

## Chapter 15 – Hunters

To those that had never experienced lust, it was a hard thing to express. In countless humans or non-humans, there was something that would set a person into this feeling. Most well-known for its use in its most common and pervasive version; shorthand for sexual lust. That may have given some people an idea of what the feeling was, but lust was more than that. There were people who lusted for power or knowledge or money. Lust drove men mad.

The thing to understand about the feeling is that it is all-consuming. It is an addiction. The aspect of the experience that has found itself as the target of a soul's lust is to them an inescapable need. As much as they may want to escape, it will always draw them back in. The glance to a beautiful woman, the opportunity to make an extra dollar, to see just beyond the ridge; there is always something beckoning them back. But with all addiction, it is insidious. One can believe themselves in control, just indulging in what they desire in a perfectly harmless way. Lust builds, though. Once you have a bite, you want more and more. Eventually, everyone who suffers from a form of lust falls for their gluttonous desire. Maybe it is because they delved too deep or stepped into a situation that triggered their dam to shatter. It may be no fault of one's own. But you still fall.

Everyone makes mistakes. It is inevitable. It is unavoidable. No one is perfect. Missteps have different varieties though. Some are mere stumble and some change lives forever, but most fall into the middle ground.

Unfortunately for Mattias, this was not going to be a stumble. Or a middle ground.

For him, the lust for blood had suddenly overtaken him. Every semblance of his humanity began to strip away until there was only an animalistic drive to feed being left behind. Survival was all that mattered beyond that. As he lost control, thoughts began to fail. Blood stopped flowing to his brain normally. He couldn't think like a human. Complexities were impossible to understand, and soon only the simplest of thoughts would remain. As he faded, his form changed too. He could appear as human most of the time, but his skin tightened against his bones as the blood had dried up. If he had noticed earlier it may have been enough to stop it. By the time he had gotten home, the skin shrank on his form, giving his fingers a long and claw-like appearance.

The point of no return was crossed. Thoughts left, and time lost. It happened fast. Suddenly. A single mistake, and he was a monster. He was one of the many reasons that humans feared the night. He had set up what defenses he could quickly, in hopes that someone would stop him. He had some confidence that would work or at least buy enough time for someone to get to him, to stop him. His last cohesive thoughts though were fear. He had fallen like this before. Each one was worse than the last, though. Each fall threatened to be the last. One would be the one where he wasn't able to get help in time, and he either escaped his home and fed on a bystander, or he wasn't able to feed in time and he simply faded into a ghoul.

In those moments, there was a cold that swallowed him. It was a heavy cold, pressing his chest against his lungs. It was a challenge to take in the breaths he needed, to keep thinking. The cold was otherworldly, clinging beyond just his skin and stretching deep throughout his body. It felt as though the ice was scratching along his soul. It was that frigid grasp of death. His body was shutting down, soon to

be animated only by the curse of undeath that he had stumbled into. The panic that caused in him should have warmed him somewhat, but instead, it only deepened the chill.

His vision blurred.

His mind blanked.

His memories became vague and broken.

Dreamlike would be the only word to describe how he remembered anything that happened for the next stretch of time. He could catch glimpses of memories. These scattered images and senses were impossible to make sense of, and they seemed to be without rhyme or reason. The idea of a chronology was lost as things seemed to bounce from one time period to another as they desired. He could neither tell how long he was in this state nor when the scant visions of his time within it had occurred or even in which order. The truth was, that time was as lost to him as anyone with an injury or who had fallen out of consciousness.

What he did remember was vague. Perhaps the easiest memories were the earliest after fading away and the latest. He remembered the feeling of hunger, of stomping about and searching for food. He remembered ransacking his refrigerator, and the general mess he made in trying to find any semblance of blood. The scent of old take out, the chill of the box, and the dripping of the frozen goods after he left that search all stamped into his mind.

He knew that it was after that when his mind began to search elsewhere, though he didn't know the exact drive that took him to search anywhere else in his apartment. He remembered attempting to sniff out the scent of blood. Someone to feast on. There was another scent blocking him though. There was only the pungent smell of garlic. As he got close to the source it overwhelmed him, and he needed to retreat to be able to breathe anything but the smell. It confused him. It made him frustrated and angrier. But he could smell just the smallest hint of blood beyond the horrific smell.

He grew more and more frustrated, his claws tearing at the walls in search of a new exit. He remembered the tearing drywall under his fingertips and the sound of the crumbling matter. The hunger began to hurt, his body aching with a need he could not contain.

He didn't know when, but the hunger overcame his dissuasion tactics. Eventually, he made his way past the line of garlic below his door. He remembered using all of his strength, his celerity, to rush to create an opening. He remembered the sensation of wood against his shoulder, the shattering door raining down around him. He remembered the scream. That delicious, unexpected scream.

The source of the scent of blood had been leaving the apartment. They had wandered too close to his door, and his drive to catch prey had overwhelmed the rest of it. It gave him the strength of cause to push beyond his defenses and start the hunt in earnest.

He remembered the look of terror on the man's face. A bloody nose. It was unfortunate, a mere side-effect of the cold weather and dry heat clicking on. The scent was all the vampire had needed.

This poor soul had never seen a vampire, not a true vampire on the hunt and now, mere minutes or hours after missing a feeding, here he was. His control was lost. The human was no more. Only the beast remained an emaciated and skeletal form. The skin had drawn back tight enough to tear and rip. His jaw bone shone through, skin tore as it constricted around the bone. His long fangs dripped

with a black substance, old blood or venom returning up and through their veins. His eyes were dark, dull and soulless, fully dilated for a truer hunt.

The way Mattias moved was disjointed. His human body fighting the curse within. His joints twisted and snapped, sudden jerks of movement. Once his eyes had fallen on his prey, his entire body swung about towards him. As any excited animal, his mouth opened dripping of blackened bile that only further highlighted the four sharp and expectant canine teeth – and he let out an otherworldly wail. There was no soul to this sound. This was the sound of death, a cold gasp before a screech that sounded as though it tore from the throat. He threw his arms back, preparing to leap on the startled and unfortunate man.

Those memories had left his head. But there was one from this instance that survived. There was a sound, the sound of metal smashing against flesh. The feeling was there as well, just at the side of his head. A rush of anger surged up from within him, and his target shifted to the poor bastard who had hit him. There he saw a blur, stunned. A figure of a man, standing with a baseball bat in his hands. He couldn't make out any figures, only the shadowed form. He heard the word.

"Run," The man had called out. He heard his prey's footsteps.

Interloper. He could smell the man's blood through his skin. He was ready for a fight. Adrenaline pumping through him. To the beast, it didn't matter. A man with a bat was no threat. He could feast on this one instead. The memory of lunging towards the man was clear, but the man took a second swing. Somehow, it had been unexpected, but it landed squarely at the top of the vampire's head, crashing down and sending the beast to a sudden stop.

He skittered on the floor, wildly twisting to pull himself back up. But there was another powerful swing of that aluminum bat. The last had come down, but this one came back up. It was a hard swing that found its mark against the chest of the rising beast. It would have knocked the air out of any man, but it just smacked against his ribcage. There was a pain, there was the sound of creaking bones, and the hissing anger of the vampire. Another strike against him followed. This human was admirable for fighting against him. A gallant act to save one of its kind. It was foolish. It was pathetic. It would have no mercy from the beast. Defenses like this were useless, only driving the beast towards anger.

He remembered the focus it gave him, the need to end this human, this mere prey that dared to interrupt its meal. He would be more than a snack, though. His anger would drive him to drain the poor defensive soul.

He didn't remember much for some moments. The many footfalls of prey feet, a fleeing man. There were flashes of a chase, through the halls of his apartment. He had been faster than the prey, but the prey was smart. It didn't run in a straight line. It took turns, moving through open apartments at times. The chase, though only pieces remained in his memory, was a short but distant one. But Mattias had chased the prey with a rage that only built every moment he wasn't caught. That hunger and frustration made him lash out further and further, attempting to reach his foe.

Even in this bestial form, he knew when he was being led on, though. He remembered that realization, the moment he stopped chasing. Other prey would be easier. With a wail, the vampire stopped his chase and turned to find an easier feast.

That had been his mistake.

The prey had been the Hunter.

As soon as his back was turned he heard the clattering of the bat to the ground. It didn't concern him. It should have. The next memory was clear. Pristine. There was the hurried sound of feet dashing down the floor. The prey was returning to him. He turned to face him, only to feel a sharp pain in his chest. There was the feeling of something foreign, the crack and splinters of his ribs and the agonizing squelch of wood tearing and pressing into flesh. He was being staked. Salt and pepper hair tussled from the running, tired eyes, sweat on his skin, scruffy beard – a moment of closeness and familiarity with the hunter.

A fitting end to a beast.

As the stake sank to his heart, he felt a sudden and all-consuming cold. He let out a quiet moan. His body twitched, with blackened ichor dripping from the wounds given to him.

Then there was nothing.

So, it was a welcome surprise when the lack of anything gave way to a sound. It was the sound of skin slapping skin lightly, the snap of a rubber band. Sight came back to him suddenly, blurry at first. He saw the source of the sounds. A man sat nearby, with rubber tied around his arm, two fingers slapping the nook of his elbow. His eyes drifted up a bit further. The man took a needle a moment later and pressed it into his own arm, soon after dragging forth blood. The man was familiar.

It took him a second, before Mattias tried to speak, "Rory?" He spoke as his vision clarified. His voice was harsh, and he could feel the skin of his jaw flapping against his teeth as he spoke.

"Oh, hey... you're trying to talk, but you still look like a lich," Rory responded with a smile. "Don't do that. I still have to sew you back together after we get blood in you."

Mattias felt himself look around the room. He was in his own apartment. He had never left the building. He twisted around to look about, to see what he had done. His apartment was a mess, torn to bits and only minorly cleaned up around where they sat, and some in the kitchen. His eyes fell on the bent aluminum bat nearby, a discarded and bloodstained stake on the table. He swallowed and turned back towards Rory.

Salt and pepper hair, scruffy beard, tired eyes.

"You were the hunter?" Mattias asked, rasping out the words with a sufficient bit of volume.

"Just lucky I got here before Olivia. Don't think she could have staked you. You were full-on gone." Rory spoke, holding up the needle. He waved the tied hand. "Eyes up here, droopy," Mattias instinctively looked, only to have his jaw caught by the man. It was odd to feel another human's skin on his bone. "This will feel weird awake..." He said, pressing the needle to Mattias' canine, sinking the point of the needle into the canine's opening.

He was right. The feeling was uniquely unpleasant. Open nerves and a cold needle – but the feeling of blood flowing through his tooth a moment later removed any unpleasant feeling. When the needle was removed, he felt better and took a breath. "Thank you,"

“You’re welcome. Quit talking. Seriously...” Rory said quietly. “I can see the tendons holding your jaw together. You need to heal. Go back to sleep.” He said with a pat of his hand against the vampire’s shoulder. “One of us will be here when you wake up. And I’ll put you back together. Mind and body.”

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