# How to make a Monster

Ray could barely make out the scratching of his pencil over the sound of Miss Mandela's words. He could barely hear her words over the sound of his mind, telling him where lines had to go instead of taking up the information that was transmitted in his direction.

Something about tectonic plates. The blackboard was filled with text that barely registered with the spoken words, which had registered even less.

He didn't care. The only thing on his mind was the cape that he was sketching out, slowly working through folds and billows that would be blown into the cape by an errant breeze.

It wasn't particularly great. He could do better.

Douglas looked over. From the corner of his eyes, Ray could see the boy roll with his, before he threw a longer, more interesting look at the piece of paper sticking out from underneath Ray's notebook.

He could roll with his eyes all the way to London, for all Ray cared. He just kept sketching, working his way from the cape to the muscles of his hero. He had lined out her heroic pose, pointing towards evil with one hand on her hip and the other aimed at whatever nemesis she was heroically scowling at. The scratching of his pencil was the only thing he could really make out as he lovingly started on her arms, her belly, her chest…

"Ray," came from just behind him. Tess was hissing at him, but he was just getting in a flow. He really didn't want to get distracted now, so he ignored it. Acted like he didn't hear her. She couldn't become too loud.

Not without Miss Mandela noticing, at least.

"*Ray*," Tess hissed again, sounding more insistent, "look *up*."

Ray blinked. He turned his head, looking up at the blackboard. Maybe there was homework, or…

Miss Mandela had gone. Ray blinked and tried to make sense of what was on the board, but there was nothing…

Someone scraped her throat right next to Ray's bench. He inhaled sharply as he slowly turned his head to the older woman standing there.

"Mister Miller," were the words that warned Ray of what was coming, "I don't think I'm teaching a creative arts class during this block."

The woman snatched the scratch paper from under Ray's notebook. Ray tried to grab it, but the old hag was somehow fast enough to keep it from his reaching fingers.

The class was silent as the woman held up the paper. Ray felt the eyes of the others on his half-finished sketch, before they turned to look at him.

They judged him. Miss Mandela judged him. She made sure that everyone could see what he had been drawing as she walked towards the front of the class, where she crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it into the trash.

"This is geography class, Mister Miller," the woman said, "we don't draw here, and even if we do… we don't draw *that* kind of nonsense."

Some snickering started around Ray. He felt like he wanted to bury his head in his hands as he saw the corners of Miss Mandela's mouth turn up just the slightest.

"And, based on what you think of," she said, "you are looking to be disappointed, later in life."

There it was. Several people burst out laughing. Vincent and Trevor pointed in his direction.

"Sad loser!" someone said, two words that were quickly picked up by the two boys.

"Alright," Miss Mandela said, as the words threatened to turn into a chant, "alright! As I said, we are looking into plate tectonics today, not into human anatomy. Pipe down. *Pipe down* I said!"

It was too late for Ray. He rested his head in his hands as he concentrated on his desk, not looking up. He didn't care what Miss Mandela would say… he could still hear the others laugh around him.

As Miss Mandela started talking again, he heard Vincent's voice whisper.

"Loser Ray and his Super Slut."

Miss Mandela didn't stop talking. She hadn't heard it… or she didn't care. The people around Ray cared, though, as the words were picked up. People snickered, others laughed.

"Bet he can't get any, anyway," Trevor said, just a little louder.

Angela shuddered audibly to Ray's left.

"I can't believe he draws stuff like that," she whispered, so loudly it could have been a stage whisper, "it looked just like me. *Ew*."

Ray buried his head deeper in his hands, trying to tune them out.

"Here," Vincent said, "some paper to start drawing on again."

A balled-up piece of paper hit his head.

"Draw yourself a girlfriend, loser."


"She went too far," Douglas said, "I mean, yeah, you weren't paying attention, but to say *that*…"

"There's nothing that can be done about it," Tess muttered, "old hag Mandela has seniority and the administration just wants her to ride out her time until retirement, anyway. They won't do anything against her."

Flanked by his friends, Ray felt a little safer. He could still hear the laughs of the others in his class and he could still hear the whispers of the people around him. His nails dug into the soft meat of his hands as he tried to keep them from trembling.

He still didn't dare to raise his head. He could still feel the looks of the others around him.

Tess and Douglas fell silent when he didn't react to them. He felt their eyes on him, though he couldn't feel them judging him quite as harshly as the others.

"You know you can prevent it, right?" Tess finally said, bumping her fist against Ray's shoulder, "don't draw during class. That won't give them, or our stupid teachers, the ammo they need."

Ray shrugged and shook his head.

"I like it," he said, "it makes me relax, you know."

"Yeah, we know," Tess said consolingly, "but hey, we'd also like for you to not have to live in fear of these bullies. They already like to pick on you enough without all of… what just happened."

"They'll forget about it soon enough," Douglas added confidently, "and Miss Hag-e-la probably already did, what with her memory being short-term and everything. Just keep your head down for a bit and it will soon be back to normal."

"Well, he's already doing that a lot," Tess observed. Ray sighed as he looked up and tried to square his shoulders.

The weight of his bag made it hard.

"What's for lunch today, anyway?" Douglas asked, "anything special?"

Tess rolled her eyes. She got her phone out and showed the screen to Douglas.

"Fish, rice, and white beans in tomato sauce," he read, "man, Mondays really are the worst."

Tess nodded. She shrugged.

"At least it's a break," she said, "let's get our food, and… oh look, our usual table is still available."

Ray looked over, at the corner where they usually sat. The lights were still broken, though you hardly noticed that if you sat with your back to the wall. The rest of the cafeteria was already filling up, but that corner… well, it was always available to them.

Ray's stomach was agreeing with Douglas. He wasn't feeling hungry and the look and feel of the food didn't really help. He put his tray on the table and pushed it aside a little to make space for his notebook.

Not the notebook he used for class. His *good* notebook.

He felt the tough texture of the paper under his fingers as he flipped through. Several of the pages were already filled with several shades of gray, lovingly rendered over hours of work. Heroes, villains, monsters, vehicles… anything that was on his mind.

This was the book that he liked.

He settled on the first empty page he found. It was a good page.

"Immediately, huh?" Douglas asked, amused, "does what you have in there want to get out that badly?"

Ray nodded. He got out his lightest blue pencil and started working on the general shape of his heroine, the muscled superhero. Though Miss Mandela took the first drawing from him, she was still in his head.

She wanted out. She wanted to be freed, probably because of all the other things that Ray had in there. They couldn't measure up to her, but… he felt like he had to oblige.

The worries of Miss Mandela's geography lesson and the words of the others started to disappear as Ray's pencil touched the paper. He let the image flow through his fingers and the thoughts disappear from his mind as he went. Tess and Douglas were chatting, talking about some game they were

playing together. Sometimes he liked to listen and chime in. They made the game sound fun, even though he didn't want to play.

Today, though, he just drew. He could only hear their voices, though he didn't register what they said. They could have been talking about anything… until they didn't.

"Well, well, well," a new voice rumbled from directly behind Ray, "look at what is going on."

"Oh, come on, Vincent," Douglas said, drawing Ray's attention to the situation at hand, "didn't you have your fun during class? What do you want now?"

"Funny that you ask, nerd," Vincent said, though Ray could hear Trevor's dumb snickering from close by, "Angela felt *deeply* disturbed by what the creep drew. Wouldn't want him to just turn around and do it again, now, wouldn't we?"

"Yeah," Trevor added, "you better not creep her out again."

"But it looks like someone didn't learn their lesson," Vincent drawled, his voice coming from close to Ray's shoulder, "would you look at that… I think he made the tits even bigger. Pervert."

Ray clenched his teeth and tried not to hiss as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He tried to cover his drawing from the prying eyes of the bullies, but the moment his finger touched the blue graphite, it smudged. He lifted his hand again.

The paper disappeared from under his fingers just a second later. Trevor laughed as he held up Ray's book.

"Come on guys, don't steal," Douglas said, his voice tense despite his calm posture, "can't we just be nice to each other for once?"

"We're being nice," Vincent said, as he grabbed the notebook from Trevor's hand. Ray winced as the pages creased under his rough fingers, "to Angela. You guys are the bullies, you're letting him ridicule her, even though she explicitly asked him…"

"Come on, Vincent," Ray interrupted him, "I wasn't drawing her. It didn't even look like her!"

"Well, she clearly thought you did," Vincent countered, flipping through the notebook, "what other porn did you draw in here? I better not find anything that resembles me…"

"Resembles?" Trevor asked.

Vincent sighed and rolled with his eyes.

"That *looks like* me," he said slowly, looking at Trevor, "'resembles' means 'look like'"

Slow realization dawned in Trevor's eyes. Ray didn't even care that the guy was an idiot.

He cared about Vincent going through his drawings, though. He tried to reach out for it, but Vincent pulled it away before he could get even close.

"No, no," he said, "I'm checking if you drew me, or someone else we know."

Ray hadn't done anything like that. In the distance, he could see Angela and some of her friends smirk in his direction. Trevor looked back at them several times, as if he was checking that they were watching.

Ray swallowed as Vincent tutted and shook his head. He held up Ray's notebook between two of his fingers and looked at it in disgust.

It was open at the drawing of a soldier that Ray had drawn. It was dynamic and showed a lot of muscle through ripped and damaged sleeves. Vincent pointed at it.

"Clearly inspired. Derivative, even."

"I don't even want to think of you in my free time," Ray said, while he saw Trevor form the word 'derivative' with a confused look on his face, "I promise, Vincent. You were *not* the inspiration."

"You don't inspire a lot of confidence," Vincent said, shaking his head, "between this, the monsters, and whatever else is in his sick head… I think I'll do everybody a favor if you're not getting this back."

"You can't do that," Ray protested. He heard Douglas' chair scrape behind him as his friend was also getting up, "it's my property. You can't just steal from me."

"And you can't make drawings of others," Vincent repeated, "nobody will punish me, just you…"

He stopped as Ray lunged and grabbed for his notebook. He didn't care if some of the pages got creased, not anymore. It was his, it contained his memories, and…

Vincent wasn't fast enough. Ray got a hold of the sturdy cover and a handful of the thick pages. He pulled, trying to get it free from Vincent's hands.

A terrible ripping noise made its way through Ray's heart. Several pages came free, pulled apart by both him and Vincent. They each held a cover when Ray looked down, with half of the pages hanging loose between them and several others drifting to the ground.

Laughter came from Angela's table. She and her friends were pointing and laughing hysterically at Ray.

"Bah," Vincent said, "look what he did. Destroyed his own property."

Ray looked up at him, and down at the pages, and back up at Vincent's mocking leer.

"Well, it can't get much worse than this, can it?" the boy said, as he tossed the half he was holding onto the table, right into Ray's untouched beans with tomato sauce, "here, you've got your junk back. Hope it'll teach you a lesson."

Trevor laughed.

"Yeah, learn," he said, "you should."

Vincent took Trevor by the shoulder and shook his head as they walked away. Ray couldn't even hear the chatter in the rest of the cafeteria anymore as he ducked down, collecting the fallen sheets. He numbly picked them from the ground, until he found another hand.

"Here," Tess said, handing him a stack of papers, "they're stupid. And dumb. Did you see how Trevor acted? They…"

She tried to smile, looking up at Ray and faltering when their eyes met. Ray couldn't find the strength to shake his head, just accepting the stack and getting up.

"I'm sorry, Ray," Douglas said numbly as he was wiping the other half of the remains of his notebook down, "we'll… let's see how expensive a new one is tonight, right?"

He tried to smile encouragingly. Ray nodded slowly.

Now he really wasn't going to eat these beans.

*'Tesseract: These two are soooooooo dumb >_<'*

*'Diaboliglas: Don't get me startd :/ the society we live in.'*

*'Diaboliglas: When MLK fought for equality, he didn't mean for guys like these to just…'*

*'Tesseract: Just what?'*

*'Diaboliglas is typing…'*

As Douglas was typing, Ray just stared at the three dots moving across the bottom of the chat bar. He scrolled up, only seeing the messages of his two friends as they had started talking when home. Douglas' pink text and Tess' green were forming a harmonious duet.

Ray didn't dare to interrupt the two. They appeared to be having fun.

He looked up when his computer gave a ping. Someone had pinged him, though he quickly saw that it was Douglas.

*'Diaboliglas: oh btw @X-Ray I'm checking Amazon what was your notebook called?'*

Ray's mouth pulled itself into a thin line as goosebumps ran down his back at the mention of the notebook. Douglas didn't understand… it wasn't as simple as just replacing the notebook.

His fingers landed on the keyboard. He started typing, explaining that to Douglas… until he sighed, stopped, and removed the whole rant.

*'X-Ray: sec'*

*'Tesseract: he lives!'*

*'Diaboliglas: Don't act dumb.'*

*'Tesseract is typing…'*

Ray reached over to his bag, where the remains of his notebook had been carefully stored. The pages felt slippery and slimy as he pulled them out, some of the sauce having soaked into the formerly clean pages.

He sighed and grimaced as he wiped his hand on his pants. He saw a lot of red between the pages, and some white beany debris hovering on the edges. He had to find the right title page, but after Vincent ripped them all apart…

Ray's nose wrinkled as the stink made its way inside. He hated what had happened, but he had to pick through to find the answer to Douglas' question. He felt pangs in his heart as he looked at the drawings. Some of them were still clean, but many were damaged. Some beyond saving as the sauce had gotten into the paper and the graphite had smudged and moved.

He stopped briefly as his eye fell on a page that was caked in sauce. Bold black lines were visible underneath the red, having warped and moved as the page had grown wet and saturated. With some effort, he managed to get most of the covering gunk off. He vaguely recognized the drawing

underneath, of a businessman with a cane he had seen walking by. He had looked busy and dignified, with the cane in one hand as he was checking his smartwatch with the other.

Now, he looked like he had crawled out of a particularly bloody swamp. The man's legs were still okay, but everything above the waist had been mangled. It was almost as if the lines had gotten up from the page and moved to make the drawing even more unrecognizable. Even the man's eyes appeared to have enlarged and turned irregular.

They had turned evil.

He moved on, turning over, until he found the one page that contained the exact brand and type of notebook that he had once bought. He grimaced when he remembered and turned to the chat, where Douglas and Tess were still going.

'X-Ray: I don't think Amazon has this one.'

'Diaboliglas: why?'

'X-Ray: I got it in som mom n pop store. Pages felt good.'

'Diaboliglas: :/'

'Diaboliglas: lemme try anyway.'

'X-Ray: it's a 5k-Artist-Special 220gr/m2 nat. tex.'

'Tesseract: that's a mouthful. why not Moleskine?'

'X-Ray: feels wrong. don't like the texture of the pages.'

'Tesseract: well ur te artist.'

Ray shook his head with some amusement.

'Tesseract: y the feel important?'

'X-Ray: u don't like touching nasty things?'

'Tesseract: not the same ;P'

'X-Ray: ye it is'

'Diaboliglas: can't find it.'

'X-Ray: I'm gonna see what I can save.'

'X-Ray: maybe draw a bit.'

'Diaboliglas: do that m8.

'Diaboliglas: I keep searching.'

'Diaboliglas: See you tomorrow?'

'X-Ray: ye'

'Tesseract: nite!'

Ray didn't close the chat. He just kept the discussion between Tess and Douglas go as he mentally checked out from what they were saying. Their chat kept going, one message popping up after the next as they discussed…

Well, whatever they wanted. Ray put the pages that he had been looking at aside, though his eyes got pulled to the old man again… or what he had turned into. Ray felt his eyes being pulled to those of the man, who looked at him with a wicked glare.

Or maybe it was an inquisitive look? The man was almost asking Ray what he was going to do about the tomato sauce situation.

Ray felt his fingers itch. He had a drawing in there, somewhere, that had to get out. Ray leaned to the side and took out his drawing pad. Filled with large, thick paper. It gave him all the room he needed to draw, though it was too big to actually take with him to school. Though the notebook was his favorite, the pad was his go to at home.

So he removed the cover and stared at the empty sheet at the top. He would carefully tear it off when he was done along the glued line at the top, as he had done with all the other drawings before.

The remaining pad was thin and looking unhealthy. It wouldn't be long until he would have to buy new paper.

He put the tomato-red drawing to the side, keeping it in his eyesight. A tin of pencils came out of a drawer. Ray's fingers danced over them, until he instinctively selected the right one and threw one last apologetic look at the man next to him before pencil hit paper.

Ray didn't think. He just let his mind's eye lead his fingers as they danced over the paper. The pencil was just a tool while Ray's fingers and mind worked together to create.

He didn't want to be like Trevor, or Vincent, who were only able to destroy. There was no kindness in them, they were just there to cause damage and make others unhappy. The way that his notebook had been mangled told Ray enough and he knew that the school, maybe even the world, would be better if they weren't around anymore.

But he couldn't do that. He could only think about what they had done, but he was unable to stop that. The teachers didn't even stop them, even though they tried to stop Ray from doing what he liked to do.

Well, nobody was stopping him at that moment. Nobody could tell him that he had to stop drawing… or judge him for what he had imagined, like Vincent and Trevor had done. They had gone out of their way to embarrass him in front of everyone else. Miss Mandela had done the same. She had gone out of her way to show his drawing and everyone had shown their true colors.

They didn't appreciate art. Not like Ray did, at least, or Tess and Douglas.

At least they let him…

Ray's mind came to a screeching halt as he looked at what his fingers had been doing. His conscious mind had been distracted, but his fingers certainly hadn't. They had kept going, kept drawing, leaving jagged lines and angles that Ray almost couldn't recognize. A drawing that was most certainly impossible, unwilling, and yet… it was there.

It took Ray a couple of moments before he started to recognize elements. There were actual muscle groups and limbs, in a bestial layout. Ray turned his drawing as he explored it, finding that it worked better on its side. He hadn't thought he could do that, drawing something sideways, but, well…

It's just drawing in a different angle.

Though he didn't know what he was looking at, it looked fearsome. Fierce. He liked it. Vincent would never be safe from something like this, if it had been real.

As he looked up, the chat had stopped moving.

*'Tesseract: night, Doug.'*

*'Diaboliglas: 'night. You too, Ray.'*

*'Tesseract: rite and Ray :*'*

It was past midnight. Ray swallowed, letting the time sink in.

Perhaps it was time to go to bed.


Ray shivered. The world was cold and misty. He could see about as far as his hand could go, but there was nothing in the mist as he peered around.

Or did he see shapes move in the mist? Something unrecognizable did move somewhere, though Ray didn't dare to move to investigate. Maybe there was something dangerous, or something that would cause Ray some kind of grief as he found it.

'You are scared,'

The voice rang through the mist, muffled by the distance and the moist material hindering it.

Ray turned around, trying to peer through the white clouds and identify the source of that voice.

'You are damaged,' the voice continued, 'you have been harmed.'

Ray swallowed as softly as he could. His mouth opened just the slightest bit, but he couldn't find words to return to the voice. He didn't want to anger it, or make it feel like he was a weak prey.

'So harmed that you can't even talk for yourself,' the voice continued, shifting through the mists, 'so harmed that you require help.

'We all do so, sometimes. You have helped me… so I will help you. My task is clear…

'Master.'


The dream had rattled Ray. He barely listened as he was sitting in class, Tess and Douglas behind and next to him. Miss Mandela was droning on again, and Ray could see how Trevor was keeping an eye on him.

Would he tell on him, if he started drawing? Was he hoping that he'd do so?

He didn't want to give them the chance, but his fingers were aching to…

"Man, Trevor looks lost on his own," Tess whispered, drawing Ray's attention. He threw her a covert look over his shoulder and saw her nodding towards the lone Trevor, "you think Vincent got sick, or is he just skipping?"

"He's not worth our wonder," Douglas whispered curtly, "we shouldn't let him live rent-free in our heads. That's letting him win and we have to be better than that."

Ray reluctantly nodded. Tess made a face at them.

"You think that…"

"I hear talking coming from the back of the class," Miss Mandela suddenly said, "is someone trying to be an artist, again?"

Ray ducked his head down instinctively. He looked up at the teacher, and at the classmates around him. They threw him looks, grins, as Miss Mandela put her hands on her hips.

Tess sighed and just rolled with her eyes as the woman came towards her.

"Mister Miller, have you…"

She stopped when the door suddenly opened and people gasped at the figure coming through it. Ray didn't recognize the boy who walked in, who looked like he had gone through hell. He was scratched and mangled and bleeding from several cuts.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Miss Mandela," the boy said with a raspy voice, "I think I need to go to the nurse really quick."

It took Ray a moment before he recognized the voice of Vincent. He swallowed as he looked at the boy. His eyes were moving in different directions underneath his messed-up hairdo, keeping an eye on different angles and corners. His fingers were twitching, balling into fists and relaxing as he was waiting for Miss Mandela to stop gaping at him.

"Mister Mendoza," she said, "what in the seven heavens happened to you?"

"I was attacked by some animal on the way to school," Vincent said, wiping some blood from under his chin, "it took me a bit to get away from it."

"What kind of animal could have done *that*?"

Vincent shrugged.

"I dunno," he muttered, "it was too fast. I just ran, but it got some mean bites in… or scratches… I think?"

"Well, yes," Miss Mandela said, "then you should definitely go to the nurse. Ask them if you need shots, too, just in case."

Vincent cringed, but nodded as he turned around. The classroom exploded in murmurs as several of the students turned towards each other to discuss what they had just seen.

Douglas' face was white as a sheet when Ray looked over. Tess leaned forward.

"Do you think that…"

"Everybody *quiet*," Miss Mandela screeched, "yes, I know that was a bit exciting, but we have a *class* and I won't…"

"You can't expect us to just go back to plates now," Angela protested loudly, hysterics in her voice, "what happened to Vinnie? Is he going to be okay?"

Tess quietly pointed at her mouth, before she made a gagging motion and pulled her finger away. She rolled with her eyes while Ray heard her exaggeratedly repeat the girl's words under her breath.

Others didn't agree with Tess, though, as they got up from their seats and joined in.

"He will be *fine*," Miss Mandela protested, "he will go to the nurse and come back before you know it."

"How do you know *that*?" Angela almost screeched.

"Instead of protesting, Miss Pierce, you should take notes for him," Miss Mandela replied curtly, "so he can catch up on what he missed. I will have no further complaint or argument, do you hear me?"

"Well I'm going with him," Angela said, getting up, "I won't have him walk all alone."

Douglas looked at Ray as the girl stormed out, ignoring the further protests of Miss Mandela.

"She wouldn't do that for one of us," he muttered dryly, "or do you think she's seen the light to become a halfway decent human?"

Several other students were getting up in the commotion. Douglas' words were unheard, though Tess' snort got them a couple of looks. Nobody was distracted enough to not start walking towards the door.

"Everybody sit down!" Miss Mandela screeched, "if anybody else leaves this classroom, they will *fail* geography this year. Do you hear me? Anybody who walks out has *failed* and will need to re-do the subject!"

Several of the students who were getting up, halted on their way out. They looked to each other and to the door, before they turned to Miss Mandela. The woman was standing in front of the class with her arms folded.

"So go," she said, "you know the consequences. I'm paying attention."

Nobody moved. When students started sitting down again, muttering and protesting under their breath, she nodded.

"That's what I thought. Now, plate tectonics…"

Ray still heard muttering, but Miss Mandela ignored it. Class appeared to continue.


"I've got to go by the library," Douglas said as Ray was walking with Tess and him to the cafeteria, "I finished my book and definitely need a new one. Go on without me and I'll join you in a moment, okay?"

"Sure," Tess said, "see you in a bit, take care!"

Douglas waved briefly as he changed direction, jumping between two first-year students to get into the hallway that led to the library. Ray followed him briefly with his eyes before they continued to the cafeteria.

He frowned as he saw something move in the corner of his eye. He turned his head, but there was little to see between the people moving around and the decorations hanging from the walls and ceiling to give the drab hallways some life.

As Ray turned his head, he kept seeing little movements. There was something behind him, or right next to him, hiding in the shadows… or he was starting to see things.

"You coming, Ray?" Tess asked, "I think that, now that Vincent is all bandaged up, they'll have something else to worry about. Maybe we can just eat in peace, today."

Ray nodded and hurried after her. They got their food and sat down in their usual corner of the cafeteria, slightly away from the other students. Ray dared a look over his shoulder, at the table where Vincent and Trevor would usually hold court. Angela was sitting there, fussing over Vincent. He was bandaged up and Angela was straightening the bandages that were shifting as he moved.

Vincent didn't fuss over the attention, though Trevor was keeping half an eye on them, his food almost untouched.

Ray barely wanted to touch his own food. He wanted to draw, though he had to remind himself of the fate of his notebook. All he had was the drawing of the night before, neatly folded in his backpack. It had felt *right* to take it.

'Master.'

Ray jumped as the voice made its way into his ear. He turned to confront the voice, but found that there was… nothing.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

Tess looked up from her phone.

"Hear what?" she asked through half a mouthful of food, "not much to hear, to be honest."

'I'm talking softly, Master,' the voice whispered in Ray's ear, 'she won't hear me. I'll be quiet.'

"What's going on?" Ray asked, freezing in place, his eyes moving to the corners of their sockets to try and find the source of the voice, "are you…"

"Who are you talking to?" Tess asked, "are you on the phone with someone?"

She threw Ray a sharp look. He squirmed in his seat.

'I will announce myself,' the voice said softly, 'greetings, Tess. I have come here to announce that…'

It didn't get any further before Tess recoiled and sharply inhaled. Her head moved left and right as she searched for what Ray knew she wouldn't find.

"What the fuck?" she muttered, "what the actual… what's going on? Where did that come from? What are you on about, Ray?"

'Ray has asked me to help him deal with an issue,' the voice continued, 'unfortunately, I have to report that I didn't succeed completely. The 'fucking asshole', as you described him, got away before I could finish my task, but…'

Tess shuddered again.

"What the…"

'You are repeating yourself,' the voice chastised her, 'fortunately, I can adapt to that. You have…'

It stopped as Tess got up from her chair. Ray felt his hands tighten into white-knuckled fists as the voice was speaking and Tess was getting up.

"What do you mean, 'deal with an issue'?" she asked, her voice rising, "are you talking about this morning, when Vin…"

"Shh," Ray hissed, interrupting her, "I don't know, but…"

'You gave me life yesterday,' the voice said, 'with what you were thinking about, my task was clear. Tomorrow, I will finish it, and…'

"No," Ray quickly said, seeing Tess open her mouth in obvious protest, "that is…"

He rubbed his forehead.

"I can barely get my head around it. Did you plan to…"

'Kill him,' the voice said. Tess gasped, 'as I surmised that you wanted. You certainly gave me the tools to do so.'

"Wait," Tess repeated, "did you just say that Ray gave you the tools to…"

Ray swallowed. He wanted to shake his head, but…

"Not on purpose," he said, "I didn't think anything would happen, all I did was draw this, and…"

'And that was all that was necessary,' the voice said content, 'you may call me Shadow. I am here to do your bidding.'

"Why can't I see you?" Ray immediately asked.

"Is that really the question we need to ask right now?" Tess asked.

"Of course," Ray said, "if I have someone to help me against these bullies… I need to know if there are limitations."

Tess swallowed.

'I keep myself concealed from those who would judge you for me,' Shadow said, 'it would be counterproductive to cause you more grief, just by being with you.'

"That makes sense," Ray nodded.

"Did you really create something to harm Vincent?"

Ray turned to Tess again. She was looking at him weirdly, through narrowed eyes.

"Not specifically," Ray said immediately, "but…"

He thought back to the night before. To the anger, the frustration, and the damaged picture. The eyes that were staring at him as if they were wronged.

"But he had it coming to him," he finally said, "you saw what he did to me. He deserved some payback for it. He's a bully."

"Nobody deserves to be mauled to death on the way to school," Tess hissed at him, "you call that thing off… whatever it is."

Ray swallowed. The hiss and the look that Tess gave him were different from what she usually did. She just didn't do that.

"I'm serious," she said, to underline what Ray was thinking, "call it off, or I'm going to tell people, Ray. You are better than that."

Ray swallowed… but he nodded after a moment.

"I'm… sorry, Tess."

"What are you sorry about?"

Ray looked up at her, but couldn't stop his eyes from shooting this way and that as she tried to make eye contact. She grimaced when she realized what was going on… and that he was going to remain silent about it.

"We will speak no more about this," she said, "and you will…"

She made a helpless gesture at the cafeteria, before she took her tray and moved to sit somewhere else.

'Well, that was awkward,' the Shadow's voice came from Ray's shoulder, 'don't worry. I will stay with you from now on. You won't have to fear for offending your friend any further.'

Ray nodded. That would undoubtedly reassure Tess… if she would just let him explain that to her.


Ray was listening to the sound of his own footsteps as he left the school grounds. The sound was accompanied by a light pitter-patter of rain on the ground as he walked, just enough to be noticeable, but not enough to completely hide the sound of footsteps.

Shadow was hiding in the corner of his eyes. The movement was there, barely noticeable, but it didn't show up. Ray fought against the urge to look over his shoulders, to search for it.

There were people around. They would notice it, especially if he…

He didn't notice it until he was pushed to the side. Ray's shoulder banged against the bricks of the street before he felt another push. He went tripping and sliding forward. Light suddenly belonged to the distance as an alleyway appeared to hide it all. Pain shot through his shin and noise filled his ears as he tripped over a trashcan and hit the ground.

Laughing filled the alleyway. A dark snickering that sent shivers up Ray's spine as he looked around.

He didn't recognize anything. He tried not to make a habit of hanging around in filthy alleyways. As he turned around, he saw the shape at the entrance of the alley slowly walk in.

Ray tried to crawl backwards. His eyes grew larger as he felt his back hit a wall and realized that there was no way out. Nothing except the way that he had been pushed in through, past the person slowly walking up to him.

The worst part was that he recognized the voice that was laughing at him.

"Thought you were so funny, huh?" Trevor said slowly as he walked up, "think that you're so much smarter than us, and better at drawing, and more intelligent."

Ray swallowed. He felt his breathing speed up and his heart hammer against his chest. He tried to focus on the bully walking up to him, but could only focus on the general alarm his body was experiencing.

"I heard you talking," Trevor went on. He cracked his knuckles, which pulled Ray's attention immediately, "you think it is okay that Vinnie got hurt, huh? That he got beaten up. You probably paid someone to do it, didn't you?"

"It- it was an animal," Ray stuttered, "not me. I didn't do it. I couldn't…"

"Then why was that chick with you so scared, huh?" Trevor interrupted him, blocking the last light from Ray's face as he towered over Ray, "she couldn't believe that you would hire someone to act like an animal, huh? Too bad that Vincent is too fast and smart and strong to be beaten like that."

"I don't even have money!"

Trevor pulled him up by his shirt. He felt his feet dangle freely in the air while Trevor roared at him.

*"Don't lie to me!"*

Ray tried to scream. He found that he couldn't force the breath through his throat, neither up nor down. His hands reached for the fingers around his throat, but couldn't get a proper hold of them.

"*You* hurt Vincent!" Trevor continued, as spit flew at Ray's face, "*you* did something to do that! I heard you talking, I *saw* you talking!"

Ray got rammed against the wall. Trevor let him go, letting him drop to the floor. Ray coughed and coughed, fighting to get some air down his throat.

"You think I'm dumb, huh?" Trevor said, "well, I'm not! I'm smart! I see things! You can't hide everything from me!"

A kick landed squarely in Ray's stomach. He doubled over and tried to grab a hold of the foot, but Trevor was way faster. The foot disappeared, only to return to kick Ray between the ribs. It left and returned again, finding a new spot to bruise Ray. Again, again, and again.

Ray felt the moans and shouts escaping from his lips as he was finally able to draw breath. He pulled his arms up, protecting his head from the repeated kicks.

'Do you need help?' the Shadow asked in Ray's ear. 'He will not be able to stand up to me.'

"You're stupid!" Trevor shouted over its voice, "you're dumb! You're evil! Stop protecting your head!"

A kick against his shoulder flipped Ray over. He fell on his back and had Trevor standing over him again. He grabbed Ray's arm.

His drawing arm.

'If you want help…'

"There's nobody to help you!" Trevor bellowed, enraged, "you hurt him? Well, I will hurt you. You like drawing, huh? Let's see if you can do that if I break your fingers!"

Ray tried to ball his hand into a fist, but Trevor pried his fingers loose. His rapid breathing calmed as he watched in horror how the boy took one finger in his meaty hand.

"Help!" he shouted, "someone, please! Help me!"

'As you wish.'

Trevor released Ray's finger. The boy flew through the air, ramming into one of the alley's walls.

Ray saw the Shadow. It stood between them like a lion, bent forwards and leaning on several legs. It rammed into Trevor as the boy tried to get up, beating him down again.

He looked at the Shadow, but couldn't make out anything that it could use to seriously hurt Trevor. It looked fearsome, scary, but he had neglected to give it anything dangerous.

'I work with the tools I am given,' the Shadow snarled, 'if you want something more effective…'

"What did that…" Trevor started, before the breath was beaten from his lungs and all he could do was shout. He kicked out, pushing the Shadow away.

Ray felt his breath quickening again. He dropped his backpack and rooted around in it, looking for the drawing of the Shadow. The art that he had inexplicably folded up and put in his backpack.

He ignored a tearing sound as he unfolded it.

*'Careful,'* Shadow snarled at him between the heaving punches that Trevor threw at it.

Ray ignored it, ignored the rip that had removed one of the creature's limbs. He put a pencil to the paper and drew quick, rough arcs at the creature's feet, on the toes. He added spines to limbs, teeth to mouths.

Behind him, Trevor's sounds of struggle turned into screams of agony. Hot red liquid splattered around Ray, landing next to the paper… but nothing landed *on* it.

The screaming went on for an eternity. Ray kept drawing, kept going, until silence returned to the alleyway.

He didn't dare to turn around.


"Good news," Douglas said, as they had taken their place at their usual table, "I found your notebook! It's on its way, should arrive tomorrow."

Ray blinked. He looked up at Douglas as he sat down. The boy just smiled at him, one corner of his mouth turned up a little more than the other in a satisfied smirk.

"You didn't have to do that," Tess said, her eyes darkly on Ray, "not your responsibility, you know."

"Well, I felt bad," Douglas said, "and I've got some money to spare. Let me spend it the way I want to."

Tess rolled with her eyes. Ray tried to focus on the plate in front of him, willing his blood to stop rising to his face at the idea.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"You're welcome," Douglas smiled, "now what's up with you, Tess? You've been all doom and gloom, today."

"Had a bit of a rough night," Tess said, throwing another look at Ray, "couldn't really sleep."

"Well, at least you were on time," Douglas snickered, "as opposed to some others. At least Vincent showed up, yesterday. Trevor…"

Ray felt a pleasurable shiver run through his spine at the mention of the name. He remembered the blood, the screaming…

"You know," Tess said, drawing Ray's attention back, "I don't think it's appropriate to talk about people who aren't here."

"Well, you never seemed to have a problem with it before," Douglas laughed, "if somebody enjoyed gossip, it was…"

*"Well no longer,"* Tess bit at him, causing Douglas to trail off "I don't think it's appropriate anymore."

Silence reigned as Ray slowly put some food on his fork and shoveled it into his mouth. Tess looked away from him, barely touching her food, and Douglas' eyes shot from Ray to Tess and back to her.

"So," he continued, "I missed you guys at the raid, yesterday. We could have used a better healer, Tess. What's your excuse?"

Ray swallowed. He looked at Tess, who was glaring at him.

"I went to bed early," she said testily, "still couldn't sleep."

"Okay, okay," Douglas said, "any chance I could convince Ray today?"

"Probably not," Tess said, before Ray could respond, "he doesn't want to play games with us, right, Ray?"

Ray nodded slowly, looking away from the girl. Footsteps pulled his attention.

"Hey, nerds."

Ray looked over. It was Vincent, still heavily bandaged. He kept his eyes glued to the corner of their table, one arm hugging around his chest to the other side of his body.

"Trev' said he was going to talk with one of you, yesterday," he continued, "haven't seen him since. Any of you talked with him?"

Ray turned around fully in his seat, leaning an arm over the backseat.

"What do you mean?" he asked, "I didn't speak with Trevor, yesterday."

There hadn't been a lot of speaking to be done before Trevor had started to push Ray around, after all.

"Well, he said he went after you," Vincent repeated, "and he's usually a man of his word. He does what he says he'll do, and all."

He narrowed his eyes at Ray.

"Are you sure he didn't speak with you?"

Ray shrugged and shook his head.

"He didn't," he said slowly, "maybe he went and forgot about it? All I know is that he probably got what he deserved."

Tess gasped softly behind him. Ray fought to keep a grin from his face, even though he could feel Tess' eyes on him. Douglas stayed silent, but Ray could see him moving from the corner of his eyes.

Or was that Shadow?

'You are an agile liar,' Shadow whispered in his ear, 'you do this more often, perhaps to hide what you really feel from those that would exploit it?'

Ray swallowed. He shrugged his shoulders at Vincent.

"I can't make it any better than that," he said, "nothing to gain from me, man."

Vincent sighed. He nodded at Ray.

"Well," he said, "I can't make you spill the beans you don't have."

He nodded at Ray.

"But I'm keeping an eye on you, dweeb. You better not do anything weird or creepy."

Ray rolled his eyes and shrugged.

"As always."

Vincent narrowed his eyes at him one last time before he turned around. They were quiet for a moment longer before Tess leaned forward.

"Please tell me that you and that weird voice had nothing to do with that," she hissed, "you didn't, did you?"

'The female is angry,' the Shadow muttered in Ray's ear, 'that is unwanted.'

Ray resisted the urge to nod. He shook his head, instead.

"I didn't do anything to Trevor," he said, "and I think he probably got what he deserved. As I told Vincent."

It wasn't a lie. Yet, Tess shook her head. She looked away from Ray as she put her hands around her face.

"Oh my god you did," she muttered, "you and that voice, didn't you?"

"What are you two talking about?" Douglas asked, "Vincent isn't usually this easily persuaded. This should be a moment of celebration, not one of stress."

"We're talking about…" Tess started, before Ray threw a French fry at her. She blinked as she fell silent, staring at him.

It gave him just the moment he needed.

"It's nothing," he said, "we had a… bit of a discussion, yesterday, during lunch. We'll talk about it after class, okay? While heading home?"

Tess scoffed. She shook her head.

"Sure, talk about it alone," she said, "see if I care."

Douglas went from Tess to Ray again. He frowned for a moment, before he laughed.

"You two are being weird," he said, "but okay, I'll play your game. Now, about yesterday…"

"So," Douglas said, as he was walking with Ray after class, "you said you were going to explain something? You and Tess had a discussion? About Trevor?"

He was playing with his phone. Did he take this seriously? Ray tried not to get too annoyed by that as he put his hands in his pockets.

'Is this wise?' Shadow's voice sounded in Ray's ear. 'Are they going to listen to reason, unlike the other?'

Ray balled his fists in his pockets. Of course it would pick a moment that he couldn't comment.

"Yeah," he admitted, "it happens, right? Just like… you and Tess were talking when I was to the toilet."

"Ah, of course," Douglas nodded, "yeah, innocent things."

'They talked about you.'

Ray nodded almost imperceptibly. Shadow had informed him of that. Shadow had shown that he was a good friend.

"Did Tess say anything about what we discussed, then?" he asked.

"No," Douglas said, "she's been seeing this guy, she couldn't stop about him."

'Liar.' Shadow hissed. 'Lying comes easy to him.'

Ray frowned. His fingers grabbed onto the fabric of his pockets, hooking into them and pulling it together. He looked around and nodded to an alleyway.

"Let's not discuss it in public," he said, "instead… let's go in there."

Douglas stopped for a moment as he looked up from his phone.

"Something that is too sensitive for the street, huh?" Douglas said, tapping his screen a couple more times before he put the phone in his pocket, "are you being a little dramatic, maybe?"

Ray shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said, shrugging, "we're being bullied. Well, *I'm* being bullied. I want to be careful that the wrong people can't hear me."

"Yeah," Douglas said, "okay, I can come with that. Let's go, so you can feel comfortable."

Ray smiled as he led Douglas forwards, towards the entranceway to the alley.

He swallowed when he recognized the alley. He saw the trashcan, still on its side. The spot where he had pushed himself against the wall.

Was there still a dark spot, where Trevor's remains had been when he had fled the alley? Did he just imagine that?

The rain had already washed away the blood. It was gone, nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it was for the best.

"Dude," Douglas said, "you wanted to go in there yourself, you know."

Ray nodded. He tried to steady himself but found his deep inhale to be shaky.

Maybe it was even for the best. This was a good place to tell Douglas everything. He steadied himself a little as he walked further into the alleyway.

'The place of power.'

Shadow's words sent a shiver of pleasure over his back. Ominous, but right.

"You know," he said, as he walked over the dark spot, almost feeling Trevor's body under his feet, "I have never really been best friends with Trevor. He has always been mean, and contrary."

"Yeah," Douglass agreed, "he's not the sharpest knife in the drawer. He's just confused, I think, and he takes that out in a poor way. I feel sorry for him, sometimes."

Ray frowned as he looked up at Douglas. The boy was lightly leaning against the Alley's wall, his arms folded and one eyebrow slightly raised.

"You should try that, sometimes," Douglas continued, "just… feel sorry for him. Try not to confuse him some day, and he might even be nice to be around."

'He was dangerous,' Shadow whispered in Ray's ear, 'he was hurting you for something you didn't do.'

Ray swallowed. He steeled himself and nodded.

Douglas smiled.

"I'm glad you agree," he said happily, "is that all? Did you want to tell me that Trevor bullied you? We were all there, you know."

Ray suppressed a growl. He shook his head.

"That's just the introduction," he said, enunciating every word slowly, clearly.

Douglas raised his hands with a slight smile on his face. He even bent his neck.

"Sorry, sorry," he simply said, "please continue. Don't let me interrupt you."

Ray nodded. He started pacing in the alleyway, moving from one wall to the other between Douglass and the exit.

"Yesterday," he finally said, "when Vincent came in hurt… I was happy. He's a bully, too. And I said so… and apparently, word came out. You know how annoying Angela can be, she probably overheard and made a stink about it… and Trevor was just a big, mean, stinking dog who wanted to act on that. He was an idiot."

Douglas pushed himself off the wall with his shoulder. He frowned at Ray, opening his arms and holding them by his side.

Ray noticed that he was clenching his fists.

"You're using an awful lot of past tense there," he said, "did you and Trevor… already have a talk? Did you discuss it and talk it over?"

"No," Ray said. Douglass winced, "he pushed me into an alleyway. *This* alleyway. He tried to break my arm, but I… had a friend who interfered. Who protected me."

Douglas looked around. He shook his head at Ray.

'He won't understand.'

"So you had a fight, and he's got roughed up," Douglas concluded.

Ray stopped on top of the last place where he had seen Trevor.

"He was killed," he hissed, "right *here*."

Douglas shivered.

"That's bad," Douglas muttered, "but hey, it wasn't you, right? It was your… friend? You're okay."

"I'm not sure about that," Ray said, "it might be that I…"

'Don't say it.'

"That I…"

He couldn't look Douglas in the eye anymore. He looked away, towards the corner of the alley, where Trevor had lifted him in the air.

'Don't spread knowledge about us.'

"That I created them."

Douglas mouthed the word 'created', as if he was mulling it over.

"Created?" he said, slowly, as his eyes widened in worry, "you… you're saying you're responsible?"

"Yeah," Ray nodded, "it was me. Trevor was out to hurt me and I defended myself. He won't be bothering anyone anymore."

Douglass was quiet for a moment. He turned around, looking at the end of the alley, before he turned back to Ray.

"And why are you telling me this?"

Ray shrugged.

"So you know what happened," he said, "you'd have found out, eventually. Best you hear it from me, I figure."

Douglas nodded.

"That's really bad," he said, "you… shouldn't keep this quiet. Someone died!"

'He doesn't understand.' Shadow growled. 'He is going to turn on us.'

"He had it coming," Ray said, shaking his head and balling his fists, "he bullied me. He was being a monster to me. *He got what he deserved*."

Douglas raised his hands calmingly as Ray's voice rose. His eyes went this way and that, as if he was looking for something. Ray could see Shadow standing at the entrance of the alleyway, hiding in a shadow, but Douglas didn't seem to focus on them.

"Okay, okay," he said, "no argument there, but now that it's been done… you need to do the right thing, man. You need to hand your friend in. They're a murderer. Hell, you would probably be rewarded, I think."

Ray shook his head.

"They wouldn't understand," he said, "Shadow protects me. He *is* me. He is with me and for me."

"Listen," Douglas said, shaking his head, "I… won't say I fully understand. But Tess and I, she's also listening, we can…"

"She's *what!?*"

Douglas cringed.

"I dialed her in," he said, "she wanted to know what happened. We're on your side, Ray. Don't worry. We can help you fix this."

Ray felt his face burn. He felt his fists clench. His blood started boiling and his teeth clenched as he felt his breathing become heavier.

He took a step forward to Douglass.

"You betrayed me!"

Shadow jumped forward with a roar. Ray felt the monster fly by him, more thanks to the air it displaced than because of the creature brushing past.

Douglas got flung to the ground. Blood started to fly around as Douglas screamed, but nobody appeared to hear him.

Ray didn't look away. He watched as Shadow tore Douglas apart and the alley stained red again.

A phone flew in Ray's direction. It was Douglas' phone.

He tapped the screen once, activating it and showing that the call with Tesseract was still going. He shook his head, only looking up when the screams stopped. Shadow came walking in his direction.

'I dealt with him.'

"I didn't ask you to," Ray said, narrowing his eyes, "what friend are you, if you do things without my asking?"

'A friend with initiative,' Shadow said, though Ray could see its head moving uncertainly, 'though… you didn't want me to do that?'

"Doug?"

Ray looked at the phone. Tess' voice had come through it.

"Douglas, are you still there?"

Ray brought the phone up. He looked at the remains of the boy that was once his friend as he swallowed.

"It's me."

"Ray?" Tess asked, her voice shaky, "did you do something with Douglas?"

'He got what he deserved.' Shadow said. Ray nodded at it.

"He got what he deserved," he repeated, "you tried to spy on me, Tess. You did something horrible to me… and you used Douglas for that."

"What?" Tess said, "no, Ray. Listen to me, what did you do with Doug?"

Ray didn't listen. He looked at Shadow, who sat up. They tilted their head, listening.

"Show me that I can still trust you," he said, "deal with this."

Shadow nodded once. It loped off and disappeared into the darkness.

"You did something dumb, Tess," Ray said, speaking into the microphone again, "I thought you were my friend. That you were on my side. I thought the same of Douglas."

Tess' voice was unsteady as she spoke.

"What did you do with Doug, Ray?" she asked, begged, "please tell me he's okay. You're better than that, right?"

"I am better," Ray said, feeling the temperature drop from his voice, "but I have a friend who will do what is necessary to do."

"What do you mean?"

Ray took in breath to answer, but he was interrupted by the noise of shattering glass from the other side of the line. Tess screamed, before a clattering sound came over the line. Ray nodded when the connection went dead.

He had always been all alone, after all. At least now, he had a *real* friend.