

*Death of a Creative
Soul*

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It's cold and dark. The rain is falling outside, providing a sense of despair and calming ambience. Here I sit, my soul wrenching around within my body waiting for the chance to walk around free of the bonds of this awful meat suit. I can hear the tears of people around me and it brings a sick twisted smile to my lips. I've been tormented and left for dead but it's alright. I had to suffer to get here, didn't I? It's not just my being that's under scrutiny, it's my creativity. Sure there was a time when all you had to do was paint what one has never seen and you could easily have been called an artist. What if you painted a piece of work without paint? What if your canvas was your home wall and the instrument used was scalp of an intruder?

If you paint a masterpiece with a body part and use the blood of a visibly breathing creature as your medium, you're insane, a sociopath, but if you use the life essence of a plant living out its life around you, you become a famous artist. Huh, because that's not fucked up or anything.

I used to paint the walls with the bloods of my enemies. I recall I once walked into my own home and saw a man standing over my good friend, laughing as he pulled the steel laden instrument from my companion's body, running the serrations over his tongue like he'd just laid into a bushel of fruit. His gaze was pointed and suddenly focused on me, standing before him. I guess he thought I would be afraid. I suppose he was mistaken...

Within moments I found myself painting a mural to my fallen comrade with the blood of his assailant across the stone walls of my home; my lips curled into a twisted and heinous smile as I did so. His blood stank of rotten meat and decaying bush, but my mind had taken leave and my senses were honed on the masterpiece I was creating in front of me. I'd started under the light of a dull red moon and ended as the drops fell from the pain stricken skies, halting the sun's pretentious rays. It was beautiful. If only someone had the brilliant idea to create a camera then instead of now. Oh well, it taints my most pleasant dreams.

His body had been stricken with stiffness when I picked him up, but it still moved slightly. Curious. I walked to the center of the woods and propped him against a tree so he could watch me work, watch me dig his grave. I knew he was still with me; he never truly left my side, even when I'd begged him to do so. Stubborn 'til the end, but that's what I loved about him. I started to dig into the sopping earth with my still blood stained hands. His eyes were still open, almost as if he was watching me from beyond the grave, despite my efforts to close them. He always was an odd fellow.

Hours passed and the moon greeted me through barely parted limbs as I finished. I moved to pick up his, now deceased, body. I'd expected him to be lying on his side, but he was sitting upright still, perhaps more so than when I had placed him. Strange. I placed no thought to it after a few seconds and carried him to his final resting place, placing a final kiss on his forehead. He was always a gentle soul, always one to stand by me despite what he'd been through; what I'd

put him through. I slowly placed him into the hole and began burying him. The night air was stringent and cold. My skin rose to meet it, the drops of the morning's rain still hanging from the stooped trees as I wished my dearly departed friend peace.

I woke up to the sound of footsteps coming in my direction. Of course they wouldn't leave me to my devices. They never left me alone. I camouflaged his grave to the best of my abilities and ran through the woods, the turf granting my feet speed as I did so. They couldn't keep up with me. There was only a hand full that could. A mile or so into my trek I looked upward to find a tree with large branches hovering over me. Perfect. I jumped to grab the bottom knot protruding from it and grasped the bark with my muddied feet. I ran up to the top of the towering structure with ease, jumping from limb to limb, eventually perching at the top and laying back to find some semblance of rest for my beaten body. I chuckled to myself as I saw them run beneath me, their hounds more confused than they.

Their footsteps trailed off into the distance; the perfect lullaby for a descendant of the Devil's blood... At least that's the name they had given me and mine.

Day broke the next morning, and through my squinted eyes and clenched jaw I sneered a curse at the towering sun. Its rays burned my olive skin as I rolled to find a lower branch. Without my knowledge, my fingers had curled around the upper rung of a vine and I'd slowly started my descent. My eyes still slanted, radiating hatred for the beaming light source above, as my feet hit the ground. I raised my hand in an attempt to shield myself further before starting my journey to find the nearest bout of water.

As I did, my insides began to wrench from side to side. A ball of hunger welling up inside of me as I passed bit by bit of the untainted forest; no human dared tread into these sacred woods and murder the children of the Earth. My finger tips grazed young saplings and old barked roots as I continued my hunt. Their soft touch reminding me of the viral and symbiotic nature that existed between man and plant, plant and sun, sun and life; for that, I suppose I could forgive the flames of teeming death hovering above me. As my mind gave way to undesired thoughts of forgiveness so had my journey come to an end.

The water was warm at the surface but below it froze. It was simple perfection. I continued to walk through the watery depths until my head had vanished from surface view, and there I sat for several moments, pondering the events leading to the death of my dear friend. The hunger inside of me rose again, but I managed to quell it. What would I do to avenge him? Better yet... What *could* I do? By this time, there was no doubt that the hunters had removed the assailant's body from my dwelling. It brought an angered sigh to my lips thinking of those cattle traipsing through my sanctuary and removing items they deemed fit for examination. This life was nothing like the last.

As I surfaced, my mind immediately ran to the years that had come before the beginning of my current existence. I was but a boy, watching as my father, Vergil, bandaged the wounds of

my eldest sibling, a smile on his face. The face that wore more years than any individual could hope to achieve though his flesh would betray his secret, warning those around him of his young age. He was like a stone, allowing the leaves and vines of those around him to grow upon his tattered soul so they may find comfort and solace. He was a very kind man... His tribulations were undeserved, but what was one to expect when given a Hellion such as Luca for a sibling?

The water caressed every inch of my now naked body. My senses thrilled to gain relief from the air around it as the calming waves lifted me from my troubles. Even the creatures of the lake swam about me as if they knew I was of no consequence to them. Why would I be? They were not what I'd hunted... At that moment, the only thing I dared hunt were memories of a life past.

My father was a man of little words, but when he spoke it was almost as if he had moved mountains. He was kind and gentle, his voice like velvet. He never once allowed his children to think that they were unimportant. In fact, we knew just how important we were to him. At least his true children knew. Many times had come when he took me aside, perhaps I was injured or in mourning of some type, and treated my ailments saying, "I do cherish you and love you as one of my own, but you do not belong to me." Those words resonate within me like the sounds of a dying man, but for some reason they never broke me.

I was not the bastard child of a fraudulent fuck by my mother. Biologically, I *did*, in fact, belong to my father. But he was never a man to look at the meat a soul was wearing. He knew who I was, but even to this day I have no idea, all I know is the role that I play and lives which count on me to play it.

It took several minutes before my hunger rose again. It was painful, as if a man had pierced my sides and drained my blood only to replace it with the venom of a coiled viper. I grasped my middle hard as my eyelids attempted to squeeze the life from the eyes they protected. Tears ran from the corners – glistening as the waters that held me, only tinged red. Suffice it to say, my thoughts had run back into the dark depths of my mind while another took control of the foreground.

I could hear the footsteps of another, slowly wandering through the woods. My eyes opened as I sank beneath the surface of the water, my breathing halted as I quieted my beating heart. She was young, only a child. I watched patiently, wondering where her company was. A child that young didn't wander the woods without the aid of another. I tried to quiet the hunger, but it grew louder within me. Damn it.

She slowly started to place her swollen little feet in the water as she sat by the banks, the end of her frazzled clothing falling into it. She didn't seem to care. I moved without alerting her beneath the surface, resting underneath a downed tree, taking refuge in its large roots as I surfaced; if only for a bout of air. She continued to kick her feet in the water, warding off all creatures that may have wanted to come closer to her. She was quiet for a girl her age. I watched

her for a few moments longer as the breeze blew past her and marked my nose with her scent. My head began to pound like the drums of the Romani people. My body began to lurch forward despite my best efforts to keep it still. However, it froze upon the appearance of a large man covered in the furs of smaller creatures. My blood came to a slight boil, watching him parade the pelts of the creatures he'd murdered for sport.

He frowned at the young girl, violently wrenching her from her serenity. He never waited for her to become fully aware of what was happening. Instead, he dragged her by her wrists; her tiny feet not grasping the soft supple ground beneath her. Once again, I felt my instincts rise to the surface as he yanked her along, ripping the skin from her knees. I stalked him until I had reached the banks of the water. My hands quietly grabbed the grass riddled shores as I pulled myself onto dry land. It was obvious by the scars he'd been given that he fancied himself a hunter. Humans are comedic creatures.

He walked slowly, his pride getting the best of him as he dragged the silent girl as one would think a child now to drag a ragdoll. By the time his so-called hunter senses picked up on the movement from the water my toes had wrapped themselves around the upper bark of a nearby tree. I waited until he turned around to gaze at the water, narrowing his gaze before shrugging off the feeling of fear that had encompassed him. I watched through unmoving eyes as he continued forward, dragging the limp girl away from her oasis of serenity.

The scent of her copper blood caressed my nose forcing my senses to heighten; I couldn't wait any longer. This sad excuse for a hunter had made his way into my line of sight, walking to the perfect spot. I jumped from my branch to a neighboring tree and began my descent; my hands lead the way as my feet brought up the rear. He'd turned around again, feeling as if something was watching him. Once his eyes had been brought forward again, he immediately met mine. I smiled in his face, knowing he couldn't stop what was coming to him.

His face became stern as he dropped the young girl and reached for his blade. By the time his chubby fingers had wrapped themselves around the hilt I was gone; hiding in the trees above him, allowing the vines and leaves to camouflage my skin. I laughed to myself as he began to curse. His frustrations were sweet to my ears. The young girl trembled behind him, looking around frantically. I dropped silently to the ground and scooped her up. Her eyes screamed of terror though her mouth never once opened. Within seconds my tongue had run across the blood covering her knees, slowing the bleeding instantly. I wanted to finish her right then and there but she was innocent. I placed her on a limb close to the ground but out of reach of the man aiming to recapture her. My finger met my lips as I signaled for her to stay quiet and to hold on to the branch. She nodded as I stalked him from the bark once again.

He started slashing the trunks of the trees around him as if they had caused him some sort of harm. I growled at his disdain for the life of another. Before he could turn to meet the source of my hellish noise, his legs had been swept from under him; trusted blade buried in his forearms

as he lay pinned to the ground, unable to move. His blood caught my attention: rotting flesh and decaying bush. I suppose this was the answer to the hounding questions in my head. Dear friend, you always were there to protect me and keep me on the right path. I chuckled to myself as he screamed his obscenities once again. My tongue found its way to his wounds, though this time it did not heal. Instead, his wounds gushed more of the crimson delight.

“Demon!” he screamed as if he was alerting someone nearby.

Oh how mistaken he was. Within moments of his next proclamation I’d wrenched his throat from his neck, slowly drinking up the blood that had once flowed inside of his tainted veins. His flesh was soft regardless of the muscle beneath his sweet skin. My hunger was satiated for the moment as I sat there, examining the nearly bare bones of the so-called hunter that lay before me. His blood coated my mouth, chest and hands as I stood and reached for the pelts, skulls still attached. I removed the skull from the skins, tears holding close to my eyes as I smiled gently.

“Forgive those that walk among you... They are young and ignorant... Arrogant at best... The girl has not wronged you, please.... Allow me to give her your pelt for warmth.”

I placed a kiss on the skull of the fallen creatures before burying them on the shores of the lake. Soon after, I gathered the pelts they had left behind and searched for the girl amongst the trees. Despite my ghoulish appearance she didn’t seem to mind. In fact, the young one wrapped her arms around my swollen neck and began to sob silently into it. I placed an arm around her as to not lose her small figure as we reached the forest floor. I offered her the pelts and gestured for her to be on her way, but she held fast to me. Strange.

“Would you like to come with me?” My voice was uncertain that this would be the better idea of the two; the opposite being to leave her be.

She quickly nodded. I quieted her for fear that her head would soon hit the ground and leave her small neck wagging about. I wrapped her in the pelts of the fallen animals. She smiled and sat back at the lakeside. I watched her move before making my way to the water, once again to remove the stench of the deceased’s blood. She watched me as if intrigued and overjoyed. I quickly shrugged it off and returned the smile she’d given me but a few moments earlier before falling into the waves of the water once again.

Several days passed. She skipped alongside me as if I wasn't some flesh craving beast. As if I was the gentlest being in existence. She watched me hunt as if it was nothing. She stared with curiosity-widened eyes as I tore my victims limb from limb; barely giving me a chance to stand to my feet before she reached for my bloodied hand. She was an odd girl; her complexion light but her hair dark. She never wore anything on her feet, and yet the hard ground never once pierced her delicate skin. She'd pick the fruit of the land, knowing exactly which ones would be best fit for consumption. If I managed to catch her fish or a pheasant for her meal, she'd smile at me and clap her hands together. Despite the times she's watched me hunt, not once did she mimic me; tearing at her food. Instead, she kissed the fish or pheasant and then proceeded to eat the seared flesh in an almost gentle manner. She was a strange girl. Although there was something much stranger than just the way she ate and acted.

I'd finished hunting before she'd woken up. She was curled into the bout of fur pelts I'd left for her. I placed the small bird off to the side while starting a small fire with which to cook it. I started removing the feathers and placing them into a small turtle shell – the shell was a bit of a trinket she found on our passive journey. She loved picking up random shells and old bones. A few times she'd found feathers belonging to the most colorful of birds. And the smile she'd always borne on her face when she showed me these things was simply beautiful.

I continued my task but was interrupted by the sound of her whimpering. I looked only to see her curled up into a ball so tight her limbs had turned red. I got up and wiped my hands on my pants as I walked towards her. She was shaking. I reached out to touch her when her eyes shot open and she quickly threw herself against a nearby stone, cutting the back of her little legs. I drew my hand back and watched her, raising my hands if only to show her that it was me and I meant her no harm. Her small chest was heaving, her hands were trembling, and her blood was flowing from the wounds behind her. Such a sweet smell. I couldn't help but take a step forward before realizing that it was probably making things worse. The voice that rang through my ears was miniscule and almost non-existent, although, it forced me to stop dead in my tracks.

“I'm sorry...”

That was the first I'd heard her speak. I'd assumed her mute.

The pain of the gashes behind her seemed to have hit her as she slumped to the ground and began crying, holding them with her little hands. I knelt in front of her and looked her in the eyes, trying to comfort her.

“It's alright. Would you like to take care of this for you?”

My voice, though soft, was tainted with hunger. I could only hope she was too young to notice.

She nodded quickly, sniffing and wiping the tears from her eyes; her blood smearing above her cheeks as she pulled her hands from her face. I wiped the smears away with my thumbs, immediately wiping them on my pants. I didn't want to startle her any more. I took her hands in mine and started to wipe away the crimson liquid between my hands. She just watched. I gave her a reassuring smile as I picked her up and placed her on a fallen log by the camp site. She stood up and turned around, showing me the deepened tears in her skin. The blood flowed in copious amounts down and around the wound to her ankles and feet. I knew what she wanted me to do, I'd done it once before, and from the looks of things I was about to do it again. I lowered myself, quelling the hunger inside of me. Her blood was young and sweet. It teased me, but I refrained if only for a moment, trying to control my movements. Within seconds I could feel my tongue gliding over the first wound, halting the bleeding. She winced and made a small sound before I could continue to the next. I looked up at her, waiting for her to give me some sort of answer. She nodded and I continued on.

Once both of the gashes had been taken care of, I pulled away; falling hard on my ass. I tried to shake it off. I tried not to think about her sweet tender flesh, or what it would feel like to tear her limbs from her body. I kept my eyes shut and constricted my breathing. I didn't want to hurt her. Yes, it was odd that I was fighting my instincts to save a girl I'd only just met, but there was something about her; something strange. My fingers curled in the dirt behind me as I kept my breathing under control. My eyes were still shut, the taste of her blood still torturing my tongue. All of my senses were on overdrive; I wanted to hunt her so badly. It was a mere second after the thought had crossed my mind that I felt a small warmth curl up in my lap. I opened my eyes and looked down at her, huddled into the blanket of pelts and staring back at me with pale blue eyes.

She smiled at me...

I wrapped an arm around her and held her close as she tucked her head back into the ball that was the rest of her body. I couldn't help but give a soft chuckle. Within seconds, she had fallen asleep again. Her little voice gently masking the snores coming from her mouth; this girl felt safe, felt *familiar*. It was strange, but it didn't quite matter at the time. At least that's what I seemed to think.

Night had fallen and we'd packed up and started off again. I carried her on my shoulders while she rested her prized turtle shell on my head. She was so precious, like my own little jewel. Our trek was quiet yet anything but foreboding. My mind was completely focused on her whimpering in her dreams. I couldn't help but think what could have startled her like that. I was lost in my thoughts, slowly growing more and more furious at the assumption that someone had done something horribly wrong to this little flower. I wanted to hurt them. I could feel the growl welling up inside of me, feeding my hunger. I had to close my eyes and force it back.

“What's your name?”

Her voice was light and soothing; almost silent. It snapped me out of my meditative hatred and back into the present. I continued to walk, my voice distant and dark. I hadn't spoken my own name in years...

“Diavol...”

She perked up when she heard it and giggled, laying her sweet little head on top of the turtle shell and gently closing her eyes.

“Di...a...vol... Diavol. I like it. Can I call you Avol?”

“You may call me whatever you please, little one.”

“My name isn't 'little one', although that's what my papa used to call me...”

The man from before, the so-called hunter, was not her father? Or was he?

“Was your father the one I killed?”

She shook her head as tears began to run down her face, staining streams along her porcelain colored skin. Her voice grew. My strides slid to a halt as I reached for her, carrying her in my arms as a mother carries her child to a cradle.

“I didn't mean to upset you...”

“I know...”

She trailed off.

“What is your name?”

She looked up at me with her pale blue eyes, now a deep purple, brightened by the blood red moon.

“Alexandreina...”

“May I call you Dreina?”

She giggled as she looked into my steely red rimmed gray eyes and nodded, recovering quickly from the tears.

“You can call me whatever you want!”

I couldn't help but laugh.

She continued to stare at me. I guess my laughter made her a bit more comfortable, as if she wasn't already. Her hand reached up and touched my mouth. I tried to keep myself from biting down on her fingers as she explored my teeth; the hunger inside of me pulling to the surface once again.

“Dreina, please. It's not safe for you to be that close to my mouth.”

“Why not?”

She blinked slowly and stared up at me. I looked around, making sure we weren't being followed or sitting amongst a well of predators. I sat on the ground, legs folded, while she sat on my lap.

“Dreina, it isn't easy for me to be around other people. You've seen what I eat, how I hunt.”

“Yeah, you're like a wolf!”

She made a snarling face and raised her arms with fingers curled to simulate claws. I laughed again.

“Something like that, yes. And, much like a wolf, your little hands that close to my mouth, to my nose, is like dangling a carcass in front of a hungry pack. It hurts me to say this, but it makes me hungrier. I just don't want to harm you, Dreina. You're such a precious little girl; the last thing I want is for you to be hurt.”

Her eyes blinked several times as her little mouth welled into an “o” shape; the gears in her mind turning.

“I have to keep my hands away from Avol's mouth so he doesn't eat me. But Avol doesn't want to eat me anyway, but my hands make it hard for Avol to not eat me.”

She quickly tucked her hands underneath her tattered dress and smiled.

“There! No more hands so Avol doesn't have to not want to eat me!”

I chuckled again and looked at her.

“Thank you.”

We sat there for a few hours: she made shapes and played with her hands and dress, while I sat, my back against a nearby tree and eyes closed, listening to the footsteps around me. The creatures that came out at night were not those of myth. There were flesh eaters, blood drinkers, and your typical midnight predator. I'd never had a problem with any of them, even when my dear friend was alive; none dared hunt him. I doubt I'd have much trouble with them now that he's died.

I knew some of them were hunting the girl resting in my lap; others were too scared to get within sniffing distance. I could feel their eyes, hear their breathing, but none of them were stupid enough to come near me.

“Avol?”

Her tiny voice broke the stalking silence that threatened my mind.

“Yes?”

“Are you a monster?”

Her question only forced a twisted smile to my lips as I nodded.

“Yes, Dreina, I am a monster.”

She cocked her head to the side, cradling it in my arms, as she spoke.

“You don't look like a monster, but if you are that's okay. I like you.”

“I like you too.”

She fidgeted slightly in my grasp.

“Avol?”

“Yes?”

“Can you eat bad thoughts?”

Her question caught me off guard.

“No, but I can try to make them go away.”

She looked down at her hands and sighed to herself.

“Oh, okay...”

I wanted to ask her what was running through her little head. What was it that was plaguing this little one so? I didn't dare ask for fear of another salt driven assault of tears. After a

few moments of my gazing at her raven-colored hair, her eyes met mine. She wore a worried look, her mouth twisting in uncomfortable positions.

“What’s the matter?”

I asked, my hunger rising as I stared at her.

“You’re hungry, I can feel it. You gotta eat, Avol!”

Her shrill voice caught my ears in a way that made my head jerk to the side. I took a deep breath, quieting the hunger for but a moment.

“I know, Dreina. However, there is nothing here for me to eat. I would have to hunt, and I won’t leave you alone.”

She sat up and put her hands on my cheeks, as far from my mouth as she could reach, and pushed them together.

“I am okay! If you don’t eat, you’re gonna eat me!”

I stared for only a moment before nodding and going to stand. She was right, and that concerned me. She was but a child, a life to live that would far surpass mine.

“Alright, but I won’t be far. If you need me, please scream for me.”

She nodded and I placed her on the ground near the tree where we both sat. She giggled. I suppose I’d hit one of her more “ticklish” spots. What was it about this girl that drove me to think so? I shook it off and took to the trees. I kept an ear on her while I clawed my way through the brush and vines that surrounded the branches. My hunger had reached the point of no return. If I didn’t find something soon, I would easily go after Dreina. I began to panic, my body burning hot as adrenaline coated my blood and coursed through my veins.

I wanted to double back; I wanted to hunt that poor girl. I knew where she was, I knew how easy it was to make her bleed. I knew that she could have easily been taken by a predator such as myself. But, for some reason I decided against it. The image of her gazing pale eyes sat at the forefront of my mind. I tried to close my eyes and come to my senses, but that was part of my problem. My senses were on overdrive and there was nothing I could do. At least, I assumed there was nothing I could do.

I stopped atop an old willow. Odd. I’d traveled this part of the forest several times and not once had I seen this tree. It wouldn’t hit me until much later.

The familiar smell of copper filled the air, and coincidentally, my nose. An inhuman growl surfaced, borrowing my lips and voice as it did so. I followed the scent of the wounded. My mouth was salivating as I climbed down the bark of the willow. I’d caught my prey sitting

idly at the base of the tree, unaware that I was closing the distance between us. My heart beat slowed as my eyes adjusted to the figure. It didn't occur to me that the figure's scent held a familiar tone to it. My biceps flexed as my forearms increased pressure to ease my descent. My feet held steadfast to the bark as I elongated my torso, slithering towards the ground. I could feel the hunger taking over once again.

The blood in the air reeked of testosterone. Male. Perhaps he was a hunter? I came up behind him, ready to strike, when he spoke. His voice was quiet and raspy as if he'd been deprived of oxygen for far too long.

“You never could control yourself, Diavol...”

The use of my name didn't hinder nor did it deter me from stalking my prey.

“If it's a pound of flesh you desire, old friend, please take it. I have no further use for it.”

“You speak my name and call me friend as if you know me.”

He chuckled before turning around. My feet stopped and my body tensed as I spoke.

“What do you want?”

“No banter for an old friend on his way off? Avol...”

“I watched you take your last breath... I painted the walls with the blood of your assailant. I gave you the burial you requested. Why are you here?”

He stepped closer to me, closing most of the gap between us. His voice was worn as he looked into my cold eyes with his.

“I'm not here to punish you, Avol. I'm here to help you. You're hungry and you will not allow yourself to feed on the girl. Smart. But there is no one for miles, and your lust gets the better of you frequently. I do appreciate the burial but you need to feed immediately. Please.”

I took a step back, my instincts screaming for me to attack but my gut held me in place.

“You're here to protect me...”

He shook his head and looked at me again.

“I am here to guide you. So far you've taken a step in the right direction. Please, accept your fate and finish me.”

“You can't truly expect—“

He cut me off immediately. His hands were mangled and bloodied as he pressed them against my face. I couldn't help myself. I immediately forced him to the ground and proceeded to

break his arms, tearing them from their sockets with a sickening crack and the moist sound of the flesh severing itself. He screamed, but what did I care? I plunged my hand deep into his chest cavity, tearing bones from his ribs and removing organs as if I was picking fruit from an orchard. His blood was sweet, his flesh was tender, and his bones made the perfect crunch as I bit into them. There was no stench with him, only sweet smelling crimson life-force. I feasted on his flesh. Pound by pound, my body began to incinerate him and take in the nutrients it craved.

I started towards little Dreina; this time taking the forest floor instead of the trees. I stared at the ground as the crimson moon illuminated my steps. Why had he done this to me? All I remember was his white skin and the glistening smile on his lips. His beautiful blue eyes staring into mine just as I took his life, watching him die once again. I grasped my chest as I walked; a sharp pain making itself known to me as I tried to shake the last image of my beloved friend from my mind. His blood still stained my face and hands. His words haunted me while his scent plagued my nostrils once again. I'd wanted to taste his flesh from the moment we met, but he was the only one to sedate me, hence our friendship came to be. He knew I'd craved him but he didn't care. He knew what I was, but there was never an ounce of fear in his voice. Even in death he was protecting me. Even in death he was confusing my senses and forcing my sanity to betray me.

I looked up and saw the young darling staring at me, her turtle shell in her hands and a smile on her face.

“Avol! You ate!”

I couldn't help but smile at her, although that look on her face...

“Yes I did... we should rest, Dreina.”

She nodded as if that was the answer she was waiting for. Without hesitation she ran at me, jumping into my arms and smiling. I kissed her forehead.

“I take it you've eaten as well?”

She nodded her head so blindingly fast that I grew concerned that her head would fall from her neck once again.

“Alright,”

I began preparing an area on the ground until she looked at me and held fast to my neck.

“Avol, I wanna sleep in the trees!”

“Will you feel safer in the trees?”

“Yeah, especially if I have you there,”

I smiled again, holding her as tight as I could without hurting her. She giggled with joy as I took to the trees once again. Her hair grazed my nose and her scent lodged itself within my nasal passages. Familiar. I continued to cradle her with a single arm in front of me as I ran to the top of the trees, finding a branch wide enough to accommodate both of us. I rested my back against the bark and smiled at her.

“How about here?”

She looked around, examining the area before smiling and curling into me; her turtle shell tightly clutched as she slowly slipped into a deep somber sleep. I brushed the hair from her face, making sure not to get any blood on her porcelain skin. She was like a sleeping angel before me. I stared at her until my thoughts started to escape me. *Avol*. They had both named me this. The sweet taste of their blood on my lips, caressing my tongue; it was all very familiar to me. I still hadn't pieced anything together. Perhaps I needed to rest.

As my eyes began to close, I saw his pale blue eyes once more, his voice ringing in my ears. *You will not allow yourself to feed on the girl. Smart... I'm here to guide you.* Even in death his words confused me. He never could make it easy for me, as if his every word had to be some sort of lesson that a beast such as myself had to learn. Why did he torture me so? I sighed heavily, and settled onto the branch itself. I looked down at the girl in my arms once more before zoning out and forcing myself to sleep. The blood red lunar goddess watched me from above; the Earth comforted me from below while the creatures of the night sang my lullaby.

Dreina moved in my arms, getting more comfortable. I smiled as I started to fall into a deep slumber, the thoughts of the night's occurrences leaving me for a few moments while I did so.

.4.

I woke up to the soft touch of Dreina tracing an image on my chest. I chuckled slightly, although her touch burned the skin beneath her tiny fingers.

“Dreina, what are you doing?”

She looked up at me and pointed at something on my chest.

“You have a pretty mark on it.”

I looked down to see the burned scarring of what looked like a skull just above my heart. My brow furrowed as I stared down at the mark.

“Did you do this?”

She shook her head and looked at me. Her eyes were wide with curiosity.

“I don’t have any fire, and it looks like it hurts. I wouldn’t hurt you, Avol!”

Her eyes began to water as she stared at me. I felt a wave of guilt rush over my body as I lowered my forehead to hers.

“I know, I’m sorry for even thinking it. Was it just there when you woke up?”

She nodded, sniffing and wiping the tears from her face.

“Okay, it’s okay.”

I wiped the remainder of her tears away. He did this to me. He marked me. He said he was there to guide me and take care of me, and yet he forced my tolerance to the side and pushed my instincts from my control! Bastard! I grew angry with him, and the angrier I became the more the mark began to hurt. Dreina lifted her hand to touch it but quickly pulled it away before contact, hugging it to her body.

“It’s hot, Avol...”

I could feel the burn creeping higher and higher. I tried not to focus on it, tried to keep myself from cursing his name once again.

“Are you hungry?”

She looked up at me with confused eyes and nodded carefully.

“Would you like me to hunt for you?”

Her head ran from side to side as she looked into the turtle shell.

“Can we pick berries? I want berries today!”

I chuckled once more, wrapping my arm around her in an attempt to secure her as we began our journey to the forest floor. As soon as my feet touched the ground she handed me the pelt blanket and her turtle shell. Words never crossed her lips, though the look in her eyes begged me to wrap the contents of the shell and return it. I knelt on the ground, dried blood still coating my hands as I gently removed the bones, feathers, and stones from the shell and wrapped them in the pelts. She gladly took the shell from me and ran off into the woods before I had a chance to stand again; so young and full of life.

I held the small parcel between my arm and chest; I'd prefer her prized possessions to not dirty with the blood of another. Her scent was easy to follow as I gently brushed past trees and plants. A small hiss came to me from above as I strolled through the forest. My eyes aimed upward, avoiding the rays of the fiendish sun. A snake had been slithering through the bush and branches of the trees nearby, stalking me as its prey. Reaching up to a vine, I took hold with my free hand, my feet acting as two more allowing me to climb into the branches nearest the reptile. I cocked my head to the side and stared into its slit eyes as it flicked its tongue in my direction. My legs were crossed and tightly latched together beneath the branch as I reached for the creature. Without hesitation it made its way to my hand, coiling around my arm.

The beast was close to four feet long, its color a deep brown with black markings. It erected itself slowly, staring at me, inches from my face; swaying from side to side as I stared into his eyes, flicking his tongue at me as if he was trying to speak. I moved in closer, staring at the creature, wondering what it is that he was saying to me. He squeezed my arm with an intense strength. I smiled at him, sadistic thoughts running through my mind. He gasped and started to retreat, but it was far too late for that. I had taken a hold his tail and flexed the entirety of my arm, forcing the muscles to the surface. The serpent tried to escape but I wouldn't let him. My mind questioned whether or not to keep him alive. He pleaded with me while he seemingly resigned himself to his fate.

Of course releasing the beast was had its consequences as well. He lunged at my chest; razor sharp teeth grazing the skin before my hand could take hold of his mouth. There wasn't much damage done, just a scratch, but the serpent had a much worse fate. His head had been crushed within my grip; an action I could not remember committing. I stood on the branch, jumping to the floor of the tree encroached forest, carrying the lifeless creature across my shoulders as I continued my search for Dreina. I could hear the patter of her footsteps running towards me and the giggle in her voice as she attempted to creep up on me.

I closed my eyes and smiled, sitting on the ground with my legs folded as I waited for her to assault me. Within mere moments, her tiny body had leapt into mine; landing in the bowl I'd

created with my legs. She laughed as I tickled her with my free hand; her own still clutching the turtle shell.

“Avol! Stop it!”

She shrieked as I continued to tickle her. I stopped after a few moments, noticing she’d picked a plethora of berries and leaves.

“Did you get what you wanted, Dreina?”

She nodded her head as the last of the laughs escaped her tiny lungs.

She had blackberry juice all over her mouth and cheeks. Her little hands were also covered in the juices of other berries. I chuckled to myself as I began to wipe away the mess with a leaf she’d plucked when she grabbed it and sat straight up. It took me by surprise, but I allowed her to take it from my hand. She looked at me; then examined the singed scar decorating my chest. I looked back at her, confusion littering my features. She got close to the mark and noticed the snake’s attempt at confrontation and wagged her tiny finger at it.

“You should not bite Avol. He will bite you back.”

I gave her a soft smile and nodded.

“You’re a smart girl.”

She merely grinned at me and began treating my wound with a paste she’d created from various fruits and tree saps. I’d expected it to sting, but it was surprisingly soothing. The burn from the mark subsided almost instantly and the annoyance from the attempted bite disappeared completely. I stared in shock as she merely smiled at me and got up. She replaced her warm body with the turtle shell within my legs and proceeded to brush herself off as she spoke:

“I found water over there. Can we go in it?”

I nodded to her, realizing that it would not be easy to continue on without removing the stains from my body and cleaning my clothing, at least partially. Humans were often nosey creatures and blood tended to peak their curiosity. I rose to my feet once she’d taken her treasure from me. She began skipping ahead of me, dodging trees and vines as she did so. I kept my pace behind her, trying to keep a safe distance as not to be tempted by her scent once again. She stopped just short of the water and looked at me while she placed the turtle shell to the side.

She slid out of her tattered dress and placed it to the side as well. Another garment clothed her beneath it, however, unlike her dress, this piece exposed parts of her back and shoulders. I stared for a moment, the scars dressing her skin shocking me into a state of silent submission. The marks about her were the same as the hunters I’d killed only weeks before. Had those idiots really marked this poor girl? She couldn’t have been but nine years of age. Anger

began to build inside of me as I thought of the torture they had put her through. They couldn't have thought her useful for any other purpose but to bait the creatures of these sacred woods.

She hadn't paid any attention to my seething disposition while she ran and jumped into the clear waters before her. Once she resurfaced she turned around and looked at me, a smile on her face. Again, this angel had snapped me out of my common state of hatred and forced a smile to my lips. I placed the serpent and wrapped items to the side and began to walk into the water as well.

My pants grew heavy as the waves consumed the fabric. Dreina swam over to me and wrapped her little arms around my neck and held on tightly. I allowed her to continue on as I took the water into my hands and began washing my face and arms. I felt her arms release from around my neck, my hands instinctively reaching behind me to catch her before she could slip into the waters. She ran her fingers through my hair, releasing it from the confines of the rope I'd used to keep it back.

“Avol has long hair; not as long as Dreina's though.”

“No it is not. If my hair was as long as yours, it may prove a bit of a hindrance while hunting, don't you think?”

Her eyes widened as she proceeded to make the welled “o” with her mouth.

“I think that is a good point. Avol cannot have very long hair. It's dark though, like mine.”

I laughed and nodded while her little fingers started measuring the distance from the top of my head to the round of my shoulder. She then swiveled around my body to face me with her hands still measuring the distance and smiled as she said:

“It's this long! I like it!”

I had to laugh again, this time with more vibrato than before.

“I'm glad you like it. Is there anything about me you don't like?”

She sat in front of me in deep thought for but a moment before shaking her head.

“I like everything about you. You're a nice monster.”

“I suppose so, but that's our little secret, alright?”

Her hand slid across her mouth as if to keep the words inside of her. I gave into yet another small fit of laughter, although this one was cut short by the rustle of branches and leaves from just beyond us.

I stared into the trees and bushes before retreating to a more secluded area and looked at her. She nodded in affirmation without my saying a word. I began back to the banks as she climbed into the roots of a nearby tree. Recognizing the stench defiling the air, I immediately stood to my feet. This one had come alone as far as humans were concerned, but he had brought a canine companion. Though I'd made it a point to avoid the animals these delinquents brought with them, I feared that I may not be able to this time. Such a shame.

He stepped through the thicket, looking around as if searching for someone. I watched from behind a tree, taking the low road as opposed to the higher climates I was so used to. The mutt had easily picked up my scent and began growling, alerting the hunter to my presence. I gave a sadistic smile. The beast would be left without a master, only relying on instinct if it was smart enough to submit and run. For the sake of the bitch, I'd only hoped that she was smart enough to leave her master now. She wasn't.

The hunter started towards me, his hand wrapped tightly around his blade, this one much leaner than the one I'd accosted earlier. He bore the marks of a warrior and carried no trophy of innocent life about him. I may have had more of a problem on my hands than I'd thought. Without warning he threw a blade into the brush, driving the murderous point deep into my shoulder. I sneered as my breathing began to pick up once again. Reaching over and pulling the bloodied blade from the joint, I stood to my feet, my eyes now full of vicious intent and lacking the human compassion I'd had only moments before.

He spoke a simple word and the dog lunged forward. Unfortunately, its jaw became acquainted with my knee. I reached for the now pained beast and proceeded to break its consciousness, depriving her of air until I'd become sure that her heart had slowed sufficiently and released her. My aim was not to harm the mutt. She was a loyal companion, she was merely following orders. However, she had made the mistake to follow the previous command.

I never broke eye contact with the hunter, his blades hungry for more of my blood. I smiled at him and opened myself up. Blood poured from my shoulder, but it only fueled me. His previous blade was buried beneath the dirt close to my feet. He gave me an arrogant smirk and dropped the supplies he carried on his shoulders. We slowly began to circle each other, both knowing that we were not going to leave this unscathed, if at all.

His blades ran through the air like the wrath of a thousand hornets, slicing into my skin and exposing the crimson rivers flowing beneath it. I grabbed hold of one and smirked as I quickly slid down the angry steel, spilling more of my blood across the thirsty ground. My hands met with his wrist and quickly dislocated it with a sickening pop, the smile on my face broadening as my blood boiled to an almost unbearable point. He quickly pulled away from me, staring as if that was nothing more than a test run, gauging what it was that I was willing to do to defeat him.

He wrapped his lean fingers around the unhinged appendage and snapped it back into place, rotating it in circles whilst reassuring himself that it was capable of battle. Deeming his longer blades useless, he threw them to the sides, allowing them to protrude from the earth like slender metallic trees. He took the stance known to only those from the Far East and began to stalk me as the serpent had from earlier. I kept an eye on him, my own stance resembling that of the primal creatures paroling the night forests.

He made an attempt to grab me, his fingers curled simulating fangs. I easily retreated to the branch hanging from tree nearest me and forced my body to arch in a way that would easily get me behind him. Before he turned around to strike again, I'd buried my foot in his spine listening for the crunch of spoiled bone. Satisfaction breached my thoughts, though his stance was unwavering. He made another strike for me, this time catching me a bit off guard as his knuckles tapped my lower right rib. I felt blood pooling around it beneath my skin and was suddenly stricken with a burning pain that threatened to bring me to my knees. He smiled as if he knew I was only standing by the stubbornness of my stupidity. Perhaps we both were, at least partially.

A small sting ran from my calf to my hip. I looked down only to see what looked like a fang carved blade sticking out of my knee cap. It appeared hollow and reeked of poison. My gaze to met his. The hunger inside of me was claiming my sanity once again. I knew then that this was no longer a friendly battle. Either he was to be devoured or it was Dreina that would take the fall. Never would I allow it to be Dreina. I'd sworn to her safety. He whipped around in what seemed to be a blur. My eyes would betray me now; I resigned myself to closing them and losing the sight that many coveted. The breeze of his movements pressed against my burning skin, my foot stepping to the side while my hand quickly reached out and removed the flesh from above his knees. It hung from my fingers like loose vines while the scent of his blood danced throughout my nostrils. He grunted and faltered slightly, but it wasn't enough to hinder him from coming at me once more. I turned around and forced those same fingers into the wound, slithering beneath the leg that threatened to make contact with my chest.

I retracted my hand, holding the bone placed over the joint of his knee and licked the blood from it; his flesh from before now hanging from my lips. I felt the ground beneath me tremble from the weight of his collapse. His grunt was pained, but I knew the adrenaline within him would keep from staying on the earthen floor. He returned to his feet. My eyelids had retracted for but a moment, allowing my eyes to witness his stance changing from that of a serpent to that of a large preying beast. His strike was precise, grazing the flesh on my throat. Had I not stepped back, I may have been at his mercy if only for a few seconds. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist dislocating it once again, the palm of my hand pressing hard against the elbow that was extended before me. My lips curled into a twisted smile once more as I heard the all too familiar crack of snapping bone and smelled the copper of sweet vampires' nectar.

No longer could he contain the screams from within him; his feeble hand grasping his arm, the ivory bone piercing his dirt laden skin. I smiled at him, wondering if I should wrench the life from his lungs or if I should toy with him further. The poison from his fang driven blade had spread throughout my body, but to no avail. The hunger coursing through me had easily taken over what was left of my nerves and function. It made the decision for me, no longer allowing me to enjoy his pain. I removed the sharp cap of his knee from my hand and forced it into the base of his throat before stepping swiftly and dragging it to the back of his neck, severing the arteries pumping life essence to and fro within him. Again I licked it as he stared back at me.

He smiled and began his last assault, burying blades beneath my skin, but it didn't matter. The muscle that took residence there had forced them out, spitting them to the ground. He knew he wouldn't be able to survive this, and yet his face still wore the smile of a defiant child. He nodded at me to the best of his ability; telling me it was alright to finish him. He'd given me more a fight than any before him. An interesting human, to say the least. However, he was still human and my body still desired a feast and a feast it was given.

I stood before the slowly waking bitch, Dreina at my side. The mutt's eyes opened as she looked from side to side, wary that her master was no more. A whimper escaped her lips as she looked up at me, a snarl bared across mine. I growled and snapped at her as an alpha would to an insubordinate. She began to whimper lowly as she tucked her tail and stood to her shaking feet. Her head was lowered and her ears drawn back as she looked at my chin, knowing better than to make any sort of eye contact. Dreina seemed enticed by the situation and stared at the dog for a moment longer before looking up at me.

“Are you going to eat her too, Avol?”

My voice was cold and dark as I spoke.

“No Dreina, I am not going to eat this poor beast. She was merely defending her master.”

She looked back at the mutt and smiled, patting her atop her head.

“You're a lucky one. Avol isn't going to bite you back, puppy!”

I watched carefully. The canine seemed to have some sort of reverence for the girl as well, but it wasn't fear. Her downtrodden tail moved from side to side as if she was well acquainted with her. Strange. Dreina took my hand once again.

“She's a hunter's puppy.”

I nodded again, staring at the beast.

“She is. Should we leave her a meal?”

She nodded and proceeded to take my hand to her turtle shell, still coupled with berries and leaves. I retrieved the serpent from before as we both made our way back to the quivering mutt.

“Here puppy, these are for you.”

She placed the berries from her shell in front of her. I laid the snake before her and nodded.

“Come now, Dreina... We need to leave.”

Her eyes pled with mine as she pet the dog.

“But she’ll die out here, Avol!”

“The forest will be kind to her. She has yet to lose her instincts, she will survive, I assure you.”

Content with that answer, she smiled and waved at the dog before I picked her up, giving her the shell and her dress - the pelt of items again in my hand, and placed her on my shoulders. The pain from earlier had fallen to the wayside as I began to walk again. She sat atop my broadness and pulled my hair back, tying it with a vine she’d found nearby. I smiled if only to reassure her that I was alright, though my mind faced the hunter several times more.

He was nothing like the others, yet he bore the same marks. *Dear friend, what signs are these that you place in my path. What of this girl?* I sighed and shook my head. Dreina looked over my brow to meet my eyes.

“You have pretty red eyes, Avol.”

Red? The last I checked, that was but an addition to the rest of my colored irises. She piped up once again:

“They’re red like the moon up there!”

“Are they now?”

My voice seemed calm but concern took hold of my mind. As if the events of the previous days and weeks had not plagued me enough, now I must deal with these changes within myself. What had he done to me? What had he freed inside of me? More importantly, why had he warned of the hunter?

Dreina popped me in the top of my head and I looked up at her.

“Yes?”

“You think too much, Avol. It’s not good for you sometimes.”

He used to remind me of such things frequently, I thought to myself.

“I’m sorry, should I speak more?”

She nodded and held on to the sides of my head easily, the shell resting between her arms.

“I like your voice; it reminds me of my papa’s.”

“Does it?”

“Mmhm, and you remind me of my papa too.”

I tried to let the comment pass but I knew better than to expect it to. I smiled.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She kissed my head and smiled.

“Yeah, papa was a good man.”

With that last statement, she began to hum and sing a child’s tale of her adventures with her father. I continued forward and listened closely to her every word until she’d tired and fallen prey to her slumber; still clutching the shell in her small arms. My smile faded as the thoughts from before began to torment my current state. Things were not as they seemed; that was obvious.

There was a stream creeping through the woods. Its song was quiet; a soft lullaby to soothe my darling Dreina to continue in her sweetened sleep. She laid in a bed of leaves and garnish I'd found around. I couldn't bear to leave the poor girl in the dirt. The bed was close to the banks of the stream; my eyes fixed to her sleeping form as I removed the clothing from my body and stepped into the water's coursing flow.

It was warm against my most tender skin. I could only guess a hot geyser miles down to be the source of the heat. At least that was to be the only rational answer, though rationality seemed to have no basis in my reality any longer. My fingers reached behind my head, releasing my hair from its newly found bonds. The tendrils stung my wounds as they fell to my shoulders. Small fish swam between my fingers, their fins gently brushing the skin on my hands. I hadn't placed much thought on my ailments until now. There was nothing there but a few scars. Surely the hunter had done more damage to me than this. I searched my flesh for a sign of abnormality, however, there was nothing. In fact, the only wound that had made itself painfully apparent was the one driven deep into my shoulder, and even that stung like the insignificant bite of an insect.

Dried blood scraped from my knuckles and surrounding skin now tainted the once clear waters beneath me. I'd been so honed on feeding myself I never truly got down to scrubbing my meal's blood from my bronzed covering. Though my body completed the action of cleansing itself, my mind had run to the deepest reaches of darkness. Frequently did it replay the encounter with my dear friend; his pale blue eyes still burned into my memories alongside Dreina's. Why had he tortured me with these riddles? Why had he forced me to feed on his supple flesh? Who had awakened him and what games did he play? Moreover, why had he been targeted by the hunters? They were Neanderthals at best, incapable of intelligent thought. Why would they have come this far into the wood to brutally murder an innocent man?

These questions plagued me more than they disturbed me, although there was one instance that had laid waste to any semblance of comfort that my mind had sought after: the last hunter. He was nothing like the others. He had been marked in a way foreign to this land and every other hunter throughout. Those markings belonged to a well known clan of assassins far beyond the reaches of this place. His movements were so swift. Surely he knew he was nothing more than an agitating meal to a creature such as myself yet he faced me. The smile on his face betrayed his motions several times and yet he persisted.

I allowed the flow of the stream to gently brush the rest of the filth from my existence. Crickets serenaded the stillness of the night with their song. Toads sat atop the pads of lilies, watching and belting out their baritone calls to one another. Bats swooped from above, devouring the moths caught in the confusion of their screech. I peered into the night sky, watching the creatures feast on the each another. Their dance was ravenous but melodic. It was comforting in a way.

I allowed the festival of carnage to entertain me for several moments longer before returning to the shore of the stream where I'd left my clothing. My bruised fingers wrapped themselves around the thick cloth of my pants and dragged them into the water where it met my other hand. I began to scrub it clean. The smaller the traces of my condemned deeds, the less I will have to explain, moreover, the less I will have to worry for Dreina's safety. I'd sworn to both her and her departed father. Strange how you feel the presence of another once the memory is reawakened.

She'd spoken of her father for several hours before falling asleep. I couldn't help but think of him as a familiar soul I once knew. She mentioned his light blue eyes and his feathery gray hair. Apparently he was built like a mountain, his face chiseled from years of wear and tear. She said his chest was broad, much like the largest trunk of the largest tree in the wood. The images she painted of this man landed him amongst the most stringent of giants, yet his demeanor had to have been one of soft compassion to have fathered a child such as Dreina. My mind raced as my thoughts began to collect at the forefront, forcing themselves to gain recognition.

I'd drifted into something of a silent stupor, my hands still washing the thick fabric within them, now obviously clean.

“Avol?”

A soft voice called to me from the banks ripping me from my thoughts. Dreina was standing there rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her little hand balled into a loose fist. She still clutched her precious shell.

“Yes?”

“What're you doing?”

I swam to the edge of the water and looked up at her, smiling.

“Just washing myself... Are you alright?”

She nodded and stared at me.

“You're not thinking again are you? That's bad for you when you're by yourself!”

Her concerns were almost comical but adorable as well.

“Only a bit, I promise it's nothing too dense.”

My hands gripped the bank as I pulled myself upward, though I was met with the gentle motions of her little feet swaying in the water. I smiled, sitting on the bank still fully naked from earlier, dragging my drenched pants back on over the scars and bruises cluttering my legs. She

glanced for but a moment before halting the band of my pants from rising any further, staring at the old wounds, her eyes sad.

“What are those?”

“Scars...”

“Why do you have those? Is it because you’re a monster?”

I tried to give her the softest smile I could muster and nodded. She removed her hand and allowed me finish pulling my pants up the length of my legs; fastening them. Her eyes met mine for a brief moment before her gaze fell to my mouth. She gasped. My head cocked to the side once again, staring at her with unnaturally blazing red eyes.

“Dreina? What’s wrong?”

Her hands made their way to my mouth as the mark began to burn on my chest. I quickly pulled away from her, staring into her blue eyes once more.

“Don’t do that...”

She pulled her hands back quickly, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Avol! I just wanted to see your teeth!”

“Why? What’s wrong with my teeth?”

“Some of them are pointy... I just wanted to see which ones.”

“Then you ask, okay?”

She nodded slowly.

I managed to pull my lips back far enough for most of my teeth to show. A loud gasp filled her lungs once again as she leaned in to look at them. From her reaction, I had a feeling my mouth was no longer mine. Had the hunger claimed even more? I ran my tongue over my canines, easily slicing it open, tasting my own blood. Mistake. My instincts began to take hold of me once again. I shouldn’t have done that.

Before my senses could tell me what was going on, I found myself holding on to Dreina. She was staring at me, her face whiter than usual and her eyes wide with fear. I could have sworn they would fall from their sockets if they had been opened any wider. Leaning in, I took the young girl’s scent. It was so sweet, succulent and alluring. I wanted to feast on her delicate flesh, fill my mouth with her erubescence blood, and pick the remains from my teeth with her ivory bone. She was tantalizing.

My mouth widened to take that first tender bite when my chest began to burn. It burned hotter than white fire. I'd released my grip on the girl, my hand immediately darting towards the skull, separating along my flesh. She pulled away and hid behind a tree, but kept a distance close enough that she could watch. *Why hadn't she run?* I looked down at my singed chest once more, the mark drawing blood. There wasn't much I could do. Never had I felt a pain this debilitating. My legs buckled beneath me as I attempted to stand. There wasn't an ounce of strength left in me, though my body continued to lurch towards Dreina as a one armed corpse of the reanimated variety would crawl towards its prey. I was wounded and hungry, and the only thing standing between me and satiation was the ability to move. Huh, like I'd allowed that to stop me in the past. However, this was not like the past. I hadn't counted on the small girl lifting a sizeable stone and bludgeoning me until I could no longer see, move or hear. I dare say she'd knocked me unconscious... And she had.

I awoke the next morning underneath the shade of a nearby tree. My head was pounding and the sun had assaulted my eyes with its hatred once again. My mind raced to regain any memory from before. It wasn't until Dreina made her way to my side that I remembered what transpired the previous night. There was a pulsing sensation coming from my head. *That's right; she beat me with a giant fucking rock...* My fingers made their way to the injury point, but I couldn't seem to feel the amount of damage due to a crude plant-based bandage tightly wrapped around my head. I squeezed my eyes shut, my mouth pulling back into a pained hiss as I sat up. Then, I felt it; a small gust of wind and the sting of tiny fingers swatting at the skin on my hand.

“AVOL!”

Her voice was loud as she screamed my name and stared at me with her hands on her little hips, her brow furrowed.

“Don't touch that! It will undo and I'll have to do it all over again!”

Shock. That was all that crossed my face. This tiny girl had managed to knock me unconscious, then pieced me together and attempted to tend to my wounds.

“I'm sorry... For both this and last night,”

She puffed up, holding her breath in her cheeks to seem bigger before letting the air out into one frustrated statement.

“I didn't even bite you! And I took my hands away so you wouldn't want to eat me! But you wanted to eat me anyway! Avol! I didn't do anything wrong! Why did you try to hurt me?!”

My gaze fell to the floor as I spoke; my voice soft and filled with shame.

“I tasted my own blood... I didn’t mean to. I was unaware that it would have that effect on me. I’ve learned, I won’t do it again without the proper situation.”

She stood, appearing to contemplate my words for a moment. I could hear her heart beating and her breathing slowing. I also heard... little feet running at me?

By the time my eyes met hers she’d wrapped her tiny hands around my neck and proceed to hug me so tightly I was sure she would easily cut off the circulation to my head. I reached up and placed a hand on her back as I returned the notion. After several moments she pulled away and stared at me, remarking:

“It’s okay if it was an accident.”

“You aren’t upset?”

Her head shook from side to side.

“You said you were sorry, and you meant it. Dreina is okay now!”

She giggled.

This girl was like none I’d met. Surely any other human girl would have tucked tail and run to find the nearest hunter by now, but she sat by me.

Hours passed as we sat together. I rested against the tree while she frolicked in the coursing waters of the stream. She truly loved the water. I watched her for a few moments, smiling, before I’d noticed the burning sensation coming from my chest. I peered downwards to see yet another wrapped bandage covering me. Without thinking, my fingers reached around the outer layer and began unraveling it. *What the hell is this?* My eyes grew wide as I stared at the additional singe marks stemming from the original skull now creating three – two to either side of the first. The thought of the debilitating pain returned to me and forced a cringing shiver to run through my body. I couldn’t believe that I’d been marked yet again.

It was still tender as I ran my fingers over it. There was still heat resonating from it. I felt my heart speed up. Memories from the night before threatened to assault my senses and give me more than just a shiver. I felt a tinge of panic before standing to my feet and looking around like a caged animal. Dreina was walking towards me, her hair being rung out between her little hands as she did so. She bumped into my leg and stumbled backwards, her hands immediately falling to her side as she looked up at me and gave a full cheeked smile; her arms wrapping around my waist.

“You’re standing up now. Does that mean you feel better?”

I gave her a soft smile and nodded, trying to forget my panic.

“I have you to thank for that. Where did you learn to make bandages like this?”

“My papa’s village; we had a lot of gypsies and medicine people. They were really nice.”

She spoke of these people as if they were no longer. I wanted to ask, but once again I quelled my curiosity.

“Ah, I see. Well then, shall we go?”

She blinked at me, wonder running rampant across her face.

“Go where?”

I swept her up and placed her on my shoulders. She popped me in the head once again.

“You’re hurt!”

I chuckled and glanced upward.

“And you just hit me in the head.”

She puffed up again and folded her arms.

“I wouldn’t have to be so rough if you’d take care of yourself, dumb-dumb!”

I laughed and bent over, picking up the shell and handing them to her. Again, she’d picked berries and placed them in her little shell. She began eating them while I walked through the dense wood. I knew there was a village just a few miles off. This little girl needed to rest, and I grew hungry once again. It was time to move on...

Night had fallen just as we arrived in the small village. Farmers were bringing their crop back to their secluded homes, hunters returned from their daily work, wives opened doors to greet their husbands; it was pleasant and disgusting. No one noticed the new duo walking the streets; shoes missing and clothing tattered, yet we still remained unseen.

Dreina watched the porch lamps as the flames danced within them, hypnotized. Fireflies flitted by her nose, snapping her from her trance only to place her into a new one. She giggled atop my shoulders. I smiled. No one thought to look at us a second time. No one thought to give us a second glance; perhaps, that was their first mistake. Then again, their first mistake could have been leaving their lives in the hands of the gods and not taking any kind of precaution against their cruelty.

We continued on for a few feet more before I heard the growl of a little stomach resting behind my ears. My eyes began scanning for an open door. Perhaps there was a person, a family, willing to take us in for the night. She needed to eat, and a good night's rest could do nothing but help at this point. An older gentleman sat atop a wooden box, smoking a hand rolled cigarette. The herbs were sweet; it smelled of sage and mullein, perhaps even a stitch of angelica. His eyes caught mine as a smile started to curl onto his lips. Dreina giggled when she saw him there.

“Avol?”

Her voice was quiet and calm.

“Yes?”

“Could we go over there? I like him. He's nice looking.”

I nodded without apprehension as she clapped her hands together and gave a delicate squeal of delight.

The older gentleman noticed the change in our course and stood to his feet. He met us at the end of his porch, the grin on his face larger than before. The cigarette laid smoking across his cracked lips, buried in the midst of his gray beard. His hair was long yet pulled back into a tightly woven braid. He appeared to be one of the village hunters. His demeanor was quiet and calm, unapologetic yet respectful. Surely, he was a man who knew of homage for his catch. For the first time since the death of my dearly departed companion, I felt a soft comfort. It was pleasant.

Dreina all but leapt from my shoulders to meet the man in the air, turtle shell still in her grasp. He laughed at her enthusiasm, catching her with ease. The wave of panic that crowded my body evaporated instantly once she was within the clutches of safety. Strange that she could elicit such a strong emotion in such a short amount of time. She was surely an odd child.

He looked at me as he spoke, his voice gruff and his gaze somewhat scrutinizing.

“You two looking for a place to stay tonight?”

“Yes, if it isn’t too much trouble. We would appreciate it.”

He nodded and walked into the small house, Dreina still in his arms as he gestured for me to follow him.

“Well come on then, son.”

Son? Funny. I followed, trying to wipe the dirt from my feet before entering his home. Dreina jumped from his arms and started to explore the house without question. She gazed at the skulls decorating the walls and garnishing the fire place. I watched for a few moments before my thoughts were interrupted by the older gentleman. He stared with some sort of curious intent. His eyes were stuck on mine as he moved in closer. I took a step back and looked at him from the top of my nose.

He chuckled as he circled me, my body seizing out of instinct.

“So you’re the one causing all the commotion, are you?”

I stared at him; my eyes immediately began to change from cautious to defensive.

“You don’t have anything to worry about here. I’m not going to try anything. Besides,”

He began to walk towards the cooking area – a ditch like room with a fire pit garnishing the floor.

“I happen to think what you’re doing to those fuckers is all too beneficial.”

I stalked him carefully, my voice low and dark as I did so.

“How do you know me?”

His eyes were a deep gray, portraying an almost jovial light.

“I’ve hunted in these woods for decades. Not once have I smelled the blood of another man, let alone as often as I smell it now. You’re covered in it. Not to mention, they fear you as if you were the plague.”

I sat beside him, staring into the fire.

“They fear me? How can you be so certain?”

Perhaps, I sounded a bit more content with that bout of knowledge than I needed to, but it pleased me that those responsible for Pieire's slaughter had some sort of stringent emotion forced upon them.

He nodded, proceeding to throw a large slab of buck upon the flames.

"They talk about you. They don't much care for those of us who listen, but we outnumber them by the droves."

He smiled.

"They speak of a man who leaps through the trees and scales the forest walls as if he was a part of them. They say his eyes are void of human decency; much like yours. They've frequently talked of others hunting and going into the wood to take sport in the art of death and failing to return. Most of them suspect the slender 'jungle beast' to be responsible."

"And they assume that this is me? Perhaps, the forest just grew sick of their deceptive games trampling Her for devious sport and swallowed them whole."

"Or, perhaps She grew tired of them corrupting her branches and released you upon them."

I chuckled softly and looked at the man. His breath froze as his heart skipped. I began to wonder if he had fallen prey to my gaze as so many others have.

"*You* have no need to fear me. Besides, you probably wouldn't fit my tastes anyway. You seem to give Her the respect She deserves."

He nodded and looked back at the roasting meat before him. Had I truly caused such terror to well within him by merely looking at him? The mark on my chest began to burn; my hand immediately darted upwards and grabbed at it. There was blood... A lot of blood. I grunted and immediately fell to the side, bracing myself with my free hand. Why? Why now? I wasn't hunting. I wasn't stalking. I hadn't lost control. Why was this happening now?

The old man looked up at me. His eyes widened as he stared at the blood seeping through my fingers. Without a second thought, he quickly made his way over to me, examining what seemed to be the cause of my wound. I allowed him to remove my hand, though the sudden flux of oxygen forced sharp pains throughout my body, almost paralyzing me. I tried to refrain but a loud painful scream erupted from my lips and betrayed me.

Dreina came running down the hallway, her little feet carrying her as quickly as they could. She got down beside me and looked at the blood then at the old man. She angrily stomped over to him and began screaming. I tried to tune her voice out, but it echoed inside of my skull amplifying the pain coursing through my chest. I cried out once again, this time my voice was

strained. She immediately dropped to my side and looked at me, panic and worry flooding her young features.

“Avol!”

The old man stood to his feet and ran to an open door, disappearing into the darkness. I spoke up in his absence to the best of my ability.

“He ... He didn't do this, Dreina... Don't yell at him.”

“Why are you bleeding, then?!”

I showed her the mark on my chest. Blood continued to pour from it as I did so. She gasped

“Avol! What are we gonna do?! You're hurt really bad!”

“I don't know, Dreina... But I will be alright, I promise.”

I reached for her face, gently stroking her cheek with my thumb offering her a saddened and weak smile. She rested against my hand, her face easily engulfed by my palms. The old man came back from the room carrying a few handmade boxes. He fell to his knees and began to work on the bleeding. There was a warmth that ran through before a dull burn took over. My eyes slid from Dreina's tearful gaze to the old man hard at work on my chest. He didn't dare cauterize the wound for fear of disrespecting the mark. Instead, he rubbed a dense salve across it to stop the blood flow. A man such as himself probably knew the consequences of an injured predator and dared not risk it.

I'd lost a large sum of blood; so much so that my body began to grow cold despite the flames of the fire. The man knew that there was nothing more that could be done among the realm of natural healing. He reached for a blade from within the box and rolled up a sleeve. Dreina glared at him as best as she could but said nothing, curious as well as on edge. We watched him as he slide the infinitely sharpened blade across his skin, drawing blood from his weathered arm. I wondered if he'd done this before, if he knew of others similar to me. I could only think for a moment before my instincts began to take hold of me once more.

The scent of the blood filling the air was aged and smelled of a sweet bark. I reached for the man's arm, gripping it hard as my fingers created a cage which he could not escape. The smell tortured me as I brought it to my lips. I ran my tongue across the gash forcing it wider as more blood spilled into my mouth, charging my senses. He winced slightly. A small part of me wished he hadn't. My grip grew tighter at the movement and my teeth sank into his arm just above and below the gash. He grunted but did not move. There was something off about his blood. Maybe the herbs he'd smoked had made their way into it, although there was an extra I'd not smelled before. *Wormwood*. His blood was thick with it. Within moments I'd detached myself, coughing and sputtering before slipping into a deep sleep. My chest continued to pound

with a throbbing pain, and Dreina continued to sit by my side. I felt no danger despite the circumstance. In fact, I felt as though we were both in the presence of a man capable of our trust. Apparently, my body agreed...

What was happening to me?

I had no idea where I was or who had done what to me. I simply knew that something was different. My hands looked as though they belonged to me, as did the rest of my body but something felt off. I opened and closed my fists, making sure they were still useful; bended my knees and cracked my neck from side to side. There was nothing wrong. At least there was nothing wrong with me.

It was dark. There was nothing around. I could smell someone else and hear their movements but other than that I saw nothing but shadows from the surrounding trees. Trees? Had I fallen asleep in a forest? And where was Dreina? The old man had vanished as well. My body tensed as I looked around me. There was a familiar scent and it knew nothing of boundary. It came closer to me, stifling my sense of security. I did not enjoy being the one on the opposite end of the hunt.

I stood still, my eyes closing as I listened and felt for the intruder in my midst. Within moments, I felt the brush of another across my skin. The touch was cold and unwavering, yet brief. Without warning, my fingers curled tightly around the wrist of my trespasser, my eyes opening slowly revealing my disdain for his games. Pieire. My dearly departed companion stood before me, laughing as if we'd re-entered childhood. I glared at him for a brief moment before releasing him.

He held his arm close and rubbed it as if it would take the sting of my grip away. His laughter subsided only slightly as he spoke.

“Avol, you should learn to lessen that grip of yours.”

My face was stone, not one emotion creeping towards my brow.

“What do you want? Would you prefer that I kill you once more? Or should I allow you to mark me again?”

Whilst my features refused to betray me, my voice did not. He took a step closer and looked deep into my eyes.

“I'm sorry I had to do this to you, but you were ready. Besides, once it's through you'll thank me...”

“Thank you? I doubt I'll thank you for this curse...”

He sighed and turned away, walking towards a small bout of water before taking a seat at its edge.

“I know I owe you an explanation, and I’d love to give it to you if you will hear it. You know I would never betray you, and had he not told me it was for your own good I would have left you alone.”

I cautiously eased my way to his side, sitting by him, gazing at nothing.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Pieire? Why didn’t you allow me that one notion? Why enshroud your actions in mystery? Have I offended you? Perhaps he’s the one I’ve angered...”

“I can assure you he is nothing more than pleased with you. He knows that this is hurting you, that this is bringing you pain. However, he also knows that this will only further your evolution. Avol, do you remember when he sent you here?”

I stared for a moment, trying to regain my thoughts. I’d known of him but remembering the first time was no longer a luxury I held.

“No...”

My voice trembled slightly as I spoke. Fear decorating my tone for the first time since childhood:

“I can’t remember the first time. Fuck, I hope he doesn’t regret me.”

I’d forgotten what a comfort his touch was. I quickly recalled after but a moment of his hand resting upon my shoulder.

“He doesn’t regret you. If anything, he wants you to continue as you are, but he’s growing concerned that you’ve lost the connection with your bloodline.”

“I don’t have a bloodline...”

“See? *That* is what he’s afraid of. You’ve been born into the same family at least twice. You know that you will continue on through this line and yet you assume that you can be associated with no one. Don’t you wonder why it is these hunters target you?”

“Target me? It was you they killed.”

“They wanted you, Diavol. You can only deny that for so long.”

I knew he was right. I knew that his death was my fault. I could only sit and hang my head as the thoughts of sadness and feelings of guilt ran through my mind and plagued my heart. I’d lost my friend because of my blood. The mark began to burn once more. Blood started to slowly seep from the carved skulls adorning my otherwise barren flesh. Again, my hand reached for the burning mark, trying to comfort it. Pierre reached over, removing my hand from the wound and placing his own on top of it. Unlike mine, his attempts lacked futility, quelling the pain and stopping the blood flow immediately.

Our eyes met again. Mine were those of shock and appreciation while his bore remorse and sadness.

“I hope you can forgive me for what I’ve started. I didn’t know it would hurt you this much. Avol, I only wanted to help you remember.”

“I don’t blame you for this. I suppose I should be thanking you as you inquired.”

He shook his head and stood to his feet.

“It’s not me you should thank, Avol and you know that. If there was ever one that you should thank it is the little one. She is keeping you here, keeping you grounded. Don’t lose her.”

We sat in silence for but a few moments before our childish antics came to aid in the dissipation of the uneasy tension filling the air. His pale blue eyes caught mine as he offered me his hand, his black brows raised and taunting me as they did when we were kids. I chuckled and grabbed his hand, pulling myself up. He quickly patted me on the back before tossing me into the waters beside the bank. I surfaced and gasped, reaching for his legs eventually grabbing hold of one and pulling him beneath the surface and laughing. Within seconds he resurfaced as well, laughing loudly. A smile ran across my lips as I began to splash him. He retaliated.

We played in the darkened waters for several hours before tiring ourselves out. He rested against the bank while I floated on the water’s surface. It only took a few moments before he heaved a sigh, foretelling the depth of what was to come next, threatening our childhood fun. Without warning, he pulled himself from the water and looked at me. His stare told me to join him as he walked away from the water and towards the trunk of a standing willow. Follow him I did.

“You want vengeance against these hunters, don’t you?”

Those were the first words he’d spoken to me since we’d ended our games. I sat beside him and nodded.

“Of course I do. Whether or not it was my blood they were after, it was your life they took.”

“They took it but once, Avol. You ended it the second time.”

Anger crept into my eyes. They burned as they fixed themselves on him.

“Have you lost your mind? You were the one who came to me, placing your hands upon my face when you knew my hunger was beyond my control. *You* killed *yourself*, Pieire... It was no fault of mine that you used me as your instrument...”

He stared for but a moment before nodding in defeat.

“You’re right. I did. Forgive my insolence. I just wish you wouldn’t go after them for my sake. They’ve given you the girl, they’ve served their purpose. I’d only hoped that you could serve yours without risking your life.”

“I risk my life for lesser things than to avenge my fallen comrade. Do you honestly think I’d deem you any less substantial than the games I play with those I deem fit for consumption?”

“No, Avol, I don’t. But if you lose your life—“

“Then I’ve lost my life and I will either rejoin you in this afterlife or I will be sent to complete whatever it is he wants me to complete. Besides, if I do bare a bloodline, am I not a part of a bigger sect of individuals who may deem humans fit for prey, as well? You’ve said that there are more of us. If it is Vergil’s line that is to take out the virus infecting this planet, then his line will do just that. Why worry about me?”

He chuckled sadly and shook his head.

“You’ve always been headstrong, failing to listen to my logic. And yet, I still stand by your side, even in death.”

“Because I’ve always got a point...”

“That you do, and I will always stand by you. Just know that this is far from over, my friend.”

“I’d expected nothing less. He’s never been one to give me any sort of chance at an easy shot.”

“And he will not start now.”

I nodded as he stood to his feet once more. It was time that we depart and both of us had some inkling that there was far more to this than we’d originally thought. *Surely the hunters couldn’t be the only reason for my discomfort, for my pain. There had to have been something more than just that.* Pieire turned and smiled at me before I had a chance to move.

“Those eyes suit you, Diavol. They suit you very well.”

First Dreina, now Pieire... Had they truly changed that much? Had *I* truly changed that much? I gathered my thoughts enough to finally bring them forth, but he’d vanished and left me beneath the willow.

“A trickster, that is all you are, dear friend...”

I smiled and stood as I explored the darkening forest...

I awoke to Dreina's head placed gently on my stomach, snoring like a precious pup. The attempt I'd made to slide myself from underneath her failed due to her fingers reaching around and gripping as much of my trunk as they could, holding me in place. She was strong for her age. Her brows knitted together in her sleep as a soft whimper escaped her. I placed my hand on her back and rubbed it if only to reassure her that I was going nowhere, or perhaps I was merely reassuring her that the dream she was having was just that: a dream. She loosened her grip and rolled down the slope of my body as I sat up, landing her in my lap.

I reached down and began to remove the hair from her face with my finger when I noticed the darkened hue around the tip and knuckle. *Blood?* I couldn't recall hunting anything, or anyone, for that matter. I pulled my hands away from her face and looked at them in shock. My eyes started to dart from side to side looking for the older gentleman that had helped us the night before; at least I'd assumed it was the night before. Shame slowly began to creep into my mind. *Had I killed the old man?* A soft tune came from the corner of the room. I turned my head slightly to get a better view of the shadow flickering across the wall. There he stood. My mind instantly fell into a somber relief as I stood to my feet, Dreina now secure in my arms. There was an open lot on the floor nearest the old hunter where I'd decided to take a seat once more. The wood in his weathered hands was slowly being whittled into something legible. It was some sort of serpent.

He continued to carve into the bark, his eyes gentle, his face relaxed, and his voice soothing.

“No worries, son. You didn't hurt anyone, though you were close.”

I stared at him, my mind trying to piece together the last several hours.

“What happened?”

Dreina moved in my lap, pulling my arms towards her as she slept, covering herself as if they were some sort of blanket. He smiled.

“I gave you my blood and you blacked out. Well your mind blacked out. Your body seemed a bit rabid.”

“Forgive me; I've been going through some... *changes*, so to speak. I'm not quite as accustomed to my body as I once was.”

Not once did he turn his attention away from the serpent in his hands.

“No one was harmed, there's no reason to ask for forgiveness... That little girl of yours is a smart one. Where I had prepared to fight, she was prepared to feed. The blood on your

knuckles is animal's blood. She threw the carcass at you during that frenzy of yours. You tore it to pieces. Better it than us though."

He gave a soft chuckle.

Of course, Dreina had been the one to save me once again.

"Yeah, she does things like that frequently. I would've thought she'd be gone by now, but no. She's still by my side."

"She's your guardian."

His voice was sure of what he'd said. A guardian for a creature such as myself, surely had to be more powerful than this... right? I peered down at the girl sleeping in my lap. She turned to the side, nestling into my chest. I smiled softly, watching her sleep. The old man cleared his throat, forcing my gaze to lift from Dreina.

"How can you be so sure that she's my guardian?"

"She can stand by you while you feed, a truly gruesome act, and yet you both share a tangent adoration. She forces your hunger to the surface and you immediately search for an alternative. You've tasted her blood and yet you have never once forced her to gush as you've forced me to. You care for her."

My eyes narrowed. My mouth grew heavy due to the weight of the fangs slowly crowding my gums.

"How do you know this?"

He chuckled and continued to carve the most intricate designs into the wooden serpent. The air about the room darkened as he did so.

"Would you really prefer the 'how' to your questions? Or perhaps you would prefer that I answer the more dotting question, my son."

He called me son again! This man was wearing my nerves thin; the mark on my chest was a clear indicator of that as it began to redden, threatening another drench of blood. My voice was still cold as I rose to my feet, Dreina still asleep in my arms.

"Answer which ever you wish, old man, but I would advise you stop wasting my time."

He placed the finished serpent on the ground. Its mouth was wide and the fangs that it bore were ever so enticing, almost alluring. Had it been animate, I would have fallen prey to its intrigue, if only for a moment. My eyes rose under the hood of my brow to stare at the man, the charm of the snake now floating into the back of my mind. His eyes had finally met mine, though there was something odd about them this time. The gray that had graced them before was but a

memory as they glowed with eerie silver. His features had hardened considerably though his skin smoothed over the slopes of his cheeks. He stood up, his frame straightening as he did so, ridding his spine of the slight crick within it.

I could feel my body lurching towards him, but every ounce of sense I had screamed for me to control it, to submit. I stared at him for but a moment through narrowed eyes. They burned as if I'd been branded; however, the pain only lasted for a few moments before I'd been overcome by a calming pleasure. Hot streams of crimson flowed from my ducts... This man standing before me had commanded such respect that my body fought amongst the reaches of my mind. Before I could realize what had happened, I found myself folded on a single knee, the other raised as my foot lay flush against the ground, my arm draped over my thigh as the other held Dreina close to my chest. My head was bowed, but I could not figure out why as I stared at the wooden floor beneath me. *Who is this man that my own body would betray me to please him?*

I could hear the smirk on his lips as he spoke, slowly circling me as he did so:

“Diavol, it has truly been a long while since I’ve seen you.”

My voice shook against my will as I spoke through gritted teeth:

“Who are you?”

He knelt in front of me. I could feel his rough skin against the bottom of my jaw, lifting my chin to force a meeting of our eyes.

“I sent you here... Maybe it’s my fault that you don’t remember me. Maybe if I’d presented myself sooner you would have remembered these eyes.”

His eyes did feel familiar. They were comforting to me for some reason. A burning sensation inside of me began shift from my gut to my chest, burning another mark beneath the three skulls. It was almost as if the pain was trying to remind me of the identity of the being standing before me.

“Your eyes I recall vaguely... How is it that you can say *you* are the one who sent me here?”

He released me from his gentle yet firm grasp, standing to his feet and backing away from me as he turned to find his seat once more.

“Pieire mentioned my intentions to you, did he not?”

I stared at the man a moment longer. He smiled a gentle smile, but it warned against testing his wits. Perhaps he was who he said he was.

“He did...”

My voice broke as the memories flooded my conscious mind,

“Your concern is duly noted, but I am still confused as to why you would place so much emphasis on a bloodline that doesn’t remember me.”

He stared at the snake; examining it with his fingers as he spoke to me. His voice appeared to be saddened by my comment.

“You only assume they don’t remember you. Vergil told you that you were not his son, yet he cared for you as if you were the fruit from his very loins. He knew my intentions and I knew of his brother’s interference with the line. It would have been damned had I not stepped in. You bore children of your own at least once, did you not?”

My eyes searched the floor as my mind searched for the answer deep within my mind.

“I don’t... I don’t remember.”

He sighed sadly and nodded. My answer appeared to weigh heavily on him.

“You fathered three children. One of them still lives today. The family I gave you to deserves retribution. You were to be their saving grace.”

“Is that all I’m to be?”

“No, Diavol. You are to be the one who writes their history and the history of their guardians. You are to be the one who does the bidding of the gods and goddesses. You are to be the one who aids in the judgment of those who wish to disrupt the balance which they protect. You are smiled upon by the Creator. Your union of soul and bloodline was solely on the permissions of judgment and observation. You know my will falters not, and you know I would have you destroy the men who hunt you, though you may not retain your humanity if I do. However, I have been watched by the goddess throughout this process. She still favors you...”

I chuckled softly as I relaxed my stance, falling backwards onto my haunches.

“I suppose I should find solace in the fact that Selene still adores me. She is both a beautiful goddess and a powerful titan; perfection in her hybrid nature, to say the least.”

He laughed at me and continued to stroke the fangs of the serpent.

“You still remember to garnish her with compliments.”

“Yes, and I remember that she is never far from where you stand...”

Cobwebs had fallen from the memories within me as I spoke. It was a strange sensation to say the least, but one I welcomed with open arms. Pieire had seen this through; he knew what was to

be done. And he knew that I would be quick to questions the relevance of my existence within a mortal bloodline.

“Peklenc, I need to know... What other purpose do I serve to this line? I exist within them as a mortal... There isn't much that I can do.”

The god stared at the serpent for but a moment before locking eyes with me again.

“This is a line touched by another. They walk among the wilderness as one of the beasts, and yet live amongst man as one of the men. They are the hybrid creatures of man and Earth, god and goddess, spirit and flesh. They harbor no ill-will, aside from the soulless one, and they will bare you something that god nor could goddess bare you.”

“And what could that possibly be?”

“Eternal absolution...”

“You mean to tell me that none of you are powerful enough to give me absolution?”

“Not in the way that you need it, Diavol. None of us can give you what you deserve... Just as none of us can teach you to live among these humans as our archetype and their reverent companion. You need them, and one day you will wear the mark of the serpent and understand these words... Until then, I suggest you keep her safe and continue your path.”

I scoffed at the man standing before me, wondering what he could possibly have meant by any of the cliché bullshit he'd fed me; as if that could satisfy my questions. They bore just as much a hunger as my body.

“Right, the path for vengeance that I've been begged to keep from.”

“Pieire knows that this is a path you will continue down until those responsible pay. He knows better than to ask you to abstain from your instincts more than once. I swear, for him it is but a test to be sure you are whom he thinks you are.”

I nodded, rolling my eyes all the while like a petulant child.

“He does enjoy testing his theories...”

Peklenc smiled and picked up yet another chunk of wood, carving off pieces as he thought of what to create next.

“Now, let's enjoy the rest of the evening, son. You deserve to sit back for a change.”

I nodded and relaxed myself again as he continued his craft. Perhaps he was right. I smirked as Dreina squirmed in my arms, smiling in her sleep. I began to lose myself in the vision of her before I was snapped back to the current by the scent of blood. The god masquerading

before me as the old hunter had cut deep into his finger as he carved. His eyes met mine with a gentle smile as I made my way over to him.

I felt as a dog would, had his master been ever so slightly injured, staring at the wound before he offered it to me. My lips sealed around the bloodied digit as I drank. The familiar taste filled my mouth, almost dulling my mind instantly. *Wormwood... of course.* What was left had pieced the events of earlier together. I licked the wound shut before he'd offered me his arm. I could no longer tell him no. I bit down into it, blood coursing through my mouth as I did so; hitting ever inch and feeding every sense. It was like warm mother's milk to a rattled infant: so sweet and so calming. Again, I found myself falling into a deepened slumber.

If I'd still worn confusion about this creature before, it was clear now that he had every right to call me son...

Dreina fell back onto her little feet as my eyes flew open. I caught her before she had a chance to fully reach the ground, my body now erect and staring at the young girl. She blinked several times before looking back at me. I offered her a soft smile, hoping to ease the shock, if only slightly. A smile curled up on her face, bringing out the dimples in her soft cheeks. She was such a beautiful little girl. Her arms wrapped around mine, her face softly nuzzling against my searing flesh. She was cool to the touch, the perfect remedy for the burning blood coursing through my veins.

“Avol! You woke up! You scared me when you opened your eyes! They were really wide!”

“I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to frighten you. But you *were* very close to me, Dreina. May I ask why?”

“You looked like you were dead! I wanted to make sure you were alright. The old man said you were fine, but I wanted to see for myself. You weren’t breathing or anything...”

I brushed the hair from her face before kissing her forehead.

“I’m alright, Dreina... It takes quite a bit to end my life. I’m not sure how I would’ve been killed without my knowledge, anyway. No one can get close enough, unless you killed me.”

I smirked as I watched her little face turn red at the accusation. Within seconds I wore a bright red mark on the side of my face; her arms folded across her chest.

“I would never hurt you like that! You know I wouldn’t!”

I nuzzled my face into her soft neck, smiling while taking in her scent. She smelled incredible.

“I know you wouldn’t, little one... It was a joke... and obviously it wasn’t a very funny one.”

She pushed away from me, ripping the sweet smell of the nectar pumping through her veins from my nostrils. I opened my eyes again and looked at her; she still sat atop my lap.

“Don’t call me that... only papa called me that.”

Her voice sounded sad as she spoke. Shit, I’d forgotten that that was a pet name that was designated only for her father.

“Forgive me, Dreina... I’d forgotten that you only liked your father to call you that.”

She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand and nodded as she got up slowly.

I sighed to myself and stood to my feet, the rest of my body aching like I'd hunted a tribe of a considerable size. I felt the hunger inside of me well up, threatening to end my sense of self control as it did so. I looked around quickly, trying to get my bearings before I was forced to hunt yet again. Where had he gone? The pain in my chest starting to resurface, burning my insides with the fury of a million angry gods, welled up into my mouth, passed my nose and radiated through my eyes.

I could feel the blood vessels splintering and exploding throughout my face, my eyes flooded with blood as the veins slowly began to leak into the whites. My mouth grew heavy again. I felt as though there was something more inside of me. What else had that bastard Peklenc done to me? My sight had betrayed me, leaving only the most carnal of senses. I couldn't see a thing but I smelled fresh blood. It was enough to force my hunger to the surface. I prayed that I'd be able to control it as well as I had in the past. Huh, yeah, that worked out well, hadn't it?

I reached for the edges of the room trying to get my bearings before I became completely enslaved by the beast inside of me. I'd never met the creature. I didn't know that one existed within me; none other than myself that is. My fingers reached the sides of the room, digging firmly into the walls as I cried out. I imagine I'd frightened poor Dreina as she slowly backed away from me. She stopped short; I could hear her feet shuffle to a tight halt as her breathing started to pick up. I couldn't help but snap my head in her general direction, taking in her scent as the blood from my eyes rained down my face like mountainous waterfalls. I must've looked like a demon; Dreina shrieked at a pitch that was unknown to most humans. My ears burned hot as I fell to my knees, grabbing the sides of my head. It felt as if I was being drilled by a swarm of wasps.

I cried out yet again, though this time a roar accompanied my voice, annihilating all traces of familiarity I may have had with myself. This creature, whatever it may be, wanted to be set free. It wanted to wreak havoc on the villagers around me, on the hunters in the forest, perhaps even on Dreina. I couldn't allow it to escape the confines of my body. I began to crawl towards the door, trying to find my way out. I couldn't hurt her, but I couldn't control whatever it was that lived inside of me either. There was no fucking way I was about to let her take the brunt of this curse. She was an innocent child, she had done nothing wrong.

Once outside, I caught the scent of several men, women, and their children. Their children. I wanted them. I could smell the innocence in their blood; the tenderness of their flesh playing tricks on my imagination. Children were pure and untainted by the work of their parents. *No, Diavol, they are innocent.* The thoughts ran rampant throughout my mind, but I could tell them nothing. The hunger began to take on a form of its own, pulling me away from the forefront. I needed help. I needed someone to stop me. Anyone... I wasn't ready for this, I wasn't strong enough to tell it no. Pieire, Peklenc... Vergil... someone... please... Help me...

It wasn't until nightfall that I found myself feasting on the flesh of a hunter. My mind had vanished throughout the day. I could remember nothing. I couldn't make myself remember anything, except for this burning hunger inside of me. I wanted to end everything. I wanted to give in. I wanted to stop struggling. My teeth tore through the flesh of the dying man before me; his throat was raw from screaming. His flesh was tough and lacked the sweetness that I so craved, but it was full of something else: fear. I wanted desperately to find more like him; I wanted to feed the hunger inside of me.

Once the man in front of me had been reduced to nothing more than a stain on the grass, I stood to my feet. My nose caught the scent of yet another. He was close... He was behind me. I turned around quickly; ready to devour anyone who dared stalk me, my back hunched in an odd yet still predator-like position. I stood tall once I'd determined there was no threat. In fact, the man behind me was nothing but a mutilated corpse, and he was not the first. He was one of about twenty. Twenty men slain by some creature... A creature whose scent was remarkably close to mine. I couldn't seem to grab hold of my senses before my hunger snatched them away once again. I could feel the lust for their flesh overtake me once again as I fell to my knees and began to feed like a wild animal. I couldn't force my hands to remove themselves from the ground beneath me; my bare feet dug into the crimson soaked floors of the field in before me. I gorged myself on the flesh of these men for hours, the moon's glow red as the black curtain of nightfall clothed me in my primal state.

...Is this the hunger of my bloodline?

The thought was shoved to the back of my mind as I fed the intensity of the hunger within me.

Peklenc had done it again, only this lesson was to be much harder than the last...

I found my way back to the village once my hunger had been fed; glad for the cover of night fall. No one could see who the figure was who stalked their streets. No one knew what had transpired only hours before. The blood coating my skin and face was not up for questioning due to the surrounding darkness. In fact, the villagers had sealed themselves inside of their homes, almost as if something else had frightened them away from the comfort of their own abode.

I still hadn't regained my eyesight as I continued to walk the streets. My other senses were heightened severely, as if my last frenzy was nothing but fuel to the fire. Though I could no longer see, I could smell Dreina's sweet blood and the stench of Peklenc's tainted meat. The twisted mix of scents easily aided in my return. The old cabin stood before and with it sat Peklenc. He was the only one sitting outside, carving at wood as he had before I'd left. He whistled an old tune that easily put my mind to rest as I approached him. His lips were still pursed as I sniffed the air, standing only a few inches from his outstretched blade; my mind caught in the entrapment of the song.

"Even without your sight your instincts are remarkable."

"Would you mind putting that down? I've been through enough for one night. I don't need to add 'stabbed' to my list of activities."

The darkness that erupted from his throat only worsened the searing hot pain of the blade driving deep into my ribs.

"You seem to think your night is over, my pet. You've still so much work to do."

Out of pure instinct, I wrapped my hand around the old man's throat, forcing his head to the side, pulling hard at his scalp with the other.

"You're about to kill an innocent man, Diavol."

I didn't care. All I cared about was healing my body and removing the threat of another assault.

I leaned into him, my teeth bared and hungry for the taste of flesh. I came within a hair's breadth of yet another feast before I heard the saddened sounds of a whimpering child coming from the doorway. I looked up despite the lack of vision; my nose compensating for it as I took in the scent of whomever had disturbed me. My mouth was still opened, ready to tear into the meat Peklenc was masquerading in, but Dreina wouldn't allow it.

She walked over to me, wrapping her little arms around my tensed hand, tugging, trying to remove me from the hunter's body. My instincts shrieked for me to tear into the girl before me, but something else inside of me forced me to comply with her wishes. I released the old man

and bowed to Dreina, if only to reach her level. Her hands reached out and held my face, hugging me close to her before gently stroking the hair on my head as though I was a dog. I could hear her beating heart, the air filling and expelling from her lungs, the catches in her diaphragm. I knew she was panicked; that something was causing her tiny body to react in such a manner. My only question was what?

I picked her up and placed her on my shoulders, ducking as I entered the cabin. Our time with Peklenc was over. I could no longer stay in the same dwelling as him. His presence alone was enough to cause me to fear for my sweet Dreina's life. My body was a weapon in his hands. Normally, that would not have bothered me, but normally, I would have been able to tell what the hell was going on inside of me; something I was no longer capable of doing...

Dreina hopped off of my shoulders and sped off to what I can only assume was the back room. She returned a few moments later with the shell in her hand. I could hear the rattling of the bones she'd collected. As I reached out to find her, my fingers grazed across the pelt on her shoulders; my head instinctively cocking to the side in a somewhat curious notion. I could hear her giggle at the gesture as she tugged my hand and started for the door. I followed close behind her, passing the old hunter as I did so.

“Diavol,”

His damaged throat forced my name through narrow passages as he tried to speak.

“At least allow me to return your sight.”

I could feel his hand moving through the air, reaching for me. It took everything within me not to lash out and remove the calloused appendage from his body. My lips pulled back in a strange animal-like snarl. I wanted to hurt him for what he had done to me. I wanted to rip him limb from limb, but I allowed him to touch me. Perhaps, a small part of me wanted to spare Dreina any more heartache during our journey. Perhaps, I knew that the man before me was capable of more than just causing blood lust and removing my sight

As I'd expected, his hand was rough. His touch burned against my skin, the muscles beneath it pushing to the surface as my bones began to crack and shift within me. I wanted to pull away, the pain was excruciating, but I held fast. Dreina's hand grasped mine firmly in an attempt to calm my nerves. It seemed to work. I looked down at her, though my vision had yet to return. The tears filling my eyes out of pure response dripped onto my arm and began to roll off before I felt a small pair of lips touch my skin where it had originally fallen. The pain began to subside once again as blurred resemblances of shapes and figures started to reacquaint themselves with my brain.

Peklenc removed his hand from my cheek and smiled as he sat back in his place, whittling at the wood block, my blood still decorating his blade. I stared at him for a moment,

waiting for my eyes to adjust to the night about them. Everything seemed sharper and more defined. I looked towards the heavens where the red moon had once watched me from above only to see that She had been crowded by an inbound storm; the clouds swirling with an ominous presence about them. Dreina squeezed my hand once again. As soon as our eyes met she smiled at me.

“I helped make you better!”

I chuckled and reached down to place the pelt over her head to give her some form of cover from the impending rain.

“That you did, my fair Dreina. That you did...”

She smiled and started to pull me towards the pathway in front of us. Despite what he’d done, she turned and waved at him, allowing my hand to drop to my side for only a moment before reclaiming it with her own. Peklenc looked up and smiled at the girl before giving me a knowing nod, the smile never leaving his lips. I hated when he did that. I hated not knowing what it was that was coursing through his twisted mind. He knew I was never fond of it and yet he did it anyway. At times, I truly hated him.

Dreina pulled me forward once again and we began our journey, though this time it was bit different. I only hoped that I would be able to maintain myself long enough to avenge my fallen companion, that I would be able to refrain from hurting the tiny angel that had taken such a liking to an ill-tempered beast. Perhaps now, the only thing I had to truly worry about was myself...

I scooped Dreina up and placed her atop my shoulders, holding her steady as I always had as the sky broke.

She giggled where she sat while the drops tickled her face.

“Avol! It’s going to storm!”

“Yes it is...”

“I love storms!”

Her voice was shrill but it didn’t cause my ears to bleed as it had before. It calmed the hunger welling up inside of me. Just the sound of her joyful cries seemed to tame the beast inside of me if only for a moment. In fact, to steal the clichés of my master, it almost felt as though it was the calm before the storm...

... *Just fucking perfect...*

I could feel the shift of the weather against my skin. The wind whispered obscenities in my ear as it taunted me, leaving with a wicked cackle. The tears from the heavens hit the ground just before my feet; gods and goddesses fearing for their precious creations, no doubt. Perhaps they wept out of a staunch fear for their very lives. They had every right to fear for themselves. Peklenc had crossed a line, and for that he would pay. I heard the thunder screaming my name off in the distance; growing louder the further I went. It sounded almost as if it was at my mercy. It sounded as though it was pleading for forgiveness. Huh, tough fucking chance.

I walked for hours, my thoughts running wild as Dreina slept. They were filled with nothing but hatred for the god who dared test my boundaries. He wanted something from me, and he'd made that painfully clear. Then again he was the least of my worries at this point. In fact, he was steadily becoming the least of anything to me. He was but a man, a man whom I intended to make pay for what he'd done to me. Fucking prick. My blood began to cool while my mind attempted to push the games of my "master" to the side. The burning sensation finally subsiding for the time being as I trudged on.

Dreina whimpered softly in her sleep, though her arms attempted to squeeze the eyes from my skull. She tensed the entirety of her body, the turtle shell cracking slightly against the back of my head as she did so. Hissing lowly, I reached up to remove the girl from my cranium. Her eyes shot open as she fought within my grasp to get away. I knew if I'd held on to her for a moment longer she would have hurt herself, or I may have been the one to hurt her.

I placed her on the ground and took several steps back, allowing the young one to regain her wits. Her small chest heaved while she took in the drenched wood about her. Her eyes caught mine as she slowly calmed herself, venturing from her refuge. Within moments her arms held my waist tightly, my bloodied pants a sponge for her tears. I closed my arms around her, hoping to console her. Her sobs wrenched my heart from its cage, wringing it dry. I was compelled to hold the youngling, to protect her from whatever devils tortured her mind. I wanted to know what it was that troubled her so, but she'd fallen asleep once more. My arms constricted her slightly; attempting to grant her a sense of security and comfort before scooping her up completely.

Dreina, what is it that haunts your nightmares so...?

The rays of the sun had yet to pierce the thicket of clouds covering the skies; a pleasant surprise to say the least. It was refreshing to wake up to a darkened sky; to be granted a break from the forlorn battle between the furious sun and myself. I gave a defiant smirk as I stared towards the sky, daring Peklenc and his brethren to make a move. They didn't respond. Typical.

I held Dreina close to me as I began climbing down the length of the tree. I could only assume that we'd found our way into its branches thanks to some instinct or other. *Of course we did.* My thoughts continued to curse the gods and plead with the goddess. Well, they continued on until I looked down. Two pale blue eyes stared at me above two dimpled cheeks. I gladly returned the smile as I set her down and handed her the shell she'd left atop the branches, the crack minimal and almost nonexistent.

She took it and giggled softly before running behind the tree we'd slept in only the night before. I chuckled and walked after her. Before I could reach her, however, she rounded the tree and was staring at the bark, digging her tiny fingers into what appeared to be holes. I came around and looked at her, wondering what it was she was playing with. She quickly reached for my hand and pressed my fingers against the holes.

“Avol, why do they match your fingers?”

I stared for a second, trying to piece everything together. This lack of knowledge was starting to wear thing on my nerves.

“Maybe I made those holes when we were coming out of the tree.”

“You've never made holes before. Did you mean to?”

I shook my head before reaching down and scooping her up; the image of the marked tree slowly burning itself into my mind. She reached over and knocked her knuckles against my skull. It took everything within me not to pin her to the ground and snarl in her face. Perhaps, my eyes showed just how much of a war was being waged from within me.

“I'm sorry. You just looked far away again.”

“Merely thinking, Dreina...”

“You think too much, Avol.”

“Hm...”

I sat for a moment, pretending to allow the words to penetrate my head before responding.

“I suppose I could stop doing that for now, but you'll have to give me something else to do.”

“Like what?”

She gently laid her head against mine when she spoke.

“I like to listen...”

“Avol, I don’t know what you like to listen to, dumb-dumb.”

“I’d like to listen to you.”

She blinked, curiosity filling her face. For the first time I could see the deep crimson in my eyes reflecting from her pale blue hues.

“Listen to me?”

“Yeah, maybe you could tell me about your dreams.”

She paused for a moment. It almost looked like she was trying to gather the courage to begin the story. I sighed and looked at trees before us.

“It’s alright. You don’t have to say anything until you’re ready.”

For a split second, she opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, but quickly closed it and nodded, holding on to me as I continued forward. The silence was more than a confirmation that something was plaguing this poor girl. Where she was normally a free soul, laughing and talking about the most random of things, she now sat quiet in a bout of looming fear. I wanted to help her, but I knew pushing her further would have done more than simply cause her to shut down.

I continued along the forest floor, stopping at yet another of Earth’s veins. *She granted me some sort of comfort and solace, after all.* Dreina slid from shoulders, sitting on the ground as soon as her feet met the turf. I looked at her, trying to figure out if I’d crossed a line earlier. She merely gave me a saddened smile and hugged her knees to her chest, exposing the skin beneath her tattered dress. More scars leered at me, grinning across her porcelain flesh. I tried to contain the beast within me as my anger began to take hold again. The mark of the hunters littered what should have been a flawless canvas...

She quickly covered the marks on her legs with her arms, though she’d only managed to expose the scars decorating those as well. I gave her a soft reassuring smile. It wasn’t her that nearly set the beast free within me. It was the thought of a hunter dragging a blade across a young girl’s flesh for sport. Dreina hadn’t made my blood boil. That was a deed reserved for the wounds of the creatures they’d baited with her. She was innocent in all of this. It was no more her fault that my hunger filled my insides than it was her fault that those bastards had barged into my home, my sanctuary, and brutally murdered Pieire. She wasn’t the one whom I’d been “sent” to judge. No, my wrath belonged to those who’d forced themselves on innocent bystanders such as Dreina and my dear Pieire.

I was ripped from my thoughts by the sound of her soft whimper. She was trembling slightly as she stared at me wide eyed. *She’s afraid of me...* I turned away, trying to force my body to retract any threatening signs of the beast within. I knew my eyes were forced to remain

in their crimson state, but I could only pray that the teeth within my mouth would find some way to return to a hidden state. After several moments of forcing my body to bow to my will, I'd forced the remainder of the beast back into my mind. I could feel Dreina's eyes on me, watching to see if it was safe for her to approach me.

I heard the quiet patter of her steps as she wandered over to my side, staring at me from behind. I turned slowly, a smile still on my lips as I looked at her. She returned it, the fear melting away slightly though remnants still remained in her eyes. My arms spread wide, inviting her in as I did so. She stepped away for a moment, contemplating the consequences of getting any closer. I suppose she'd thought the pros outweighed the cons as she leapt into my arms, nuzzling into my chest. I held her close as I took in her scent. It was comforting, to say the least; almost as comforting as Pieire's.

They will pay for what they've done to you Dreina. And they will pay for what they've done to you as well, my dear friend...

Night came quickly. The trees hanging overhead rustled with movement as their inhabitants slowly crept from their homes. The hunting time had started once again. However, these beasts were not those born to nature. The hunt belonged to the creatures born of the gods and their Creator. Some were insidious, other smelled of neutrality, while a select few gave way to a more benevolent existence.

We'd found ourselves deep within the forest, far beyond the reach of normal man and beast. The only fools who dared trespass here were the hunters. I suppose it was a bout of goodness that they trespassed on such land. How else would these creatures be granted their succulent meal? More importantly, how would *I* be granted *my* meal?

Dreina rested on my shoulders, oblivious to the dangers that could potentially befall her. Then again, she was a smart girl. Perhaps, she knew that no one dared touch her while in my presence. Not as if it mattered, though. Her curiosity of the surrounding world was intriguing. She'd glance from place to place, though her body lay still above me. Her head would zip from one part of the wood to another, watching the reflective eyes scattered about. At certain points, she would gasp at the trees hanging their heads out of pure exhaustion beyond us. She held her child-like curiosity throughout the entirety of our journey.

I smiled as I glanced up towards her, continuing our walk for but a moment. Of course there was a hitch. My eyes shifted from tree to tree trying to locate our stalker. Dreina looked down at me and tapped on my forehead as she did so. I didn't respond, I only held my ground and began to search for our amateur assailant.

"Avol? What's wrong? Is someone bad out there?"

My eyes continued to scan the trees; the hunger within me starting to peak once again as my teeth grew.

"Yes, Dreina... "

"Are we going to get hurt?"

"Don't worry, you're safe with me. No one will harm you..."

I'm still unsure whether or not my words comforted her. She only grew quiet, no reassurance that she was calmed or comforted.

It wasn't long before we were confronted. The creature was tall and lean, much like myself. The difference lied in his pale complexion and deepened eyes. They were an oddly dark shade of gray. His skin was whiter than Dreina's and his teeth were long and sharp. Otherwise, he appeared human. Well, aside from his lusting eyes. The fool stared at the child atop my

shoulders, giving no regard for my presence what so ever. I was starting believe that people enjoyed making this mistake. If not for enjoyment then perhaps suicide.

He reached for her. I scoffed to myself and took a step back staring at him. His eyes met mine and a strangely cocky smile curled up onto his lips. Again, he reached for her. Again, I stepped away. I knew I couldn't very well leave her on her own. I couldn't set her down here; not without her standing by my side. I continued to stalk the assailant, thinking of the pros and cons of having Dreina stand beside me while I maimed and fed. He reached for her again while my thoughts sorted themselves out, though my hand had reached for his and crushed the bones within it.

I was brought back to reality by his pained cry. Dreina stared at him, fear running through her eyes as she held onto my side, digging her nails into me. It felt like her fear had run from her and straight into me, only when it got to me it was turned into a deep and primal rage. I snarled at the creature before me, my face heavy with the weight of the fangs and sharpened teeth protruding from my gums; shown only by curled lips. Terror ran through him, and it was plainly visible.

He released a hiss backing away, trying to put distance between the two of us. His distance was closed once his throat was within my grasp; from my hand to my mouth. Blood rushed my tongue as my teeth bit through his throat, crushing his windpipe almost instantly. His grip was strong, but mine was several times stronger. The bones in his arms shattered while my fingers tightened around them. My other hand spread wide across his back, my fingers digging into the muscle surrounding the spine, ripping it from the bones then quickly grasping the cord. His mouth opened to scream again but nothing but a gargled choke climbed out. I removed myself from his throat and proceeded to rip his trapped arm from the socket, tearing out a large piece of flesh before devouring it and bone soon thereafter.

A small part of me still wished that Dreina wasn't so close while I fed my dark hunger. I didn't want her to see just how gruesome this was. Some part of me knew that she'd always known how destructive my hunger was but for her to see it was a whole different matter. Or so I thought. Before I was given the chance to kill the blood draining fool, Dreina had picked up her small shell and grabbed whatever was inside of it. She climbed the man before me, pushing my hands and mouth to the side. I backed away out of mere shock before growling at her. I was met with a hand across the face and a finger pointed directly at me. The look in her eyes forced me to refrain from harming her.

She turned her attention back to the walking corpse and forced a handful of herbs and assorted items into the freshly carved hole where his throat used to be. Without warning, she smashed the turtle shell against his mouth, knocking the teeth from his skull. Her fingers forced their way into his mouth as she began to retrieve every ounce of bloodied ivory bone and placed them in her shell before dismounting the creature.

He fell to the ground, spasming and coughing up a liquid close to blood but it lacked the right smell. Normally, the stench of these creatures was worse than that of any hunter I'd come across, but this was sweet and enticing; so much so that my body lurched toward it without warning. I took another bite of his flesh, this time with less ferocity. The flesh was tender and succulent. I could hear myself groan softly as his bones crunched under the weight of my teeth. I was clear of the body within minutes, licking my lips and looking for more.

Dreina stood beside me and smiled, however, this smile bore a spooky resemblance to Pieire's. It also bore a strange resemblance to the goddess after she'd fed. I looked at her with my head cocked to the side as she pulled her turtle shell close. I picked her up and placed her on my shoulders as we continued forward.

"That was fun! Can I help you more?"

I tried to find my voice, but it was lost within me. Instead what came out was a disgruntled yet stifled grunt.

"Okay, you can tell me later..."

She paused for but a moment.

"... I didn't like him. A lot of other people like him hurt me sometimes."

I growled to myself, thinking of the many ways that I could potentially torture and maim those responsible for hurting her.

"It's okay now, though. I have Avol! And Avol always makes the bad guys go away. Even in my dreams! Well, sometimes in my dreams."

I gave a silent huff, she giggled.

"Sometimes in my dreams you aren't there, Avol."

Her voice slowly began trailing off into a depth of sadness.

"And when you aren't there, I'm with those bad guys. And they leave me alone in the middle of the woods and cut me and beat me up and go on their way until the bad things come and try to eat me. They even tied up my papa, and cut him like that too... Then they take me away and steal me forever!"

For a moment I fought with myself, but the words came out despite the twisted melding of voice and growl spilling from my lips.

"I won't leave you alone. They can't hurt you anymore. I promise, Dreina... We will find them and hurt them... For you and P-Pieire... And your papa..."

I could feel her climbing down to my arm, hanging off of my shoulder as she stared at me.

“Do you know my papa?”

I shook my head, but she continued to stare at me.

“Then why did you say his name?”

I stopped dead in my tracks and looked at her. *He had a daughter? And he never told me?*

“Pieire...? I-is he your p-papa?”

She nodded frantically and stared at me.

“You *do* know papa!”

I nodded as my mind cursed the fucking bastard for failing to mention his blood.

She smiled at me and giggled as she climbed back to her resting spot atop my shoulders.

“Papa was a weird man. He went away after they killed him...”

After they killed him? Fucking great, yet another bout of questions and open ended bullshit for me to think about...

The wood was so thick that no ounce of sun could pass through the branches. It was a veritable cave of trees with the occasional skeleton and scattered bone hanging from the walls while old flesh clung to the forest floors. Branches hung low, some broken and screaming of a battle between two predators. Others were merely scratched and carved. One, in particular, bore the mark of the hunters. They were known for carving up bark in order to show their comrades where they'd come from and what direction they were heading in. Perhaps, this was a blessing in disguise. Surely, they would have enough to feed a small girl. Surely, there would be enough of them to feed a large man.

I sniffed near the circular carving in the trunk of the tree, taking in the scent of the hunters. Their stink was thick in my nostrils. I felt like falling to the ground and inhaling the death from the rotting flesh strewn about the floors, but I refrained. Where there were human hunters, there was food for a human child. At least, a presumably human child. I followed the carvings and the thickness of the odor permeating from the clan of men traipsing through the dense thicket of trees; men and something else. The scent caught in my nose like fresh honey dripping from the comb. It was female. There were at least three women running with this belligerent bunch of ass-wiping Neanderthals. *Great, just fucking great.*

I'd slowly begun to come to terms with the change in my instincts, with the spike in my desires and lusts, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to introduce a new temptation. I could only hope that I would be able to resist. It had been so long... I continued walking towards the hunters' site, trying to still my tattered and rushing nerves. I couldn't help the hunger rising inside of me. What was worse, I couldn't stop my body from lusting the closer I got to the camp site.

Dreina continued to look from side to side, inspecting every tree we'd come upon. She was naming them as we passed, calling them friend and even conversing with a few. She was such a strange child. It didn't matter how many times I told myself how strange she was, it always seemed to surprise me. Her fascination with the surrounding trees quickly vanished as her stomach growled in my ear. I could feel her hand reaching for it. I knew she was hungry, and that was all the confirmation I needed.

“Avol?”

“Yes?”

“Can we eat soon?”

“We will. I'll make sure you're full, okay?”

She clapped her hands together and giggled as she kissed my head.

“Okay! You take good care of me, Avol.”

I chuckled and glanced upwards.

“I’m glad.”

Her weight shifted back and forth as she nodded frantically.

“You have to be careful, Dreina. If you nod too fast you could hurt yourself.”

“Will my head fall off?”

“It’s a possibility.”

She stopped and whimpered softly.

“Okay, I’ll stop moving so fast. I don’t want my head to fall off.”

Laughter escaped my lips as I spoke:

“Good, I don’t want a headless Dreina running around. That would be odd, to say the least.”

She laughed and hugged my head as she rested hers on top of mine. I gave her a content sigh and continued on. *It was nice while it lasted...* I knew my sanity was falling to the wayside with each step I took. I could only hope that I’d be able to retain some form of control. Huh, yeah right. Like that’ll happen...

We neared the camp within a matter of hours. Night started to creep forward as the remnants of the day receded into the thicket of darkness; not as if the day was too much brighter than the night. Their fire was ablaze, some poor dead creature slumped to the side by the sleeping area, and another of the natural variety spigoted and roasting over the flames. Their stench easily covered the roasting flesh. Filthy bile based creatures with God-complexes... But their women...

I stalked a young huntress returning from what appeared to be a bout of scouting. She was covered from head to toe in what looked to be some sort of animal skin clothing, random bits of bone and steel based armor on her forearms, shins and abdomen. She smelled like the most succulent piece of the tenderest meat. Her scent taunted me continuously. It took everything from within me not to lunge at her. Her shoulders were square but her hips were perfectly rounded, and her figure was impeccable. She was the picture of a true huntress. And I wanted her.

Dreina's stomach pulled me out of my voyeur-like fantasies. She was getting hungrier by the second. Whatever it was that I was bound to do I needed to do it fast. I counted the hunters and started counting their pets. The mangy mutts had yet to pick up on my presence. I'm still unsure how that was even remotely possible. I still stank of fool's blood and days old sweat. Oh well, less for me to concern myself with. A grin crossed my lips as I smiled. Their numbers were dwindling and it was obvious. Necklaces of fallen comrades hung from their wooden spikes, an offering of food left by their things to appease the dead spirits. No self-absorbed hunter walked these woods in life or in death without becoming the hunted. *Idiots...*

My hunger began to grow, as did the beast within me. It was clawing at the surface, prying its cage doors open. Again, my teeth grew. And again, the mark on my chest burned hot as it bled slightly. My heart began to race. It felt like it was punching a hole in my chest. My senses jumped into overdrive; the scent of the huntress now starting to drive me mad. I heard my spine crack as it slowly started to elongate. I bit down hard on my lip, forcing it to bleed. Dreina slid down from my shoulders and stood by my side, staring at my hands as sharpened bone started to protrude from the tips of my fingers, expanding slightly. I could smell her fear; hear her heart start to race. I could smell the adrenaline coursing through her blood as she stood by my side. I knelt beside her, my body shaking and perspiring profusely from the pain. It took her a few moments but she started to reach for me. I easily bowed my head, though my eyes stayed with hers as she gently pet me. I offered her a soft smile, my hands braced against the floor. She easily returned it, opening her arms to hug me. I was caught slightly off guard when there was no embrace. Instead, I was met with a well armored kick to the back of the head.

My lips pulled back in a vicious snarl as my hands reached forward to catch my weight. The bones resembled claws, darkening in color, eventually fading to an almost glossed black. I stood and stared at my assailant: another huntress. My instincts took over immediately. Within seconds I had her pinned to a tree, my free hand clawing at her body, ripping the clothes and protective armor from her chest. I grew hungrier by the second. The artery in her neck pulsated wildly, immediately drawing my attention. My eyes slowly began to scan her partially naked body. My hand reached for the soft skin as the other kept her pinned to the tree. I was lost inside my own mind. I couldn't break myself from the trance of the woman standing before me. The pressure of my claws pressing lightly across her breasts seemed to inflict some sort of pain. My eyes left her body and returned to her eyes when she grunted. Once they'd returned, I noticed the blood running from the wound. Again, instinct took over and leaned in, biting with the daggers adorning my mouth. I fed for several moments on her sweet blood. *Better than mother's milk...*

Again, I was interrupted by a blunt blow to the back of my skull. Without warning I bit down harder, wrenching the flesh from her chest as I turned to stare at the hunter behind me. He held a large hammer in his right hand, a dagger in his left. Judging from the blood dripping from the surface of the large steel cube in the depths of his right hand I'd say it was the hammer. I turned my attention back to the woman, snapping her neck instantly before turning to the hunter

again. The scent of my blood was quickly filling the air and any bout of sense I may have had left escaped me thoroughly. I jumped him and promptly removed his bowels from the confines of his abdomen. He swung once with the hammer, then again with the blade, his intestines falling from within him and dragging across the ground.

I raised my right arm to counter his wild blade. The metal stuck into my it, snapping off at the hilt as the hunter tried to retract it. I pulled my arm back and swiped the detached blade across his throat, licking the blood from his jugular as he fell to the ground, bleeding out from the gaping hole where his greed ridden pot belly once was. In comparison, the neck wound was but a scratch. I went to return to the dead woman about the ground before I heard Dreina's high pitched screech. My head snapped towards her, my mouth opening wide, releasing a primal roaring howl hybrid from deep within me. The hunter holding her captive stared at me, a cocky smile decorating his disgustingly muddied face. He held a blade to her arm, pressing and attempting to make a mark. I didn't know I was capable of such movement...

Before he had the chance to even contemplate slicing her arm open, my hands had made their way through his rib cage and removed both lungs, forcing him to suffocate while choking on his own blood as he collapsed releasing Dreina. I breathed heavily as the beast's growl settled deep within my chest. She held on to my sides, shaking slightly. I scanned for the rest of the hunters, knowing at least one had to be around. Unfortunately, I was right. My original prey, the first huntress, had come around the site, aiming for every spot that could have been considered a critical and, perhaps, fatal. I speared my hand and grabbed a hand full of her hair, pulling through the fresh hole in her throat. Her blood oozed down my arm, passed the blade, dripping from my elbow. I pulled her hair harder, easily ripping her head from her shoulders and using it as a mace to disorient the second male hunter.

Her teeth embedded themselves deep into his face, removing a large hunk of flesh from his cheek as it finished the rotation. I wrenched the decapitated skull to the side as I pounced on the burly man. My ribs separated slightly, the entirety of the cage cracking and shifting within me. Sensing the opportunity, he buried his fist in the right half of my ribs, forcing me to retreat. I could hear Dreina whimpering. At first, I'd believed myself to be the cause of her fear, but once I'd inspected her a bit more I noticed the frightened gaze that she wore just after her nightmares. It was directed towards the brute standing before me. Within seconds, I found myself tearing him in two, his blood showering me as the halves of his corpse collided with the ground. I searched for the others but they were nowhere to be found. And they say hunters are all stupid...

Satisfied that we were alone, I knelt again by Dreina's side and looked at her, making sure that no one had harmed her. She wrapped her arms around my neck, despite the blood. The beast was quiet, pushed so far behind the boundaries of its cage I would have forgotten it existed. She cried softly in my grasp, clutching me as close as she could.

“Dreina... You’re safe now.”

She stayed deeply buried in my arms, shaking.

“I won’t let them hurt you...”

She looked up at me, her eyes still leaking tears. I wiped them away, careful not to scratch her with my claws. *Where’d they go..?*

“I know... but you didn’t get all of them, Avol.”

“I know, but next time I will. Next time I’ll be ready for hundreds of them, and next time you will be safely out of harm’s way...”

She nodded as she buried herself back into my bloodied chest and arms.

After several moments of crying and reassurance she sat on the ground nearest the fire, a leg from a small pheasant in her hand. She tore into the meat, still sniffing the tears away. I’d tried to sit across from her earlier as to not contaminate her meal with my own, but she wouldn’t have it. As a result, I ended up eating like one of the civilized cannibals of the still tribal countries. We ate in silence as my mind raced back to the hunters and huntresses. I knew that those who’d escaped would come back with reinforcements. It was only a matter of time until this heinous war came to an end. I fully intended to wipe every foul-smelling, shit-eating, piss-sniffing hunter from these forests. I fully intended to keep my promise to Dreina... And I fully intended to kick Pieire’s ass for setting me up like this... *Dick...*

Dreina fell asleep soon after eating. I cleared the camp site of corpses, taking whatever bounty I saw fit to claim. I'd had my fill of flesh and had used their bones to pick the remainder of their carcasses from my teeth. Normally a meal like that would have satisfied me for at least a couple of days, but I was nowhere near full. My hands began to shake violently at the thought of hunting. I could hear the cries of the beast from within the depths of my mind. I knew it would surface and I knew it would surface soon. I sighed heavily, regaining my composure before picking her up and continuing on.

The deeper we'd gotten into the wood, the thicker the stench of the hunters. I'd slowly begun to wonder why it was that they were so far in the depths of this eternal hell. Had the villagers protected them finally come to their senses and banished them? Had they worn their welcome thin in the presence of their fearless leader? Either way, it didn't bode well for them...

My feet had grown weary of the ground beneath us. They ached for the rough bark of the trees. They calmed me for some reason. Within seconds I found myself climbing to the top of the wooden graves, ripping from branch to branch, Dreina secure in my arm. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about the events of earlier that evening. I'd suffered such a lack of control. Originally, I'd planned to take the young huntress before feeding on her, but it was obvious that didn't have any merit where my body was concerned. It no longer cared for the touch of another. It solely wished to be fed and destroy everything and everyone around it; everyone but Dreina.

The beast bowed to her will. She didn't seem to fear it. It was almost as if she knew that she could control it. She knew that she wasn't its target, and even if she was she knew that there was nothing it could do to hurt her. I'd like to think she thought it was me beneath those claws willing it to stay away from her, but we both knew that wasn't true. I merely wished to keep her safe and out of harm's way; a feat I cared nothing for since the death of Pieire. Come to think of it he was the only one who'd truly given me a reason to defend someone... In this life and the last. Maybe my desire to keep this young girl safe was because of her father's blood. But what excuse did I have for the beast?

I continued through the trees, my toes still gripping as they used to. My body still leaned from side to side and offered some form of relief from what you call physics and gravity. Their scent was my guide as I raced towards another of their camps, although, something had changed since I'd lost myself. The clumsy hunters were about, yes, but there were several others; perhaps, hundreds. I stopped short of my goal, looking at the poor girl sleeping in my arms. I'd promised to keep her safe, but I'd also promised to make her nightmares disappear; to destroy those who'd hurt her in the past. I looked for a crevice, one which would provide her with some sort of protection from the creatures that stalked the night. I'd thought about taking her with me, but there was no guarantee that I'd be able to fulfill either promise had she been there. For once, that mistake was mine to bear, and mine alone...

I left her nestled within the bowls of an old willow. The branches had grown twisted around the trunk, eventually draping over to the sides as a traditional willow would. Its leaves were thick, dense, and awkwardly vibrant. It lacked the gray hue of the rest of the trees about it. I pulled at the warped vines and distorted pieces of wood, trying to clear some sort of path to reach the darkened hold in the depths of its belly. It was small enough to place her inside, yet large enough for her to feel comfortable. As soon as it'd been cleared, I left her and her shell within its confines, placing a hand on the strange old tree, asking for its aid in protecting the young girl. In another instance, I'd leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

Her eyes opened slowly as I pulled away. She reached forward and grabbed my hand, holding it close to her. I knew she didn't want me to go; she didn't want me to leave her there to defend herself. I offered her a soft and gentle smile before leaning in and holding her close. I felt a slight sting in one of the shallow wounds littered about my body. Her tears fell freely, cascading down my blood stained skin. I held her closer and kissed her head once more, trying to express how much she meant to me. She and her father both had given me something to protect, something to avenge, something to remind me that I was more than some flesh eating monster. I was a man, a man born of blessed blood, a man who would no longer deny his heritage be it divine or simply within the realm of human.

She pulled away, wiping the tears from her face. I looked at her for a few moments longer before realizing that she knew what it was I was planning. She understood what it was that I had to do, and accepted it so easily. I wiped the remainder of the tears from her face, my voice soft and, hopefully, reassuring.

“Dreina...”

“I know Avol. You made us promises.”

“I did... I swore to both of you that they would pay for what they'd done to you”

“What if they kill you?”

I gave her a soft smile, stroking her cheek with my thumb.

“They won't kill me.”

“What if I never get to see you again?!”

“Dreina, this is not our last good bye, I can assure you of that... I only ask that you stay here.”

She stared for a few moments, tears welling up in her eyes as she did so. Surprisingly, she held them back.

“Okay, Avol. I'll stay here.”

I offered her yet another smile and kissed her head once more before starting off, my stride quick though my feet were heavy.

I dared not look back. Her eyes were trailing me and I knew if I'd turned around I wouldn't have had the gall to leave her behind. She was safe. I'm not sure how or why I'd known that, but I did.

... My dear Dreina, you will be alright. I promise I will end your nightmares. I promise they will be judged for their sins... I swear, Pieire, I will protect her...

At the time, it didn't feel like much of a lie...

That was the first time I'd left Dreina on her own. I wanted to go back, to hold her close and tell her I'd never do it again, but I knew better. I knew she shouldn't follow, I knew she shouldn't even be within earshot of me. I knew that if she'd come along she would have been more distracting than helpful. But it didn't stop me from wanting turn around. *She's safe where she is. Nothing will happen to her where she is, everything is okay, Diavol...*

I continued forward, leaping from branch to branch, allowing my toes to curl hard around the twigs and bark of the dead trees. The scent of the hunters began to drown out my thoughts. Their vile and putrid stink actually enticing for once. I allowed my body to continue hunting them, continue tracking their movements. They'd set up camp amongst the trees, avoiding any form of clearing. They were smart for once. Their tents were made of animal pelts, their fires burned within the earth in large hollowed pits, their water hung above them in sewn animal skins, and they sat around, laughing and comparing the unfortunate skulls of their victims.

I watched a group of young hunters: they were brash and refused to believe that anything could harm them. They flaunted their kills like it was something to be proud of. One held up the skull of a fox pup while the other brazenly gloated about slaying the father just for sport. The two compared the skulls like fucking jocks comparing their dicks. That's when the third spoke up and openly blurted that he'd killed at least a dozen foxes just for the hell of it, an entire den eradicated, just because he fucking felt like it. The other two stared at him before bursting out into an obnoxious bout of laughter. It made my skin crawl and my ears were damn near on the brink of bleeding. I wanted to go down there and bludgeon them to death with the skulls they so openly paraded with. But how disrespectful would that be to the creatures they murdered?

Instead, I quieted my anger, the beast inside of me still scratching and clawing to get to the surface. I couldn't give it enough of a grasp to take over. This was *my* hunt, *my* kills, *my* vengeance, and no one, not even that god-awful beast within me was going to take it from me. For the first time, I'd forced it to subside. And for the first time, the carved skulls in my chest bled and burned without notice. I leapt from the trees and landed in the midst of all three of the young hunters, smiling at all of them. There was still blood staining my features, and for some strange reason unbeknownst to me, it frightened them. They were quick to draw blades and clubs, and they were quicker to fall headless to the ground, their fingers still wrapped around handle and hilt. It was a simply delicious feat, and watching the blood pour from their necks was starting to fuel my age old hunger.

For hunters, they were a dense lot. Not one had turned to see that their young apprentices had fallen. Not one had seen me enter their prestigious campsite. Most importantly, not one saw the head of the loudest fox-killing idiot hurtling towards their face. One thing they

did happen to see was the blood pouring from their largest member's nose as the skull of the deceased cracked against his own.

The man was the size of a titan. He towered over me by at least two feet. His hands were like trunks and his head like a boulder. His presence, however, was clumsy and about as intimidating as a child caught in the jaws of a wolf. There was nothing frightening about him. Nor was there anything frightening about his band of rejects. They'd begun circling me, five maybe six of them. One attempted to say something, but his words were so clouded by the meat in his jowls that I couldn't understand him. Not that it truly mattered. Surely, nothing of interest could have come from those lips anyway. Well, almost nothing. I smirked as they closed in a bit more. They were all so eager to die and yet they figured it was just an eagerness to fight. Perhaps if it's a match with a reaper, then yes, you are all so eager to *fight*.

I felt a soft pain in my shoulder. One of the men had gathered enough of his testicles to bury his blade in the bone of my back without getting the okay from his master. Just as quickly, those jolly good testicles of his were lying by his feet in front of him, his own blade still buried in the skin of his scrotum. I still remember the look on his face once he felt the air blowing between his legs. It was a mix of horror and shock. He almost didn't know what to do with himself. Should I scream? Should I pass out? What the fuck should I do? I also remember the look on his comrade's faces when he fell to the ground, his chest cracked open like the ass of a lobster. They rushed me in an instant, all but the big one. And in an instant they fell, their hearts grasped in my hands and pieces of their throats being ground between my teeth.

The Goliath snarled, picking up what appeared to be a blunt hammer. He brought it down hard against me. He'd tried to grab the upper hand, I suppose he'd used this tactic on many others. Unfortunately, his great plan did nothing more than piss me off. I felt the bones in my shoulder, the same one oozing blood from the nutless moron lying about on the floor, crack into several shards. I saw his rotten smile, his teeth decaying within his head and black as tar. Even a creature like me has standards. I resolved myself to the idea that he was nothing more than a hunk of rotten flesh and forced the handle of his precious hammer through the soft bowl within his throat, just below his apple, changing its course of direction to move more swiftly upward into the base of his peon of a brain. He fell hard against the ground, his eyes rolling into the back of his head while his mouth fell open. The smell was rancid, worse than rotting cod or month old corpse. I nearly vomited!

I reached over, grabbing a large burning bout of dried earth and rammed it into the festering pile of bacterial shit he'd once called a mouth. Burning the filth created a much more pleasant stench than allowing it to grow into anything other than that...

I'd caused a stir with the rest of the hunters and huntresses running about. They'd all retreated to their tents. It was only a matter of time before they all came forth, although there was a single tent that no one entered. Come to think of it, no one had come out of it either.

Interesting. I took the lull in combat to readjust what was left of my tattered shoulder, sliding the joints back together and forcing the cartilage around it to adhere to the shattered ball that was my shoulder. After a few seconds of excruciating pain, I reached for one of the deceased and started to devour the corpse, hoping to regain some semblance of my strength. There was no way that this would be the last of my injuries, and there was no way I was going to give them the opportunity to harm me further without regaining something from one of their own.

His flesh is so fucking tender... I need more...

The beast crept forward, trying to force what was left of my humanity away. Again, I forced it to the wayside. It fought back, trying to force me to let him pass. I could hear him breathing down my neck, my grip on him slipping the more I pushed. He was powerful, a monstrous subterfuge laughing as his darkness overcame my eyes. His voice was deep and heinous. I'd never heard anything so hard and gruff before him. He was an unstoppable juggernaut. I could hear his tongue gliding over his rough and scaled lips before it retreated into its dank cave, taunting me with words I'd sworn he didn't know.

“You fight me constantly, Diavol, why?”

I looked around cautiously. There was nothing and no one within a hundred miles; only me and some twisted disembodied voice. I slowly stepped towards the words being directed at me. As I spoke my words were lost, even to myself. I couldn't tell if I was afraid or simply in awe. What came from my lips was a hushed breath carrying empty words.

“This is my body, beast... What could you possibly want with it? It is of no use to you.”

“But you're wrong, Diavol. This body is powerful. This body is strong. This body belongs to me and my kind. You would have known that had you kept up with your supposedly human line.”

I continued to stare into the darkness. It sounded as if the beast was getting closer still to me. My feet began to work on their own, no regard for me or what I wanted. My curiosity had grown too strong for me to fight any longer. Something within me told me this battle was one that I was meant to lose. Shock ran rampant throughout my body. I could feel my spine tense and my muscles freeze as the beast stepped toward me.

“You own nothing. You've done your part, Avol. It's time for you to rest; time for you to give up this existence as a man and take your place among your master and his kind. This is no longer your fight.”

Before I had the opportunity to interrogate him further, he'd retreated. I tried to follow him but he was nowhere to be found. Frustration built within me until I could no longer

contain it, screaming at nothing. Again, he'd beaten me... again he'd won... again he'd forced me to face my reality. I didn't want this, but then again, when did I ever get what I wanted?

Candied blood caressed my tongue and cascaded down my throat as I fed on the flesh of my final victim. All around me were pieces of bodies and charred weapons marking the graves of every hunter the camp had seen. I hadn't recalled finishing the bloodied battle, but it was obvious, other than myself, there were no other survivors. I'd finished off countless bodies and, from the looks of things, removed the skulls and hearts from every one of them, piling them into some ritualistic symbol about the flames. It seemed the corpse in my arms was the last of my victims, but this one was for my sustenance only. I dared not share the sweet flesh with any other deity besides myself.

I pulled away from the corpse, tilting my head back as my fangs way heavy in my mouth. I wanted to feel every ounce of the sweet nectar run down my throat. It forced a beast-like groan from my lips before I allowed my head to fall, readying myself for yet another bite as I opened my eyes. Before I had a chance to fully lower myself I felt my heart stop. My hands started to shake as I stared at the corpse before me. I'd fed on Dreina. The angel lay lifeless and half eaten within my arms. How had she gotten free of the willow? How had she found me?

Why didn't I save her? Why didn't I stop?! Why did she deserve this?!

I held what was left of her close to me. Her blood still tainted my hands as I wept. Not once had my eyes been wet with tears before now, even at the death of my beloved Pieire. I felt an immense blanket of death and sorry fall over me. I tried to apologize but nothing fell from my lips but stifled sobs. I couldn't believe that I'd done that to her; after everything I'd promised...

I felt the change in my body flood me like a rush of crimson stained waters racing towards the floors of a virgin forest. My skin burned, my mouth was lead, my eyes were laden with needles. I raised my head to curse the heavens, to scream for Peklenc and his hoard of judges. Her eyes still stared at me asking why I'd given in, why I'd hurt her the way I had. Why hadn't I stopped myself as I had in the past? She was my only salvation, now resting amongst the goddess...

Forgive me, Dreina... Forgive me, Pieire...

I carried her corpse through the entirety of the forest; her shell held to my chest. I wept until my eyes had swollen shut. What was left of her body lay limp in my hands as I knelt beside her father's grave. I began to dig a smaller one next to it. A small part of me wanted to bury the two together; if only to appease my curiosity. Pieire had walked among the living again, perhaps my sweet Dreina could...

I knew it was nothing more than a fairytale. I knew I'd never feel her warm porcelain skin against my arms. I'd never wipe the tears from her cheeks again. My chest would never again be her safe refuge. I'd taken her life, and I would never see her smiling face or her bright eyes again. I placed her gently within the earth, burying her with the dirt ripped from Her bosom. I remember leaving the shell resting gently within her tiny arms. Her grasp around it so tight I thought she'd come back if only to crush the shell.

I stayed at their grave site for days. I remember giving up several meals. My body ached to be fed, but my remorse had taken over. I became feral, chasing away anything that dared trespass near their graves. I stayed in that state for weeks before falling into a deep sleep. I could hardly remember much after that; only that I'd fulfilled my promises to the blue eyed family of the goddess.

I still remember those days, even now, sitting in my study, writing about my past as if it was nothing more than a dream sent to me by some conniving god. The falling drops have always reminded me of her. The crystal blue skies looked like the eyes of my beloved companion. Seeing the death and chaos reigning throughout the streets of this modern world has always made me *happy*. Perhaps it's because of the terror I'd wreaked throughout the years. Perhaps, it was something more reminiscent of the bloody streak of vengeance I waged on the clan of idiot hunters and their incessant desire to be the supreme rulers of nature.

I'd lost some part of my memory but the wounds from my past still litter my flesh, even in this new body amongst the family I'd created. My memories come back slowly, the markings in my chest still burning beneath the flesh. Every so often, they will push themselves to the surface, singeing the flesh in skull-like patterns. Though I'd say the circular pattern has completed itself since the birth of my son, Daniel. He lacks Diavol's temperament. In fact he lacks just about everything revolving around Diavol. Perhaps, I'm jumping the gun again.

Diavol died protecting those graves. He refused to feed my body, never once giving in to the temptations that presented themselves. He grew rabid and weak. He left that night; finally returning to the side of his master and his loved ones. He had no true allegiance to the humans. Dragul's bloodline belonged to me. It was the line I'd been born into, the line I'd sworn

to protect. I'd been born of some divine beast, slid into a body to better assimilate. Diavol was simply the soul they'd coupled with me.

Oh well, I'd imagine he's happier with this outcome anyway. After all, who would want to be forced into a world where the forests scream and man's evil runs rampant? It's stifling even for me. But here I sit: blazing microchips and pollution. Lovely. Then again, it's not all bad. In all honesty, Daniel makes my life just that much easier. I'd do anything for him; perhaps give myself over to the blood guzzling corpses, as foolish as they may be. After all, it is but a small price to pay for the serpent...

Huh, interesting...