

LIVE UNDEAD

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Razor gnashed his teeth against the cage.

The crashing waves of guitars and the squealing wash of keyboards weren't what drove his frenzy as he thrashed against the mesh. He could smell them. The audience. The putrid stench of stale sweat and warm beer singed his nostrils. He climbed the fence, slathered his tongue over the steel, and caught sight of an irate biker as the man chucked his beer. The bottle exploded against the fence. Smiling, Razor bounded back down to the stage and raised his middle finger to the crowd.

"Fuck you all," he screeched into the microphone, his voice distorted horribly by the shitty PA. Their music would push the limits of a decent system, much less the cheap systems in the trashy dives they favored.

While Razor raged, King remained anchored stage left, thrashing out riffs, head swinging in circles, his hair a blackened whip slicing through the air. The nine-inch nails that studded his leather forearm bands swayed as his hand raced up and down his fretboard.

Wraith moved his pale, towering form around as if trying to seduce the audience. The burly assortment up front weren't his type. None of them were fans. They just happened to be there, regulars none too happy to see their favorite watering hole invaded by a band of misfits and freaks. He much preferred the young, lithe goth kids who would come in droves when they played the larger cities. There were a few there tonight, but sadly not enough.

Knife in hand, Razor head-banged his way over to Leech, the keyboardist. They ripped through their final song, "God is an Excuse," and it was time for the show's closing theatrics. As the band's name changed, so did their show. In recent years, the act had grown darker and more disturbing. It was only right to change with the times. The blade flashed across Leech's throat. Arterial spray spurted into the air. He stopped playing, grasped the wound, and wobbled around like a broken spinning top. His blood slicked the stage and sprayed the audience.

Razor sank to his knees and played with the blood, smearing it across his sweaty, bone-white chest. The vitriol of the audience gave way to gasps of horror and confusion. The act they had just witnessed too shockingly realistic to be fake, yet too violent to be real. It was that twilight between

what was real and what should have been impossible that allowed the band to exist.

A smile stretched across Razor's make-up smeared face, a rictus wide enough to proudly display the incisors he had filed to razor-sharp points. He reveled in the moment before turning away from the audience and launching himself into Thorn's drum kit.

King snapped out of his fugue state, smashing his guitar across the cage, then shattering it against the stage. Wraith kicked at an audience member, knocking them off the fence, before trashing his own instrument. Razor emerged from the wreckage of the drums and found his microphone. He croaked, "Good night," and broke into laughter.

With that whirlwind of carnage, chaos, and destruction, the Live Undead finished their set.

Nothing kept to himself in the corner of the Skull and Bones bar. Only feet away from the other fans, he might as well have been alone. Though it was his third time seeing them, each time hit him anew. The chaos. The carnage. The blood. The 'fuck you' attitude. The performances registered in the recesses of his mind, thrilling him in ways he never fully comprehended. He just knew Live Undead was his favorite band. As Razor scaled the cage, thrashing like some kind of wild animal, seventeen-year-old Nothing was entranced.

Then, he noticed her.

At first, he caught only a glimpse, something perceived just outside the corner of his eye. A shape suddenly rising above the darkness and coming into sharp relief. Just like Nothing and the dozen other faithful who had made the pilgrimage, she was lost in the music. As Razor smeared blood across his chest, Nothing's glance turned into a stare. The delicate softness of her features was sharpened to an edge by the right combination of black lipstick, eyeliner, and a Live Undead T-shirt.

As Nothing devoured her dark glamour, her eyes found his. At first she barely looked, but eventually she dared to meet his gaze completely. In that moment, he felt connected to her, linked by an invisible tether fashioned from their shared love of the nightmarish band. She allowed a smile to curl across her snow-white face.

The moment was fleeting.

She turned back to the mayhem unfolding on stage. Their bond was severed by the slices of feedback cutting through the PA as the band destroyed their instruments. The girl screamed something incomprehensible as Razor laughed maniacally into his microphone. Nothing thought it sounded like "I love you."

After the show, the girl slipped away, their connection lost forever without so much as a second look in his direction. Then, for the first time all night, Nothing noticed the dirty looks and ugly resentment his presence fostered in the Skull and Bones's regular patrons.

Nothing had never felt more alone.

Eden crossed the parking lot and slipped behind the Skull and Bones bar. She entertained the idea of talking to the pretty goth boy she had noticed during "God is an Excuse," but thought better of it. Not only was he possibly gay, but talking to him would get in the way of her true agenda. She'd opted for that particular show instead of something closer to her home because the place was a shithole. She might actually get to meet the band. The thought sent a shock of electricity down her spine, as if she had touched some imaginary third rail just by daring to think it.

The cargo van was parked only feet from the open backstage entrance. The vehicle's tinted windows were impossibly dark, bested only by its paint job. When she noticed the attached storage trailer, she lingered near it. Fighting the temptation to knock on the rear door, she approached the club

and peered into the ugly recesses of the Skull and Bones.

As she worked up the courage to enter, something caught her eye.

Between the van and the venue, a flame flickered to life. Eden turned just as the merchandise guy lit his cigarette. A smile slithered across the unwashed, greasy man's face. Shadows pooled in his sockets, swallowing his eyes in darkness.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I was hoping to meet the band."

The twin orbs of darkness in his skull fixed on her, devouring every inch. "I think we can manage that," he said, the smile oozing wider and wider across his face.

Hunched over the sink in the cramped and sweaty dressing room, Razor was a wreck. Streams of eyeliner streaked his face, his lipstick smeared and his head full of noise. He was always spent after a show, no matter the quality of his performance. Disgusted, he smashed the mirror and slumped forward. The ringing in his ears slowly receded, allowing the silence of the room to come forward from wherever it had been hiding.

Hearing footsteps, Razor glanced over at the doorway. Mason, his head haloed by the smoke streaming from his nostrils, sized him up. "We have somebody who wants to meet you," he said as he crushed out his cigarette on the wall.

Razor had smelled her before Mason told him that she was there. He took in her scent deeply, sweet jasmine perfume mixed with sweat and cheap beer. He closed his eyes and savored the aroma, allowing an image of her to form in his head. Like Wraith, he had a preference for the Goth teenagers who sprang up around their shows, no matter the venue. He loved their clothing, the pallor of their skin, and their dark eye and lip makeup. The feeling that they desired death more than anything was intoxicating.

Finally, Razor turned.

The girl stood behind Mason, the image in his head almost perfectly matched the reality of her. He wondered what she thought of the liquor bottles filled with blood, the untouched tray of cold cuts, and the randomly scattered clothes.

Inside his mouth, Razor tongued his fangs.

His name wasn't Nothing, but he liked to be called that. It just seemed more fitting than the one his parents had given him. It was the name he gave Brandon shortly before he asked for a ride. There weren't a lot of options at the Live Undead show, so when Brandon offered to take him twenty miles down the road, he accepted. The boots he was wearing definitely weren't made for walking, so every little bit helped. Hitchhiking had become a necessary evil. His parents couldn't afford to buy him a car, so Nothing walked when he couldn't get a ride.

They sped along, Skinny Puppy playing on the stereo. Nothing glanced at Brandon. Heavy set. Dark clothes. Piercings. Raccoon eyes. Skin paler than death. In the right light, he looked like a young Robert Smith. Nothing imagined Brandon was considered something of a freak back home, but at Live Undead shows, he was another anonymous face in the crowd. Just like Nothing.

Nothing stared out at the nameless countryside and the endless night that blanketed it. With only the chaos of the music filling the air, his thoughts found their way to the girl from the show. Before he had climbed into Brandon's Cavalier, Nothing saw her disappear backstage with the band's manager. The initial pangs of jealousy quickly subsided and were replaced by regret. If he had taken the initiative to talk to her, he might have accompanied her instead of winding up in Brandon's trash-filled car.

“We're here,” Brandon said, pulling over to the shoulder.

“Thanks.” Nothing hesitated. He often found himself exchanging money or sexual favors for rides. As he looked Brandon over, he decided either option would be fine. But Brandon said nothing else, so Nothing slipped out into the cool and welcoming night.

The Cavalier pulled back onto the road. He watched the car speed away until its tail lights were swallowed up by the darkness.

As he made his way down the deserted road, he returned to the idea of meeting Live Undead. While it was something he desperately wanted, he never managed to find the nerve. He didn't think he could talk his way backstage, so he saved himself the embarrassment of failure. Even if, by some miracle, he did manage to get backstage, Nothing was certain he'd make a fool of himself there. He had simply spent too many hours listening to Live Undead, screaming along with the words, to do otherwise.

An oncoming car snapped him out of his thoughts. He extended his thumb and hoped for the best. The black van didn't even slow, just blasted past him and on into the night.

Living in Cleveland, Eden routinely saw her favorites perform, but had never felt a desire to meet them. Sex with musicians didn't appeal to her. They were just men and women, and any conquest would be fleeting. She preferred her musicians remain unattainable, larger than life gods performing on stage instead of flesh and blood humans sleeping in her bed.

But Live Undead was different.

Their music held a bleakness that seemed genuine. They weren't simply adopting a pose like so many others. They felt like the real thing. The lyrics were ominous, the vocals inhuman. The music was chaotic, heavy, and noisy, while somehow maintaining melody and cohesion. The stage show was frightening, bloody, and disturbing. She never knew where the carefully constructed illusion ended and reality began. Even the few fan-filmed videos she found on YouTube had a strange snuff-film-like quality about them. After watching Razor flaying skin off his chest, she was determined to get an up-close look at those madmen. She just hoped that their brand of darkness didn't disperse under the harsh light of scrutiny. She had to know that some gods were indeed real.

Seeing Razor in the dressing room, she felt her heart leap. Even with his makeup-smearred face, he was a creature of unmatched beauty. His motions were smooth and elegant, just like on stage. When he met her gaze, her knees weakened, and her head went dizzy. His eyes were endless pools of black. As she stared into those waters, she felt herself sinking deeper, and deeper still.

The hours afterward were lost in a haze of alcohol and drugs. She had never tried cocaine, but when Wraith offered her some, it seemed like a grand idea. The high hit her hard, blasting her outside the club and into the band's van. King's tongue was in her mouth, and his hand explored her breasts before sliding down between her legs. When her panties found their way to her thighs, she couldn't have been happier.

“Time to go,” Mason growled as he climbed inside the van.

“Can I come with you?” she asked. “Please?”

King responded with a grin that flashed his fangs. She loved that he had veneers. The whole band all did. It only served to make the illusion even more realistic.

As the van sped away from the club, Razor's mouth was the first to find hers in the darkness. His hands explored her body as another person, Wraith, she thought, removed her clothes. Razor folded her pale body into his arms. His tongue flicked against her neck as he took her down to the cold, sticky floor. *He looks like a corpse*, she thought, as she found her way on top of the singer. The image didn't linger for long before she worked her way down to his cock. A faint metallic smell hit her, followed by a warm slickness oozing down her back. She ignored both as she eagerly took him into her mouth.

Just outside Wilson Heights, the man pulled to the side of the road. The spot he chose was dark and secluded. David had that same sheepish look on his face Nothing had seen a dozen times before on other men. When David finally managed the courage to ask for a blowjob, Nothing was already at the guy's zipper.

Nothing wasn't gay. He did like boys, but he also liked girls. Truthfully, he didn't really know what he was. Sometimes, he thought of his penis as an example of Depeche Mode's idea of God's sick sense of humor. He often wished he had been born a girl. Maybe things would have been less complicated that way. Compounding his confusion was a body that he despised. He loathed his feminine hips, tiny waist, and slight stature—he barely topped five feet, four inches. Even worse, as the guys around him were growing body hair, Nothing was embarrassingly prepubescent, seemingly cursed to remain a boy and never fully grow into a man.

Grabbing the back of Nothing's head, David bucked his hips and came.

When David's semen started spurting into his mouth, Nothing couldn't help but feel disappointed. David had come quicker than Nothing would have liked. Pulling away from David's cock, Nothing wiped his mouth, but the taste of the guy's load lingered. That was fine with Nothing. He actually liked the taste of semen.

"That was great," David whispered.

Smiling at the compliment, Nothing sank back into his seat. "Thanks. I'm glad you liked it."

David put the car into gear and wheeled back onto the road. Minutes later, Wilson Heights appeared through the darkness. As they left the highway that cut through Wilson Heights, and turned toward his neighborhood, they passed Shadow's house.

Friends since they were eight years old, Shadow and he shared everything, including taste in music, movies, and video games. At times, it felt as though they were halves of the same whole, cruelly divided into two incomplete kids. Nothing loved Shadow dearly, even though his friend had refused to give him a ride to the Live Undead show.

David dropped him off a block from his house. They barely looked at each other as Nothing climbed out of the car. It wasn't that he was ashamed of what he had done; he hadn't ever been embarrassed about sex. He knew David was, however, from the guy's guilty expression. Nothing couldn't look because he had found shame to be a uniquely infectious disease.

Nothing slipped through his bedroom window. The details of his room barely registered—the vintage Skinny Puppy, the Cure, and KISS posters adorning his walls, the piles of clothes littering his floor, the keyboard standing quietly in the corner. Every detail was a little piece of his identity, yet never felt as if they fully comprised his inner core.

Shaking free of the weird melancholy closing in on him, Nothing went over to his computer. While he owned a couple dozen CDs, the bulk of his music collection was housed on his hard drive. He started his Live Undead playlist and made his way toward his bed.

As he undressed, his thoughts returned to *the girl*. He wondered how her night had turned out. He hoped that Live Undead were everything she had always imagined. Lying in bed, Nothing decided that he would actually try to meet them the next time he went to one of their shows. He had his own ideas of what they were like and wanted to find out if they matched reality. He just wasn't sure how he would do it.

At dawn, they slept.

They arrived at a motel a few hours before sunrise. Secluded in a wooded area just off the highway, Sunny Hills Inn was perfect, the sort of rural motel teetering on the brink of financial collapse that Live Undead preferred. The empty parking lot, dilapidated office, and weathered bungalows couldn't help but cry out in economic despair with the kind of unique desperation that resulted in few questions, no matter how strange or questionable the clientèle.

Mason checked them in. Though he was human, the band trusted him implicitly. Handling all of their business, he ensured they remained strictly a cult act, barely registering on the fringes of the rock world, a band that attracted only the hardest of the hardcore devotees to whatever style of music they practiced. At the moment, they played extreme metal. In previous decades, they had veered between styles, enjoying some more than others. Mason had become enchanted with them when they were Burnt by Light in their industrial phase during the late '80s. Razor would atonally screech out dark ballads of love and death while the band delivered some of the harshest and most bizarre electronic noise imaginable. It barely classified as music, but Mason loved them like no other.

While the music changed, the one constant was the live show. Razor favored theatrics, so the band tried to maintain that element. During their short-lived stretch as a grunge rock band, they ditched the Grand Guignol entirely. Over-the-top performances didn't draw fans, but Razor was miserable. He lamented the boring clothes and the naturalistic presentation. But most of all, he hated the unwashed audience they attracted. He enjoyed his food more when it came in colorful wrappers and tasted sweet on his tongue. Their run as Bone China was mercifully cut short by the arrival of industrial rock and Nine Inch Nails. They became Resurrection Cult and Razor couldn't have been happier.

The band prepared the room. As they duct-taped black trash bags over the curtains, sealing the space off from the impending day, Razor supervised their efforts. He wasn't just their front man. He had put the band together, scouring the country for others of his kind and drawing them into his group.

It made perfect sense in a bizarre way. They could stay on the move, drifting from town to town, and bring the disaffected and angry youth to them. They drew kids who came from broken homes and shouldered troubled backgrounds. Those types of kids ran away all the time and often weren't even missed. No more hunting. No more stalking the night. The food would come to them for a change. They'd formed their first incarnation, the Night Creatures, in 1974, an ominous glitter rock band, a group so frightening Alice Cooper wouldn't welcome them to his nightmare.

Mason took care of the van. He drove around looking for some means of scrubbing out the blood, cum, and various bodily fluids that slicked the cargo area. He found a small self-service car wash. Those places were a Godsend. No one was ever around at five o'clock in the morning, so he could go about his task without worrying about secrecy. On the rare occasions he couldn't find such a place, he would have to buy bottles of water and find a lonely stretch of back road. That would mean hours of work, in which case he wouldn't get back to the room in time to sleep and would have to crash in the van. His instructions were clear. Under no circumstances could he enter the room while the sun shone. They'd lost a drummer that way back in the eighties.

As he pressure-washed away what was left of Eden's blood, he couldn't help but think about the coldness of Razor's body pressing tight against his. Razor enjoyed feeling a warm human body next to his and would often sleep next to Mason. Mason allowed himself a smile. His time ended, and the water cut off. He fed more money into the machine to finish his work.

Mason arrived back at the hotel an hour before sunrise. Most of the band had already gone to sleep. Thorn had taken the closet while King and Leech lay next to each other on the floor. On the bed,

Razor wrote some lyrics, and Wraith watched television next to him. Wraith found his way to the floor, and Mason crawled into bed. Razor watched the day come. His dark eyes never left the windows until he was certain the light wouldn't find its way in.

Apparently satisfied they were safe, Razor crawled over to Mason. He whispered something Mason didn't catch, then slipped an arm around Mason's waist.

"Tranny-boy."

Nothing knew the insult was coming before it slipped from Hunter Parks's perfectly shaped mouth. He had even known it was coming before he noticed the Frankenstein-monster-sized teen lumbering toward him in the hallway. He had first discovered the insult taking shape during third-period history. He could practically see the vowels and consonants gleefully lining up on the tip of Hunter's tongue with each hate-filled glance.

Trying to ignore him, Nothing opened his locker.

Never one to be ignored, Hunter slammed the door shut. Clutching his books to his chest, Nothing recoiled at the loud metallic clang.

"The fuck were you scribbling in your sketchbook, you creepy little bitch? Probably writing some kind of death list or something."

"I wasn't writing anything." Nothing had actually been writing lyrics for a melody that had danced in his head throughout most of the morning. While he loved heavy music, when Nothing wrote songs, they turned out to be more like The Cure or Depeche Mode than Slayer or Behemoth.

"Then you won't mind me having a look, will you?" Hunter effortlessly jerked the sketchbook free, sending the rest of Nothing's books scattering to the floor.

"Hunter." Nothing tried to snatch it back. Hunter simply pushed him into the lockers and turned away to leaf through the pages.

Nothing again tried to grab the sketchbook. Hunter shoved him back with enough force to send him crashing awkwardly to the floor alongside his books.

Gathering himself up, Nothing realized Hunter was laughing. With his back turned, Hunter most certainly hadn't witnessed the pathetic display of physical comedy. He was too engrossed in the sketchbook to care about some stupid pratfall. Having spent countless hours slaving over each tear-stained word and inky black drawing, Nothing felt a streak of shame race through his body.

Hunter snorted. "You really are one sick little girl, you know that?"

Traffic slowed and congested in the hallway. Everyone had to witness the car crash in progress.

Looking at all the curious faces, Nothing suddenly wished he were anywhere else. "Give me that back."

"Give me that back," Hunter mocked.

His shame turning to anger, Nothing clenched his fists. "You're a fucking asshole," he shrieked, then threw himself at the sketchbook. Ripping it free, he turned and raced away down the hall.

"You little bitch," Hunter yelled.

Even though he was running as fast as he could, Nothing knew he wouldn't escape. He never escaped. To confirm his fears, he glanced back and saw Hunter closing in, his smoothly tanned face growing an irate shade of red.

Just as Nothing careened down a side hallway, Hunter nailed him in the back of the head. Nothing splattered across the ground, losing his sketchbook.

Hunter seized Nothing by the shirt and yanked him to his feet. "Say that shit again."

His head fuzzy from smacking the hallway floor, Nothing stared hopelessly into Hunter's rage-filled eyes. Nothing knew that he could never hope to be Hunter's physical equal. Football. Wrestling. Basketball. Hunter had trained his muscular body to excel in all of them.

Nothing could only best Hunter by using his brain and his tongue. So Nothing used the second of those options.

He kissed Hunter.

The response was quick and merciless. Hunter slammed Nothing into the wall and then hammered him with a series of hard punches. The blows sent Nothing crashing back to the ground.

“You fucking faggot.” Hunter began kicking. He might have kicked once or a hundred times; it wouldn't have mattered. Everything bled into one great big throbbing sense of numbness.

Eventually, Hunter's fury waned. He spat on Nothing before turning toward the crowd that had gathered. As Nothing sat up miserably, he caught a glimpse of Hunter receiving high fives and slaps on the back.

Long after the crowd had gone, Nothing managed to get back to his feet. Grabbing his sketchbook, he limped off towards the boys' bathroom. The numbness he felt fell away with each step as he approached the last stall. Crumbling down onto the toilet, he ached like never before. He tried to fight back his tears, but when he saw the graffiti on the partition wall, he completely surrendered.

Nothing gives good head.

While he longed for rock stardom and millions of adoring fans, in his loneliest moments of desperation, Nothing would settle for simply escaping Wilson Heights. “It gets better,” or so the celebrities and anonymous strangers on the internet promised. Sitting there on the toilet, staring at those four simple words scrawled in permanent black ink, Nothing feared those promises were all lies. He would die in a small town, all of his hopes and dreams unfulfilled and his life unnoticed by anyone but the bullies and assholes who lived to abuse him.

Nothing had just started wiping the blood from his mouth when his cellphone buzzed. The text from Shadow simply read, *did u hear bout the body?*

Nothing could still taste his own blood. Hours had passed since Hunter Parks had beaten the shit out of him, yet the flavor lingered. Having sampled it enough over the years, Nothing had come to appreciate the metallic bitterness. He liked it so much that he had even taken to cutting himself and sucking at the wounds. They were little cuts, just enough to draw blood, but never enough to leave scars. He knew that the habit was weird and strange, and doubted Shadow would understand, so he kept it a secret.

“So, you going to tell me what happened with Hunter?” Shadow asked over his headset as the Witch sobbed somewhere in the darkness.

They were playing Left 4 Dead 2. Even though they lived only blocks apart, Nothing preferred to play online. Often depressed and moody, he had been trying to hide his fragile emotional state from Shadow for a while. Even when he was at his most miserable, he feigned being happy for his friend's sake, and it was easier to pull off the act when he was only a disembodied voice over a headset.

“Just Hunter being a prick.” Just like the taste of blood, Nothing had come to accept bullying. Part of him even thought he deserved it.

“Are you even trying?” Shadow squawked when Nothing startled the Witch. Shadow's voice was soft by nature, but when he grew annoyed, it became razor sharp in pitch and a little bit of Appalachian hillbilly crept into it.

Nothing couldn't help but laugh when the Witch killed them both. He wasn't really interested in the game. When he wasn't occupied with the blood lingering in his mouth, he thought about *the girl*. He still didn't know her name, but he had found out what happened to her.

As pale in death as she had been in life, she'd been found twenty minutes outside of Wilson Heights, her throat savagely ripped out and the blood drained from her body. So little had been left of her neck, her head barely remained attached to her body. The newscaster had said it looked like an

animal attack, but the lack of blood at the scene and the signs of sexual assault left everyone confused.

Only Nothing knew the truth. At least he thought he did.

But what did he really know?

He had seen her slip backstage with Live Undead's manager. To get to their next show, the band could have traveled right past where the girl had been dumped. His knowledge was all inference and assumption, but it was enough to get his mind racing. His conscience screamed for him to go to the police. He was, at the very least, one of the last people to see the girl alive. The voice in his head grew hoarse before finally falling silent. While rolling through the possibilities, he realized one simple truth. He had found his way to meet Live Undead.

His name wasn't Shadow, but he liked to be called that. Before Nothing had come up with the idea to pick new names for themselves, he was Peter Hickman. There was nothing wrong with his name, but he had to admit he liked "Shadow" better. The musicians in most of their favorite bands used similar one-word monikers, names designed to allow for a sense of mystery to surround them. Shadow was superior to Peter in as many ways as Nothing bested Zach Preston.

Throughout the course of their relationship, Nothing was always coming up with plans and schemes, and Shadow would initially balk, only to relent if Nothing was excited enough. That was how Nothing had talked Shadow into becoming an air band for a day when they were thirteen.

Nothing saw a picture of Frost—from Satyricon—breathing fire online. The stark, sepia-toned image was so evocative, he became obsessed with it. In time, obsession wasn't enough, and Nothing had to perform the act himself. He obtained lamp fuel and theatrical makeup days before he even broached the subject with Shadow.

When Shadow expressed concern, Nothing dismissed the worries as if he fully understood what he was proposing. Nothing named a litany of bands that performed the act on stage and promised that he would take as many precautions as possible. He said he would use only a small amount of fuel, and they would have a fire extinguisher on hand just in case. They wouldn't even do it near either of their houses. He had an ideal spot already picked out in the woods—secluded and safe. No one would ever know what they had done. He jumped around from point to point, even getting sidetracked talking about KISS, but his desire was clear. Once Nothing finished his argument, Shadow had finally agreed.

Nothing did the corpse paint for both of them. He managed to obtain a studded leather collar for himself. Shadow didn't dare ask where he had gotten it, but couldn't help but feel a bit jealous that Nothing hadn't gotten him one as well. As they looked themselves over in Nothing's bathroom mirror, Shadow had to admit they looked good; they almost looked like a real band. Decked out in their Black Metal regalia, they made the trek out to the woods and arrived shortly after twilight.

In the steadily growing darkness, they started their rock show. Drums pounded to life from the tiny boombox Nothing had brought, and they thrashed away on their imaginary instruments. Shadow stopped playing when they approached *the moment*. He had to watch Nothing. While Shadow's performance was apprehensive, at best, Nothing went full force. He banged his head and shrieked the words silently, completely committed.

Dread filled Shadow's heart as Nothing lit the torch. Nothing took a mouthful of fuel, a lot more than he had promised, and closed his eyes. Shadow prayed Nothing would reconsider, but he didn't. He spewed his mist, and a belch of flame streaked the sky. The blaze had been over in a flash, but by the time it died, Shadow was in love with Nothing and didn't even care that they hadn't brought the fire extinguisher.

Shadow wasn't sure what to expect when Nothing slid through his bedroom window shortly before midnight. Nothing had said it was important, but matters of life and death arose on a regular basis with him. He loved Nothing, but knew the guy could be a drama queen.

“I need to go to the Live Undead show tomorrow night.”

“No.” Shadow tried not to roll his eyes. Nothing loved the band, Shadow even suspected he would sleep with all of them if given the chance, but Shadow couldn't justify driving a couple of hours just to see their show.

“I'll buy your ticket. I'll even pay for gas.”

“You just saw them last night.”

“This is different.”

“I'm sorry, man.”

“What if I sucked your cock?”

The suggestion stunned Shadow. While he enjoyed it when Nothing gave him head, the idea that his friend was willing to barter the act made him uneasy. He wasn't certain which was more uncomfortable: that Nothing was willing to prostitute himself or that he thought Shadow would happily become his john.

“What's so important about this show?”

Nothing explained everything. He obviously tried to lay out his case calmly and coolly, but he failed miserably. As he unfurled detail after detail, he got sidelined in unimportant events. He had to apologize a few times before starting over again. It was a jumbled mess of a story, but one Shadow could tell meant a lot.

“What do you think?” Nothing asked when he finished explaining.

Shadow could see the hopeful earnestness in his face, a brand of innocence he had seen less and less of over the past year. “I'll buy my own ticket.”

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