

Three: During

Ursa Major sat in his old recliner, its arms splayed outward, and backrest canted slightly to one side, a victim of too much time spent under the onslaught of the big man's personal gravity. The lamp on the side table cast the only light in the room, lighting the huge face with a yellowed parchment glow.

He was wracked with coughs, and his skin was shiny with sweat. The dark orbs of his irises floated in twin seas of red, and his breathing in between coughs was wet and labored. A particularly violent series shuddered through his huge form, and as it passed, he spit dark phlegm onto the stained carpet in front of his chair.

His father never broke eye contact, watching him as he sat on the dusty sofa. He sat obediently, years of training at odds with the sea of antipathy inside him. He'd been in the kitchen, mopping up the last dried stains of his mother's blood from the cracked vinyl flooring, when the rough voice had drifted through from the living room doorway.

"Pissant. Front and center."

He'd leant the mop handle against the counter in front of the sink, and had picked up the pistol from where it lay next to the chipped and stained porcelain basin. He went through into the living room.

"Sit."

He'd taken a place opposite the chair, and the man.

"How come you ain't sick?"

His father had already asked this several times today, and there didn't seem to be any need to modify his answer this time either.

"Dunno, Pop. Just lucky."

"Lucky, huh? So much for 'only the strong survive', I guess. Now it's the *little* man with the gun."

He didn't answer, just waited.

Nothing passed between for a while. They just regarded each other.

His father broke the silence again.

"Maybe I'll be one of them fast ones, like your mom. Take a piece or two out of you before you can put me down, like she did me."

"Maybe, Pop." He kept his voice neutral.

"That gun ain't worth shit, then, right? You'll pass the favor on, 'less you can find the sack to do yourself. Kinda like a circle of death instead of life, eh?"

He didn't bother to point out that there was nothing circular about either scenario. It didn't matter. This was coming to a close soon, anyway. There was no portion left within him that didn't hate the man in the chair, even as death loomed

over his every cough, inching closer. His biggest surprise had been his unwillingness to do it yet. He'd day-dreamed about it for years, and there'd never been an opportunity like the last twelve hours. For the first time in his life, he had all the power.

Yet, beneath the surprise, he knew why.

He'd been there two times, when his father had put an end to another man who stood in his way, once with his fists, and the other with length of steel pipe. He was a blunt instrument wielding the same, clearing the path forward of obstacles regardless of their nature.

There'd been many nights when the big man had spoken of others forcibly removed from his personal path, his face red from alcohol, or his own drugs, or both, listing out particulars as if his son and wife should be proud of his single-minded efficiency. The dark eyes had glowed with the remembered pleasure of each one.

Remembered pleasure, and an almost coy hint at where his wife and son stood in relation to his forward movement through the world. As if they needed more evidence beyond the aches of healed bones and aging trauma they each bore.

That was why. Despite his hatred, he had no desire to be anything like the man. He wouldn't kill him just because he could.

No, Ursa Major had to become something else first.

Another fit of coughing took the big man, and lasted almost a minute and a half. He spit again onto the floor, and the glistening lump was immense. The blood-red eyes found his again.

"Kill me. You know you want to."

He shook his head.

The blood-red eyes darkened even more as anger swelled, and blood pressure increased. The man attempted to lean forward, but was unable.

"Kill me, you little shit-stain. You gonna lay down all the way to the *end*?"

He said nothing, but didn't look away. He just looked back into those huge red eyes. Something seemed to drain out of the big man then, and a series of choked coughs ensued.

He was unmoved. Everything was a manipulation, and he doubted this was any different. The question that came confirmed it.

"What you think happens after?" His father's voice was almost a croak.

He pretended to think about it, quietly thumbing off the safety.

"Dunno, Pop. Maybe you can send me a letter."

The huge lips upturned in a grin.

"I was wondering when you'd try to get your licks in. You never had the balls before."

He shrugged. His father pressed him on the matter, but it was just a bid by someone used to steering things to continue to do so.

"C'mon. All that readin'. You gotta have an opinion on it. You think it's measure for measure for old Darius Mackie, or the big black?"

He took a moment to compose a response, though he knew this was just another manipulation. Even now, his father's power over him transcended his own hatred. It was in that moment he realized the truth of that wouldn't end with the man. The realization brought with it a despair that threatened to un-do him. He refused to acknowledge it, countering by dipping into his lake of rage.

"I'm kinda hoping that it's the first one, Pop. Then I don't have to wonder where you ended up."

The laugh was no more than another cough, and the words that followed were the guttural croaks of a soul on the precipice.

"You should have tried that a long time ago. I'd have made you pay, but maybe I'd have respected you a little for trying."

"Drop dead, Pop."

"That don't appear to be in the cards now, son."

Coughs turned to convulsions, and in the yellow light of the lamp, he saw the black eyes film over, the red color leaching away. The huge body spasmed and twitched, and then came to rest. Silence filled the room, save the muted ticking of the faded RC Cola clock on the far wall. The ticks counted past thirty, then sixty, and then ninety. Somewhere shortly beyond that, he lost count. He watched, and waited. It didn't take much longer.

The body in the chair twitched slightly.

He brought the gun up from its resting place in his lap.

Ursa Major exploded out of the chair, arms extended in hunger and violence, now-gray eyes finding his as an inchoate growl rumbled deep in the expansive chest.

The .45 filled the room with sound.

The huge head twitched slightly backward, and still-moving legs out-paced the body's center mass. His father fell backward, revealing a red and gray tapestry painted on the lamp-shade, the recliner head-rest, and the wall behind as he crashed to the carpet, head smacking against the foot-rest of the chair. The neck cracked loudly, and the body twisted to one side as it articulated what the physics of the fall demanded.

Then it was still, and Darius Mackie was gone to wherever it was that evil men went at the end.