

The Explorers



C. J. J. 10-

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Chapter 8: Claw marks

The world was still dark when I awoke, but that was mostly because I couldn't raise the effort to lift the lead weights that were my eyelids. What I could make out were the scents of woodsmoke, antiseptic... and her.

Oh gods. I couldn't move, but I waited, baited on every breath for another whiff of her scent. Rebeca.

I snorted, feeling something thick and warm run down my nose as the water drained out, taking with it the ghost scents of things I didn't ever want to remember. A moment later she was at my side, pressed up against me, blotting my face with an old blanket.

I let my mouth fall open, tongue flicking out to lick the palm of her hand. She even tasted the same as I remembered.

"That tickles." Her voice was quiet, but it sounded like a choir of the gods. She was about to say something more, but cut off mid-word as she realized I was awake. A moment later she was gone, I could hear her scrambling back, away from me.

Why? Why was she leaving? That had felt good.

I slowly dredged my eyes open, it was worth it just to see her face. She looked back at me, wet hair suggesting that she'd just recently gone for a dip.

"Hey, Babe..." I tried to say it, but my throat was rough and dry, it came out as more of a soft growl. I wanted a raise a hand towards her, but I couldn't. Looking down, my hands and feet were bound tightly in what was left of the ill fated climbing rope.

She still hadn't ventured near me since I'd woken. She kept her distance, skirting around me to pull English's sword from her pack, never letting her cautious green eyes leave my face.

"Uh, Babe?" My voice was slowly starting to return, "I did tell you I'm not into the kinky stuff, right?" I wiggled one of my bound toes.

A smile touched her lips, but she wouldn't move closer. I was hoping she'd pulled the blade to cut me free, but so far no luck.

"Tommy?" She edged forward, holding the blade between us. "What's my name?"

"Unless you changed it, I'm assuming it's still Rebeca, Babe." I tried to do my best puppy dog eyes, but I just pulled a muscle in my face and ended up looking like I was having a seizure. "You mind cutting me loose?"

"No." She put the blade down beside herself. "Not until you tell me exactly what's going on." Her eyes narrowed, "You were about to force me away. And where's English?"

Ah, bugger. The memories of the last few days were slowly drifting to the surface of my mind, like someone stumbling drunkenly towards me in the fog. They were not pleasant things to recall.

I was about to try and beg forgiveness when a sneeze wracked my body, it lifted me a good foot off the ground as my nose tried to dislodge its self from my face. It felt like she was slapping me again, only from the inside this time.

Streams of neon purple flew from my head, coating my chest as it spread out. I sneezed again, throwing enough forward that Rebeca squeaked and scrambled out of the line of fire. I lost enough mass from my skull that I was starting to feel light headed. I could even feel the tingle of cool air entering my sinuses where all the gunk had been.

Rebeca was back at my side again, mopping me up, bolder this time. It seemed she was no longer as concerned that I might bite her hand off.

"You've been doing that since I pulled you from the water, Wolfy," she said as she tried to blot up the mess. "What is it?"

"Darned if I know. Wait, you pulled me from the water? Fat chance."

She grinned. "You doubt me? I did work on the Dice, remember? You think they would let people work on a sea going vessel without teaching them some rescue skills?"

"Yeah, I guess." I shook my head, it felt clearer with every sniffle. "I guess they didn't want any of their rich old men getting tipsy and falling into the drink."

She was almost done mopping up the rancid stuff, I leaned forward to sniff it before she pulled the soiled blankets away. It reminded me of a garden in full bloom... I pulled back reflexively. Rebeca's head jerked up at my sudden movement.

"What is it, Tommy."

"Burn it," I whispered, throat horse again, "Burn it all." She just looked at me like I'd started foaming at the mouth. "That's her, Mistress, Al-Sedexterous, whatever her name is. Burn it." I nodded my head towards the small fire she had made. A moment later all the soiled blankets were smoldering, sending of great plumes of rancid smoke.

"That's got to be it, Rebeca, that's got to be what she's doing." I thought to my formerly tender nose, "All of us there, were all felines, canines, all men. We all have senses of smell more powerful than you could ever dream of, and that's what she uses."

"What? She sprays on perfume, like I did?"

"No, not perfume. It can't be, it's more than that..." I tried to think of the word... "Pheromones. Sex chemicals. Everyone there is a man, and we'd do anything she'd ever ask of us, even lay down our lives at her slightest whim."

"Gods... English."

This was not good, I'd almost forgotten about the lion. Then I remembered the chambers where I'd seen him. The mere memory of those rooms alone was nearly enough to leave me reeling. He must be all but swimming in pheromones.

"I don't know if I can get to him, Rebeca." She looked up at me. "He's in the center of the complex, right under her... its thumb." I cocked my head to one side. "And I don't know how much my regeneration had to do with the fact I recovered from this... you don't even want to hear about some of the side effects I've seen."

"We can't leave him, Tommy. Could we go for help?"

I shook my head. "And get who? Jon? The police? They're mostly men, they would do nothing but add to her army." I sighed, but looked up at her. "We'll think of something. But, Rebeca," I winked, "Could you untie me? Like I said, Babe, I'm not into the kinky stuff."

Her nose wrinkled up in a laugh as she came forward, no hesitation this time. "You never know, Wolfy, I might just want to keep you this way for a while..."

I must have sneezed and horked up at least another five pounds of that putrid purple goo over the night, most of these going straight into the fire. The flames belched up a green glow every time I did. Each round left me feeling like I'd regained a couple of IQ points, like the world snapped a little but more into focus.

The sun rose, and we trudged back towards the encampment. I'd tried to convince Rebeca to wait where we'd been, but it was hopeless. She still barely trusted me further than she could throw me, despite my best efforts last night to prove I was over that other *thing*.

I stopped when the building was still a good half hour away. I'd rarely seen anyone venture more than a stone's throw from the walls, but didn't want to take the chance that today would be the exception.

"Rebeca, I need your sword." She looked at me a bit oddly, but handed it over. I inspected the blade for a moment, it was still shiny, having seen little use. It was wider than what I wanted, but I had few other options.

I took a deep breath and shoved it up my left nostril.

I could hear Rebeca shout beside me, but I kept pushing and twisting as her hands came to pull it away. The pain was enough that I almost passed out, but I had to do a good job or my regeneration would have it healed in no time.

The next thing I knew I was on my knees, doubled forward, staring at the blade as it lay in an ever expanding puddle of my blood.

"Tommy! What was that for? Did she damage your brain or something!?"

"Nah, Babe," It was hard to talk with my nose so messed up, "I need to do this if I want to go back in. I need to make sure I can't smell her."

"I can go, Tommy. You don't have to do this."

I brushed her away. "No you can't. They're expecting me back. You wouldn't get more than two steps before you're caught."

I reached down to take the sword to my other nostril, but my hands were shaking so hard I couldn't even grip its slick handle.

"Give me that," She said, lifting it from the ground. "I want to make sure you're going to be coming back to me." The blade stung red hot for just a moment before I blacked out.

I was afraid to even so much as look at my face when I came to, Rebeca had been serious.

She'd done such a number on my nose that it practically hung off me in shreds.

The last thing I did before I left was to set up my plan B. I pulled a single wooden box from the largest of the packs and placed it in Rebeca's lap, asking her to prepare it.

The final walk to the compound was anti-climatic. I saw a few men on the way, but not a single one of them paid me even the slightest attention. In the noonday sun, the spotless walls and paths, the perfectly trimmed trees and shrubs, they all looked more like a prison, or an asylum, than a home.

I stole in the same side door I'd left through, trying to avoid anyone, but at the same time not look like I was avoiding people. You know, act casual. I needn't worry, there was no one in sight.

I wasn't really sure what to do from here, I didn't really have much of a plan A. Just a vague idea that I needed to find my titan of a lion and give him a good smack in the snout.

Oh gods, I am so hosed.

How could I hope to even get within striking distance of him? He could crush me with one hand, and last time I'd seen him he hadn't exactly been happy.

The hallways stayed disconcertingly empty as I moved forward. Other than the occasional scuffle from the other side of the walls, there was no one.

It must have just been my imagination, but even with my cut up nose I would have sworn I could smell the scent of the she-demon when I stood outside her quarters. I tried the handle, the door swung open on silent hinges.

The lion was nowhere to be seen.

I made at least three full circuits of the place, just to make sure he wasn't hiding on me. Nothing.

Okay, this wasn't part of my plan. I had no idea what to do now. Where could he be? Could he have fallen out of her graces already? Perhaps he'd been relegated to a room like I'd been sleeping in.

Back in the hallway, I tried to return the direction I'd come. The door was locked.

I tried another, and another. Both bolted tight. A third door opened for me, it led deeper into the complex. I slipped through, silent as I could, trying to stop my claws from clicking. On the other side of the walls I could hear people moving.

The pantomime repeated its self two more times. At every intersection there was only a single choice. That door always led deeper into the building, towards the room where I had first met Al-Sedexterous.

Even through my cut nose I could tell she was beyond the final set of hallways, laying in wait behind a set of brass relief double doors that were etched with images of snakes and apples. Had a flair for the dramatic, this one did.

I could almost see a color to the air as I pulled the doors open, letting them both fly before me with a boom. It didn't seem worth it to try and keep a low profile now. Obviously they knew what was going on, and any ventilation to the room would be a good thing.

I was surprised she was there, but her manservants were not. Save English.

She was reclined against her moc throne, draped in velvet and skins as it was, it looked like something out of a Conan novel. Her veil was drawn, obscuring any glimpse of her face, and her long, willowy, almost spider like arms stretched out beside her. One of them was caressing the lion's face. His eyes were shut, and he let out a low half purring sound as she kneaded him. He sat on the floor, nearly out of sight behind her.

"Tommy," Her voice was dry and harsh. She turned to me, almost as if surprised to see me there. The laugh that rasped from behind that veil told me otherwise. "I offer you all the comforts of my home, the gift of my company, and you turn me down. For what? For that bitch?" Her last word crunched, as though she had bitten on her tongue.

I let my mouth drop open in a half smile. "I'm a canine, you she-devil. Bitches are what I go for. Just not those of your type." Her back straightened at the barb, English's purr stopped as her hand fell away.

"You would do well not to slight me, you mongrel runt. I offer you euphoria, and you insult me?"

"That's the most inventive you can be, 'runt'? Gods, lady, can't you come up with anything original? I can't count the number of times I've been called that. And by better people than you, *your excellency*." I took a step forward, my blood was boiling. Now that I could see her without her shrouds of illusion, all my pent up emotions were running wild. I could almost taste the blood on my tongue. "Some tin-pot dictator you are, get a couple of goons at your beck and call and you think you rule the world. You can't even keep a little wolf like me in line. You've got nothing."

"Ah, but I do, little Tommy." I could have sworn I saw a smile behind that impenetrable veil. "I have your friend here." She raised her hand back to English's face, running her fingers through his mane like he was just another skin draped across the floor. "And he has been most forthcoming on telling me all about you."

"English?" I tried to get a glimmer of recognition from the lion, but he wouldn't even open his eyes as he began purring again.

"Poor Tommy," Her voice cooed out a dry cackle, "He's told me everything. How you think, what you know, even what that little..." She paused for a moment, cocking her head up at me, "Woman means to you. I was hoping that you would return to my service after she was gone, but finding Amstys made it painfully obvious your infidelity."

"English, we're leaving." I took another step forward, hoping to get to the lion before she could set him upon me. She just laughed.

"Tommy, my poor boy, you won't be going anywhere, and neither will he." She peered at me for a moment, as if unable to see my torn face, "Though I am curious how you deify me."

I shook my head. "If you're too thick to make the connection, I'll never be the one to tell you."

"His nose, Mistress. He's cut up his nose," English volunteered from behind her, voice pouring out in a dreamy haze.

Sometimes you just can't count on your friends.

"Ah," She raised a finger, laying it aside her hidden cheek. "We'll just have to wait for that to heal. I always could use a smart one like you on my staff. I knew hunting was too base for you."

"Piss off." I took one final step forward. Reaching out, I ripped off her veil. It shredded as it came away in my hand.

"HOW DARE YOU!" Her voice was a shriek that rattled the walls.

I pulled back. Even English, in his stupor, flinched. Her face... wasn't there.

Her head was bare, a bullet shaped mass of flesh and bone, the only feature upon it a single lipless slit of a mouth. No eyes, no hair, not even so much as a nose broke the splotched, wrinkled flesh that stood before me.

"My veil! Give me back my veil!" I stepped to the side as she screamed. She didn't turn, but

kept shrieking at the space I had last been when I spoke. English's eyes, however, followed me as I moved, closing to slits as a growl grew in the air.

The air, oh gods, that air. I couldn't smell it, but by now I could taste it. It sat on my tongue, no longer a floral scent, it had grown and mutated to the stench of burning gasoline and fetid fish. I had to keep from spitting in an effort to clear it from my mouth.

"English, my dear, get him. Find him. Bring him to me." Her voice had fallen to its former ductile tones, like the eye of a storm.

This was not good.

It took the lion only a leap to find himself a single stride from me. I didn't even get a step before I felt his claws dig into the scruff of my neck. It was no contest, this was a man who had spent his entire life hunting down fugitives. Everything I had learned about fighting other men had come from him. And he was not being gentle.

I swiped at his arms, trying to raise even so much as a scratch, but my fingers touched nothing but air as he held me face out, arm's length from him. My toes didn't even scrape the ground.

"English... don't..." It was hard to breathe, being held by the scruff like this.

"You've upset Mistress... mate. You don't upset Mistress." For just a moment I thought he recognized me, but by the time I got myself turned enough to see his eyes, it was gone.

He held me out before the faceless monster; off the ground with one hand, and arms pinned behind my back with the other. She reached out, ever so lightly touching my nose with a single withered finger.

"Yes..." Her other hand came up, encircling my mussel. Even with my nose cut to shreds, I could feel her scent beginning to invade my mind. "You truly are a smart little wolf." She lowered her head for a moment, pressing the crown of her skull against my face. The feeling was starting to overwhelm me now... maybe it wouldn't be so wrong to stay here with her... she had been so kind in allowing me to live, giving me another chance...

She looked up at me again, suddenly her features had taken on a completely different cast. Green eyes and brown hair... Rebeca.

I snarled and lashed out with my teeth, ripping aside half her featureless face, tearing it down to the bone. She staggered back, screaming and clutching her rendered skin with bloodstained hands.

"Kill him! Kill... him!"

For a moment, as he watched her, English's grip loosened. I used it for all it was worth and kicked him square in the balls.

I heard him make a high pitched 'Eeep', a more effeminate sound than I think had ever come from that lion in his life. He fell to the ground in a boneless pile. I didn't bother to turn and look though, I made a bolt for the only exit in the room I could guarantee. The skylights above us.

I can't climb, I really can't, but adrenaline can make you do things that you thought were impossible. Behind me, I could hear the sounds of the other men banging on the doors around the room. They wouldn't hold long.

A moment later I was nose to nose with the glass that formed the ceiling, I didn't even slow down. My snout had been healing ever since Rebeca had pulled the knife free; I gave it another good slashing as the shards of glass exploded around me and came down like frozen razor edged rain. Below me, I could hear the faceless thing scream out in fresh pain as they struck her.

I almost thought I was scot free when a hand closed around my dangling tail. English's massive

claws dug in and began dragging me back down.

Fire lanced through my spine as I wrenched forward, feeling vertebrae pop and fur shred. I came free with a ripping sound that I was sure left the cat with a fist full of hair.

I took off over the uneven roof, claws skidding across slippery tiles. It couldn't be more than a minute's dash to the edge, then another sprint to the relative safety of the sparse woods beyond.

A roar erupted behind me, and English came cannonballing through the hole I'd made like he could fly. He landed on the roof a half dozen paces behind me, frosted flecks of saliva wavering at the edges of his lips. He didn't even seem to be concerned with his balance, or the slashes made by the sharp edges in his palms as he charged towards me. His normally golden eyes were died a fiery red with the bloody veins that filled them.

I landed on my back, trying to scramble away as the lion came upon me. He didn't even slow down, hitting me like a force of nature.

The impact sent the breath whistling from my lungs and nearly knocked me senseless. If that wasn't enough, we were airborne. I'd been racing to the edge of the the roof? Well, it was a tie, we were both over it now.

From the corner of my eye I could just make out the shape of the building that had jailed Rebeca. Then we crashed through its wall.

The lumber, plaster, and clapboard that made the structure splintered beneath us. Alone, I might have just bounced off the wall, but English's weight sent us crashing through with hardly more than a hiccup. I could feel the splinters dig into my back, through my pelt, and wedge themselves deeply into recently abused flesh. Already I could feel the blood dripping down.

The world went dim for a moment, I thought I'd blacked out until I saw a texture to the darkness. It had a mane. The lion's bulk was great enough to blot out what little sun leaked through the hole we had made.

He was kneeling on my chest, holding me prone, squeezing the breath from my very lungs. I couldn't even get a word out to plead with him. He paused, for just a moment, I could see the faintest glint in his eyes. I almost thought he recognized me, then he huffed in a breath and roared. One hand came streaking down towards me, claws spread.

It was an inch from my face when an even darker shadow wrapped around it, holding it fast. The new shadow was flecked with patches of white.

It was Amstys. I could see the wolf beside the lion, looming in from the gloom like a devil emerging from the shadows.

"Tommy? What's-"

He didn't get even a chance to form his thoughts as English turned on him, leaping upon his unprepared body and dragging him to the ground with a snarl.

For a moment it was all I could do to watch. They two were almost evenly matched, a golden demon vs. a monochrome devil. But it was obvious English was the more experienced. Amstys may have spent a life hunting in the woods, but English had spent just as long stalking his fellow man.

I scrambled to my feet and raced away as quickly as my bruised body would move – I didn't get far. The only door to the room was locked tight, and, unlike English, I didn't have the mass alone to knock it down. The thing was barred with a dead bolt on the other side. It was as good to me as a slab of steel.

I turned back to the two, blood from their battle had already flown to scatter across the walls

and ceiling. I didn't have anytime to spare in my escape, so I did my best to tiptoe around them without getting dragged in to the melee.

I only made it halfway before one of English's arms broke from the fight, sinking into my leg. Amstys must have heard my cry, for a moment later I heard him yell "Run!" and his teeth tore into the lion's flesh.

It was just enough to let me rip loose. I hobbled to the rend in the wall as quickly as my abused body would carry me, stumbling into daylight.

There was still no sign of pursuit from the main building, no one streamed from the doors, neither did they fall upon me from the roof. I was thankful for small mercies as I sprinted to the trees in the distance.

I was just a stride shy of their concealing safety when English made his triumphant return to the stage. Amstys' body was hurled through the wall I had so recently slipped from, flying to lay a dozen meters away, crumpled on the dry ground. The white patches on the wolf's body were now stained red, he barely seemed to breathe.

The lion looked my way an instant later, his slitted eyes locking upon me. He didn't run towards me, but rather strode at an easy pace. Like he had all the time in the world.

I took a half step back and slid away amongst the trees.

The Alberta scrub around here was just the final gasps of parkland jutting down from the north, a mixture of boreal forest and plains. Islands of green forests surrounded by seas of gold grassland. I was back in my element now, amongst the shadows and foliage, and he knew it.

He stopped at the edge of the trees, scratching the ground with a toe as he sniffed through an engorged nose. I was so close to him, almost within reach, that I could make his face out clearly. The normally tan pad of his nose was dyed an ugly purple, a vein in it beat in time with his heart.

"I know you're out here, mate." His voice was calm and relaxed for a moment, I could almost believe he'd thrown off her shackles, that all this had been a ruse to escape, "I'm going to find you, Tommy. And I'm going to kill you." His tone fell flat. "I'm sorry. She commands it."

I couldn't help myself, I spoke, "You don't have to, English. You can fight this."

It took him a moment to find me, hidden in the shadows. That split second was all that saved me. An instant later his claws shredded the trunk I had been leaning on, leaving splinters and sawdust in their wake.

Silence fell again as he lost sight of me, I almost heard him laugh. "You know that won't happen, mate. You always were a smart wolf. Smarter than I." He stalked forward a step, pulling aside a branch that until seconds before had hidden me. "There are only two ways out of this, mate. And you already know what they are." Another lunge, this time he almost grasped my tail as I fell back, deeper into the forest. "Either I do Mistress' bidding, or you leave me for the vultures. I will find you, Tommy. I will find you, I'll never give up."

He was good to his word. The hours dragged by as he followed me slowly back into the forest. It was nothing but a game of attrition, every time he found me he added a new rip or bruise. I was only lucky enough so far as to avoid a broken bone under his assault.

I, on the other hand, couldn't fight back. This was the same man who had saved me from a life of poverty and nothingness back in V-town, the man who had stood by my side with the humans when no one else would. I slashed and clawed at him when he held me, but I never drew blood.

I had been slowly making my way back towards Rebeca the entire time, back to our packs that

were stashed a safe distance from this nightmare of a place. All in all, I hadn't been doing poorly – until I reached the edge of my little island of trees.

I'd been so focused on avoiding the golden menace that I didn't notice until I was practically standing in the naked air. The trees ended in an abrupt divide with the grass, so sharp that it almost looked like one of the gods had peered down and shaved it clean with a razor blade.

By the time I realized I was out in the open it was too late, he'd already spotted me, and the chase was on. He came roaring out of the trees towards me, and the only direction I had to go was into the grass.

I dove away, falling to all fours, running for everything my life was worth. My face was still cut up, not to mention the rest of my body, and every breath was through my mouth, adding a ragged edge to my already pained gasps.

Thankfully, English was little better. He may have grown up among the grasses of the serengeti, home in Africa, but it had been a long time ago, and the Canadian prairies were just different enough to give him pause.

A quick glance over my shoulder left me with a snapshot of him a single stride behind me, a smile of pure ecstasy plastered across his face. I wasn't sure if he was reliving his kittenhood, but I sure as heck didn't want to be the reenactment of his first kill.

I could just make out the next refuge of forest over the grass, and Rebeca somewhere within, when he caught up with me.

He landed on my back, driving all four of my limbs from beneath me. We skidded to the dirt, a cloud of dust raising brown and red around us. I twisted onto my back, trying to keep his snapping fangs from my neck. If he could get his jaws around me, that would be the end of it. Not even the gods could help me then.

I snapped and slashed, completely forgetting my promise to avoid harming him. Not that it did me a particle of good. The grin was still pulling his face into a snarl that I'd never seen before. It took me a moment to realize that not a single claw mark had landed upon me. He was toying with me, like a cat playing with a mouse.

"English, Micheal, Please..." It came from my lips as a ragged plea.

"Sorry, Tommy." His smile never faltered as his claws came down into my shoulder. My blood whelled out, splattering onto the thirsty ground that drank it up.

"Tommy!" I heard the soprano of Rebeca's scream cutting through the air. English's onslaught paused for a moment as his head peeked up above the grass.

I took what reprieve I could, scrambling away. I had to run on two legs now, slower, but all I could do with a wounded shoulder.

"Rebeca, the box! Get the box!" I wasn't sure if she heard me, but she ran back to where the packs lay. A moment later she came back into sight as I raced towards her.

I slid to a stop beside her, coating us both in a shower of dust. She pushed the simple wooden box into my hands. It had come from the largest of the three packs, and was a good foot to a side. I popped the top and quickly peeked within. Good, it was still there, and in one piece.

He would do worse than merely kill me if I damaged it.

Somewhere, out there in the grass, I knew he was stalking us. Every so often I could hear a playful growl, see the black tuff of a tail break the golden waves.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty..." I pushed Rebeca behind me as we waited. Not that it did us any

good, we both knew it was me he wanted.

A moment later he must have changed his plan. He rose to his feet, breaking the surface, rising above the grasses like a bronze god being born from the earth.

"Don't run, Tommy," his voice was a soft purr, as though drugged. "The hunt ends here. I've already given you too many chances, and Mistress did give her orders." The purr morphed into a growl without ever breaking rhythm.

I stood my ground, waiting, quaking on my toes in fear. We only had one shot at this, and I had to make sure he couldn't miss what I had for him.

He strode forward again, looking like nothing so much as if he were walking down a street in V-town, like he was headed nowhere more important than the café. I let him close to within a half dozen meters before thrusting my hand within the box. I pulled out its contents.

It was a simple bone china teapot.

It was plain white with blue gilding, and looked as old as the earth. He stopped dead the moment he saw it, confusion alight in his golden eyes.

"You know what this is, Micheal," I addressed him by his real name, the one his mother had given him. The tea set had been the only thing he had taken when he had run from his home in Africa, after avenging his mother's death at his own father's hands.

"Mate, please, don't..." He was whispering now, the smile gone from his lips. I could barely hear him, and the waterfall of emotions that fell behind his eyes was enough to tare my heart out.

"Don't make me do this." I held the pot out, ready to dash it against the ground between us.

"Tommy... please. Mistress commands..." His voice nearly broke.

"Is this what you've become, Micheal? You would leave my blood staining the ground? Like your mother's? Are you no better than your father was?"

His hands went to his head, even from here I could see where they dug through his mane, raising welts and dripping blood across his face. "Tommy, please..." He was on his knees now, eyes focused forward into nothingness. "I can't... only two ways out of this..."

That was when Rebeca hit him from behind with the heavy metal skillet.