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Of all the smelly, slimy, dirt stupid pains in the ass you could run into in Lower Erebus, mondachs are near the top of the list of ones I never want to see. And now there are two of them standing between me and the end of the alley I cut through to get to work. Unusual in itself because they rarely come out of the maintenance tunnels under the Corridor, but lucky me, here they are, ready to fuck up my day. If slugs could stand six feet tall on two legs with noodley white hair, eyes like the bottom of the ocean, and a mouthful of tiny, razor like teeth, you would come close to what these repulsive fiends look like. But nothing can describe the rotten sewer smell that exudes from their slimy flesh. Clothes don't help disguise it either.

I reach back and pull the jagged black, Teflon-coated blade I carry against my back—there's no way I'm sticking my claws in that flesh—and wait for them to make their move. I don't have to wait long.

“We'll take your wallet,” the one on the right says in their typical gravelly voice.

Mugging? “I don't think so.” I don't wave the knife in invitation; just stand there and wait, hoping they'll change their minds. I'm not worried about them beating me, just the consequences of the encounter. I shudder just thinking about it.

They step closer, and now I see they have blades of their own. Goody, a knife fight with mondachs; can it get any better? They don't fight fair—little in real life does—instead coming at me at the same time. The last thing I want is to touch them, but it looks like that's not something I'm going to get a choice in. I duck away from the first one, swinging the blade and catching him on the arm, then turn as the other one comes at me from the back. Luckily they're as clumsy as they are ugly. I catch number two's knife on the tang of my bigger one and rip it out of his hand, sending it clattering across the alley. When he turns to retrieve it, I boot him in the ass. He sprawls on the ground while his partner comes at me again, this time more prepared.

As much as I would love to avoid contact, playing on the perimeter is a sure way to get killed, even if it is against two Neanderthals like this. I move in on him and block his blade while digging mine deep into his shoulder. He grunts and tries to spin away, but the jagged edge of the knife holds him in place. I stare him straight in the eye and have all I can do not to heave from the smell as purple viscous blood flows from the wound. Shit, this is going to suck.

I pull back with my other arm and pound my fist into his face. Once. Twice. A third time. Several of his teeth fall out, hitting the alley floor with a soft ping. He snarls and brings his own blade up to catch me in the side. I dodge the move and yank my knife out of his shoulder, tearing a large hole in his slimy flesh. And now the blood sprays everywhere. I choke back a gag and come at him again, this time burying the knife in his gut then twisting and sawing it out. He grunts again and sinks to his knees, trying to hold in his guts. That should keep him occupied.

I haven't forgotten about his partner. Number two has his own blade back and is slipping up behind me. I turn and kick at him again but he dodges the move and throws himself at me, swinging wildly with the knife. I can see why they keep to the tunnels because their fighting technique would leave them dead in seconds on the streets. He wraps his arms around me and rides me to the ground, and now I'm stuck under his slimy body. I push up, trying to get the knife between us, but he's decided to bury his mouth full of needle sharp teeth in my neck. Oh hell no. I grab him around the neck and twist him away, then roll out from under him and back to my feet. I wipe the purple blood off my face and wait for him to gain his feet, then swing wide and slash him across the belly. He growls as I change the grip on my knife and move in again, burying it in his chest.

“Die you smelly son of a bitch.”

I boot him off the blade and look down at it. “Great, now you've ruined a perfectly good knife.” I kick him in the face, not bothering to watch if he gets up again, then turn and jog out of the alley towards my loft. Some days, I swear it doesn't pay to get out of bed.

I take the knife into the shower with me and scrub the mondach blood off it and myself, then throw my clothes into the washer. I don't know if it'll get them clean; if not I can burn them. Luckily Darrius isn't here to make fun of the fact that I got ambushed by a couple of mondachs. This time when I leave I stick to the main street and by the time I get to work, I'm an hour late. White Eagle takes one look at me and decides I'm not in the mood to discuss it.



It's Friday night and the Eagle's Nest is packed with clientele itching to get under each other's skin. They're a rowdy three deep at the bar and every table is full. I glance up at a ruckus at one of the pool tables and shake it off. As long as they're not busting up the furniture or threatening Alex, I'm not getting involved. A month ago that got me into trouble; I'm a little more diligent now in how I dole out violence.

Alex pushes her way to the bar and sets down her tray with a heavy sigh. "Where were you earlier?"

"I got mugged by mondachs."

She screws up her face. "Ew. Out of the tunnels?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it looks like you survived. I need three beers and a shot of Jack." I nod and proceed to pour the drinks.

"Hey what about me?" a stevedore beside her protests. "I've been standing here for ten minutes."

"She's better looking than you," I quip, setting the glasses on Alex's tray.

"You want to go to Jolly's after work?" she asks me. When I shrug, she adds, "Maybe we can get a hold of Darrius, see if he wants to go."

"I don't know. Darrius has been MIA since he got back. I've barely seen him."

"What about my beer?" the stevedore interrupts.

"Keep your shirt on." I draw the beer and set it down in front of him with a splash. He mumbles something I can't hear and heads back to the pool tables.

"Yeah we haven't even sparred since he got back," she replies.

I won't pretend the change hasn't bothered me. Usually Darrius is up in my face about everything, but since his return from Tartarus, he's holed up in his room, when he's home at all, and has little to say to me other than terse, one-word answers. He had gone to Tír na nÓg with our new friend Kellen to resolve some kind of blood oath on the fae who killed Kellen's parents. They were gone for nearly three weeks Physical time, which could be months in Tartarus. I don't know what happened there and he's not talking about it, but it was apparently enough to plant a burr of some kind up his ass.

I fill a few drink orders at the bar then turn to another man who's pushed his way to stand where the stevedore was. I notice him because he's wearing a fedora and a tan trench coat, of all things. He looks like a pulp fiction private eye.

"What can I get you?"

"You Laec Matthews?" he asks.

"Who wants to know?"

He thrusts a folded piece of paper at me. "Message for you." He hands it off and disappears into the throng at the bar. I open the note and glance down at the message. Short and sweet: I HAVE YOUR BROTHER.

"Hey!" I yell. "Hey come back. Who gave this to you?" I duck under the bar and chase after him, but he's already gone. No sign of him in the parking lot outside either.

"What is it?" Alex asks, sidling up to me. I hand her the note; she reads it and passes it back. "You think it's Darrius?"

"Who else could it be?"

"Who could grab Darrius? He's like, well..." she glances around and lowers her voice, "you know?"

Yeah, I do know. Darrius is a powerful not sure what that according to Alex, laid waste to whatever got in his way in Tartarus when we were all there. It would take a lot to get the jump on him. Normally I'd go charging off in a blind snit, determined to move heaven and earth to find him, but I've learned a thing or two in the past little while. Besides, I haven't *felt* anything to indicate he's in any danger. "Can you watch the bar for me for a few minutes?" I ask her.

"Sure. Where are you going?"

"To talk to White Eagle."

White Eagle is sitting in his office as usual pouring through paperwork of some kind. I barge in and close the door then toss the note down in front of him. He glances at it then up at me with a quirk of his brow.

"Some guy just gave me that."

"He say where he got it?"

"He left before I could ask. You think someone snatched Darrius?"

White Eagle looks at the note again and shakes his head. "This isn't about Darrius."

"What do you mean?"

"This is Darrius's handwriting."

I grab the note and look at it more carefully. He's right. "Then who?" It hits me then. No, it can't be. I look up and meet his eyes.

"Ethan?"

“Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

“Who else could it be? It’s not like I have a big family.”

At least he doesn’t remind me that I’m supposed to forget about him, because despite the whole erasing me from Ethan’s life thing that the Guardians did, I’ve kept tabs on the man I grew up thinking of as my little brother. I know he’s engaged, living in St. Louis. I even have his home phone number, which I pull out of my wallet. I grab the phone on White Eagle’s desk and dial the number.

“What are you doing?” White Eagle asks.

“Checking something out.”

“And what are you going to say?”

The phone is answered on the third ring. “Hello?” A woman’s voice. It stumps me for a few seconds.

“Uh hi, I’m trying to reach Ethan Matthews.”

“I’m sorry. Ethan had to go out of town on business. Can I take a message?”

“Do you happen to know where he is? It’s really important that I get hold of him.”

“Well,” she hesitates. “May I ask who’s calling?”

“It’s...Tom. I’m an old high school buddy of his.”

“Oh, well Tom, you could probably reach him locally. He’s in Erebus. Would you like his hotel information?” I don’t say anything for several minutes. “Hello? Hello, are you still there?”

I hang up the phone.

“What is it?” White Eagle asks.

“He’s here. He’s in Erebus.” I sink down onto the chair in front of White Eagle’s desk. “I don’t understand. Why would Darrius write that note? Who has Ethan?”

“Well, if I’m to understand the note, I’d say Darrius has him.”

“What? No, that can’t be right. Why would Darrius take Ethan? This doesn’t make any sense.” I try to wrap my head around it, but I can’t seem to get there from here.

“When’s the last time you talked to Darrius?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, couple of days ago. He hasn’t been around the loft much. In fact, I’ve barely seen or spoken to him since he got back from Tartarus.”

White Eagle stands. “Look, go back to work. I’ll make a few phone calls, see what I can dig up. There has to be an explanation.”

I’d like to believe that, but what am I supposed to think? Someone has Ethan, and that someone wrote me a note in Darrius’s handwriting. “I need to go see Kellen, find out what went down in Tartarus.”

“Tomorrow. It’s too late tonight. Give me a chance to check on a few things first.”

I shuffle back out to the bar and finish my shift in a daze. White Eagle still doesn’t have any answers for me by closing time. I’m hoping I’ll get home and find Darrius there and this has all been a misunderstanding. I guess I should have gotten Ethan’s hotel information from what I assume was his fiancée. Then I could have called him. I might have sounded like an idiot, but at least I’d be able to verify that he’s there and he’s all right. This not knowing and thinking the worst is not helping my new-found patience.

“Maybe Darrius will be home when you get there,” Alex offers as I’m leaving, echoing my thoughts. “Call and let me know, okay?”

Luckily no one attacks me on the way home, which would be bad news for them in my current state of mind. The loft is empty when I get home. I check Darrius’s room; he doesn’t have any more possessions than I do, but I can tell half of those are gone. Only his winter clothes remain in his closet. His pack and sword are also missing. I check the bathroom; his comb, toothbrush, and razor are gone. I try him on his cell and it goes straight to voice mail. The phone rings as soon as I hang up.

“Is he there?” Alex asks.

“No. And his stuff is missing.”

“I want to go with you tomorrow when you go see Kellen.”

“Ok.”

“We’ll figure this out, Laec.”

I appreciate the support, but it doesn’t ease my mind. I told Ethan I’d watch out for him. He may not know me now, but I meant what I said.