would a mere human be okay with caring for the son of the tormentor?”

“I promised his son’s soul safe passage and, in return, he gave me the boy’s body.”

I began prepping for his ritual. I could feel my “human” half pulling at the controls, wanting to regain his body. He was strong. He wanted nothing more than to take his long awaited breath of fresh air. I’d overstayed my welcome, and I knew it. Surely, this quim could figure out that I was nearing my time.

“Yes, according to legend you adhered to that promise, twice over, if I recall. But, you have yet to tell me where you were? Did you not hear the cries of your people?”

“I was consulting with my elders. Nothing goes without their say. They thought it best that I remove myself and simply watch; create new strings, new vices, new perils for the human race to endure as I bided my time.”

“They confined you?”

“Yes, they confined me until a suitable body presented itself from the line I’d created. Suitable, but uncontrollable.”

I winced as I spoke. He was pulling at the reins harder. His rage was unparalleled, even in my world. I had to succumb, but the ritual was not yet started, let alone completed. I could tell my servant’s mind had switched gears. I owed him more of my deeds, more of what the elders required of me, but I didn’t have time.

He looked at me, fear filling his eyes. This man’s body was forcing me to falter. It was draining what power I’d had left and converting it into pure, unadulterated fury. Without a moment’s hesitation, I plunged my hand deep within the servant’s chest. He bit down into his lip so taught that he ripped through the flesh with rounded teeth.

His body held strong as I sank my fingers into his heart. The organ moved in my hand like a trout being pulled from its hiding cove. My hunger began to peak as I chanted a series of words. He began to fade as the one inside me pulled hard at my mind. I couldn’t stop him. He was emerging and there was nothing I could do to force him back. Surely, this move would come back to haunt me, but time ran short.

I took my servant’s hand and plunged it into my own chest. I mimicked the motion he was to repeat. His fingers were frail and cold, not nearly enough strength to stop my beating heart...

When I looked down, I saw he was buried wrist deep in my rib cage. I didn’t know what the fuck I was doin’. It was almost as if someone else was saying the words, pulling some ancient bullshit from the depths of my mind and forcing it into the other guy. His blood smelled sweet. *What the fuck?*

Before I knew what other weird shit was happening, I’d leaned over and bitten into his shoulder. He screamed and pulled his hand from my chest. It was like the pain had a mind of its own, forcing me to bite harder and deeper. I felt the bone of his shoulder crack in my mouth like fuckin’ frozen pop rocks in the summer time. And, for some stupid fuckin’ reason, I’d taken his hand and put it back in the hole in my chest. Somewhere in my head I was thinking, “I’m gonna fucking die.” But I felt stronger, bigger, hungrier...

This fool had taken control while I was weak. He found an opening and exploited it. I pulled away from my slave's flesh and looked him in the eyes. Tears filled them as he slowly began to open one then the other.

I pulled his hand from my chest and brought it to his lips. I finished the ritual with barely any time to spare. There was no telling what this ape minded baboon had done. I could only hope that he hadn't interfered to the point of ruin. He was very good at finding the most inopportune time to take advantage of the situation. He knew my weaknesses better than I'd known them, myself. He was a threat, one I could not extinguish without extinguishing myself. Perhaps, this was the trial of my elders. I'd created something so fierce I was unable to control it. Perhaps, they knew that this was to be my permanent coil. *No matter.*

The man collapsed before me, now a complete slave to my will. He was hungry; I could see it in his eyes. Unfortunately, I had not time nor strength to teach him what to do. I lifted his bloodied head and looked him in the eyes. He returned my gaze with much effort.

"Your name, what is it?" I commanded with what little strength I had left. The barbarian within me was feeding on my power and growing strong by the minute.

"Adam," his breathe was frail. He knew he was no longer welcome amongst the living as a man. He'd fallen from his mortal haunches.

"Adam, how fitting. You will have to find your way, but remember you are doing this for me. We have taken this fight to another... If he approaches you, do not give in to his demands. You have proven worthy of this gift once, do not make me regret it."

He nodded as my counterpart pulled his way to the surface, forcing me to my feet. He was stronger than me. Shockingly resilient for a mortal. *I miscalculated...*

I didn't know who the guy bleeding out on the ground was, other than the dirty fuck who interrupted my fuckin' coffee. But, he wasn't exactly on the top of my "give a shit" list. I was hungry. My body was hungry...

I pulled my mortal flesh from the dregs of Adam's apartment. I led him outside amongst the sheep wandering the streets, giving him his pick of the cattle. I was fading fast, but had I stayed with Adam, the exchange would have been in vein... I needed to find a way to merge with this barbican inside of me, to become one. This could not keep happening. Perhaps, bringing in the well-being of our son would be the key to melding with this tyrant...

There's so fuckin' many of them... All just wandering the street, no regard for their lives... I guess I could pick off a few... So... hungry....

My master left me to my own devices. Somehow, I'd fallen into his good graces and he'd spared me. No. He'd given me a gift. To most people, a gift from Peklenc isn't something to be overjoyed about. It's a curse to live among the shadows and prey on others. Sometimes, those people were the same people you sought so hard to protect and cherish. It's the curse that drives you to murder, to feed an insatiable hunger. Those who are destined to walk the earth as a beast were punished by my master, forced into a life of disdain and jagged hunger. But this? No, this was a gift. For some reason unbeknownst to me, he'd chosen me. Even after I'd made such a fool out of myself earlier on, he'd chosen me to be his eyes and ears; his hunter, if you will... *Me...*

I woke up several hours later with the sun beating down on my face through the cracks in the walls. I lived in squalor, not a single penny to my name before I'd run into my lord. *He may return to finish me if I continue calling him these things...* I'd seen his power, I'd seen what he could do, and I'd seen the power that arose within him. The man I met at the diner was the one in charge of that body; no one could mistake that. However, to see him overthrow Peklenc with such vigor was enough to make my head spin. *He called himself Randall.*

I pondered the name for a brief moment before trying to stand to my crippled feet. I felt the death from before creeping into my lungs slowly. I was exhausted and all but ready to collapse before the being that gave me this life. I was ready to die. Even in my current state, death seemed a welcome reprieve, but my body refused it. In fact, my body wanted something. The hunger coursed through my veins like PCP through a junky. It ran from my feet and fingers directly to my heart, head, and gut. I felt as if I'd been hit by a cannon ball, doubling over to restrain the pain. The things I craved now, not food but flesh. I remember agreeing to this term, but had I known exactly what the cost was then I may have reconsidered...

The hunger subsided for a brief moment, enough time for me to rise to my feet and get my bearings. The clothes I was wearing were new, my wounds had been tended to and I was no longer covered in filth. I looked myself over in a cracked mirror left behind by the previous tenants. I appeared to be a new man. *He's given me some part of my dignity back... Perhaps reconsidering was too harsh a term...*

I examined myself further, noting that most of the scars I'd had were now healed or barely visible. Even the wound from merely a day ago returned to its rightful make up. I ran my fingers over ever healed wound and smiled until a sharp throbbing exploded throughout my body from my chest. Then, I remembered the painful exchange that occurred only the night before. I pulled down my shirt collar to examine the wound only to find a new marking: a wicked fanged skull with Peklenc's mark surrounding the crown of the head. I ran my fingers over it; partially expecting it to vanish like a child's chalk painting in the rain, but it remained... And it burned. It burned horribly.

No matter what I did - cold cloths, towels, water - it still burned. *Eat.* There was a small voice inside of my head. It was feeble and weak. I thought I was going crazy and the reflection I saw on the other side of that shattered mirror was only

making things worse. It looked exactly like me, but had the jowls of a dog, the eyes of a wolf and the skin clung to the bones as if it hadn't eaten in months. I stepped closer to see exactly what it was that was speaking to me; surely, I'd lost my mind and there was nothing there but my own reflection... But the closer I got the more agitated it got. I was nearly nose to nose with the reflection when it slammed its padded hands against the glass and knocked me away.

I caught myself before I fell, grabbing my chest out of surprise. But those hands... I jerked my hand away as soon as I felt something sharp pierce my chest. Those hands weren't mine. Those hands were the same as the one in the reflection. They were padded, partially clawed like those of a beast. I looked up at the mirror, but the reflection hadn't changed. To the contrary... It remained where it was, growling and snarling with no remorse. It even began pounding away at the glass as if it was trying to escape. I didn't think it was possible for something like that to exist, until I noticed a few webbed cracks appearing in the glass. *No...*

I ran from the room as fast as I could, making my way to the front door. The sun was pounding the pavement like a 400lb linebacker. But, it didn't hurt. I was expecting some sort of reaction, but it merely felt like rays against my skin; just as it normally did. It was warm, inviting, nurturing... distracting, too bright, annoying...

I ran for shade, immediately. There was an alley that blocked the sunlight around the corner. I stopped there, sliding down beside a dumpster. Surely, returning to this filth would be an insult to my lo—I mean Randall. But it was the only thing I knew. I didn't know how to feed this beast. I didn't know what I was doing or what I'd gotten myself into... I didn't know the men walking towards me. I didn't see their weapons. I didn't know the territory was theirs. I only knew that it was hungry, and I needed to feed it.

Before I could gather my thoughts, the men were surrounding me. Some laughed. Others scowled. I knew they thought of me as only filth and, for some reason, that made me smile... A lot...

There was nothing left but a bone here and there, bones that were easily thrown into a dumpster or the gutter of the South Side. I'd thought the meal I partook in the day before was the greatest thing to happen to me, but this was far better. This was nourishment that I hadn't known that I needed. It threw all of my senses into override, forced me to see the world in a completely different manner... It was fantastic.

I started walking down the street after cleaning up and pilfering through the men's wallets. There was about \$400 between all of them. There were also a few ID cards, some lottery tickets, one had a grocery list and on another a note reading "8 P, the garden." At first, I'd assumed that it was merely a time to meet with a potential date, but ... *That man...*

He had a tattoo on his arm, a fanged skull much like mine, but with tribal spears behind it and some sort of animal marking on the front of the skull with smaller animal skulls below it. For a moment, I thought it was simply a tattoo. Then, I remembered the marking that was given to me only two days prior. They'd branded me with two tribal spears exactly like it before my meeting with Randall. They laughed; much like these men did only these men weren't all marked with the

same tattoo. *They were spreading.* Neither Randall nor Peklenc would be pleased with this information, but I knew I had to find the master and tell him... But, surely I couldn't go empty handed. He would destroy me if I interfered with his recollection time again. *I need to know more...*

Perhaps, I would show up at the garden at 8. *Ridiculous, there are dozens of gardens. How am I to find the right one, how could I possibly—*The voice spoke again, this time it was much stronger and louder than before. *Smell it.* The idea was ridiculous by nature, but given the circumstances, I stood a chance of gain from that command. I put the paper up to my nose, gathering the strange scents radiating from it. It smelled of the dead man but also of distinct flora known only to one garden. I'd gone there several times to recollect my thoughts. I suppose attending whatever meeting the dead man was going to attend could prove beneficial to me and mine. But in the meantime, I must learn to satisfy this beast. I must learn how it works and how to coexist with what I've become...

.13.

I was back in my flat in the east end. Everything seemed like it was back to normal. I was waking up on a fucked up bed, with fucked up coils and a fucked up headache. There was dried blood on my knuckles, and I was still fucking hammered from the night before. Nothing felt as horrible as it did a few days ago, though. Everything felt normal at this point. Felt like my life just needed to hit a few snags before it got a chance to reset itself. I dragged my 250lb ass to the bathroom, my hair screaming that it needed a goddamn trim while the rest of me screamed that I needed a shower, and I had to agree.

I looked in the mirror, those crimson locks of mine beginning to blend perfectly with the blood seeping out of my forehead; might have been because my hair was stuck in that gash and covered in brain juice. I slipped my fingers underneath my blood-caked locks and, as gently as I knew how, pulled them out of the gash. It hurt, like a bitch. But, the only thing I did was hiss a little bit at the pain. That was about it. No use crying, right?

I examined the wound for a minute, figured it was fine and began examining the rest of me. There were five cuts along my abs, six bullet holes in my arms, and a massive circular wound in my chest, right over my heart. *The fuck was I doing last night?* I ran my fingers over the wound in my chest, trying to figure out what could have done that and how the fuck I was still breathing. Judging by everything I was looking at, I should've been dead. I should've been, but I wasn't. I just kept looking and looking, getting closer... I guess I got lost in my confusion because hearing:

"Kid! You good in'eh?" scared the ever-loving shit out of me.

I jumped, shoved my fingers into that giant chest wound and managed to slam my head into the mirror when I went to double over from the searing pain running through my body, which prompted a "FUCK GODDAMN IT" to erupt out of my mouth like fuckin' lava. And as if it wasn't enough, I bashed my jaw on the sink on my way to the floor and in came Uncle Iain to witness the heap of mess his nephew had become sprawled out over the tile. I'd say embarrassing, but I was busy writhing.

"You look like shit, kid."

"Really? I thought I looked like fuckin' roses!"

"Ey, I was jus' sayin', a'right? Geez, touchy."

Normally, Uncle Iain was the one who made me feel better. It'd been like that since I knew I had uncles. Drew fucked with my head, fixed my mistakes (both physical and otherwise) and knocked my block off when I was bein' an idiot. Uncle Iain was always a good ear, sweet, made me feel like I wasn't such a fuck up and always knew what to say. Either way you slice it, though, both of them always had my back. Usually... Today felt like Uncle Iain was ready to rub my face in some mess that I'd gotten myself into.

“How would you know, you blind bastard?! Shit!”

Yeah, you know how I said I make a lot of mistakes? Well, that was one of them. Not two seconds after those words left my mouth was I eating a black leather steel-toed boot from, you got it, Robert. The guy was a fuckin’ ninja and had no problem getting physical when it came to Uncle Iain. Normally, Uncle Iain stopped him, but today I’m guessin’ I deserved it. He pushed Robert out of the bathroom and calmed him down AFTER I got to taste the ass of his fuckin’ shoe.

I guess it wasn’t all bad. Uncle Iain could’ve left me on the floor to try to figure out how to get up on my own. Instead, he held out his hand and smiled. I took it, I stood up and I spit a mouthful of blood into the sink. Wasn’t the first time I pissed Robert off and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“You got any clue what happened to you las’ night, kid?”

“I dunno. I went toe to toe with a world-class boxer wielding a machine gun harpoon and lost?”

“Well, nah...”

“Then you wanna tell me what happened?”

“You’s get cleaned up first, then I’ll tell ya, yeah?”

His accent was a weird twisted mash of something from someplace in Brooklyn, hints of Irish, and purebred Bostonian. In short, he was harder to understand than a Russian learning fuckin’ Chinese. But “cleaned up” sounded like something I would’ve done on my own; so, I agreed after kickin’ him out of the tiny 6x6 bathroom.

I was in there for about an hour and a half. There was blood caked on everything, and every time the water hit some part of my body I flinched. It hurt, but not from the scars or open gashes. I felt like I’d torn a few muscles, sliced a few tendons and gotten my skin torched.

I walked into my room to get dressed and felt those god-awful icy blue eyes following my every move. I kept searching for clothing, trying to ignore his stare, but it wasn’t exactly easy. The guy was in my head and knew every move I was going to make, which unsettled me just as much as it probably should have.

“So what, now you’re on guard duty?”

He muttered something under his breath, his thick Australian accent hitting my ears like sandpaper; then he took his stupid ass boots and stomped down the hallway. Sometimes, that guy really pissed me off...

I got downstairs and immediately pulled a beer out of the fridge. Someone had already started the coffee pot and was making the strongest brew I'd smelled since my mother. I found a seat at the table, after grabbing an icepack, and put my wounded ass in it. The icepack was a godsend. Fucking heaven in a 4x6 plastic sack.

"You know who we are?"

Without a doubt, I'd done something to piss Uncle Drew off. I don't know what I did, but I did something he wasn't happy about.

"Please don't hit me, today. Big foot over there already took care of that."

"Won't have to hit you as long as you don't attack us again."

"What?"

"You attacked us."

"Me. I attacked you guys?"

"Yeah, and we almost killed you. Probably would have if you hadn't passed out."

"Is there any way we could start from the beginning? This middle of the road shit ain't workin' for me."

I'd seen that look, and you only get the searing red eyes when you're lunch or you've done something to put him in machine mode. Both were places you didn't want to be with him.

He poured me a hot cup, put it in front of me and took a seat at the other end of the table. I felt like I was on fuckin' trial for murdering the guy's dog or something.

"How much did you have?"

"Coffee? None."

He slammed his hands on the table, nearly breaking it in two. He recoiled, recomposed and looked at me again.

"There was an abnormal amount of adrenaline in your system, Randall. You should be dead."

"Yeah, I was telling myself that earlier, but clearly my body doesn't agree with that prognosis, doc."

“Someone spotted you out back, in an alleyway, ripping into some poor schlep.”

Here comes the Yiddish... I hate the Yiddish...

He continued as I moved awkwardly in my seat.

“They approached you; you allegedly smiled at them and tore them to shreds. Even their organs were minced meat. If it wasn’t for Frank, you’d be fucking locked in a cell somewhere in a chemically induced coma.”

“Look, the only thing I remember about last night was some fucking dream about a guy whose shoulder I bit a chunk out of. That’s it. The rest is bullshit blackouts and waking up to Mush Mouth.”

I saw Robert flinch out of the corner of my eye, but at this point I was ready and welcoming a fight. My blood began to boil beneath the surface. My skin burned, and my eyes felt like someone had thrown hot salt in them.

“Look, I’ve done a lot of stupid shit, but you’re really gonna come into my house, sit at my table and stage a fucking intervention for something I didn’t do? You’re smarter than that, Uncle Drew.”

He shifted in his seat. I was making matters worse, but I didn’t know what else to do. The non-confrontational route wasn’t exactly one I’d mastered and I was getting sick of being put on trial. He stood up and ran his hands over his face before looking me over. He looked like he wanted to say something but he just didn’t have the gall to do it. *I really wish he’d hurry up, this fuckin’ headache...*

I saw him open his mouth to speak. Words were forming on his lips before his twin was snarling at my side like a rabid dog. Somehow, I’d felt proud about that. Years of flawless evolution and selection had finally made its way to the foreground. The one they called Drew was staring at Iain. I knew the older one’s instincts were on alert but he could compose himself in a manner that seemed impossible for his animalistic younger twin brother growling in my ear. I turned to look at him, my eyes meeting his as my brows arched.

“I’m not here to do anything. I simply want to talk.”

The blue-eyed telepath in the corner was on edge. Then again, they were never fully at peace. One of them always accompanied one of us, although the ratio had shifted in his favor over the years. He kept trying to read my thoughts, but judging by the nose bleed and blank stare, he was unable to do so.

“What do you want?”

Drew was sounding more mechanical by the minute.

"I told you, I want to talk. Do you think we can do that without any more bloodshed?"

He was methodical, which made him the most sensible one in the room. He took his seat again and stared at me. Those eyes hadn't changed since I first put them in Diavol's skull. They'd maintained their ferocity throughout the ages. *Yet another feather in my cap.*

"What?"

His fuse was almost shorter than his nephew's. He was quick tempered and lacked stability. Every second I wasted put me deeper into the numbers game, one I wasn't certain to win with my belligerent other half pulling at my strings.

"Last night was a mistake. You weren't supposed to get involved."

"You put Frank in the hospital. We were getting involved."

"I apologize for that, but next time I advise you to stay out of it. This hunger isn't something you'd do well standing against. The two in the alleyway learned that the hard way, as did your friend Frank."

"You're gloating."

I sighed. I wasn't trying to, but by this point they noticed that Randall wasn't the one speaking. They knew I was something he didn't want traipsing about in his body, and they intended to remove me. *If only these fools knew how devastating that would be to the man...*

"My apologies. I just..."

"Hunger, I get. Uncontrollable urges, I get. But you, I don't get. The fuck are you and where the fuck is my nephew?"

"He's here. He hasn't gone anywhere, though it would be much easier to speak with you if he wasn't struggling so much."

"You're unwanted, I take it."

"Yes. He doesn't like someone else calling the shots in his body, though he may want to get used to it."

"It doesn't have to be permanent."

“It does if you want him to live. This body doesn’t belong to him or any of you, for that matter. I created your line, I waited for millennia, and now I have my twisted and tattered reward. So please, don’t antagonize me.”

He snarled at me, baring only a few teeth. He wasn’t happy with that answer, but the perks to talking to the sensible one granted me some understanding. Randall and I weren’t to separate under any circumstances. Thus, Drew took the next logical course of action.

“Why? Why show up now?”

“The cliché yet honest answer is a challenge and a self-fulfilling prophecy. The man who stole my son...”

“Randall’s son.”

“You’d be surprised. Either way, the one who took Bob has a slight vendetta against me and this family. I’d ask for your assistance in ridding the world of this fucking scourge, but that isn’t about to happen. So, I will simply ask for your assistance in gathering information.”

“Intel. You want us to get you intel? Why the fuck would we gather intel for a nameless fucking parasite like you?”

“Because you need me.”

I’d never seen Uncle Drew shaken up before, but the look on his face told me that the last fifteen minutes of complete darkness was as fucking unpleasant for him as it was for me. *What the fuck did that idiot get me into, now?*

He explained things to me. He told me that the fucking idiot taking my body for a goddamn joy ride asked for some help with getting information. He also told me that they were looking into his origin, his name, potentially a way to get him out of me... But there was no way for that to happen; even I knew that.

The more I lost myself to him, the more I knew that he was simply a piece of me that couldn't be quelled. I knew that I had to fucking accept it. But there was something else bothering me. He loved to fucking tell people that he was me, that I needed him to survive, but for as long as I can remember, I didn't fucking need him for anything.

While my uncles gathered his intel, and my boy put his nose to the books, I decided to dig a little deeper inside myself. It was time for us to have a fucking face to face. I couldn't stand it anymore. I couldn't sit there with a thousand questions, fighting a fucking war that I don't remember starting. I had to do something and he was going to fucking help me...

I sat in my room at about two in the morning. The kid was asleep, my uncles were out running around looking for leads, and that strange Adam guy from before had left me alone completely. I finally had a fucking minute to myself, a moment to catch my breath and silence my thoughts. At least, that's what a smarter person would do. Instead, I sat in the dark, stilled my breathing and closed my eyes.

"Alright, you son of a bitch.... You've got a shitload of explaining to do and I've got all the time in the world. So, don't be shy."

The room went cold. It was silent. I couldn't hear anything but the slow thump of my heart. My limbs were paralyzed, my skin began to ripple and crawl. Even time was standing still at this point. Then it happened... My heart stopped and my lungs contracted. I opened my eyes to see him standing just a few inches away from me.

Barring the primal markings and blood red eyes, he looked exactly like me. Crimson red hair, furrowed brows... annoyed smiles. I felt like I was looking into a fucking mirror. He backed up and smiled, taking a seat across the way. His teeth were ivory white, sharpened to a point. There was blood on his breath as he spoke. The copper whisking across my nose made me check my mouth for any crimson that might still be on them. Nothing...

"Randall... You have certainly come a long way."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Listen, I don't know what the fuck kind of issue you have with this Emil guy. Fuck, the only thing I do know is that he's causing me a world of fucking trouble and it's time for him to go..."

"I couldn't agree with you more. However, my young doppelgänger, he has an advantage over the two of us."

"Right, he knows more than me, and that makes him more dangerous than me."

He chuckled as he shook his head. At first, I hated him. The guy was too fucking smug for his own good. Now? Well, now he just looked and acted like me. He was me...

“To the contrary. What he knows matters not. You’re much more powerful than he is smart. You’ve got an unbridled rage that he can never hope to harness...”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“There are two... He remembers our son.”

“Our son?”

He stood up and started pacing the room slowly, his eyes glowing in the darkness...

“Yes. He is our son. You still think that the one you call Bob has the soul of a human? He was the first one I created and the one who has guarded this line since the beginning...”

“I ain’t the brightest, but I’m guessing he’s just been reincarnated several times over. And I’m guessin’ that Emil guy has some vendetta against us... but you respect him, for some reason.”

I heard the smile curling up on his lips as soon as the word “us” crossed mine. I cursed under my breath and stood to my feet.

“Us... Yes, he believes that this is his world. He believes that hunters would have done a much better job controlling the masses and watching the numbers grow. He wants to take our position as the Earth’s equalizer...”

“I really don’t give a rat’s ass what he thinks or wants. I want him dead. I want his heart on a fucking platter... I want to rip his soul to shreds and gorge myself on his pain... And you, my godly parasite, are going to help me do it.”

“As you wish, my young doppelgänger.”

He smiled and took his seat across from me. I mirrored him. I didn’t know what the fuck he meant by “young doppelgänger”, nor would I ever know, but for the first time since this fucker surfaced, I felt like myself...

I stood in front of my master's home. It was humble. I may even go so far as to say it was poor and decrepit. But, he must have had a reason for living in such squalor. He wasn't poor by any means... Perhaps, it was simply to keep a low profile... Either way, his presence oozed out of this decaying building like a freshly carved animal.

I walked up the stairs. I didn't trust the elevator; even with this new primal ability dawned upon me by my king, I thought it proper not to test the boundaries of fate's patience. His door was opened slightly. Someone must have had a key or knew exactly how to manipulate the locks. I slipped in and sniffed the air, but his scent was too much for me to riffle through. So, I started in the closest room. Despite its humble exterior, the inside was deceitfully clean and well kept. The walls had a fresh coat of paint on them; the furniture had been properly mended; the floors were swept and polished to a keen shine. The only traces of any conflict were the notches ripped from the doorframes, and even those had been painted over and partially restored. My master's home was meticulous in nature. There was nothing placed in an ill light.

I peeked around the corner, hoping to find him sitting on his sofa, flipping through a paper or periodical. Instead, I was met with emptiness. I ghosted to the next room, the kitchen. There was a hot cup of blood steaming on the table. Someone was here or, at least, someone was here not long ago. I'd prayed for it to be my master, but he was nowhere to be found. Perhaps, he'd taken his son for a walk...

I went through his belongings but only found pictures of him and his boy. There was another of a woman with crimson hair braided along her shoulders. I assumed it was his mother; the resemblance was striking...

I felt the air shift behind me but could hear no pulse, no footsteps, no breathing. I assumed that there was a draft in the building. I turned to scout out the rest of the flat but was met with two glowing eyes and a furious grip. The man had me dangling above the ground with no effort. He snarled in my face, his fangs elongated and multiplying by the second. I felt the beast inside of me rise to the surface, my own eyes changing and a growl welling up inside of me. But, he was too strong and showed no fear. He was nothing like the others I'd faced on this journey. He was purely animal.

"Iain... Put him down."

The voice was cold and calculating, like a machine. It begged for my curiosity, and I complied. I saw a second set of glowing red eyes land on me. They were harsh and unforgiving. I could tell this one was nothing like the beast man holding me captive now, despite their identical faces. I pulled away from him as much as I could, but his grip only tightened around my throat. A fight would surely lead to my death, but should I refuse to protect myself... Well, my fate may be just a bit worse than that of a man willing to fight for his life...

Just as my fingers distorted and cracked, claws running from the beds where my nails once were, the beastly one released me. The other one stood directly

behind me. Even his air was mechanical... Perfectly slicked back, not a hair out of place...

“Five seconds.”

I assumed he meant for me to begin talking and had no intention of waiting for my breath to catch up with my speaking ability. So, I spoke through a hissed teeth...

“I am Adam... I came looking for my master. Surely, you’ve met him.”

“What does this master of yours look like?”

“A powerful specimen, red hair... eyes much like yours.”

He took a step back. I couldn’t tell if he was going to strike me or give me more time to explain myself. It looked as if he was gauging my response, as if he could tell if I was being truthful or telling a gutless fib. Whatever his conclusion, he seemed a bit more pleased than the one snarling over me.

“Why are you here?”

“I am looking for—“

“I know who it is you’re looking for. That doesn’t answer my question.”

His fuse was shortening, that much was certain. I mustered up enough willpower to force my primal changes back. I stood tall and took a deep breath. Once I gathered my bearings, I examined the man. I felt as though I knew who he was, but I couldn’t quite place it.

“I have news to report to him. He sent me to a hunter’s gathering a few nights ago.”

“And, you’re just returning now?”

“The hunters are smarter than I imagined. I had to fight my way out of it.”

He turned his back to me and walked to his twin. The snarling stopped immediately, and he fell into a stupor-like trance. The machine looked at me once more, this time his fangs longer and more deadly than his brother’s. He closed the distance between the two of us. I wanted to change again, but my heart sped to an uneasy beat and I couldn’t help but look him in the eyes as he talked. My body was betraying me one cell at a time and bending to his will. I don’t think he knew quite what he was doing to me. Then again, I don’t think he cared much about what he was doing to me. His words dripped with venom, and it was at that moment that I realized who this man was.

My gut sank into the balls of my feet as I stared at him. He circled me, sizing me up for a reason I'd hoped wasn't nearly as devious as my mind was leading me to believe. I prayed that the legends weren't correct. For once, I begged fate to tell me the scribes were drunk on brandy wine and ambrosia. I didn't want to be subject to the tortures I knew were lurking behind those keenly trained eyes. *At least, give me the decency of a lapse in time...*

"Randall isn't here. I'll take you to him, assuming you have information that might be useful. If anything you say is anything less than that, I will personally rip the flesh from your bones and feed on your beating heart. Do you understand me?"

All I could do was nod...

"Good..."

He walked out of the apartment, his brother following him. He had yet to summon me, but I felt my limbs moving behind him, regardless. I couldn't control myself. I couldn't stop myself from following the twins. Their power was truly a nightmare to witness first hand. *I pray this is all I will witness...*

.16.

The night was cold. I knew Peklenc sent his beastly spy after me. I knew that the eyes watching from inside that man's skull were no longer human. I knew that he was something for me to hunt. But, as every good hunter knows, traps must be laid and execution must present itself as flawless. If I were to jump after the man, perhaps even threaten him to give me some information on Peklenc's plans, well I'd be no better than them. This was an act of desperation. Peklenc was willing to stoop so low as to send a lowly servant after me instead of coming to me himself. He was weakening himself with a gesture like that, and I could feel him slipping into oblivion. It was delicious.

His other side was waiting for a chance to break free, and potentially rip into me for what I'd done to his son. Truth be told, I never touched the boy. What honor would there be in confronting my lifelong adversary in the body of a child? He would be an easy target, despite his knowledge of our history. I wasn't willing to stoop so low as to slaughter a child, but slaughtering his ill-willed father, well... there are perks to what I do.

I feel the day drawing nearer. I was close to being ready for the final showdown between hunter and prey. He was losing his strength, his power. Even his cohorts in the underworld were willing to give up on him, if only to appease their lust for his blood. The temples he'd graced were crumbling as my tribesmen and women broke through their mortar walls and dismembered their priests. He had lost dominion over the living, and the stallion he was riding inside of clearly wasn't ready to give himself over to an outside force. *You've miscalculated...*

However, there was no room for error. I simply had no room to gloat about a victory I hadn't won. For me to jump into the fray, my mind filled with sick notions of my fantastical winning, would surely end in my defeat had I gone after him as my flesh instructed. No, I will wait, and prepare... I know my adversary well. I know he has something lingering inside of him, but as time draws nearer... well... The final battle will be one that is wrought with blood. *I can taste his soul on my lips... surprisingly sweet...*

I couldn't keep my mind off of that fucktard, Emil. I wanted him dead. He obsessed my thoughts, my actions, everything about my goddamn day consisted of Emil's smug face. I was going to break it into a million tiny pieces and torch his innards. Not even a triple black market offer would get me to relinquish his fucking little toe.

Bob was with the Butcher. He was safe with him and his wife. Whatever fucking legend slept with my family was nothing compared to the air of dominance that guy could put up. There was just something weird and off about him... Something that I trusted, and it has yet to let me down...

This will not end pleasantly for either of us. Pig Leg's voice was loud in my skull. Every punch I threw, every skull I cracked, every spine I snapped begged for some critique from him. I felt like I was losing my fucking mind. I didn't know what was going on inside my own noggin anymore. I didn't care. I just knew that as long as that fucking sicko was out there my family wasn't safe.

Uncle Drew had taken a silent turn. He hadn't spoken in days, and Uncle Iain followed suit. It was kinda creepy watching the twins exist so close to each other. Mom always said they shared a brain, but this was a little much, even for me. The two of them existed symbiotically. They hunted together, found information together, beat the hell out of everyone together. I don't think even Robert knew what he was in for. But he did keep a close eye on me, for some fucking reason. And, I'd be lyin' if I said it didn't piss me off. But him? Yeah, I'd deal with him later. Right now, I simply had to worry about the fact that I had some huge boss battle cramming its way into my schedule...

Adam stayed with me. He broke the legends down; he explained exactly what my family went through. He told me about the twins and why they'd been split into twins instead of one single being. Honestly, when he spoke about them, everything made horrifying sense. They were nothing to fuck with... He helped train me, helped me think like Peklenc, act like Peklenc, release Peklenc... Releasing him... I hated that part... But he knew more about this fucker than I could ever hope to know, so we had to work together... I had to give him control...

My young doppelgänger was learning faster than I'd anticipated. Every move he made felt more and more natural. He was faster than I'd imagined. He had all of my strengths, lacked my weaknesses, and filled the void between my intellect and his unbridled rage. Our actions were finally one, and we were no longer separated. He was willing to keep himself from diving deeper into his twisted sense of self, if only to save his son from the perils that faced us. His hatred grew deep inside of us, inside of me. I felt his lust for death and destruction more than I felt my desire to remove Emil from this lackadaisical realm. I wanted him to pay for stepping into his own so quickly, but Randall... Randall wanted him to suffer a means beyond that which I could have ever conjured. He wanted him to pay with his being...

As the days wore on, his ability to make sense of normal situations waned. He frequented the darkness inside of us and completely relinquished control to me; but even that was a bit unnerving. He'd never been one to allow another to pull his strings. He didn't enjoy it. Every time I surfaced he pulled me back into the dark fucked up torment that was his mind. I'd warned him what would happen if he kept

retreating to the darkness that he now found so comforting, but he didn't care. All he wanted was revenge... I feared that I was losing him to the same path that had claimed my son years ago. He was willing to throw everything away... He just wanted to sink his teeth into Emil's aged and supple flesh. Yes, I'd wanted this at one point, but now...

His uncles didn't speak to me. They always knew when I was in the room. They knew when he'd given me the reins, and they knew when he was hiding from the world. They knew him better than he knew himself, but as it stood, they weren't willing to share any of his secrets with me... I'd never considered him secretive... Not until I'd found a corner of his mind that held all of his darkest desires. That place is a hell even for a god such as myself... The torment, the terror... the twisted sense of self that exists within his mind is enough to drive anyone mad, and I feared that he was driving himself into oblivion. He obsessed over destroying Emil. At times, I had to remind him of his own son... I had to remind him why he was doing this, but he no longer cared. He wanted blood.

Adam made sure to keep an eye on our surroundings. He brought me offerings, asked for guidance, continued to bring what intel he could scrounge from the streets. I knew that Emil spotted him. I knew that he'd allowed poor Adam to escape the meeting with his life. I knew he'd take the bait that I laid for him. His pride would be his undoing... Just as my lust would be mine...

When Randall regained control of his body, I watched him. He was alienating himself, finding his time alone with his fists more appealing than that with his family, his work, or his hobby of locking himself inside of a cage with belligerent men too drunk to sense their death. He no longer wished to procure the organs of his opponents. Instead, he reaped them and fed his lust for blood. He had become more animal than man. He'd fulfilled the Zawadski namesake. His assimilation with what many call the Beast's Curse was unnerving, at best... In fact, I frequently found myself disregarding the impending confrontation with Emil and giving my compassion to this man's family. Yes, he'd given me what I'd asked of him, and I was wholly grateful for it. But, what he gave up... What he sacrificed... I feared he was no longer man or beast...

.18.

I couldn't sleep. My impending battle with Peklenc was nearing and my soul was yearning for some form of retribution. *Delicious in all its forms...* The days were growing longer and the nights were dwindling to a harsh nothing as I sat in wait. I meditated, honed my skills, ate among friends and colleagues and gave in to all worldly desires. Yet, there was something still gnawing at me. Surely, he knew that I was coming for him. Surely, he knew that there had to be some trump card clinging to the inside of my sleeve... Surely, he understood that my victory meant his death and the overturning of his torturous kingdom. Surely, he knew all of this... And yet, he continued to act as if I was nothing more than his pion. He acted like this was mere routine. He treated me as if I was no threat to him at all, sending nothing more than his lowly servant to spy on my ranks. Surely, he wasn't assuming that he had the upper hand in this battle. He couldn't have anticipated my movement... He never anticipated my escape, or what I was willing to give up for this battle to become law... *He has no idea what I've given for this closing moment...*

Two days before I was to move on him, I settled myself. My bloodlust was rising, and I feared that I couldn't hide my secret any longer. If my kin found out what I was they'd hunt me to the ends of the earth with no regard for what I used to be. They would simply annihilate me like any other beast they'd come into contact with. They were going to hunt me, anyway. No man can stand before a god without having some kind of reinforcement hiding away within him... My meditations were impossible at this point; the beast inside of me was tired of being suppressed and would have forced me to push our engagement up sooner had I not found a way to sate myself...

The night was young and the streets were bustling with men, women and children. I bumped into a few, their scent lingering in my nostrils as I hurried past them. For every one that I distanced myself from two more popped up in their stead. It was maddening.

I continued walking for a few hours, regaining my sense of self and controlling the monster inside of me until I happened upon a grocer's market. They were butchering cattle in the back of the shop for the next morning's sale. The stench of blood lingered in the air and drove me from my senses. My mouth grew heavy as the beast's jowls grew over mine. My sense of smell increased with every swing of the cleaver. A lusty growl welled up within my throat while my fingers changed from those of a man to those of the animal. My clothes began to rip at the seams as the bones beneath them spread wider to accommodate the flesh swelling between my frame and covering. *So sweet...*

I'm not sure how long I'd been standing there, but when my eyes opened, and I was able to calm my raging hunger I found a small girl staring at me. She had a bag in her hands that looked like the innards of the slaughtered creature. She stared at me with wide blue eyes; her black braid nestled to the side as she offered me the bag of organs. *What is she doing?*

Her voice was soft and foreign.

"What's wrong, mister? Don't you want it?"

“Why would I?”

She shrugged and inched towards the open trash bin.

“You just seemed a little hungry, that’s all. But, if you don’t want it then I’ll throw it away.”

The words “throw it away” hit me like a sharp blade piercing my lung. Before I had any inkling as to what I’d done, the bag had been ripped apart, fresh organs dangling from my mouth. The girl wasn’t fazed. In fact, she was smiling at me. I tried to hide from her, but she slipped around to my front before I had a chance to fathom what was happening.

“I knew you seemed hungry. There’s more inside. Papa just cut open a fresh lamb.”

I swallowed hard, trying to examine the girl closely. She seemed familiar to me, but from where? And why did she give me this sinking feeling that I was close to meeting an untimely doom. Everything about her made my skin crawl, but the promise of more flesh forced me to disregard my safety and indulge.

I nodded my response as if she’d asked me a question. She skipped back inside and left me out in the back alley, alone. I watched all entrances to the small street, assuring myself that no one had followed me. *If they saw me this way they would tear into me with more vigor than I find myself tearing into these poor dismembered creatures...*

Just as my thoughts were heightening to a dull roar, the girl came back out with bags of organs and a few bits of muscle meat hanging from the bones. I couldn’t choke the shift back any longer. It was hungry and willing to do what it had to do to push itself to the foreground. If I fought it, my loss could mean the death of this young girl. So, I gave in against my better judgment.

I’d expected her to run once my body shifted to its grotesque form. But, she never left my side. In fact, I found myself lying across her lap like a young pup slumbers against his master. She was stroking the top of my head and humming something quiet. It sounded like a dirge from my old country, before my death. But, that song had long been forgotten by the people of my land... *Where had this young girl heard such a song?*

My curiosity was quickly put to rest by the sound of her tiny voice carrying the notes through the air. Her touch was ancient, old enough to force the beast back to its silent corners and return me to the man I once was. I’d never felt such peace, even in my first life as a mere hunter.

“What’s your name?”

I hadn't opened my eyes or moved from my original position. My breathing remained the same and my lips were still sealed shut. I hadn't made a single sound, and yet this little musing girl knew that I'd awoken from my sleep.

"Emil. Yours?"

"Alexandria... My papa calls me 'Alex', though."

Alexandria? That name sounds familiar... Why so familiar?
"Alex... That is a pretty name."

"Thank you. I like yours, too."

I sat up and stretched, opening my eyes slowly since before I'd collapsed across her lap. The night had vanished into a thin nothingness as the sun peaked over the edge of the buildings. The air was crisp, and morning dew set upon the windows and bricks of the old buildings beside me.

"Morning?"

"Mmhm! You slept all night. You must have been a really sleepy puppy, Emil."

I spun around and looked her dead in the eyes. She'd seen what I was, witnessed my innate ability to consume flesh, and yet she sat right next to me as if it was all normal. I crouched in front of her, but before I got the chance to open my mouth and usher a warning against speaking she giggled. Without thinking, I cocked my head to the side like a curious mutt.

"Don't worry, Emil. I won't tell anyone. I promise."

"You won't?"

She shook her head so viciously that her braid popped her in her nose. She reached for it and crossed her eyes, examining the site. I couldn't help but smile.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome! And if you see Avol again, tell him I miss him."

"Who's Avol?"

She's gone...?

I could have sworn I hadn't moved that far from her, but she'd vanished...

The girl was as strange as anything or anyone I'd ever come into contact with, but she was kind enough to ensure my sanity and survival... at least, for one

more day. I stood to my feet and shoved my hands deep into my pockets. I had one more day. One more sunset before I met with the ambitious god... But something felt different... I felt like I'd been renewed... I couldn't put my finger on it, but I felt that the outcome of such a battle... Well, maybe it didn't matter after all...

My head was quiet. Fuckin' silent. I didn't know if I'd pissed him off or what, but I didn't fuckin' care. I had less than twenty-four hours to get my shit together. No one gave me a fuckin' date, no one told me a fuckin' thing, I just knew. It was a feeling sitting in the pit of my gut telling me my world was about to fuckin' explode by sunrise tomorrow... and I fuckin' welcomed it.

Adam, the fuckin' little weirdo that Pig Leg managed to wrap into this mess, was out. I told him to go check on Bob and stay as far away from this cat fight as he could. He wasn't too happy about it, but he complied. He kinda looked like he dropped a fat one before he ran out of the house, though. In fact, he seemed like he was walking on eggshells, like everyone else. No one talked to me, no one looked at me, and no one told me that I was fucking over reacting. Whenever I shot Uncle Iain a dirty look, Robert did nothing. He just looked up and sneered. The only person who didn't treat me any differently was Uncle Drew, but even he was avoiding me. *Fuck it...*

If people were going to be so damn nervous around me, avoid me, tell me that they were fine and then haul ass, then I was gonna make myself scarce; at least for a little while. I walked to the diner at the end of the street. It wasn't my usual diner, but with all the random visits from people who've done nothing but turn my life into the world's biggest circus, well, it might be time for a change of pace. Yeah, that means I have to train the wait staff all over again, but for twenty minutes of peace of mind it, it's worth it.

The bell over the door clacked against the glass as I ripped the door open. The hinges bent and the pins started coming out before I realized just how much force I'd put into that one pull. The old couple sitting in the corner stopped shoveling food in their mouths and stared at me. I walked past them and smiled.

"It's my natural hair color. What can I say? My mother was Irish."

They gawked at me while I found a secluded corner that looked like no one had set foot in it, other than the cleaning staff, for at least a year. *Perfect.*

I slid in and picked up the menu. I had no intention of eating a damn thing, but it's always nice to see what the place has; you know, just in case I want to bring someone here when this whole Emil bullshit is over. They had a few interesting bits on the pages, but the only thing I was interested in was the fucking coffee. They bragged that it was roasted in house, made specifically for that diner and that diner only. It sounded like a crock of horseshit, but it was worth a shot.

The waiter made his way to my table, his pen out and ready to take down my order. There was a slight defiant streak about him. Something that just screamed, "Fuck you, I'll do it the way I damn well please." He didn't speak, only stared at me expecting me to give him an answer without asking a question.

"Coffee, black."

He kept staring. So, I stared back. His eyes rounded and widened when they met mine. Fear ran over his body in waves of insecurity. His skin prickled as the fear

surfaced. I smirked. The kid wasn't as tough as he thought he was, but that didn't stop him from trying to sound tough.

"That it?"

"Yeah... That's it."

He turned to leave but looked like he'd gotten stuck. He tried to fight his way out of my gaze, but he couldn't move. In fact, the more I looked at him the less he moved away. So, I finally looked back at the menu and the kid fell straight on his face. There were murmurs from the other patrons. Some assumed he was on drugs. Some assumed that he was awestruck. Other just pegged him for a blathering idiot. Personally, I liked the idiot comments. Either way you sliced it, no one dared openly speculate that his fall was my fault. No one made eye contact with me; no one even attempted to glance at me. I felt like the whole room could feel the impending fight coming my way and had enough goddamn sense not to interfere with anything I may have done. *Smart...*

A couple hours went by. I was staring at about three empty coffee pots and, for all it's worth, the coffee wasn't bad. It was roasted a little long. Kinda tasted like burnt peanuts, at first. But, they got their shit together... The last pot tasted like fucking coffee. *Holy shit, they can do something right...*

My waiter came over and asked if I wanted another pot. I shook my head and reached for my wallet when he put up a hand.

"Sir, that gentlemen over there paid for your coffee." He pointed to a tall, slender man that I'd come to know all too well...

"I just wanted one fucking morning to myself. Fucker's gotta ruin everything..."

Emil smirked and ordered something for himself. I gave him the finger the way I always do and started for the door. The waiter stopped me and handed me a slip of paper. I opened it and stared at the chicken scratch that shitbag was trying to pass off as handwriting. "TOMORROW. DUSK. YOUR BELOVED CAGE." That smug fuck wanted to fight me on my own turf. He wanted to have his shot at me in the cage. The only problem with the cage was it was a place for humans to dwell and dwell belligerently. There was no room for a guy with a god complex like myself... not anymore. I slapped the paper back in the waiter's hand and glared at Emil. He raised his glass in a mock toast. I tried to pull myself out the door...

Yet, I somehow managed to end up at the same table with this fucking sociopath, sitting across from him, being civil.

"I just wanted to apologize for my initial behavior."

"The cage is off limits."

“Right to business, are we? Alright. We will simply be fighting with the appearance of two humans. That will be a fine place to get it over with.”

“You really think you can just make some fucking sport of this, you fuckin’ imp? I ain’t fightin’ in the cage. Find another venue or we’ll just spat over your fuckin’ headstone.”

His face fell at the mention of his headstone. But honestly, what the fuck did I care? I didn’t. I just wanted to show up at a decent fucking diner and have a fucking cup of coffee without interruption. Clearly, that’s too fucking much to ask for...

I got up and left him sitting in his own stew. He didn’t move, didn’t call after me, didn’t even take a sip of his fucking drink. He just sat and stared at the table. You’d think for a guy like that, he’d have heard the headstone threat by now, but I guess there’s a first for everything... Suffice it to say, I left. I just got the fuck up and walked out the fucking door. The waiter was muttering something under his breath, but I didn’t give a damn, and I wasn’t about to turn around and stroke his tiny little ego with a “what?” Fuck that. The only thing I wanted to do right now was get some fresh air away from all the fucked up shit that seemed to have a damn tracking node in my ass. *Shit... just one day of peace and quiet...*

Randall was different. He wasn't causing trouble, wasn't starting fights with Robert, wasn't doing anything besides push-ups and training. So, it was nice to see him get up and get the fuck out of the house for a few hours. He'd just been sitting inside in a silent stupor for days. I assumed this hunter had gotten to him, and I'd assumed correctly. The only problem was he'd gotten to him so badly that Randall didn't even recognize himself, and he didn't fucking care. He just wanted to kill this guy, but not just stop his heart and be done with it. No, my nephew was seething. I understood why. After all, the dick took his kid and used him as collateral. I'd want him dead just as much as the next guy... But Randall didn't think of a fucking strategy. No plan, no nothing. He just got up and decided to go all Wild West on his ass... And I got stuck babysitting his errand boy...

Adam wasn't a bad kid. He was pretty normal as far as weirdoes went. He didn't try to sniff anyone's underwear or anything like that, and with his affliction growing by the second he was easy to read. The only unsettling thing about him was his dead-set loyalty to Peklenc. I worried that he was going to do something a little rash and potentially get his stupid ass killed. The other night, I found him snooping around a den of hunters. He was just in there, looking for some information that he could present to his master. They would have slaughtered him where he stood if they caught him, but luckily, he got out of it one piece. I will give him one thing; he's good at gathering intel. He gathered enough to give Randall a decent edge against this guy...

Randall kicked the door in, tore the hinges clean off the railing, and punched a wall on his way back to his room. I got up and surveyed the damage. I was going to need more than some fucking homeowner's insurance to pay for all of this shit. And normally, I'd be busting his ass about splintering my door, but he seemed a little off; well, more off than usual. So, I ignored the mess all over my floor and made my way up the hall.

He was sitting on the bed with his head between his hands, cursing to himself. His knuckles were bloody, like he'd been going at a fucking mound of sheet metal for the last two hours. Given the circumstances, that's probably exactly what he was doing. I pulled the flask from my pocket and sat beside him. I took a swig and offered him the rest. Even that would have gotten a ruse out of him, but not this time. He just ignored it. I nudged him a bit, but he was still unresponsive.

"Randall."

"He found me. He found me at a fucking diner. A fucking diner I'd never been to. Then that little fucker had the nerve to pay for my coffee, like it was my last fuckin' meal or somethin', and tell me where and when we were going to have our little spat."

He looked up at me with piercing red eyes. Eyes I hadn't seen since my brother came back from the war.

"And he's still alive?"

“Yeah. If I would have taken him out there, I would have killed more than just him. It took everything I had to leave that place without a fucking casualty. I’m not too sure I’ve got anything left in me to stop myself the next time I see his smug smile run across his face...”

“Well, you might not have to. I’m guessing he told you to head to the cage, right? Told you to be there at sunset?”

The kid looked at me like I’d put a tracker in his ass and tagged him everywhere he went. He stood up and stared at me. For the first time, I saw a sense of betrayal in his eyes. So, I followed suit.

“Relax. It was Adam. He found some good intel about the place you were supposed to meet him. The cage where you fight is run by humans. Emil knows this. He knows that you won’t risk anything with innocent people around, despite your reputation for being a cold, hard killer.”

“Get to the point.”

“Point is, your hunter ain’t human anymore and no one else knows about it. In fact, if his friends found out about his little condition, they’d take him out for you.”

“So, he wanted to fight ... Son of a bitch...”

“Adam says he doesn’t have many plays left. He becomes a prime target after this fight if he exposes himself, but he can’t beat you without doing that unless you’re handicapped.”

“Fuck it, I ain’t waitin’ another fucking night. I’m gonna tear him to fucking pieces...”

“I hope you’ve got a plan, kid...”

“Yeah, yeah I got one...”

He slid out of the room in complete silence. To say he wasn’t himself would be an understatement. But, what the fuck do I know?

I got his message loud and clear. He was sick of the games, sick of the roundabout interrogations. He was ready to put this little tryst to bed, and he'd spelled it out in big, bold, bloody letters. Literally...

We pulled our comrade down from the rafters of the old warehouse. His spleen was missing, along with his liver and heart. Across his eyes was carved, "It's over." I'd made a powerful enemy in the god of the underworld, the god of perpetual punishment. Never had I thought about turning away from this fight until now. The carnage he brought to my front door was twisted and blown so far out of proportion that I couldn't recognize these actions as his. He was more tactical than this. He always had everything perfectly planned out, but this was a move made in vulgar rage... What was worse was the fact that he'd managed to infiltrate us without a sound and killed at least a dozen of our fellow hunters.

He was livid. He was thirsty for blood and left no room for misinterpretation. His incisions were surgical; his cauterization of the wounds was perfect. There was no wasted blood. He utilized every ounce that once pumped through the young one's body. And yet, the brutality was immeasurable.

"Sew him shut. We give him a proper burial at dawn."

There was no response...

"Get it done!"

My rage had clouded my sense of my surroundings. I turned to face the men who'd helped me bring the boy down, but there was no one to be found. They'd all gone missing but without a single footprint being slammed against the concrete. I immediately surveyed the remaining sections of the room. The shadows were still, the air was calm; even the breeze refrained from whispering its lecherous secrets... Everything was quiet... to say too quiet would be a cliché but that's exactly how they were. I couldn't even hear the sound of my own heart as it beat heavily against my chest. I couldn't feel anything...

"Figured you'd want a head start."

His voice was cold and quiet.

"Well played, Peklenc."

"You still can't tell the difference..."

"Of course I can, but to assume that you are two different people would be to assume that you were never, indeed, one in the same... and that would simply be foolish..."

I tried to keep my voice from wavering, my gait from faltering and my hands from trembling...

“You’ve killed them all?”

“Again, assuming you survive tonight, you may want a head start... The rest of your clan knows.”

Despite my best efforts, I could not keep myself from gawking at him. *How did he know?* His conscious mind was mostly human, he showed no signs of being able to detect what I was, and yet he knew. Again, begging the cliché question...

“How?”

“It’s irrelevant... You have until sunrise before they start tracking you. Maybe it’d be better for you and them if they just found a body... or a few body parts.”

He smiled at me... That smile was wretched... I’d seen it so many times that I couldn’t count the number amongst the stars if I tried. He still wanted me to believe that he was not the god that destroyed me, and perhaps he believed himself to be separate and apart from his other side, but he wasn’t. He was the same man that looked to eradicate what was left of my soul.

“You’ve come a long way, Emil... You’ve finally garnished my respect... Now, I will honor your request... Face me as I am now, and I will give you the same dignity...”

I wanted to retort. I wanted to sneer in his face and tell him to go to hell; that I wouldn’t fall for his lewd taunting, but I couldn’t do it. No part of me could fall prey to the inner workings of my mind simply because I knew this was the only thing I’d looked forward to achieving since before our fated encounter ... I’m not sure what he’d done to me, what he’d turned me into as a man, but I couldn’t help but smile at the prospect of fighting against the creator of the demon that forced me away from my original mortal coil...

He was quick on his feet. For every blow I threw his way, he parried and came back at me with another blow at least twice as lethal as my own. Hands down, this little fuck was faster than me. He was obviously skilled in what he did, which made me feel a little better about throwing down with this fuckin' imp.

He was dancing around me like a goddamn flea on the dick of a dog, but his moves became more and more predictable. All it took was a few would-be-lethal blows from him to my now bruised ribcage and a well-timed blow from my left hand. He skidded across the floor like a fucking wet mop being hacked to pieces by a goddamn sword. It was fucking perfect.

He slammed into the metal tubs across the warehouse cement and jumped to his feet. He was still wearing his cockeyed smile, and I couldn't help but offer him one of my own. From the way things looked, yeah, he had me beat. I was bloody, bruised, spitting crimson life force from my lips, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he kicked that psychopathic switch I kept locked inside. He just kept inching closer and closer to the little latch that kept it all contained, and I welcomed the moment that he finally flipped it open.

I cracked my neck to the side and smirked as he regained his footing. It was only a matter of time before he... Yeah, before he did that. He was racing at me at full speed and had no intention of slowing the fuck down. I was alright with that, alright with the fact that he was coming at me with two concealed blades along his arms. He flipped them out as soon as he reached me. So, I took them both. They sliced through my abdomen like a damn katana through a ribeye steak. It hurt so fucking bad I thought I was going to pass out right then and there, but the blood that coasted down my sides only stood to make me a little more bloodthirsty. It was my blood and it smelled incredible...

Peklenc's eyes were a bright crimson. They lacked any remorse, and it was apparent that what he thirsted for was more than a cup of blackened coffee. He wanted my head on a pike, and I'd given him every reason to push forward through this encounter. His blood dripped from my bone blades and dripped onto the floor in puddles. I thought I'd bought myself a little bit of time. He was figuring out what he was capable of in this body and was willing to push himself past the limit of the natural man.

I watched him for a few seconds longer as he regained his consciousness. I couldn't wait any longer and perhaps I'd made haste out of a fool's fear and folly, but I felt it necessary to attack him before he regained his bearings. My blades sliced through another pound of flesh. I thought I'd reached to other end of his forearm but was horribly mistaken. I saw the twisted grin on his face, exposing all manner of tooth and fang. His crimson hair fell over his eyes as he chuckled. I looked down only to find that my blade had been buried amidst the bones in his fist. I tried to remove it, to regain my weaponry before he had a chance to use it against me, but it was rammed in so tight that I couldn't remove it with the help of a dozen men, let alone by myself. I retreated with one less blade and stalked him quietly. My eyes

never left his, and for the first time I felt like I was the hunted. *Maybe I should get used to this...*

He slid the blade out of his knuckle bed with ease and ran the sharp ridges over his tongue. His eyes burned so bright I was sure he was going to escort me from this realm with nothing more than a blink. He'd gone completely mad. *I can't beat him...*

The doubt in Emil's eyes was delicious, even at its worst. Few people understood the importance of keeping my blood on the inside of my body during a fight. There was always one fuck in the cage who thought they could pull a blade. Every time, I use their fucking spines to stir my winning cup of Joe, and yet they still keep coming at me with their cheating ways. *Fucking idiot...*

I grabbed a chain from the floor. Its scent was familiar... I ran it underneath my nose and took in the smell of dried blood. My dried blood. The fear overtook his eyes as I wrapped it around my bloodied fist. He stepped back and searched around for something to hide behind. The only problem with having your fucking fanboy club of hunters in a big ass warehouse is the floor plan. Yeah, it's fucking great for torture, training and interrogation, but it ain't so good for facing off against a fuckin' psychopath with your number.

Before he had a chance to make a run for the barrels, I buried my chained fist in his gut. He coughed enough blood to make a good lot of blood sausage for a fucking Irish homecoming. I heard every bone in his chest snap within seconds, and there he lay, a heap of his former self on the ground before me. Despite the fact that I'd never seen him in this position in my current lifetime, it still pleased me: on his knees, bleeding out across the floor like a fucking sacrificial calf.

I knew that he was fighting the beast inside of him. I could fucking see it, and it was only a matter of time before it came to the foreground. The deity in me wanted to push him right here right now, but the man in me... well, he wanted him to suffer for the shit he put my family through, the shit he put my son through... So, like a good father... I broke his face over and over and over ... and over... and over... Don't think I even acknowledged that my arm was getting sore or that his blood was meshing with mine. I didn't give a fuck... I just liked making tomato puree out of his skull juice...

With every damaging hit that connected with my face, the beast inside pulled itself forward. I had gone from being the top contender in this fight to the desperate coward trying to pick his face up off the ground... It didn't like it. It didn't like the fact that I was holding myself back. It wanted to be released against him, and why the fuck shouldn't it have wanted that...

With the minute break between his fist and my face, I rolled out of the way. He buried his fist about four inches into the pavement. His eyes were deranged and his grimace was twisted beyond human recognition. Not that it mattered. No amount of skill or agility was going to save me at this point. In fact, the only thing

that would save me was the beast that I kept locked deep inside myself. Unfortunately, the door had been left open and it wandered my mind freely.

I felt my features change and crack into something heinous. I was a man inside the body of a standing wolf... I consumed flesh as he did, I hunted as he did, I did everything as Peklenc did... And yet, I was the one cursed to move around as a putrid beast. Perhaps, it was the thought of how unfair the situation was that drove me to accept the change. Either way, I attacked him like a dog attacks its prey. He went down, but the smile on his face simply widened.

I dug my claws deep into his throat, but he simply laughed. Despite the blood filling his mouth and lungs, he didn't stop. He kept going... It was maddening to see him treat me with such disrespect. It was maddening to know that, despite his current position, he was still able to taunt me. I felt my soul erupt in such a foul rage that I screamed my frustrations. *Mistake...*

Letting his anger get the better of him. This fucking idiot was willing to put everything on the line because he felt like I was being an unfair jackass. Then he let his anger get in the way of his fight. Fucking hell, when the fuck are people gonna learn that you can't beat me with your untamed "fury". I hold the blueprints for untapped, uncontrollable rage, especially the type that comes around for no other reason than it had nothing better to do.

I buried my foot in his gut and kicked him so hard he slammed into the steel rafters hanging above. I rolled out of the way, blood running out of the wounds in my throat and face, down my shirt. I pulled off the soaked cotton and tossed it to the side. He landed on the ground but bounced back to his feet like a mad man. He was growling, foaming at the mouth. His jowls were heavy with fangs and he wore the face of a dog, yet he stood on two legs like a man. He was adept at wielding those claws, but he was enraged and not thinking too clearly. He roared his frustrations at me, and I couldn't help but laugh at him. The skulled tattoo on my chest burned so hot the eyes started bleeding.

The bastard charged me, and I met his face and swiping hands with my fist. He clamped down hard on my wrist but I buried my fist deeper into his throat and latched on to the bottom of his windpipe. He began to panic... He wasn't used to pain like this, nor was he used to utilizing it as a weapon. Let's review... how do you hurt a man who revels in his own pain and suffering? ...You don't.

He followed my hand, wherever I yanked him, trying desperately to bite hard enough to remove my arm, but there was no chance... I smiled at him, all of my thoughts screaming to put him out of his blessed misery...

I saw it in his eyes. I knew I'd lost this round and that I'd be damned to endure his torment for the rest of eternity... With one fell swoop, he ripped my throat from the confines of my neck, tied it around what was left of my jaw and...

Pulled so hard his jaw dislocated itself, and it went flying across the fucking room like a goddamn football... His body fell to its knees, and he collapsed on the other side of me while his skull lodged itself into a wall. I grabbed his arms and dislocated both of them by the shoulder before slamming my heel into his back and ripping them from his torso. I did the same with his fucking legs and pulled the heart right out of his chest.

It tasted like an apple-basted steak... It was fucking delicious... And a good snack before I headed back up to Brooklyn to grab the kid... Pretty sure Jimmy wanted his place back... Fuckin' four and a half hours, though... He'd be fine for another night...

Emil was the only mortal who escaped my domain. He was the only one who'd managed to thwart my securities and move on to threaten my livelihood. He's left quite the mess in his wake, but all in all, he was awarded the death he deserved. He was truly a warrior of extraordinary caliber... But I did warn him...

I picked up my shirt and walked out of the warehouse. I was about eleven miles from my Uncle's house. It was a crisp Boston night, and no one was gonna fuck with a guy walking down the street on the South Side with blood splatter all over him. Not even the fuckin' cops were that bad...

I stopped in to Aiden's for a quick drink. The pub was full of belligerent shitheads, but what the fuck did I care... I ordered the usual, a straight flush of whiskey ...

He dropped it in front of me and in an accent thicker than my mother's, he told me "It's on the house, buachaill. S'long as you march yer arse up the stairs and take a feckin' shower..."

I lifted my glass, chalked it down, and caught a whiff of myself. *Fuck, I do need a shower...*

Just as I found the strength to stand to my feet, I was slapped in the back of my head by a half-empty bottle of Killian's and a fuckin' slurred line of "Where's my money."

I'm covered in blood, just pissed off an unknown amount of hunters, and didn't owe a fucking person a goddamn dime... I felt the smile curl up on my lips as I slammed his face against the bar. Aiden simply wiped away the blood and pointed at the door.

What was one more fight? Could probably get a damn good dime for this fucker's lungs, even if his liver is shot...

End
(Book 2: The Organ Donor)