

Jeff wasn't sure what to do. He still wasn't, even after all this time. Even though the last 2 weeks had been a blur, they were by no means short. The hospital visits, the passing, the funeral planning, not to mention the funeral itself. Death was always complicated, even more so in the modern day, and he was almost relieved when he found himself at the actual procession. Though it also served to drive the point home; Dad was gone, and there was nothing him or his brother could do about it.

The two of them were still trying to digest everything that had happened. The older of the two had dealt with death in the family before, granted never someone as close as his direct family, but he could tell his younger brother was having trouble coping. As they watched the casket lower, the two of them were equally stoic, trying to stay strong for their dad, one last act to make him proud in pass, however absurd it sounded, but while Jeff's eyes were barely dry, his brother's certainly weren't. Even now, the two of them felt lost. They weren't even out of their funeral clothes yet.

Jeff stared out the window, looking at nothing in particular, the formal black on his reflection looking terribly out of place. Sighing, he turned to the noise of a door creaking open, his younger brother slipping onto the staircase to the basement. He stopped, for a second, not sure what to do, watching as Jonas descended into their father's former work space, before deciding to come along. He told himself he was going down to console his younger brother, knowing full well that Jonas was probably going in just to look at their late father's belongings. He didn't want to admit it, but he needed time to remember family himself.

Jonas stood in front of a framed picture of the three of them, lip quivering, as he plucked the photo off of the wall. Jeff walked over, damned if he knew what to say, but hopefully his presence there would be enough to bring some small comfort to the two of them. He put his hand on his brother's shoulder, as they both looked at the simple moment in time, before looking at each other briefly. Not sure what to do, Jeff slowly lowered his hand, and looked away, taking a few steps to the side and looking the room over, giving Jonas his space.

He remembered the time they spent here together, the rough tables and scattered tools intimately familiar to the both of them, though as he put his hand on their workbench, he noticed something felt off. Looking down, the gnarled table was covered in dust. That wasn't right, it had been 2 weeks since any of them had been in here, sure, but this was year's worth of muck. Even stranger, the table creaked under the weight of his hand. He backed away, hitting one of the support beams behind him, the wood there splintering at the slightest touch.

Something was wrong, and as Jeff spun around, the walls darkened. They covered in dirt and grime, and the furniture seemed to rot. Rust crawled across pipes, leather and fabric came apart with age and exposure, and stone began to crack and crumble. He turned to his brother, about to grab him, but even Jonas seemed to succumb to whatever was happening... and yet he didn't seem to be moving, frozen in time, still save the clothes slowly coming apart on his graying skin. Jeff tore his eyes away gasping, not prepared to watch another family member go, trying to get a handle on what was happening. Looking at himself, his own body seemed unaffected, but looking past that, it was obvious he was the only thing moving in the decaying room. Motes of dust were caught in shafts of light. Shadows were frozen on the walls, clocks were stopped, rattling vents stood still...

He rubbed his eyes, hoping it was a passing delusion, but not matter how many times he blinked, the basement remained the same. The unexplained rot was followed by a growing heat, and soon he found himself uncomfortable. The heat only worsened, and he swore he could feel the still air rumbling. Soon, the room itself began to distort further, and flames began to manifest around him, adding to the slew of impossibilities. The derelict room began to fade from view, blocked by angrily flickering infernos, until the young man found himself standing in a circle of fire, the hard concrete floor shifting and cracking, changing to a more raw, unrefined surface. He screamed, mind overwhelmed, before a hand reached out to him. It was a stark white, skinless and dead looking, yet it

moved with ease, and almost seemed to beckon to him.

He grabbed it.

Maybe it was a mistake, he couldn't be sure. He didn't know if he was even awake anymore, but the bony fingers gently pulled him nonetheless, and slowly, he found himself walking through the fire. The intense heat somehow let no marks on him, allowing him through completely unharmed, and he soon found himself face to face with a tall, looming skeleton clad in a black robe. Great. He had just walked into the Grim Reaper. Go figure, this made as much sense as anything else, not that he could make heads or tails of anything from the last few minutes. Oddly enough, he had the distinct impression that Grim had any ill intent. Though before he could think of anything to say, he heard the impossible.

"Son?"

He knew that voice anywhere. He turned around, and found himself eye to eye with the man who had raised him. Once again, he found himself with no words. Though he didn't need any, as he ran over, hugging his pops. He couldn't believe it, especially as he actually felt his dad's arms around him. But even as he pulled away, he could see it in his dad's face; he wasn't entirely happy.

"Did we really have to do this so soon?", Jaime asked, "It's hardly been a few hours since they buried me, for God's sake!"

It was rare to see his dad so upset, but before Jeff could even ask, Grim responded.

"I'm sorry, but I don't write the rules. We have to."

Looking back, Grim was now in a strangely out of place business suit, sitting at a desk, looking genuinely apologetic. You wouldn't have known who it was on any other day. Jaime sighed, crossing his arms, a stern expression coming across his face, as he looked back at his son. To Jeff's surprise, the first thing he said was sorry.

"I didn't want to have to do this, Jeff, but it looks like I don't have a choice," he said, shooting a sidelong glance to Grim, "but, well... I don't have a choice. I know you have a lot of questions, believe me, I did too, but before you ask anything, just let me talk for a bit..."

He took a breath, before continuing, "You're a Hellhound," He let that sink in for a few seconds, before starting again. "You get to find the bad people, and pull them down here, into the great fiery pit down south," he continued, gesturing around the place they were standing in, "and just like me, you're gonna have to get used to being a little bit of a monster. You're a smart kid, so I'm sure you'll get the hang of it. And trust me, it'll come naturally... Now what did you wanna know?"

Jeff just stood there, absorbing everything. This must've been a dream. There was no way they were standing in Hell! And Hellhounds were just a myth, right? But yet, here he was, standing a few feet away from his dead dad, in a rocky red room full of fire and brimstone (or at least he assumed it was brimstone). He looked between his father, who's face was etched with worry and concern, and Grim, who quietly had his arms crossed, not looking terribly pleased himself.

"Wh- How.... Where..." The young man stammered, before clearing his head, looking at his dad right in the eyes. "What did you mean 'I did too'? You're telling me you used to be a-what, a Hellhound? What is this?!" The stress of the past two weeks, and the raw shock of things was getting to him. Hellhounds? Really? What a joke.

Before he could say anything else, his dad simply put his hand on his shoulder.

"Look, son. I know. This is a lot to take in. And this is hard for you. I can see it in your face. This hasn't been a ride in the park for me either, especially watching the family from down here. I'm not going to lie. This is going to be a struggle. Whether or not you think I'm lying doesn't matter. This is exactly what it sounds like; you're replacing me,"

The weight of the situation slowly settled in, as the young man took in his dad's words. He still couldn't believe it, but he found himself slowly starting to play along.

"So then what happened to you, dad? Why did you... Why'd you have to leave?"

"I'd like to know that myself," said Grim, much to his surprise. He'd almost forgotten that Grim was in the room.

"Please, sit down, we need to go over a few things anyways," Grim said, motioning to a pair of seats that weren't there previously. "After all, I just lost one of my best employees, and I've gotten in enough trouble stalling for as long as I have,"

The two of them sat, incredulity plastered across Jeff's features, solemn regret across Jaime's, as Grim continued, "I won't sugarcoat it. Your dad was murdered, and damned if that isn't near impossible with you guys. Rules say I need to have active hounds from all contracted families, and you're the eldest. It's unfortunate, but you're up."

Jeff looked at his dad, hardly believing what he was hearing, as Jaime nodded.

"Usually, we end up retiring in our line of work," his dad started, "It's not like the job doesn't come with benefits, but it also comes with complications. Ideally, you would've never have had to meet my boss, but we have to play the hand that we're dealt." Jaime paused for a second, rubbing his eyes before he picked up again. "I don't like this, not at all, especially knowing that you're in danger now, but it is what it is. Our family is bound by a contract, this is your responsibility now."

"Well... at least I'm employed now, I guess," Jeff said, his poor joke an attempt to break the tension that was mounting.

"You're damn right you are," Grim butted in, "and you've big paws to fill, you know. But I've seen what your family is capable of, and have high expectations of you, even if you're young." He shook out his hand, making Jaime wince. Jeff looked at his dad, who gave him a resigned nod, before grabbing the surprisingly warm hand and shaking. An even stronger sense of dread crept into him, as he felt an uneasy energy seem to ebb into his arm, though before he could ask anything else, the flames rose up, and in a bright flash, he was back in his basement, still in disarray and rot. Grim was gone, but Jaime was there, looking between his sons. Still distraught at having to have parted ways with them too early.

"Dad, what... What am I supposed to do now? I don't understand..." His voice trailed off, heart wrenching at the sight of his pops standing in the basement where only a month ago they had shared time together, watching movies, fixing appliances, helping Jonas make model cars...

"Look, son. I wish I could help more, but all I can do is watch over you now. Trust me, you'll get the hang of things," Once again, Jaime embraced his son, before he continued, "I miss you two. Just promise me you'll watch over Jonas, okay? If you ever need to talk, well... you know where to find me."

With that, Jaime let go, stepping back, before a few goutts of fire sprung up behind him. He took one last look at his children and smiled, before slipping through the veil of flames and disappearing from their lives once more. As soon as he did, the room suddenly faded back to normal, time resuming it's march. The rot and rust were gone, and Jonas put the picture of the three of them back on the wall. As far as Jeff could tell, things were back to normal, but he sure as Hell didn't feel good. He looked over himself, turning his hands over, not sure what he was even trying to find. His brother's voice broke him out of his stupor.

"Hey Jeff, I'm gonna go lay down. I don't really feel that great." With that, Jonas headed back upstairs after a quick nod from his older brother, leaving Jeff to his thoughts. He hadn't realized it, but he was exhausted too, and he headed up to his own room, reflecting over what he had just learned, not even bothering to take off his suit before he collapsed onto his mattress, mental exhaustion finally catching up to him as he fell into a tense, dreamless sleep.

The last month hadn't been easy. Jonas was worryingly quiet at times, though at the very least, the two were able to lean on one another when they needed to. The house had a prevalent feel of emptiness without their father, and slowly the two had settled back into their regular lives, trying as best as they could to find a sense of stability again. Jonas started going back to his High School courses, and Jeff had finally finished the paperwork attached to a family's member's death once and for all. At this point, he wasn't even sure anymore he talked to his dead dad and the Grim Reaper. Surely it must've been a hallucination born of grief. Yet it was all so clear in his head, and he could clearly remember the sensation of Grim's hand in his own.

He certainly didn't feel any different. Maybe a bit more moody, to be sure, but that was only natural after dealing with loss. "Get used to being a little bit of a monster," what could that possibly mean? That line troubled him most of all. It was almost sinister, and had him on edge. He didn't *want* to be a monster, whatever that meant. After all, he wanted to be there for others, and he wasn't sure a "monster" would be a dependable person. The phrase was particularly stuck in his mind lately, and he continued to ruminate upon it, hardly able to focus on his own college classes through the day.

Eventually, day turned to night, and he had to head back home. He languidly gathered his belongings, mind elsewhere, as he started to cross the plaza. Campus was largely empty, and the trip back to his car looked like it would be a lonely one. Though he found himself okay with this, as he trudged through the central plaza between the larger buildings, hardly noticing another student passing by him. A small chill ran through him, but he ignored it, narrowly avoiding the guitar case the other person was carrying as he kept walking.

The other person did not. He seemed to freeze up for a moment, before dropping his bags, opening up the guitar case and pulling out the solid acoustic inside. Jeff hardly had time to turn around to the sound of running, before his vision went white. Pain lanced across his head as he fell to his knees, his assailant bringing the guitar down on him again, the wood splintering as he yelled. Soon, the guitar was a wreck, and he began to kick with wild abandon, overcome by savage rage.

Jeff had no idea what had spurred the attack, and quite frankly, he didn't care, arms moving up to cover his head on instinct in his daze. Though as his body curled defensively, so too did his lips. Something else was waking up in him, as growls started to spill from his lips. His eyes snapped open, as he swatted the splintering guitar away, kicking out to push the crazed student away. The thump of his leg against the other student's body felt good, and he took his opportunity to stand back up, an uncharacteristic snarl across his face, as he stared the other man in the eye.

His world rapidly began to narrow, as he stood defiantly, one hand on the back of his head, the other tensed into a fist, though slowly he parted his fingers, cracking his knuckles as he opened his mouth, letting loose an angry, guttural roar. He bared his growing teeth, as the other man charged again, broken guitar raised to strike. The crazed man charged, his own enraged roar paling in comparison to the changing student's, and he swung. Jeff caught it, laser focused now, squeezing with his hand, the wood creaking as his fingers slowly began to dig into it, before he tore it away, the wood sizzling as he ripped it apart.

This time, it was his turn. Without even thinking, Jeff lashed out, though he didn't punch. Instead, he found the tips of his fingers raking across the other's chest, smoking lines tearing across the man's shirt, growing claws digging through muscle, the growing hound's body literally heating up as a dull ember began to pick up in his eyes. He was far from done, bones in his face pushing out and cracking into a thick snout, molars pushing out into large, rending fangs, canines and incisors growing demonically sharp, streaks of deadly crimson growing through his hair, and sprouting in patches across his arms and chest.

If the attacker had been in the right state of mind, he probably would have been scared, especially as fire began to burn around the two of them fighting, but instead, he simply attacked again, his mind tossing out reason for more anger and violence, possessed by violence, ignoring the wound in his chest as he tried to punch the thing in front of him. His fist bounced painfully off of the thick canid snout, skin burning on contact, as he stepped back. His eyes flicked across the floor, desperate to find something else to hurt with, but before he could, he was tackled, the thick body of the beast across from him sending him flying.

Jeff pounced on top of the fallen man, pinning him down with one massive, clawed hand, steaming hot drool spilling out of his maw and onto the other man's face, burning as his feet began to push out of his shoes, heels rising off the ground as thick claws pushed through the front, a slim, thinly furred tail pressing out above his tearing pants, ears pulling up into points as they move up onto his head. The Hellhound was taking over, and it was excited to carry through with it's first "job".

The hound shut his burning eyes, reveling in the changes, clothes lighting up as the circle of fire closed, smoke and steam coming off of his body, as dull red fur pushed out, displacing his burning clothes. His spine ached, as it grew thicker, longer, arms and legs getting longer as well, proportions tilting towards the animal inside of him, before he tilted his head up and howled. The sound was deep and haunting, full of anger and condemnation. His paw seared it's print into the sentenced man's chest, and he sank his jaws deep into his neck and shoulder, delivering his judgement.

The flames jumped higher, and enveloped them, as he lifted the man in his jaws, and jumped, diving down, through the earth, instinct guiding him to the place he had been once before. Within a few seconds, they were back in the fiery abyss, and the Hellhound dropped his quarry, a small pang of sadness accompanying the emptying of his jaws, before he threw his head up, another triumphant howl escaping him, summoning his boss.

Slowly, Jeff's senses slowly began to come back, the faint taste of blood in his mouth giving him a dark pleasure. He shook his head, and saw Grim leaning over the burnt and injured man, holding one hand up over the damned man. Within moments, he was taken away, screaming incomprehensible nonsense all the while. It took him a few seconds, before he noticed a portion of his view was being blocked, and as he reached up to remove whatever it was, he saw a thick, unfamiliar hand in place of his own.

He gasped, and even that felt different, a strange inhuman whine coming out of him as he rubbed over his new snout in confusion, getting a good view of his thick, clawed hands as he did. As odd as it was, it didn't feel wrong. Good, even, almost like he was exploring a new part of himself he didn't know was in him, but he was confused nonetheless. Though before he could inspect any more of himself, Grim's voice grabbed his attention.

"Well, I'd say that was a good first day on the job, hound," said the reaper, tugging on his cloak and pulling his business suit back into existence, appearance changing from skeletal to human once more. Once again, Grim held out his hand, though this time it was to help up his newest employee instead of forming a pact with him. The Hound took it in his own meaty hand, finding a strange, natural obedience in himself. He wasn't sure he liked that part, but he appreciated the help standing up.

"Don't worry, it's easy to lose yourself the first time. You actually did remarkably well for your first job", Grim continued, as the Hellhound slowly found his balance on strange new legs, before he found himself plopping back into the same chair from over a month ago. He was only half listening, as he gawked at his red furred body, thin tail wriggling, fat, canine feet tipped with unusually large claws. "I take it you enjoyed yourself, though?"

For the first time since coming back to his own state of mind, he hesitated. Normally, he would

be inclined to say no. But the still faint taste of blood, and the sensation of pressing his teeth through skin, muscle and bone... He looked down, guilty, his silence unintentionally speaking volumes. Grim had seen this reaction before, smiling to himself.

"Good. Consider it a perk of the job. Now then, I owe you an explanation..." Grim brought his hands together, having noticed the way the Hound's ear tilted up oh so slightly at the mention of "perks of the job", before he continued. "You're a Hellhound. You got that by now, I assume, and you certainly acted the part well. Your family's instinct runs as strong as ever. But you're more than just a big, red dog," he paused for a bit, looking at Jeff to see if he would respond, but he simply nodded. "Your very being has changed now, and your spirit is... altered. Your presence along is now enough to agitate the problem individuals you need to bring to me."

Jeff's ears drooped, and he reached a hand up to feel them, mind once again swimming with questions, almost literally. He could still hardly believe the way he looked, much less the "changed spirit" bit. But deep down, he knew there was a truth to it. He put a large hand over his chest, almost a symbolic gesture, as he briefly wondered if he was doomed to look this way forever. Not that he didn't like it, but...

"Don't worry. Consider that your uniform." The Hellhound looked up, tilting his head, before realizing that Grim could read him rather easily. "No, I'm not reading your mind, but I can get a general sense of how you're feeling. Another part of your changed existence." He wasn't sure if that put him at ease, or made him feel more worried, but for the moment, he let it go.

"S-so..." Jeff stammered, his deeper, inhuman voice coming out of his demon dog snout, finding it to his liking more than he wanted to admit, "So me being near people will just make them nervous and attack me?"

"No," Grim had said it so plainly, he was surprised. "While this is true, it will only work on those we need to bring in. The possessed, corrupted, bad souls and demons disguised as innocent humans... Besides, technically you'll be acting out of self defense, you know."

"Well, I suppose that's... better than I had hoped for. But what about... er..." The Hellhound trailed off, suddenly aware of his nakedness.

"Hah! Right," A mirthful laugh from the Grim Reaper. Who knew? "This time it's on me, but with time, you'll learn how to control yourself," Jeff wasn't quite sure what he meant, but he took him for his word. "But like I was saying, you're a different man than you were before. Not a different person, you are still you. After all, you met your father, he was the same man you knew. He just had a side you didn't know about until now. And don't lie to me, you like it, don't you?"

Jeff snorted, before holding his paw over his nose, still not used to the new mannerisms of his body. He didn't want to say it out loud, but he couldn't deny it. Even just sitting there, big, red, and monstrous. Hell yes it felt good. The bite and blood came back to his mind, and once again he looked down, embarrassed that such violent acts brought him joy, before he meekly nodded, The juxtaposition of fierce beast and sheepish nod made Grim chuckle again, though once more, he also reassured the hound.

"Don't worry, you're not going to become a Sadomasochist and pain junkie. You just have a more animal side to yourself now that has it's own desires. Same brain, so of course you'll feel good when you satisfy those urges," It made sense, even if it gave him little comfort, though before he could ask anything else, Grim was at his side, grabbing one of the large, padded hands in both of his own. "Now then, we both have places to be, yes? This one's also on me. Good talk!"

Before he knew it, he was going back through the flames, though as he re-emerged back on the more familiar side of earth, he found himself in a bathroom stall, body quickly shrinking to normal, yet still stark naked. Thankfully, the stall had some of his clothes from home hanging from the coat hook inside, and he quickly got dressed, before running outside to recover his bag. A few seared pawprint

shapes were burned into the stone floor, but beyond that, there wasn't anymore evidence to what had just happened a few minutes ago. Just for the hell of it, he put his foot over the burn to compare sizes, though as he felt the still warm ground through his shoe, a growl spilled out of him, and he pulled his foot away before anything else happened. He left before succumbing to any more temptations of the Hellhound kind, clearing his throat and rushing to his car.

It was going to be a long ride drive home.