

Iris

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Shonen-ai/Slash! For DD_DM. A black-winged angel finds himself caught up in the fate of a young boy that defies existence itself, a boy with paradoxed wings, a boy named 'Iris'...

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Chapter 1 - Gray	4
Chapter 2 - Survive	6
Chapter 3 - Darkness	8
Chapter 4 - Sanctuary	11
Chapter 5 - Silence	14
Chapter 6 - Reason	16
Chapter 7 - Antithesis	19
Chapter 8 - Same	23
Chapter 9 - Ruby	27
Chapter 10 - Stone	29
Chapter 11 - Bat	32
Chapter 12 - Monster	38
Chapter 13 - Dead	42
Chapter 14 - Blood	45
Chapter 15 - Lost	47
Chapter 16 - Taint	49
Chapter 17 - Half	53
Chapter 18 - Found	55
Chapter 19 - Purse	59
Chapter 20 - Mutual	61
Chapter 21 - Drop	63
Chapter 22 - Wolf	67

Chapter 23 - Trapped	70
Chapter 24 - Journey	72
Chapter 25 - Beautiful	74
Chapter 26 - Paradox	76
Chapter 27 - Disconnected	78
Chapter 28 - Distraction	82
Chapter 29 - Spider	87
Chapter 30 - Bone	91
Chapter 31 - Human	96
Chapter 32 - Fall	100
Chapter 33 - Earth	105
Chapter 34 - Pity	109
Chapter 35 - Continue	113
Chapter 36 - Scar	115
Chapter 37 - Ally	118
Chapter 38 - Nothing	121
Chapter 39 - Seal	127
Chapter 40 - Purpose	133
Chapter 41 - Labs	138
Chapter 42 - Shatter	142
Chapter 43 - Burning	148
Chapter 44 - Separated	153
Chapter 45 - Secret	157
Chapter 46 - Side	159
Chapter 47 - Opposite	163
Chapter 48 - Camael	166
Chapter 49 - Demon	172
Chapter 50 - Remember	177
Chapter 51 - Simple	183
Chapter 52 - Longevity	189
Chapter 53 - Deal	192
Chapter 54 - Dual	195
Chapter 55 - Goodbye	198

Chapter 56 - Peace	201
Chapter 57 - Fool	203
Chapter 58 - Forest	205
Chapter 59 - Bound	208
Chapter 60 - Touch	213
Chapter 61 - Ending	215
Chapter 62 - Alive	217
Chapter 63 - Sky	222
Chapter 64 - Look	226
Chapter 65 - Moment	230
Chapter 66 - Mortal	233
Chapter 67 - Rain	238
Chapter 68 - Epilogue	247

1 - Gray

Iris

- For: DefyDeath_DefyMe, aka Iris Wilder. Thanks for everything. -

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Gray.

That was all he seemed to be.

His hair was a soft gray that fell around his pale face, hanging over his eyes and draping down his back, over his hunched, skinny shoulders and thin back. The threadbare shirt thrown over was loose and stained, tattered sleeves just barely showing pale fingers curled up, knuckles white.

Valkyre shifted uneasily in the darkness, dagger tense in his hand. What was it with him?

The boy, for he couldn't possibly be any older than fifteen, remained where he was, curled up on the narrow stone windowsill, looking out through swirled and smeared glass at the city below. The dying rays of sunlight were pale and colorless, drained.

Surely this couldn't be real.

This couldn't be Iris.

Valkyre let out a silent sigh, brushing jet black strands of hair away from his face with a gloved hand. His rich amethyst eyes were cool and calculating, face expressionless, wreathed in darkness from where he stood, a shadow blending into a shadow.

He paused, eyes still on the figure by the window, blade slowly drawn back up over his body, tense.

Slowly, he stepped away from the shadows, booted feet silent on the cold cement floor.

He had made no sound, but Iris turned and looked at him.

Valkyre froze, startled. Not by the fact that he'd been detected, but by what he was facing.

Cool, emotionless gray eyes bore into his own, without emotion, without depth, without expression. Like the hard cement he stood over, or the cold panes of glass behind the boy. Those eyes... they seemed like nothing more than a void, an empty abyss.

"What do you want?"

His voice was quiet, almost tired in the still, chill air. He stared at Valkyre, not moving, showing no fear, no surprise. Acknowledgement, perhaps, but nothing more.

Valkyre lowered his dagger, shifting his footing. Perhaps they did speak the truth in their myths.

"What else?"

His reply was curt and smooth, showing nothing, equaling the apathy he'd been met with. He raised his eyebrows slightly, faint smile on his face, though there was little humorous.

"You head."

Iris did nothing, only closed his eyes, then opened them again slowly. They remained unchanged, expressionless and dim. He did not reply.

Valkyre paused for only a split second, then lept forward suddenly, blade flashing. Behind him, a pair of wings black as their starless nights snapped out, encircling him.

The dagger tip bit into dry and cracked wood, thudding heavily in the frame of the window.

Valkyre's amethyst eyes flashed in the darkness, his lithe body tense, poised.

Iris stared up at him with his colorless eyes, head tilted just slightly to one side, dagger point inches from

his face. Valkyre's arm was level with the boy's neck, fabric of his sleeve close enough to quiver lightly under the boy's breath.

"You're a bounty hunter, then."

That same voice, with that apathetic, uncaring tone.

Valkyre hissed sharply under his breath as he withdrew his blade, glaring at the boy. He hadn't so much as flinched.

"Yes," he whispered softly, dark wings folding behind him, "I am. And you are my prey."

Iris blinked, slowly, calmly. Valkyre scowled, fingernails digging into the soft leather hilt of his dagger.

As if finally realizing his annoyance, the boy looked up at him, eyes as placid and empty as before.

"...Why do you hunt?"

The other snapped about suddenly, and the blade sang as it sliced across the air, and this time dark magic swallowed up the air around it as it followed the swipe, dark tendrils leaving negative neon strands burning on the backs of Valkyre's eyelids.

But he hadn't struck Iris. The boy stood staring at him calmly and coolly against the side of the wall, silver-gray hair just settling slightly from his almost slow slip away.

Valkyre's hand trembled as the dark magic around his blade faded away slowly, translucent tendrils still snaking along his fingers and wrist, knuckles clenched too tightly, flashing bone-white skin.

"To live," he hissed. "I hunt so I can survive."

Iris was unmoving, silent, like a statue carved out of soft white marble. Cold, empty gray eyes stared back into rich violet ones.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet, almost inaudible.

"...But why do you live?"

And then he was gone.

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AN: I'm sorry, I know, it's really, pathetically short and kinda not... explaining... anything. ...Heh.

And, I know, it has absolutely nothing to do with you besides a title. But, think of this one as all yours, Deffy.

Got a whole story for this, and you'll see soon how it fits with 'Iris', of GooGooDolls. It's been in my head for a while, and it's actually been down on paper before, but I kept scratching around with that copy and re-doing it... I hope this final version will be good.

Hope you like this! I promise I'll work on this, and even more knowing that it's for you! [I'll try to get the next chappie up by Sunday, 'kay?]

Thank you for everything, and hope you'll like this lots!!!

-TF

2 - Survive

Iris

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Live? Why did he live?

Valkyre glared over the knuckles of his clenched hands through the smoky air in the bar, dimmed and thick in the pale, distant illumination of a few unfocused lights. A few people shuffled around, but most were seated at other tables, chatter light and quiet, hushed.

He was starting to really hate this 'Iris' boy, but Valkyre had to admit, he'd asked a pretty damn good question.

Deep amethyst eyes closed, and he let out a quiet sigh.

Sure, plenty of people went on living. He doubted many of them had a decent reason for it, but everyone still wanted to get by.

The angel stared unseeingly in front of himself, eyes flickering only briefly as a man brushed by a bit too close, then dissipated in the dark lighting. Valkyre looked like nothing more than a human himself, his black wings tucked away, the only hint that he was not a human in the seal pendant he wore around his neck, a simple dark piece of obsidian stone bordered and marked with gold, furred symbol pressed in the soft, burnished metal discreetly showing his species. No humans could feel it, but the magic was there, a soft pulse Valkyre could always feel, and that any human who saw it would know of.

Seals were common things to see, and most people cast Valkyre nothing more than a glance, if they even bothered to do that much. They weren't things to be flashed about gaudily; they were devices to retrain other creatures' aspects, toning them down enough to blend into the thinning human populace. Waste of time, was Valkyre's personal opinion.

Humans, he knew, still often looked at him with distaste, but he knew the root of their hatred. It was centered in envy, fear, jealousy at what the magical creatures had, that they lacked. Which, he had to admit, wasn't really that much.

Some time ago, the human populace and their mighty cities had begun to decline, falling apart like their crumbling, worn buildings. No one really knew why, but around that time, magical creatures started to show up. It hadn't been all that long ago, Valkyre knew, but neither the humans, nor himself, nor anyone else really knew why. But they were here now, drawn into the wasteland cities, all kinds of odd, mythical creatures suddenly visible again to mankind, this time openly entering their society.

If the humans were searching for saviors to lead them out of their misery, though, they were to be disappointed. Valkyre was an angel by species, but he acted no different than a human, and didn't try to be anything more. A bounty hunter was by no means the cream of society. Just a job that required prowess of body and skill, which fitted Valkyre just perfectly. He couldn't even really remember how long he'd been at it, but it was the only real occupation he had. Valkyre had faced all kinds of creatures before, but mostly his hunting was limited to crossbreeds considered improper for some reason or another.

But nothing he'd ever gone up against before had been anything at all like Iris. If the myths were even half-true... he would truly be something amazing. Though Valkyre's first confrontation with the boy had not revealed much, he couldn't deny any of the stories and rumors quite yet.

It was said that this creature, 'Iris', was a creation rather than a child of any sire, because his body was

supposed to be a blend of all bloods, of all creatures. Valkyre seriously doubted it, because everyone knew, for every species there was a paradox; for an angel, there was a demon, for a vampire, there was a werewolf. Opposite creatures would be upset simply from another's presence, and contact was painful if not guarded by seals, and strong ones, too. Converse species had never been able to create a creature of mixed bloods, and Valkyre doubted that any had even tried.

But then, where had all of these myths come from, these rumors and whisperings, all about Iris? And he wasn't only of one contrasting set of bloods, he was rumored to be all. Antithesis itself, in other words. Impossible.

Valkyre had to admit, it was damn interesting, but if that'd been his only motivation, he wouldn't have been bothered to try and find the boy.

Even if they were only more than skeptical rumors, it was enough for the state to set up quite of a high bounty. And as long as Valkyre got his gold, little else mattered. He was a survivor, and even if there was no reason for living, he'd go on anyways. Nothing else mattered but ensuring his own survival. He needed something to drive him forward, drive him constantly ahead, until...

Until he was forced to stop.

Valkyre sighed again, shaking his head. He loosened his clenched fingers, and leaned his head against a propped-up arm instead. Thinking wasn't going to get anything done, he knew that, of all people.

It was interesting, Iris, it really was. Perhaps he'd ask the boy a few questions, see if what he spoke of was really true. Some people said Iris just came out of nowhere, but a more reasonable rumor was that he'd been made in a lab, a lab that somehow lost him, perhaps lost control of him. It would explain the unreasonably high bounty set on the boy's head, and why more than half of that gold would be cut if he was dead.

For once, it'd be something really worth his while.

Valkyre ran a gloved hand through his inky dark hair, then got up from the table. The seal on the silver chain around his neck glittered briefly in the foggy lights, and the angel tucked it away under his shirt. Valkyre stepped out of the bar and let the cool night air envelop him, hiding him in the soft, comforting darkness.

He still had a job to finish.

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AN: Sorry, a complete chapter of blabbing. I just wanted to make sure I set up the basics and the background to this story, so you all know what's going on. ...I don't really know if it worked or not, I can't tell...

...Yyyyeah. I'm sorry these chapters are kinda short, but this seems like the kind of story that'll go that way. On the plus side, it should mean more updates more often... Just lemme find some time to work! I've got tons of stuff to do, and it's hard for me to just sit down at the computer and start writing, I keep getting distracted... Sorry!

I promise, promise promise to keep going with this. I really want to, so I should have some momentum... for some time. Heh.

Hopefully, the next chapter will have some more action, along with cliches, stereotypical character sayings, and other such crap... I've got a plot, somewhere!! Just let me find it...!

...I'm not setting any more deadlines, I can't seem to meet them... But I'll try to be fast. Be patient, please. Don't make me bribe you.

3 - Darkness

Iris

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Light.

Darkness.

Was there any real difference between them? When there was light, there was darkness. ...But without light, darkness would still exist.

...Why?

He was running. Quiet bare feet whispers on the splintered, rough wood. He could feel nothing.

No, he could feel.

He felt pain.

The soft drip drip on the ground. A flash of agony. So much pain.

Iris slowed his breathing down, silence and darkness engulfing him in the shadows. His pale gray eyes were as blank as ever as he blinked almost sluggishly, looking around himself.

An abandoned building. Leftovers of a library, torn bits of book and paper lying on the ground, shelves toppled, a shattered glass window. He could jump out of it, if he needed to, but he was afraid of the sharp jagged fingers of glass scratching upwards, and closing down from above.

Drip drip.

His right arm was slick with blood. It looked like nothing more than a cut, not hard enough to sever, not deep enough to bite bone.

But he couldn't ignore the pain, the screaming.

It was firey hot and icy cold, the blood slipping from inside of him, burning a trail over his pale, ghostly white skin, drip dripping softly, silently from his fingertips.

Everything hurt so much.

Iris sighed as he leaned back against cool stone, sliding down to sit with his legs half-curved up and his right arm touching limply to the ground. He turned his head to the side, left cheek pressed against the cold, inanimate stone.

So like himself. But even stones did not feel pain.

Why?

The boy closed his eyes, ignoring the patter of feet he heard from somewhere downstairs. So they were on to him.

...What did it matter?

Why did he bother trying so hard to live?

Everyone wanted to kill him. He wanted to kill him. Nobody, nothing wanted him to live. ...Except for... the lab.

...Maybe it was better to die.

Iris blinked open his eyes slowly, staring unseeingly ahead. Shadow and darkness and the faint choked whisper of moonlight. So dark.

If he tried hard, if he tried to seek that quiet calm in the raging storm always lashing out inside of himself, he could tune out the pain, the screaming, everything that threatened to rend each sinew and muscle inside of his body apart.

How long until they found him?

Iris closed his eyes again, sighing softly. Ripped and rotting strands of rich velvety cloth hung around the window's frame, billowing out with a gust.

There was no wind tonight.

"So."

Slowly, tiredly, Iris opened his eyes, pulled his cheek away from the cool, cool stone.

Valkyre stood before him, dark jacket and clothing making his pale face stand out through the black bangs, amethyst eyes burning bright like they held fire within them. His raven-black wings arched around him, soft feathers hushing whispers in the thin, wavery air.

"Iris."

The boy tilted his head to one side slightly, eyes expressionless. He wasn't surprised. He knew.

He didn't reply.

Valkyre stepped closer, gloved hand easily flicking a dagger out of a sheath strapped low on his waist.

The sharp, light blade flashed in the darkness.

"I'd have to say, I'm kind of disappointed. You're supposed to be a pretty high bounty, but a little scratch has got you curling up like an insect from a flame."

His eyes were as cool and as cold as the dagger in his hands. He flicked it quickly, steel singing sweetly through the air.

"Well?"

He stepped closer, movements careful, calculated. He knew what the boy was capable of now, yes.

Iris stayed where he was, barely bothering to lift his gaze to meet the other's. He did, for just a brief moment, then he closed his eyes.

He heard Valkyre move closer, felt the soft brush of wings just faintly, like butterfly kisses, on his cheek. He looked up.

The angel's eyes were as cold as ever as he gazed down at the boy, black wings drawing back again.

But they hinted at confusion, brows furrowed, lips drawn into a thin, tight line.

"What is it?"

A question, not out of sympathy or caring. Demanding.

Iris kept the amethyst gaze. He sighed, silently.

"...I'm tired..."

Valkyre was silent, knowing the boy was not done speaking.

"...tired of living."

Iris blinked, eyes heavily lidded, seemingly uncaring. He turned his gaze away, stared out the open window with its jagged, shattered pieces of glass glinting in the faint light, wirey frame of the window twisted like clawing fingers. Somewhere out there, behind all of the thick, stormy clouds, there was the moon, and the stars, and the infinite night sky.

He looked back up at Valkyre.

"...Kill me."

It was nothing more than a whisper, calm and soft, a statement and a fact, not a request or demand.

The angel's gaze flickered, faltered.

"...Why?"

Iris blinked, kept the eyes that were shifting now, confused and tense. Afraid to fully face him.

"I want to live. But I don't."

He searched those deep violet eyes, searching that warm, passionate soul inside. Warmth, darkness.

Did those go together?

"Kill me."

Footsteps, faster now. Closer. They were coming.

Iris closed his eyes, content. The pain would stop now, the screaming would stop.

...But it didn't. He heard the clear hum as the blade slid home into its sheath, and a faint rustle and flutter of clothing.

He snapped open his eyes and gasped, wordlessly, as he felt a gloved hand on his cheek. Angel, angel, his blood was singing, screaming.

Deep, rich amethyst eyes gazed at him, dark bangs brushing his forehead.

"...Why?"

The blood was building up, rushing, drip drip, pounding inside of him, the touch of hand on his skin so impossibly warm, making him want to scream, to cry.

Iris opened his mouth to speak, but darkness bled into his vision like spilled ink.

His last image was of those deep violet eyes and the black wings of an angel.

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AN: Ooooh, a halfway long chapter this time. Sorry.

With the way the plot's going, though, it's bound to get longer. My stories always do that. :P

Well, the obvious buildup is coming. I'll get around to it, somehow. I'm going to try and work out how the next few parts go... After a while, I'll be free to spin off as I please, but for now, I need to really re-do this from my older scrapped version of 'Iris'... I've got a blurry idea as to how this should go.

And, yes, I like to stick to as few close characters as possible. But I'll be introducing some new ones sooner or later, so it'll get more interesting. Heh.

...I name these individual chapters as Iris01 and Iris02 and such, which proves that sometime, sooner or later, I'll get to the double-digits. I swear, if I've got any goal to set, it's to get into the double-digits. XD Updates will be rather sporadic for a while though, I've got homework and school as usual, and I can only hope for a clear period during winter break. ::muttering to self:: goddamn science fair...

Well, see ya. [Soon, hopefully. Though, y'know, more reviewers would help... ::half-hearted attempt at insinuation::] ...Tch.

Ciao.

4 - Sanctuary

Iris

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Faded stainedglass windows and silent rows of orderly pews. Woodwork floors worn smooth with the passing of feet, the memory nothing more now than an echo. Swirling of thick dust motes in the golden, colored air.

A splattering of half-translucent shards of white glass above a cross on one of the pieced-together images... an angel.

Valkyre's soft breathing dissipated quietly back into the silence. He turned his dark amethyst eyes away from the high, swirled glass panes arching down from the high, vaulted ceiling. The empty space reverberated the silence around its stretching hall, soft morning light giving everything a faint, golden dusting.

An odd place to be, he knew, but it was abandoned now. The two shattered windows and uneven, splintered pews on the far side, as well as the thin layer of fine dust on the floorboards assured him of that. The church was a place that he'd used more than once now as a refuge and shelter, though still not very often. It provided a roof over his head and some shelter from weather, but he would get no food or luxuries as those provided in cheaper inns and other public shelters.

But that would mean unnecessary attention, and that was something Valkyre could do without for now. Iris.

The boy was still, apparently, asleep. Soft gray bangs turned silvery in the swirled air fell over his closed eyes and peaceful face, draping along his back, sprawled and uneven. The thin chest rose and fell gently to the breathing, the long-sleeved shirt the boy wore falling around his shoulders, showing pale, flawless alabaster skin, smooth and colorless like marble.

Iris was curled up on the tangled mess of a thin blanket Valkyre had dug up from some chest somewhere, spread out loosely over the small steps at the front of the church where an altar should've been, but had been ripped down, along with just about anything else any thief or desperate man would consider worth money.

The boy had his hands loosely clenched, tucked under the chin, legs against his torso, bare ankles and feet hidden in pools of the blanket, looking like nothing more than a common orphan from the streets. Valkyre's lips drew tight again, and he shook his head slightly. He stared into the blemished, scratched metal of the small dagger he held in his hand, metal blade polished smooth, the leather-bound handle soft and supple with use. The cold, lifeless metal reflected back his equally cool dark violet eyes, set in his own pale skin and with wavery strands of inky-black hair around it.

Black angel... darkness... Black angels don't go to heaven...

Valkyre blinked, then flipped the knife away and slid it quickly into a sheath, sharp singing edge and white-gray surface hidden away.

He paused, then looked back at the boy. The only spot of color on the otherwise monotone, bleached body was the blossoming, dried flowery form of the wound on the boy's clothing, seeping through the dirty gray-white, as well as through the layers of bandages Valkyre had bound around the wound. The blood had dried to caking brown, and flaked off the boy's fingertips and hand in little jigsaw puzzle pieces.

It wasn't sympathy, he knew, that had made him not kill Iris on the spot, but brought him here instead, going so far as to bandage the boy's wounds and settle him down for the remainder of the night.

...No, it wasn't pity or sympathy. Others before had begged him for life, or showed only apathy, or anger, or asked for death. He sometimes killed, sometimes didn't. If he didn't, the creature was brought in to the state, and left to them. As long as he got his damn pay, he really couldn't care less.

But Iris was something different. Valkyre was curious of him, intrigued, more than just a mild fascination.

...Because the moment he'd touched the boy, he'd felt something. Something like wildfire or lightning running up through his veins, something hugely, immensely powerful and unlike anything else he'd ever felt before. And for some reason... it resonated with him. It echoed something he thought he knew, didn't really understand. ...Like he'd found something that he'd been searching for... for a long time now, something he was missing...

Perhaps the myths about Iris really were true. But even that didn't explain half of everything about him... Valkyre paused, blinked, realizing that he was staring back into a pair of gray eyes the color of thick marble, expressionless, empty, hollow.

Iris stared back, blinked slowly, didn't move. His eyes weren't surprised, weren't curious or angry or scared. If anything, they looked bored, or tired.

"...Why?"

Funny how often a question was reflected right back at you. Valkyre's hand ran down to the leather hilt of his dagger again, almost instinctively, but the boy didn't move, just remained curled up where he was, empty eyes gazing up at him through soft gray bangs.

"Because I want to know the truth. About you."

His voice came out cold, blatant, apathetic. Iris closed his eyes, nodded his head just faintly, curling up closer onto himself.

Valkyre waited. He'd learned by now to be patient with the boy, whose actions were often slow, but weren't out of stupidity or lax muscles. He could tell that underneath the guise and the hollow gaze, the boy was calculating, deciding, choosing how to do something or what to say.

"...What do you want to know?"

Iris didn't look up at him. His voice was just a lulling murmur, like he was whispering something in his sleep, face hidden from Valkyre.

"Everything. What are you really made of? Where did you come from?"

The boy looked up briefly at him, eyes heavily lidded, tired, exhausted.

"...Shouldn't you know what I am?"

Valkyre frowned at him, then turned his gaze away and stared around the echoing emptiness of the church. When he spoke, his words were carefully picked, slow.

"...When I touched you, I felt... a lot of presences, yes." His deep amethyst eyes stared down at the boy curled up on the floor.

"...When I carried you here, your skin... You're cold-blooded, aren't you?" He remembered how cold the boy's body was, and how terribly light he was.

Iris barely nodded, not looking up, silent.

"Dragon. Serpent? I felt a lot of other things, too."

Valkyre sighed softly to himself at the lack of a response, stared down at the smooth black of the leather gloves on his hands, clenched together, balanced on his elbows.

"...It's true, isn't it? You really are everything?"

The boy looked up at him, held his gaze. His face was expressionless, collected.

"Yes. ...And no."

"Stop talking in goddamn riddles!" Valkyre snapped, dark eyes narrowing.

Iris only stared back, then slowly lowered his eyes. He showed no surprise, no fear, and perhaps that was what Valkyre hated about him. Half the time, the boy completely denied acknowledging his existence.

"...I am everything," he spoke again, words slow, unhurried. "...I am dragon and were... but I have no second forms. I am angel and harpie, but I can't fly... I am not immortal in any way..."

The boy stared up at the other, eyes like nothing more than polished stone.

"...Can you see? I'm everything, but I'm nothing."

Valkyre paused, didn't look away.

"But... how is it possible?"

Iris blinked, looked what might've been mildly amused, lightly surprised. Valkyre flinched slightly as the boy suddenly pushed himself up on his arms, blanket shifting and pooling around his legs, frail body lithe and smooth with his movements, hands half-curved on the smooth floorboards.

"Don't you know?"

Iris was leaning over him, one hand reached out as if to touch his cheek, childish mouth breathing out the words like a hush, loose hair falling over his face shining like burnished metal in the shafts of sunlight. What might've been a smile played at his parted lips, soft inhalation of air nothing more than a sigh.

"You..." Another sigh in the air.

His gray eyes flickered, blinked.

Valkyre stared back at him, surprised, finding no words, too startled to react, to push away or draw closer.

Iris paused, then slowly pulled back, sitting down quietly.

The angel frowned, shook his head. ...What was he talking about??

"...What's your name?"

The query caught him off-guard, an abrupt change in subject that made him turn and look at him. The boy sat on the ground, fingers lost now in the mess of blanket, legs folded underneath him.

"...Valkyre."

What harm could it do? ...Why did he want to know?

Again, something like a half-smile played on the boy's lips, eyes almost peaceful, pleased.

...Like he knew something Valkyre didn't.

Maybe he did.

+--

AN: Hum de dum... bit of hints of shonen-ai, lots of vague dialogue... sounds like my cup of tea. ^^
Sorry... I promise I'll get around to things sooner or later. I just hope all of the confusing talk isn't too bad on you all... If it gets real annoying, just tell me to stop. Heh.

...Hm... Next chappie is a 20-second piece of nothingness, but the chappie after that, some good stuff should start to happen. I'm trying to get around to it as fast as possible, okay?

So far, I am liking this much better than my last version of 'Iris'. Hope you all do too.

And as I was working on this... I'd had Valkyre originally set as one really boring guy. So I thought, hey, let's spiff up all the charries some more.

...I'll be introducing some others real soon, just lemme get these two together! XD [C'mon, you can't tell that much??]

Oh, well.

...I find Iris very fun to doodle. Just a bored-looking little kiddo. Hehe.

'Till next time. [Which should be soon~!]

5 - Silence

Iris

+--

Darkness. Silence. Night.

Blood. Something stinking, something screaming. A fire that'd died out long ago, nothing more than cold, crumbling gray ashes.

Floorboards splattered with blood, sticky and sweet. What was this feeling?

Splinters under his fingernails, on his long, thin hands, clawing, scraping, digging. What was going on?

Hissing, snarling, and it terrified him the most to realize that it was his own voice, raspy and hoarse.

Darkness all around. Cold, empty. Where was the warmth?

Sharp angles. Torn clothing, pieces of porcelain and shattered glass. Was that the silvery light of the moon?

Alone, so alone. Where were they? Sickly forms around him. Shapes he couldn't, didn't identify. Didn't want to see. An unending nightmare.

Pain, hunger. Hungering for what?

Everywhere, it seemed to consume him, fold him up in its dark embrace. Death. Everywhere. Was he dead? Or alive...?

Steps, crunching in the silence, racking, loud and shuddering. What was he feeling? Anger? Hate? Fear?

Someone was nearby, speaking, voice cutting deep into the thick silence, pounding in his ears. Who?

He saw the dark eyes, dark hair, large hands reaching for him. Fear? Surprise?

Warmth, coldness. Soft, sharp, painful, beautiful.

Words, words flowing over him like the stunningly cold water of a stream. Where was that memory from?

"...Come with me."

Rough, thick voice, deep and low. How he hated him. How he needed him.

"...Don't look at me like that. I'm not your guardian."

Arms around him. Couldn't he walk? Pain. Darkness. Where was the light? Who was this?

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not your friend. ...But I'm going to have to take care of you."

What was going on? Who was he?

...Darkness.

Silence.

+--

AN: Sorry. Really. Short as hell chapter explaining absolutely nothing, [maybe] but this part just wouldn't have worked out right as a flashback... So I had to do a seperate chapter. Hope you don't mind.

I promise though, I'll have the next chapter up real, real soon to make up for it.

This other chapter will have some nice super crunchy action. ...Hopefully. ...Or maybe the chapter after that. ^^; [I'm working on it~!!]

I come up with the world backgrounding 'Iris' in my head just fine, but when I have to get around to explaining it and 'painting' the picture with words, I tend to forget all about it...

If ever anything is confusing you then, go ahead and ask. I don't mind tips on improvements, though I won't exactly be going back and fixing chapters... duh, they're already posted, so that'd be pointless. But clearing up confusion, sure. [Unless it's a spoiler!]
Hope you're confused anyways. Heh.

6 - Reason

Iris

+--

"So."

Valkyre was on his feet, leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. Iris sat where he was, blanket wrapped loosely around his shoulders, face lifted as he stared upwards at the vaulted height of the church ceiling. The boy didn't turn to look at the angel, but Valkyre knew that he'd heard him.

"Where'd you come from?"

There was a long pause, then Iris sighed, dropped his eyes to look at him. No words.

"...Don't you know? I mean, you can't just fall out of the sky the way you are. You"-

Valkyre blinked, stopped suddenly.

Iris... he was smiling at him. A soft smile that lit up his lifeless, cold face, made him seem warm and alive and... happy.

"...How do you know I haven't?"

His eyes were so bright, gentle and sweet. So different than the apathetic boy Valkyre had just been facing. The hunter watched silently as the other stood, folding the blanket over and placing it gently on the ground.

"...I-It's not reasonable," he managed at last, immediately cursing himself for his lame response and complete lack of control. "Everyone has to come from somewhere. There has to be a reason for existence."

Iris stepped towards him, bare feet scuffing on the smooth floorboards.

"Is there?"

The silent boy he'd known had suddenly become sharp, questioning, prying. "Can you tell me why I exist?"

Iris paused, close enough to reach out and touch the other, then turned away and ran his fingers over the dusty surface of the back of a pew. Quiet again, closed off to him.

"Valkyre."

His name was softly spoken, breathed out in a whisper as if to hide it.

Iris turned back, looked at him, quietly. Shouldn't he fear him? Shouldn't he try to escape?

...What did he see?

"...Do you believe that everyone has a purpose? A reason for living?"

Valkyre shifted his eyes away, dropped his arms to his sides, stared down at the scratched wooden floorboards. He sighed.

"...I don't know," he answered truthfully. Did everyone have a purpose for living? Anyone?

The hunter started when he suddenly saw Iris in front of him, hands pressed on either side of him and trapping him against the wall, face peering up at him, soft gray eyes searching him, questioning him.

Valkyre could've pushed him away, easily overpowering the smaller figure, but he stood there, breathless, inches from touching the boy, his long dark hair falling down and brushing the other's clothing lightly, feathery whispers on skin and fabric.

"Are you going to kill me?" Iris breathed, pale lips barely moving, eyes unblinking, calm, endless nothingness.

...What was in this boy?

Valkyre swallowed emptily, kept himself away from the other's touch, from the small body leaning closer against him. He wanted to reply, wanted to say something more, but nothing came to his mind. Instead, Valkyre found his arms again and he grabbed the boy by the shoulder, making to push him aside, get away. He was startled when Iris suddenly wrapped his arms around his torso, pressed his face into his jacket, leaning against him.

"...Don't you know?"

The whispering voice held him still, made him close his eyes and pause in the frozen moment. Iris' body was cool like wood or stone, but soft and supple, the small chest rising and falling against his own so full of life, so frail and dangerous. The uneven mass of pale gray hair ran down the boy's back, strands tangled in his small thin fingers, gripping tightly to Valkyre's black undershirt and rough jacket.

The angel kept his eyes closed, felt the soft but unwavering pulse of a beating heart against his body. If only for a moment, maybe they could both forget what they were. Forget everything else, just exist so simply for nothing more than a moment, an instant...

Valkyre sighed softly, let his body relax, breath exhaled in a quiet sigh.

Yet at the same time, he knew that he couldn't be at ease, that his body wouldn't let him. He could feel Iris, more than just his physical body; he could feel the presences flowing from the boy's form, from his touch against his own. So many bloods, so many species sang and whispered and played over his skin, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on edge, made him shiver. He was feeling antithesis itself, was feeling what should be impossible... and yet here it remained, pressed against him. He could feel the electrifying shudders, the echoes of unease and pain from sides that ran against each other, threatened constantly to wipe each other out, simply by blood, by touch.

And yet... he felt none of the pain. He knew it was there, knew it in the world all around him, in his own hot, rushing blood, but he didn't feel it...

...Why?

Valkyre blinked open his eyes as he felt Iris loosen his grip, saw that gray gaze looking up at him again, soft bangs hanging over them.

"...You..." The angel searched for the words, but they wouldn't come to his lips.

The boy suddenly pulled away, stepping and turning to face the doorway of the church, far down the stretch of hollow hall and rows of orderly pews.

"...Iris."

The boy turned to face him, cool gray eyes expressionless again, waiting. ...What had made him this way? Was this what being something so extraordinary and amazing did to you?

Iris cut him off, soft voice almost nothing more than a background murmur, but enough to make Valkyre stop and listen, straining to hear him in the engulfing silence around them.

"Valkyre... Am I still... your bounty?"

The hunter blinked, held on to those stone-gray eyes in front of him, so cold and hollow.

"...Yes."

Iris closed his eyes with a sigh, turned away. Valkyre almost regretted the statement, but the logical hunter side of him demanded to be heard, demanded that he not break what little he had left over a creature that didn't make any sense, a creature that shouldn't exist...

"Why? Are you trying to convince me otherwise?"

He tried to keep his voice level and cool, but his uncertainty was seeping into it, poisonous and infectious. Valkyre wondered, why... Why, when he touched the boy...

Iris only looked back at him, expression almost sad, almost hurt and regretful. Almost.

The angel exhaled slowly, then just shook his head and stepped forward. Below him, the boy seemed almost ethereal and unworldly with the colored stainedglass pieces painting him their watery shades, the

sun slowly sinking down towards the horizon. The day was dying, last bleeding trails fading slowly, slowly to black. They couldn't stay here much longer; it was definitely not a safe place to spend the night.

"Well, whatever. We- I'm going to find an inn for tonight, and you're coming with me."

Valkyre searched the boy's face for expression, almost hoping that he'd retaliate or disagree somehow, just to give him something to do, to say. But Iris' back was turned to him, and the boy was already walking towards the entrance, bare feet whispering slightly over the smooth wooden floor.

The hunter frowned, footsteps uneven as he slowed, studying the other. The boy's hair ran midway down his back, unkempt but smooth and rippling slightly with his movements, the gray rising with the reds, yellows, and light greens the stained glass painted on him. His thin arms hung at his sides, fingers half-curved. He looked so skinny, even from here, so weak, so thin and frail... Was this really a creature so rare and exotic?

Iris turned, as if sensing the eyes on his back, and stopped, looking back at the angel.

"Valkyre."

"What?"

The boy held his gaze evenly, not looking away or shying from his eyes like so many others had.

"...Will you help me?"

The hunter stared at him, feeling his pulse quicken slightly, what was it? Anticipation?

Valkyre opened his mouth to answer, still searching for the words, still questioning what he wanted, what he needed, what he felt about this boy...

Iris' face was calm, emotionless, showing nothing of what he had to be feeling inside, stained glass images dancing over his skin, his clothes, his bare, pale arms.

Dark violet eyes widened as a black shadow spread like a stain over the ground, suddenly casting the boy into dark gray tones, destroying the mosaic of color over him like they'd been shattered, crumbled to dust.

And then, everything did shatter.

+--

AN: Ooooh, a cliffy! Well, I did promise action and stuff, but that's gonna have to be the next chapter. I'm still trying to cut this up and keep it short, but I know it's gonna get longer eventually... I'm sorry... [I don't really know why I try so hard to stick to this size, really...]

But I'll get up the next chapter sometime, gimme a chance! It should be easier since it more closely follows my rough draft...

I hope you guys take the fact that I posted this chapter so soon as time for me to finish my next! Be patient please!

...I want to work on this a lot over winter break, but our break's only 9 days, and we're going skiing and all, soooo... I'll find time for it, hopefully. :)

Had trouble with this chapter [part of why it took so long for me to get around to the last and this chapter] 'cuz I was having Valkyre and Iris suddenly together too fast (I know you all are just screaming at them to do it, but I have to make it seem realistic! ...However you do that in fantasy...) and I had to go back, delete half of it, re-do it, blah de blah...

Ignore my ranting, and have fun. Thanks again for reading, I love how you guys still visit me and check for updates, thank you so much~!!! ::bows profusely::

7 - Antithesis

Iris

+--

"Watch out!"

Valkyre jumped forward on instinct, mind barely registering the smash of glass, pieces of the mosaics raining down in a colorful, broken shower. The hunter hit Iris hard enough to knock the boy onto the ground, Valkyre himself sent flying off as a weight like a toppling mountain slammed into his side, sending him crashing into the nearest row of pews. Pain made white spots flash before his eyes, and the angel barely managed to regain enough of his senses to jerk his head away. A werewolf's jaw snapped millimeters away from his face, saliva lathered over the gleaming ivory teeth, the thick, choking smell of its breath washing over him.

Valkyre hissed at the pain in his ribs, at the six-inch long nails buried in his shoulder and chest, back and side screaming from the impact onto the unforgiving wood of the benches.

The hunter drew his legs under the werewolf's soft stomach and kicked hard, sending the huge animal tumbling off with a howl, pain splashing as blood on the floor as the thick nails driven into his skin were ripped out. The angel stumbled to his feet, wincing as he tried to lift his right arm, only to drop it back down with a hiss.

"Ha, and I was gonna think this would be way too easy!"

Valkyre whirled around at the sound. Something dark dropped out of the air through one of the already broken windows, black boots crunching on once colorful, now bleached and dark shards of glass.

The aura that brushed against him made him shiver. Vampire. ...Then they must've tracked them. It wasn't often that you found a were and a vampire working together, but each creature was especially good at tracking by blood, by scent, or tracks.

Valkyre scolded himself for letting his guard down so much. He'd set up a barrier around the abandoned chapel, yes, but it'd been a weak one, and he'd been careless.

The angel snatched off his seal, links of gold lashing out. Valkyre closed his eyes, felt his power surge up inside. His wings arched themselves as if in slow motion from his back, then snapped out, jet-black feathers matching the darkening sky, glossy smooth and angled, longest tips trailing to the ground.

A growl behind him. Valkyre whirled around, dagger instantly in his left hand, leather handle slick now with his own dark blood.

The werewolf was rising to his feet again, hackles bared, the thick froth around his mouth tinted pink. Its back half seemed smaller and ungainly compared to its broad shoulders and thick chest, long, shaggy dark gray fur hanging from its muscled body.

Great. A were and a leech.

"Hey, over here."

Valkyre whirled around again just in time to block a small dagger slashing down at him, sharp ring as metal hit metal echoing in the shattered silence of the church. The vampire jumped back, landing evenly on the ground. His movements were fast, dark clothes and glinting eyes becoming a blur as he left again, suddenly materializing upside-down, twisted and thin fingers clenched in crevasses on the vaulting ceiling. Valkyre beat his wings, rising up into the air as well.

His dagger was flashing when the vampire detached from the roof and came at him, extremely fast and

heavy, the impact as their thin blades struck overrun by the sheer momentum the other had. Valkyre flared his wings in order to avoid crashing back onto the glass-littered ground, and managed to snap out with a quick kick as he lept away.

His boot caught the other squarely in the chest and sent him flying backwards, the dark form twisting around to land silently on the opposite wall, like a cat dropping to all fours on the ground, but for the fact that this was vertical wall.

"Don't move."

Valkyre turned to the new voice, a low, sultry tone that played like warm water over his ears.

He froze, staring at the arched doorway of the church, ignoring the sounds of the werewolf's ragged breathing behind him, and the crunch of boots again on glass as the vampire stepped closer.

Instead, he was staring at the third member of the party.

A lamia.

A woman with pale, beautiful features, face framed with silky, rippling black hair. Slender, long-nailed fingers curled around Iris's throat and cheek, fingernails finished with crimson red nail polish. She wore a simple, dark-colored shirt which revealed the soft, honey skin of bare shoulders and stomach.

But once past the waist, the skin distorted into patterns, then scales. Like a frozen transformation, the rest of her ended in the curled, muscled length of a snake.

The reptile skin was the color of dusk-darkened roses, glossy scales running like glittering ice along her serpentine length, curling away in soft loops like the trail of a river on flat plains.

The thicker segments of her snake half were twisted around Iris's legs, then trailed out toward an open doorway.

A smile grew across crimson-painted lips, filled with small, sharp teeth.

"Drop your wings, little birdy, or the boy dies. You know the bounty is only one third if he's dead."

Valkyre clenched his jaw, staring at Iris, whose eyes were squeezed closed, face contorted as if in pain, pale skin contrasting to the lamia's own warm flesh, whose one arm draped almost carelessly over the boy's shoulder, other still gripping the boy by the chin, long fingernails digging into his skin.

Iris. No. He couldn't let it all go now, there was so much that should've...

Valkyre tensed as he heard the werewolf's ragged breathing from behind him. He hoped rather pointlessly that he'd at least broken a few ribs.

Slowly, reluctantly, the angel took out his seal again. His wings folded up, folded up until they became nothing again as he slipped the pendant back around his neck, barely managing to latch it back on with his left hand.

No. What was he going to do? He couldn't just let them take Iris, he needed... The angel breathed out a long sigh, trying to control a shiver that ran down his spine. What? What was it he needed?

"Hmn. Guess this kinda sucks for you, eh?"

Valkyre's dark amethyst eyes flickered over to the vampire, who was squatting perched on the back of a pew almost right next to him, chin in one hand, smirking. His grin flashed his elongated teeth, glinting in the paling light.

The angel didn't respond, looked back at the lamia instead.

"...Valkyre."

The word was nothing more than a whisper, a sigh in the air.

Iris blinked open his eyes, looking nothing more than infinitely tired. The lamia hissed under her breath, fingers tightening their grip around his throat, crimson nails digging into his soft skin.

Valkyre stared into Iris' colorless gray eyes, forgetting the vampire next to him, forgetting the were and the lamia. Just seeing his soft gray eyes. Were they really that cold...?

The angel blinked suddenly as Iris smiled at him, just a slight spread of his lips, expression almost peaceful, eyes fluttering closed.

He saw the boy draw in a breath, saw the frail chest rise, but nothing could've prepared him for it. A shriek cut the air, like life and soul ripped straight out of the throat, piercingly high and painful, slamming like a physical wave of power over the angel. He gasped as he dropped to his knees, staring in shock as the windowpanes all shattered, clear, crystalline shards snapping and exploding, images cracking then collapsing in on themselves.

And then, suddenly, it was like he was ripped apart from himself. Valkyre was still there, staring as the windows shattered and as the glass fell, staring as the lamia's face contorted in agony and she fell back, Iris still standing there as if on tiptoe, face lifted to an unseen sky, eyes squeezed closed, as if hanging suspended in the air.

But he could hear nothing. A muffled silence, like watching a movie spliced in half, everything still spinning in slow motion, but the sound gone, replaced by deathly silence, echoing nothing on nothingness.

Valkyre stared, frozen, as a tiny shard of glass fell to the ground. He heard its soft tinkle as it bounced off the ground, and suddenly the sound was all back, an empty ringing after the wave had passed. Glass trickled to the ground, and the night air swept in with a sigh, oblivious to everything.

"...Iris..."

His voice was nothing more than a choked-out whisper in the resounding echoes.

"-You!"

The lamia's once sultry voice was a serpentine hiss, her warm face contorted in fury, words a hiss through clenched teeth. She snapped forward, rising up into the air on her coiled snake body, crimson fingernails like sharp talons, veins showing pale blue through her tan skin.

Iris didn't seem to notice. The boy was curled up onto himself, face hidden in the tangled mess of bangs, arms wrapped around his shoulders. Valkyre blinked, realizing that the bandages on the boy's arm were soaked in fresh blood.

There was a sudden, huge ripping sound, like someone was peeling apart the sky, like matter itself was being ripped apart. It was thick and wet, whispering and screaming at the same time.

And Valkyre watched in amazement as the wings rose into the air.

Ebony darkness, like an eternal night folded in on itself, now stretched itself out to the boy's left, glistening velvet on silk, the demon wing spanned out, membrane stretched tight over the vast expanses, shape given by the pale outline of the structural bone, the arch of the wing tipped in an inky-black talon, shadow on shadow in the infinite darkness.

And on the right, like a whispered sigh on marble, there rose the graceful, curved line of an angel's wing, feathers singing softly as it spread out, each inch of the expanse of the clearest, purest white, clean and fresh like falling snow, soft and gentle and hushing, like the soothing words of a mother on a child, the brilliant white illuminated like something astral and otherworldly in the dark.

Both wings rose from the same body, from the tiny, crumpled form of Iris. Valkyre was frozen, unable to move, barely able to think, to comprehend what he was seeing.

Impossible. An angel and a demon... at the same time? ...It couldn't be. It couldn't happen, it defied every law in existence, it...

Iris.

The boy was screaming, screaming as he lifted those impossible wings, his cry so pained and tortured, it made Valkyre wince, gasping as if he was feeling the pain himself, sharp knife stabs at his heart, crippling him, a discarded shell in a discarded wasteland...

The wings flared, and a wave of pure energy swept over him, power like the endless pull and push of the ocean itself, a vast, untapped explosion of force, like the birth of a star from dying dust...

The lamia was thrown back, screaming, her serpentine body slamming into the rows of pews, splintering wood and sending them crashing to the floor.

Valkyre gasped as he staggered to his feet, stunned.

...He wasn't hurt. He hadn't been touched by the shockwave, at all.

...What was going on?

Iris dropped to the ground, magnificent, paradoxed wings sagging as if burdened by some too-heavy weight.

Valkyre stumbled forward, hearing the stirring behind him, the growling as the were tried to rise again, long nails clicking and scratching on the floorboards, something wet splattering onto the ground.

The angel ripped off his seal again as he limped forward, fingers slippery with his own blood and sweat. He willed his wings to rise once more, and he bit his lip to hold back the pain as he bent and pulled the still form of Iris into his arms. The boy's wings curled up as he was lifted, folded over and over onto themselves until they vanished, leaving nothing more than the frail, bare shell of the body.

Valkyre half-dragged, half carried Iris and himself out of the church door, muscles straining as he beat his wings. The night air swelled and enveloped him as he rose up into the air on uneven strokes, then leveled off, taking through the night sky, a brush of dark color on midnight black.

+--

AN: Whoo, super crunchy action! ^_^-

Wow, I'm surprised by this chapter... I did almost all of it in one breath, and when I went back to review it, there was almost nothing I wanted to change! I'm surprised by my own writing, hehe.

Well, hope that was fun for you all. This kinda was the scene that matches the pic I gave DD_DM for her b-day, but I think I did a better job here. Heh.

As obvious, things are coming together... I really, really want to get around to the next few chappies, I should be getting the two charries together and explaining a bit more about them, which I really, really need to do. Heh.

Weekend's over though, and it's last week for science fair, so the next few updates might take a while. Hope this chapter made up for it, huh?

...I rather like the vampire dude here, not sure why... Just little one-chappie dispensible character though, I'm afraid...

Don't worry, these aren't the charries I said I'd introduce. But I WILL be bringing some new ones in! Real soon! [Hopefully...]

Okay, enough blabbing. Have fun, and thanks for reading!

8 - Same

Iris

+--

"So, you're awake."

Valkyre let out a small sigh as he watched Iris stir, blinking open dull gray eyes. The boy didn't reply, just lay there, gaze flickering up to the angel. The hunter sighed again as he got to his feet, wincing at the dull throb of pain through his body. His wounds were already healing though, hurried by his angelic blood, and he was only too thankful that no bones were broken, though several muscles in his arm were ripped. It would take, at the least, a full two days for that to mend.

The angel, uneasy, started to pace. The small room they were in should've seemed rather constricted, but it was almost entirely empty but for a few broken pieces of furniture and rubbish, dust settled long ago stirred up again under his boots.

"...That was some stunt you pulled back there."

Valkyre's deep violet eyes flickered over to the boy, who sat up slowly from where he lay against the wall. Iris leaned back against the wood, closing his eyes as his head dropped back against the wall. He made no comment.

The hunter was well-used to this by now. But still, the reaction gave him some answers to the bewildering puzzle he was trying to put together. Apparently, Iris knew this could happen, and had perhaps done it before. The boy knew what flowed through his own body then, yes, but did he know the true potential of his power? What he might be capable of?

...And just where had he come from? How was he created?

Valkyre sighed again as he stopped, then stepped closer to the boy, sitting down cross-legged in front of him.

"Well?"

Iris blinked open his eyes, lowered his gaze to study the other. "...Yes?"

Valkyre paused, searched for the right words. He found that he suddenly had little to say. Did the boy even know the answers?

"...Are you going to run away from me?"

It was something else that suddenly sprung to his head; the realization that he had come to assume too much, to suddenly take too much for granted, immersed too deeply in his own thoughts to think reasonably.

Iris smiled, softly.

"No."

The angel frowned, 'hmp'hed softly under his breath. "...And why not?"

The boy leaned over, small fingers just lightly touching the sleeve of the hunter's arm, the bare tingle, whispering of magic, passing through the cloth passing between them. This time, Valkyre didn't pull away.

"Because... I'm not really your bounty anymore. But you still wouldn't let me go. ...Would you?"

Valkyre blinked at him, not sure what to say. But he knew it, inside, in some corner that he tucked carefully away, he knew that it was true. But he didn't say this to Iris.

Instead, he pulled away, rising slowly to his feet again. He stepped out of the room, turned aside to find

the bathroom. The sink was cracked and leaky, washtable covered in dust, pieces of glass from a shattered and probably stolen mirror littered the ground, but the pipes seemed to be intact. He tried the water. A gusty wheeze of air at first, but then an uneven splurt of water spattered into the dirty white sink. Valkyre left the cold water running as he stepped out quickly to retrieve a knapsack he'd picked up earlier, while Iris had still been unconscious. It was a simple leather bag with just about the only possessions Valkyre bothered to carry around; a thin blanket, spare clothing, necessities mostly suited only to a bounty hunter.

He pulled out a washcloth and wet it under the wavering stream of chillingly cold water, then wrung it out a bit, enough to keep it from dripping.

Valkyre pulled out some metal cups and filled them with the water as well, scrubbing first at the faucet end to get out any pieces of dirt and rust. It was by no means sanitary, but it would have to do. He didn't dare risk exiting the abandoned house they were occupying, afraid that someone would detect his aura. This time, the barrier he set up around the small building was much stronger.

The hunter went back to the main bedroom, dragging along the knapsack. He handed one of the mugs of water over to Iris, who was where he'd been left, back against the wall. The boy took the cup without a word and drank little sips of it.

Valkyre sighed as he sat down a distance away, back turned. The bathroom was too small a place, dirty and sour. The angel pulled off his jacket, careful to pick out the fabric tangled in his torn skin, and to work it slowly over his ripped arm. The long-sleeved, black shirt he wore underneath was harder to remove, crusted blood sticking his clothes to his skin, his bare flesh underneath shivering as it met the cool, thick air.

Valkyre tossed the shirt aside, the rips in it making it impossible for him to consider washing it and sewing it back up. The angel ran fingers tenderly over the gashes in his arm, feeling to see if anything really was broken underneath, but there was nothing, just slashed muscle and tendon.

The hunter picked up the wet towel and wiped off the blood from the bloody gashes over his chest and side, gritting his teeth as he tried his best to clean the wounds. By the time he'd washed off his arm, the towel was more red than white, and too dirty to be used anymore. Valkyre dropped it, then rummaged around in the knapsack left-handedly, pulling out a roll of gauze and another long-sleeved shirt.

He was in the middle of attempting to unwrap the bandages when he was startled by the feeling of cool fingers running over the flat of his back, small hands pressing against his side, blunt fingernails whispering as they brushed lightly over his bare flesh. Valkyre shivered, remembered what he'd momentarily forgotten.

He could feel it now, reiterated as Iris ran a finger from the hollow between his shoulder blades, up along the right side of his back near his shoulder, then arched back down in a smooth sweep, fading before it met his waist. He knew what the boy was tracing; it was something he'd seen often times, faced with himself and the mirrors...

Iris sat down behind Valkyre, cool palm pressed to his bare back.

The angel didn't reply to the wordless query of the other, didn't say anything about the depiction on his back- black demon wings etched permanently into his skin, a remembrance of what he was, what sins he'd committed. He'd seen them before, staring into the cold, cruel glass of a mirror. They were dark, their inky bodies bleeding him and staining his body with their eternity of ebony night, curled and arching over the expanse of his back, artist's depiction on the smooth canvas of his flesh. Tipped wings, velvety membranes, jutting, stark bones. Black demon's wings for the black-winged angel.

"...Why?"

Iris' voice was a whisper in Valkyre's ear. He sighed, turned his head the other way as the boy draped his arms loosely around the other's shoulder, leaning against him. His skin was so cold, so cold, faint singing of blood through his body making the other uneasy.

"...I guess it's 'cause I'm not really an angel..." Valkyre stared out the grimy window at the other side of the room, miraculously unbroken, that let in the foggy light of night. He turned his head back, just catching Iris out of the corner of his eye. "...My master... he was the one who raised me, took care of me... he told me I should've been a demon instead."

Valkyre let out a sigh, relaxing. Iris, wrapped around him, slid down to sit next to his left, leaning against his side. "...I don't blame him, either. It's true. I never wanted to be an angel."

Iris didn't reply, just remained where he was, cheek pressed to the other's shoulder.

"I know," was all he said.

The hunter looked down at the boy, but his face was hidden underneath the tangled mass of his soft gray hair. It felt cool, if a bit rough, on his skin, and tickled on the edges, like the mild unnerving of the presences brushing against Valkyre's skin.

Iris shifted, fingers fluttering as he ran them along the other's bare arm. It was decorated with smaller tattoos- a curling vine, angelic and demonic symbols, a snake wrapped around his wrist, vanishing under the edge of his glove. They were matched with more emblems on the other arm, siblings drawn from pen, writhing as they flowed into each other and twisted in a frozen dance.

Valkyre's fingers twitched slightly at the other's touch, but he did nothing.

The other tattoos were his own; his need to try and discover himself, reinvent himself as what he knew he had to be inside, shrouding and protecting himself with the impenetrable barrier from the smooth ink, drunk into his skin, enfolding him in its dark, thick embrace. ...How could he explain?

Valkyre sighed, then picked up the roll of bandages again. He tried to unravel the cloth, and found Iris' thin hands holding it out for him. He raised his dark amethyst eyes to meet soft gray.

"Here." The hunter searched the empty gaze, tried to see something behind the nothingness, but couldn't find it.

"...Fine."

He accepted the offer almost grudgingly, and managed to bandage up his chest, shoulder and arm with the help of the boy, watching silently as the other tied up the ends, tightly but not too closely as to stop the flow of blood. The boy's touches were soft, careful.

"...Thanks." Valkyre took Iris by the arm, undid the boy's dirty bandages to avoid meeting the other's eyes. He paused as the last of the gauze was pulled away, staring at the bare skin, smooth but for a small white scar.

It had healed.

Valkyre paused, looked back down at the crumpled mass of cloth in his hands. But... the wound had been re-opened just a short while ago. He saw the brighter blood dyed over the darker, browning blood on the cloth. It must've healed rapidly, and in just the past few moments. It... Iris.

Valkyre didn't bother trying to find an answer. He found a decently clean patch on the sodden towel and wiped away the last of the stains of drying blood from the boy's arm. Iris didn't do anything, simply held out his hand, quietly observing as if from a distance.

The angel folded up the towel quickly as he finished, rising to his feet. "Here, just stay here," he muttered, as he headed for the bathroom again. Inside, he washed out the towel quickly, watching as the pink stains of blood swirled away down the drain, wondering what that blood contained, hidden away.

Stepping back into bedroom, Valkyre closed the door behind him, hoping the room would be safe from the chill now of the cold night that brushed the corners of the rest of the house, let in through the broken windows and ripped, agape doorframes.

Iris sat where he'd been, tilting his head slightly as he looked at the other's entrance.

Valkyre wiped the dust away from the corner of a broken shelf, and set the wet towel to dry. He kneeled next to the knapsack and put away the gauze, then pulled out the blanket he had- thinly layered but

small enough to fit as nothing more than a small bundle inside the leather bag, a bit rough but warm and soft enough.

The boy only sat where he was, watching quietly as the angel spread out the blanket on the ground, folding up the edges on one end as makeshift pillows. Valkyre picked up his jacket from the ground and pulled it on, ignoring the frayed edges on the right shoulder. He flicked off the weak light from the dangling bulb, casting the room into soft, silvery shadows.

"Here," he muttered, "You better get some sleep." He knelt down at the edge, running gloved fingers over the worn-smooth wooden floor, uneasy.

Iris touched the angel's arm, pulled the other down towards him. "Valkyre..."

He was smiling. "...We're not so different, are we?"

The hunter studied him carefully, frowning. ...Were they? Exiled, refused by the world, without anywhere they belonged, able to perhaps understand each other better than they could themselves... Maybe. Just maybe.

Valkyre muttered something noncommittal, folding up the blanket to cover their bodies as he lay down. The angel closed his eyes with a sigh, letting his body relax, tension of everything that'd happened seeping slowly out of him. It had been a tiring day, and much had happened. He found himself now firmly entangled in the matters of this boy, or rather, his own matters. He didn't really know what he wanted out of Iris- it wasn't just a bounty though, to be sure. And it wasn't really just a need to know what the boy was... There was something about him, something more he couldn't explain, but that linked him to the other, kept them tied together as if by invisible silver threads. Valkyre, though he was by no means a philosopher, sought a reason. A reason for why existence itself remained, why it could carve and shape so many things, why it worked the way it did. And somehow, he felt that if he could understand Iris, then he could finally understand himself.

...It had been a long time since anyone had ever touched him, had ever spoken to him like this. This feeling suddenly, the end of his loneliness and solitude, broken by an impossible boy, somehow made him feel... almost happier, at ease.

He paused, blinked open his eyes again, amethyst gaze focusing quickly in the dull dark. Iris lay facing him, his face peaceful, eyes closed, curled up onto himself.

Valkyre wanted to say something, but the night's soft lull was pulling at him, and he let his eyes close, drifting away into oblivious sleep.

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AN: First off, I'm soooooo sorry for how late the updates are! Good thing though, as of now, I have JUST finished my sci fair project. ^^- Makes me uber-happy!

And now I've got this chapter done at last... It has a rather different tone and I'm not sure if I really like it... I wanted a world with nowadays technology and customs that I could describe easily, but I dislike having to make it all fit with the laws of the human world... -_-;; Therefore, blow things up, eheheh... As I've mentioned before, I adore post-apocalyptic settings. ^_^

Aaaanywho. ...Chapter actually didn't do as much as I wanted it to... But I've got the two charries into the general 'okay, I WON'T stab you on contact' relationship step, so things should go on easier from this. Hehe.

I've got a bit of idea for the next chapter [probably kind of short] and after that, things'll just run off. ^^- So. I think updates will still be a bit slow... I've got work to do for a festival in school just on the last day before school ends for winter break... And I'm gonna be away for a lot of winter break... So sorry!

::croesses fingers for a tablet or PS2 for Christmas:: Hehe...

Thanks for reading! See ya!

9 - Ruby

Iris

+--

Valkyre was awakened in the night by the cold chill of air on his bare arm and shoulder. He blinked open his eyes, greeted by the darkness and still sigh of the air.

The angel sat up slowly, testing his right arm, which he could lift up to perhaps waist height now. Getting better.

He sighed as he pulled at the blanket, which had slipped off sometime during the night. Valkyre paused, edge of the coarse fabric held loosely in his hands.

Iris lay on his side, back towards him, curled up onto himself. The thin shoulders rose and fell with his inaudible breathing, matted with his silvery gray hair, illustrious and surreal in the faint moonlight.

Valkyre sighed silently to himself. He pulled the blanket around himself, then glanced down at the boy again. The angel fingered the cloth between his gloved fingers absentmindedly, gaze roaming.

...Did Iris feel the cold? Did he feel warmth? ...Did he dream?

The hunter sighed again, then pulled up more of the blanket. He made to drape it over the boy's small form, but before the blanket had even brushed the skin, there was a blur of motion, flash of silver in the soft stillness.

Valkyre froze, staring into blank, wide demonic eyes the brilliant, deep shade of crimson red, rich as blood. They bore into him, burned at his mind, imprinted; a cold, frozen fire that raged at him, threatening to tear him apart; the hunger, he could see it, barely held back, animalistic in its fury; coupled with an immense, impossible power, broiling energy, darkness.

The angel was caught in those eyes of the demon, barely registering the glint of teeth bared in the dim light, the blunt fingernails digging into his wrist, the soft, dissipating hiss of breath.

Those eyes blinked, liquid rubies burning like molten steel and fire. The pupils, dark cores of scarlet, dilated, as if seeing for the first time.

Valkyre was frozen as he watched the other blink again, and suddenly, he was looking into the face of Iris.

The boy stared back, eyes faded back to nothing more than neutral gray again, but startled now, confused, bewildered. The breath he took in was ragged and uneven, like something was weighing down on his chest, not letting him breathe.

With a start, the boy suddenly let go of Valkyre's arm, leaving the hunter to stare at the bright, small crescents of red dug on his skin.

"I-I..." Iris suddenly pulled away, wrapping his arms around himself, blanket sliding with him and pooling around his ankles. He stared back at Valkyre, face drawn, twisted with hurt, pained.

"I-I'm sorry..."

The angel remained where he was, too stunned to move. He realized that Iris really did mean it. It was a rare glimpse into the boy's locked-away emotions, his true regret, the hurt he felt leaking out and staining him, curling and twisting at his body, wrapping him up in its dark, sweet pain.

Iris was shaking his head, drawing further back onto himself, curling up and trying to exile the rest of the world, tucking himself away in a forgotten corner.

...How cold it must be there, Valkyre thought.

Without words, he leaned over and wrapped his arms around the boy, pulling him into his embrace. The shock that ran through him, like static lightning, subsided as he closed his mind to the whispered singing of the magic flowing through the boy's veins, adjusting himself to meld into it, a drop of tainted water dissipating into the eternal sea.

Valkyre heard the boy gasp soundlessly, voice so small and thin, but then his frail shoulders relaxed, and Iris sank against his arms.

The angel sighed quietly, looping his arms around the boy's waist, fingers interlocked. Yes, he did feel cold, and extraordinarily light, but it was nonetheless the living, breathing body of nothing more than a young boy leaning against him, no matter the blood. In the end, when you stripped away the petty details and turned your back on the world's eyes, you'd see his core- like anyone else, just another being trying to get by, wanting only to live and fulfill the time given to them, however fleeting, however unfair and cold the circumstances you were placed into.

In the end, they really were just the same.

Valkyre closed his eyes, let his cheek rest on the soft, tangled mass of Iris' hair.

No, he thought, this was just the beginning of things.

+--

AN: Sorry for the long wait! But school's out now for winterbreak, and I've got absolutely no homework! Wonderful, really.

But I also happen to be leaving tomorrow for the ski trip, which'll last 'till Sunday night [today being Thursday]. So, updates will have to wait, again. Sorry.

This chapter was also kind of short, and typed up rather lazily... But I'm still into this! I really, really want to get around to showing off my new charries! [Hehe, showing off...]

So, ladeda, more random fluff, and insinuations! Oooh!

I'll try to get in the rest of the background soon, and get around to new charries! Yes!

Well, thanks a lot for reading, and Merry Christmas! ^^-

10 - Stone

Iris

+--

Soft singing light. Peaceful silence, the relaxed fluttering of dust motes in the thick air.

Iris blinked, blank gray eyes watching the swirl of air in the shaft of sunlight from the small window. The boy lay where he was, allowing himself to quietly wake to the morning.

He didn't need to look around to know that he was alone. It didn't worry him, and the boy watched the gold-dusted air drifting around him absentmindedly, as if unaware of the passing of time and all-too-human need to struggle forward towards an unseen goal.

Iris blinked as he focused his gaze on the floorboards, where a small spider was scurrying across soundlessly, round body lifted above the ground by its thin, bent-wire legs.

The boy reached out a hand, let a finger press against the ground before the small arachnid. The spider skirted around the obstacle immediately, then circled around and stopped, almost invisible sets of beady eyes set in its dark body studying the new object through faceted vision.

Iris blinked duly as the spider skittered closer, then proceeded to climb the finger, thin whispers of legs spiriting it up his hand with a feeling like the brush of air from a butterfly's wings on his skin, almost intangible.

He sat up slowly, twisting around his hand as the spider slipped around the landscape of his skin, pausing every now and then, legs twitching as if itching for action, the need to move.

Iris brought his other hand close slowly, and brushed the spider's leg gently, in an almost soft, petting way. The tiny creature jerked, skittered off a distance, then stopped abruptly again. It never occurred to him to crush the animal beneath his fingertips- it was another living thing he welcomed, respected.

There were footsteps, and Iris looked up as Valkyre entered the room, a small knapsack slung over his shoulder. The hunter raised an eyebrow, seeing the boy awake and up. Iris looked away again as the spider skidded back along his hand, then dropped from one of his fingers on an invisible thread, sliding down steadily on its lifeline. The boy held out his arm and let the small arachnid hit the ground, where it detached, then skimmed over the floorboards, out of sight.

Valkyre sighed as he dropped the knapsack next to him, then sat down.

"You're feeling okay then?"

The question came out of the angel uneasily, and he averted his eyes, frowning. Iris nodded, folding his hands over his drawn-up knees.

Valkyre sighed under his breath, then pulled the bag before him open, pulling out a few small bottles of water, along with some bread and dried meats wrapped up in white plastic. He handed out a share for the boy, who took it without a word.

They ate in silence, neither attempting to speak, both caught up in their own thoughts. The bread was far from fresh, but it was a staple that would be guaranteed to last, and the meat, though tough and stringy, was affordable and enough to get them through.

After the hunter had bunched the wrappings together afterward and thrown them out, he sat down in front of Iris again and pulled something out of his jacket pocket.

"Here, I picked this up while I was gone," he muttered, holding something that glinted softly in the fading morning light.

Iris took it, studying the object in his hands carefully. A long chain of silvery steel, with links so fine it was hard to discern them, threaded itself through a loop of soft, burnished metal that enclosed a simple, faceted stone that was like a murky, cracked piece of glass, mist-like white inside crystal clear through the unblemished parts of the stone.

"Tearstone," Valkyre supplied, remaining where he sat, patient.

Iris didn't reply, only sat there rubbing the smooth piece between his fingers, the clear, glass-like faces catching and flashing sparks of the soft sunlight it caught.

"It's a natural moderator, and should help to hide your aura," Valkyre added. He'd used the term 'moderator' for a type of material that would dullen and calm any magical presences within one's body. Though perfect for Iris, it wasn't usually used by others. Personal seals were more fine-tuned to an individual's needs, and so proved more effective, but if there were none in demand, then tearstones were often used as momentary replacements.

The boy looked up at the other, then pulled the necklace slowly over his head. It hung over his colorless shirt, taking on the dull white, glinting facets changing to catch the light.

Valkyre paused, studying him quietly. "...How is it?"

Iris touched the stone gently, movements slow and deliberate. "...It helps." He looked up, dull gray eyes almost warm, almost emotional. "...Thank you."

Valkyre turned his head, shrugging.

"It... It'll hide your aura and all, so we can get around without being noticed..." he trailed off, then stood up abruptly. Whatever had happened last night was forgotten now, and he could feel the gaping, yawning abyss between them. ...Or was it just from him?

"Come on, we're going now," he muttered. He pulled up the knapsack, then, after a pause, rummaged around inside and handed the boy a dark, rough brown cloak, made of cheap wool but long enough to run down to the boy's ankles.

Iris took the piece of clothing wordlessly, then stood up as well and pulled it on.

"I'm not sure how many hunters actually saw you, but we'd better stay safe."

Valkyre stepped into the adjacent room and packed away the knapsack and the contents into the larger bag he'd left in the building since yesterday, then pulled out a pair of soft, worn sandals.

"These won't last long, but you can't go barefoot. It'll be safer if we don't risk being recognized by taking any rides, so we're going to be walking for a while."

The hunter glanced up at the boy, who was simply watching him, standing still. It unnerved him, Iris' complete lack of reaction and movement, like he lacked energy, lacked life.

"Well?"

The sandals made a swirl of dust rise up with a sigh as they were dropped to the ground, and the boy pulled them on wordlessly.

Valkyre paused again as he stood, swinging the large bag over his back. He'd adjusted the strap so it would be carried easier, and he hefted it up on his shoulder. He'd gotten himself a new dark, long-sleeved shirt that hid the tattoos along his arms again, and a dark brown cloak was thrown over his other shoulder.

The angel paused, then stepped forward and touched the tearstone around Iris' neck, gloved fingers rubbing softly against the cool, hard stone surface.

Valkyre blinked, then quickly slipped the seal under the boy's shirt.

"It's better not to let people know," he muttered, as he stepped away. The hunter didn't look back as he walked out of the broken-down house, but he knew that Iris was following.

AN: I know, I don't update for half a week [or something of the sort] and I give you a completely nothingness chapter with 1/3 dedicated to a spider, and the rest to small talk and excess descriptions! Don't you all just love me??

...Ahahaha. Just kidding. ^^;

Well, I've got a few small things to take care of, some more explaining and character BONDING time! XD [Well, it's necessary for any long-term story, right??]

But sooner or later I want to get around to the new characters! Though, jeez, it occurred to me now, I don't even know which character to introduce, or how! o_O

Oh, well, I'll figure it out. But meh favvy will have to wait, I guess.

Just remember- though most of what I write seems like nonsense, some of it's there for a good purpose!

...I hope. ^^;

Wow, my ramblings make another 1/4 of the chapter!! XD Hopefully not. Hehe.

Ooh, and, yay, we got to the double-digits! Chapter 10! This has gone rather fast, I have to say, and I am sorry about the shorter chapters... Well, I'm working on it, really! X3 Next goal- reach 20!

Thanks a lot for reading, promise I'll try to make the next chappie interesting! See ya later. :)

11 - Bat

Iris

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Valkre sighed as he closed the door behind them. The inn's rooms were plain and worn, the wallpaper that clung to the walls peeling and yellowed, a simple mattress pushed in a shady corner with thin sheets and a single pillow. The landowner had apparently given up on trying to hold on to the furniture—the dresser was an empty skeleton, drawers having been taken away for probably no greater use than to be burned as kindling, mirror shattered and cracked too many times to be worth stealing.

The hunter set down the knapsack as he took a seat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his boots. Outside, night was falling. They had spent the full day walking to the town, and he had to admit that the unforgiving landscape and rocky ground made even his own feet ache. The pace they'd set had started out fine, but Valkyre had noticed Iris tiring late into the morning, so he'd been forced to slow down. The time they'd made was poorer than he'd wanted to, but they'd still reached the town by nightfall, which was fine. A dry, meager lunch had to satisfy them until they got a warm meal at the inn. Now, as the stars were blinking to life, Valkyre had decided to spend a little of his dwindling gold and silver to rent them rooms for the night and risk the inn.

It was more of a matter of being recognized that he was afraid of—Valkyre had left behind the other city to try and avoid more hunters, and the threat of being recognized. He had to admit that he and Iris had drawn a bit of attention coming here, but this town was well-known for turning a blind eye to criminals wanted by the state, so he considered it a decent place to hide; easy to reach, but safe enough. At least, he hoped that it would be.

Valkyre still had no plans as to what he wanted to, or was going to, do with Iris. But he knew that he needed to learn more, needed to understand him better. Something was coming, he could feel it. Something would happen.

"Iris." The boy had quietly slipped off his sandals and tucked them against the edge of the bed, the hooded cloak he'd worn now folded up in a neat bundle and left on the bare dresser table. Valkyre avoided the boy's eyes as he fidgeted uneasily with the edge of a sleeve, still unnerved by the other's unwavering eyes and stifling silence.

"...Why do you follow me?"

Valkyre couldn't have answered the question had Iris been the one to ask it, but he wanted to know why the boy stuck by him. A hunter should not be partnered with his prey, he thought, even though he knew that they had, somehow, moved beyond that false facade.

The boy smiled, something light that threatened to reach his cool marble eyes. "...Because." Iris sighed softly, drawing his legs up against his body on the edge of the bed. "...We need each other. Don't we?" Valkyre blinked, mildly surprised. He didn't want to agree with the boy, but the answer was what he was probably thinking somewhere deep down, though he would never have used the particular words the other had.

"...Maybe," he muttered, turning his eyes away again. What was it about him? Iris acted so differently than anyone else he'd ever known... so often apathetic, but then again, the flickers of emotions he saw, that he knew had to be there somewhere underneath those blank gray eyes...

"Iris." Valkyre forced himself to hold the other's gaze, trying to see into the dusky stone. He found

nothing.

"Last night... What happened? You... Your eyes, they..." he trailed off, immediately seeing that what he'd brought up had made the boy uneasy. Iris was the one to avert his eyes now, thin lips drawn tight together as he curled up onto himself.

"...I'm not sure," he murmured, thin fingers brushing the crumpled ripples of the bedsheets. "...I think... the demon..." the boy broke off, shaking his head. "I don't know," he breathed in a soft sigh.

Valkyre shifted his legs, moving slightly closer to the other.

"...Where did you come from, Iris?"

The boy turned to face him, expression carefully guarded, brows crinkled in thought, in memory. When he at last replied, his voice was hushed to a whisper.

"...I remember... the lab."

Valkyre let out a long breath, something fluttering, perhaps like hope, smothered as the boy had spoken.

Then it was true. Iris had been nothing more than an experiment in the labs. Some creation of the scientists, nothing more than theory and human mechanics, a twisting of nature.

Hard to find a purpose to life if you were created from the whim and fancy of humans.

"...I see," he commented quietly. Valkyre decided it was best not to inquire any further on the subject. Iris was silent, face turned away from him.

The angel sighed again to himself, then dug around inside of his knapsack. He didn't really have anything he needed to get out, but he needed something to do, anything. The silence then was stifling him, choking him.

"Valkyre."

The hunter glanced up at the boy's soft voice, brow raised, face kept still and emotionless. "...Yes?"

"...You won't ever take me near the labs, will you?"

Valkyre studied Iris carefully. The boy's face was also kept straight and blank, but he could hear the tinge of it in his voice. Fear.

"...No," he spoke his words slowly, picking them. "I won't. ...Did something bad happen there?"

Iris blinked, but did not turn his eyes away. "...The men," he whispered, "They want me back..."

Valkyre took this all in slowly, casually rummaging through the bag's leather pockets again.

"I see then. So you're running away from the labs?"

Iris moved closer, close enough for the angel to feel the boy's soft breath brush his bare neck. "Maybe," he whispered.

The hunter looked up at Iris for a moment, startled as he realized quite how close the boy was. He drew back, but was stopped as the other put a hand on his own. Valkyre blinked, watched as Iris turned his hand up and gently loosened his fingers from what he'd been holding, without even realizing it.

It was a pen. Valkyre's dark violet eyes immediately recognized it, from the simple, smooth form to the tapered, diamond tip.

"...This?"

Iris looked up at him, then down as the boy plucked the pen lightly from the angel's palm, small fingers running over the burnished black length, deep and gleaming.

Valkyre didn't reply, only pulled back the sleeve of his right arm. The flowing, swirled patterns of curled vines, coiled snakes, and sad crescents stood out; rich, deep black on his pale skin, the flickering, split tongue of a small snake tracing the faint blue of a vein on his wrist, before it was hidden by the edge of the glove.

The pen Iris held in his careful hands was the one that Valkyre had used to draw the tattoos on himself.

The hunter pulled the sleeve over his arm again, then took the pen back, laying it on top of the knapsack. He was shaking his head, lips drawn tightly.

"Valkyre."

His amethyst eyes flickered up to the boy. Iris was leaning over him again, head tilted slightly to one side, expressionless.

"...Can you do one for me?"

The angel blinked, sitting up. The question had surprised him; out of all of the things he'd expected the boy to ask, this was not one of them. "...Why?" He finally asked, still confused.

Iris smiled. "...Because," he stated simply.

Valkyre frowned, picking up the pen again and running his fingers along the smooth sides. What was the boy doing now? Was this some sort of test he was playing? A game?

"...A bat."

The angel looked up to find the boy still smiling at him, head tilted slightly to one side. His eyes were almost warm, but Valkyre still couldn't read anything underneath them.

"...Will you do it?"

The hunter still paused. He found that, though he tried to lean more about Iris, what the boy always did ended up something more than he'd expected, something new that showed itself, wrapped up in more and more unknowns.

"...Alright."

Iris smiled softly. The boy calmly pulled off his worn white shirt, exposing alabaster skin, pale over his thin, perhaps gaunt frame. His body was lean, fragile, like porcelain.

Iris looked back at him calmly, the tearstone around his neck glinting brightly in the man-made light, as cold as the skin it rested on. The boy turned his back, no hint of shyness or fear in his face, in his actions.

"On your back?" Valkyre moved closer, brushed strands of the long, silvery-gray hair from the boy's ear and neck. It was soft and smooth to the touch, sighing as it slipped from his fingers.

Iris nodded faintly, glancing back briefly over his shoulder, smile still in his colorless eyes. "...Just a small bat."

"...Where?" Valkyre gathered up the boy's hair, twisting it a few times to get it to stay together, then draped it over Iris' right shoulder, to keep it out of the way. The hunter paused, hand hesitating over the bare of the boy's back. Exposed now from the tangled mane of hair, he noticed the faint, ragged white scar lines running up Iris' back, two long, pale gashes... Where the wings should've been.

Valkyre frowned. That wasn't possible. Wings were, more often than not, more astral than actually physical- they never ripped clothing, and shouldn't tear flesh either. Then again...

The hunter shook his head, deciding that it was another of the topics that he'd leave to figure out later. He paused, then pulled off the glove on his right hand. The cool air felt unfamiliar on the bared skin, and his fingers flexed quickly, unrestrained.

Valkyre picked up the pen again, testing it quickly by running it over a small area of the bedsheets. The ink, after a dry pause, flowed freely, rich black bright and contrasting on the white cloth, then fading away quickly to invisibility, as it had been created to do so. The ink was potent with magic, and sank only into living skin, as Valkyre knew only too well.

He touched the boy's back. It was chill, giving off no more warmth than the lifeless wooden boards of the floor, or the crystalline rock around Iris' neck. Valkyre wondered how he must feel, always so cold.

"...Are you sure about this?"

He didn't want to do this. He didn't want to burn the permanent ink onto the boy's skin. For him, it had been nothing more than making physical his own sins, whatever crimes he must've done to deserve what he received. It was not something for a boy already so tortured by his own simple existence, and not even of his own, but of the mindless fiddling of humans.

Iris only smiled, almost sadly. He didn't have to say anything.

Valkyre sighed, then let the pen tip touch the boy's skin, on a smooth patch at the top of Iris' back, near

the left side of his shoulder and neck. Perhaps purposely to avoid the white scars of impossible wings. His movements were quick and smooth, the fine ink running like a river given life, following his every brush flawlessly. It settled into something like a rhythm, easy strokes that tapered off to fine points, an arc, then a pointed tip. The ink worked like a part of him, sinking quickly into the skin, like an acid burning its way into whatever it touched, burrowing beneath the surface, permanent.

Valkyre started, jerking the pen away. He'd done it again.

The bat was a flitting creature frozen in motion, fluttering wings outstretched, detailed to the tiny corners of its fingertips.

The angel scowled. He'd been stupid, getting himself carried away in the taunting, tantalizing flow of the smooth ink. It'd happened before, though he never really knew what was the cause. It was as if, if he could only lose himself for a moment, then he could forget everything else...

He let out an exasperated sigh. It would've been no big deal if he'd just been carving another meaningless swirl into his own skin, but he'd just etched something permanently onto Iris...

"...Thank you."

Valkyre's amethyst eyes flickered up, surprised. Iris had turned around to face him, small fingers taking the hand that held the pen, gray eyes settled calmly on him. He wondered if the boy had even bothered to see the tattoo itself.

"Why?" he asked. He had messed up; couldn't he see that? "I-I shouldn't have..." Iris ignored him, eyes turning down.

"What's this...?"

The boy had taken his hand, pulling the pen away and placing it aside. His small, cool fingers traced the circular edge of the pattern on the back of Valkyre's hand. The hunter's first instinct was to pull away, but he quelled the feeling, holding his arm out stiffly, though his eyes dropped to the ground.

It was a rather intricate design, tangled in thorned vines and indistinguishable swirls. A skull, a tainted blade, broken wings. Dark pools of ink, and ancient letters, drawn delicately as if to seem worn, faded. Valkyre looked back up to see Iris staring at him, quietly, questioning. He pulled his hand away at last, pushing himself onto his feet and away from the bed. "It's... I..." he frowned at his own lack of words, having begun to pace again. Annoyed, he stepped over and flicked off the light switch. The bulbs blinked out, and he was left in the soft, kinder embrace of the darkness. Valkyre made his way back over to the bed, where he pulled the knapsack onto the floor, tucking the pen away into a small side pocket.

He pulled off his other glove and placed it, along with its retrieved twin, on the small tabletop next to the bed before undoing his belt, laden with small pockets and a few hidden knives, and kicked it into a corner.

Valkyre kept his lips drawn together in a thin line as he pulled off his jacket and long-sleeved shirt, which were sticky and dusty from the day's travel, ingrained with dried sweat and the salty dirt blown up from the ground. He had a sleeveless white shirt on underneath, and though it would be a bit cold, it was much more comfortable.

Iris crawled under the blankets as well, shirt crumpled up and left on top of the bed. Valkyre couldn't help but notice how delicate the boy seemed to be. His torso was lean and thin, stomach just about nonexistent, gently curved body almost feminine, childish.

The hunter sighed as he jerked his eyes away, too restless for now to sleep. He reclined against the bare wall the head of the bed was pressed to, letting his eyes drift close as he tried to relax. He was startled as Iris suddenly slipped over his legs under the blankets, curling up against him, head resting on his shoulder.

Valkyre felt his face flush slightly, stiffening immediately at the feel of the boy's bare skin brush his own, the cool, light body pressed on him. Wordlessly, Iris took his right hand again, small fingertips tracing over the design, following the sinuous body of a thin serpent.

Valkyre sighed, then let his body relax.

"...My master," he murmured, careful to keep his words low and soft. "He was the one that took me in. When he found me, everyone else in the house was... dead. I... He never told me why, but it must've been something horrible, like the ague or a disease. He was the only one who would've taken me out of there, no one else would've even..."

Valkyre paused, free hand running through the boy's long hair, turned silvery in the darkness. "...We weren't ever really friends, I-I know that. My master took care of me, and even taught me how to wield a blade, to some degree... But he made sure I wasn't confused- I was not someone he'd taken in out of pity, or remorse... He was just... a momentary guardian."

The hunter put his hand down, sighing. "...And then... He just bid me to go away one day, and... I did. I learned to take care of myself after that, and... I haven't seen him since."

Iris had let go of his hand, face pressed to his neck. Valkyre had begun to get used to the boy's coldness.

"...Do you miss him?" His words were soft, whispered.

The angel paused, pulled his legs away from under the boy, and carefully put his arms around Iris' shoulders. The boy relaxed easily, leaning back against him. Valkyre closed his eyes.

"...No, not really. I did not love him, and I didn't think of him as a parent, or a partner. A teacher, maybe. Someone who saw me and took me in, when no one else would've. ...That's all."

Iris' voice was even quieter, words slow. "...What was his name?"

"...Camael."

The boy didn't seem to react to the answer, or if he did, he didn't show it. Valkyre let his eyes drift closed. Iris' skin was still cold, but the areas that he'd remained in contact with had begun to warm up. The angel was still unsure about suddenly being so close to the boy, but a part of him wanted to comfort him, in whatever small way he could.

Iris' fingers traced the small bat tattoo on his shoulder, then his hand dropped into his lap again.

"Valkyre...?"

The hunter blinked open his eyes, and pulled the sheets up closer against them. "...Yes?"

There was a long pause. "...Do you know why your wings are black?"

Valkyre immediately turned his head away, hands stilled. "No," he said, voice surprisingly calm and even, "I don't."

And it was the truth. He had questioned it often enough, why he seemed so full of this sin whose origin he didn't know. It seemed to stain him, the sunlight that touched his skin screaming out the blatant facts and truth that he could only hide, could only become a part of at night. He had seen no other angels with black wings.

Iris had not said any more. Valkyre sighed, then pushed himself away. "...W-We should get some sleep," he muttered under his breath. The boy only nodded, pulling away from him slowly, as if reluctantly.

The hunter paused, then studied the single pillow. It wasn't exactly a time for etiquette, but he muttered, "Here, y-you can use it, I'm used to..."

Iris touched his shoulder, faint smile in the dim light soft, ethereal. "It's okay," he murmured, "We can share."

Valkyre wanted to protest, quite uneasy about the entire situation, but the boy had already lain down, wriggling closer to press his bare back against the angel's body. The other sighed, rolling his eyes slightly in exasperated defeat as he lay down as well.

He brushed the boy's cold shoulder, and pulled up the blankets around them both before hesitantly draping his arm over Iris' still form.

"...Are you cold?"

The boy snuggled closer in response, small hands holding onto Valkyre's own.

"...Not anymore," he whispered.

+--

AN: Gawd, this chapter took a while. x_X Well, it was rather long, but I got in the stuff I wanted [they weren't really explanations, more like just countless insinuations, hehe...]

Am I making too big a deal out of this stuff?? Is it too obvious?? Too confusing? Too annoying?!? XD Hope not, but if it is, just tell me and I'll try to work on it. Hehe.

Well... lots more shonen-ai hints here, and I guess I'm planning on throwing in a lemon or somesuch in much, much later chapters [sorry] but this just isn't really the high lemon kinda story, right? ...I hope you don't think so. o_O

Well anyways. Oh, a note... I couldn't word it better, but do NOT think of the relationship with Valkyre and his former 'master' as yaoi or somesuch... trust me, it isn't. --; Once the characters are introduced, and the plotline really revealed... [You should get the basic jist in a few chappies' time, I hope...]

Actually, I've got the next... ...uhm, the next chappie planned out, and then... well... ...I dunno! XP I'm gonna need to brainstorm some more, ehehehe...

Oh, and about the tattooing... I don't really think of the tattoos that strongly when I came up with this, and when I imagine the charries... but it's made rather strong here... They're really just serving a purpose, ending up more permanent than I'd wanted them... Like the tattoo on Valkyre's hand, it's just a way to get him talkin' and quickly explaining his past. ^-; Not much past there, anyways... Tch...

Well.

Anyways, this was a rather long chapter, so I hope it keeps you guys happy for the time being...

Oh, oh! Another note! I got a fanart for this already! XD DefyDeath_DefyMe, thank you very much, she has drawn a lovely little piccy of my Iris baby. Hehehe. [Though, to be honest, Deffy, he sounds a little... evil/sadistical there... O_o Not like there's anything wrong with the little maniacal, sadistical types... ehehehe...]

It's beautiful! Makes me so happy!

So everyone, happy new year [almost forgot that!] and hope to see you all soon. Please don't give up on me, I promise to forever write more! XD

Thank you! ::bows, then wanders off, singing something about spiders::

12 - Monster

Iris

+--

Something was wrong. Valkyre knew it even before he had fully awoken; he could tell by the shivering body against him, by the sudden silence of the night and the stifling air.

Something had broken the barrier he'd set around the small room. It'd been a weak one, he'd admit, but he'd kept it that way, since he'd thought that the seals would do a better job now of hiding their auras, and for the fact that weak barriers were usually less noticeable to the keener eyes.

Iris was trembling, the small form pressed against the hunter warm from Valkyre's body heat, but... scared. The angel knew instantly, could sense the cold, icy flush of terror in his own veins.

Valkyre could feel the boy's clenched fingers gripping his shirt. He carefully pried them apart, gently stroking his hair. Iris' eyes were squeezed shut, face contorted, but there were no tears. This was a rare, unusual flicker of emotion from the boy; it worried the angel to see Iris like this. Whatever was here had to be really scaring him. ...But what?

The hunter pushed the boy down quietly onto the bedsheets, then slipped off as stealthily as he could. When the window shattered and a form fell through with the glass, breaking the stilled silence of the night, Valkyre already had a blade in his hand.

The crunch of broken glass was mingled with the shuffling of feet on the ground as the creature stumbled to its feet. Its pale skin glowed in the faint, dimmed moonlight, showing a bare torso and angled, twisted body. There was an animalistic growling, rasping wheeze, and the creature's head jerked up, hiss passing through thin, trembling lips.

Valkyre froze, meeting its gaze. The eyes he found were bright and glinting through the ragged mass of dirtied white hair, streaked in parts with darker shades, uneven and tangled. The eyes themselves were wide and slightly crooked, like the twisted, lipless mouth underneath, skin drawn back to reveal sharp, pointed teeth.

And Valkyre's deep violet eyes met two others- one pale, unfocused shade of faded green, the other a deep, bright glint of sickly yellow. The angel tensed, fingers tightening their grip on the soft handle of the small dagger in his hands. The eyes... they unsettled him. The pale, skull-like face, the twisted body, the darting, animal eyes. Something was wrong. This wasn't the normal hunter- this creature wasn't even rightfully sane. Its body was covered in dirt and grime, its shoulders hunched, the torn rags around its waist rotten and foul.

Valkyre flinched when the other took in a ragged, rattling breath. It shifted up, clawed, disfigured hands leaving the ground for a moment before falling back on its haunches. Its ribs were clearly visible, and there was something wrong with the way its body was shaped, something that made it seem crooked, broken.

"...Aiih... Rah..." Valkyre shifted his footing as the creature wheezed out, mouth opening and closing as if it was trying to force something up through its windpipe, a small trail of spit dribbling down its chin.

The angel stepped closer, then realized that the creature's eyes were no longer on him, but beyond him.

"...Hah... Aiih..." A twisted, lopsided grin stretched across its face. "...I... Iris," he hissed.

Valkyre froze, dared a glance behind him. The boy's eyes were wide in fear, his entire frame trembling, quivering body threatening to collapse.

The hunter whirled around again just as the creature darted forward, small body incredibly fast. Valkyre struck out with his blade, felt it bite through flesh. His assailant hissed, snarling, as it crashed on top of him, sending them both slamming onto the ground. Valkyre whipped the blade away and slashed again, gasping to keep the creature's twisted hands away from him as they scrabbled and tore at his clothing and skin alike. The animal howled again, and the hunter struck it across the side of the head with his clenched fist, sending it crashing to the ground. Something was horribly wrong. Valkyre knew it from the first instant he'd touched the creature. ...It had no aura. He couldn't tell what species it should be, if it was any. ...But that wasn't possible. Whatever it was, it clearly wasn't human. ...Was it?

Valkyre groaned as he sat up, the impact having jarred his mostly-healed wounds and leaving a new throbbing pain at the back of his head. Too late, he saw the creature rise and dart forward. He realized that it was heading not for him, but for Iris. Valkyre stumbled to his feet, grabbing for the creature. He closed his fingers around an ankle thin and spindly, with a texture like driftwood, the bones prominent under his palm as he tried to jerk the creature away. It howled insensible words as it turned on him, clawed hand slashing out too fast for him to jerk away. Valkyre hissed as blood splattered in his vision, the other's fingertips having slit the flesh from just centimeters from his left eye down across his cheek, tearing the corner of his lip. The hunter blinked furiously, trying to clear the blood from his eyes. He didn't have a chance to dodge when the creature struck out with its other foot, catching him in the chest and throwing him backwards. The impact was incredibly strong for the creature's light body, and Valkyre was slower now in rising to his feet, free hand trying to wipe the blood from his face. His blade had been knocked away, clattering somewhere in the darkness. He glanced down at his bare hand, slick with blood. The sight of it made him queasy, the inky red stains mixing into the black swirls of the tattoos on the back of his hand.

"...Aiih... liiris...!" The rasping voice was oddly wavering, as if almost singsong. The creature grabbed the boy as it crawled over the bed, tangled sheets dragged along its twisted legs as it curled its spindly arms around the boy, unmatching eyes focused entirely on him. Its gnarled fingers touched the boy's hair, his face, almost soft and caressing.

Valkyre was more startled as he realized it could speak, though its words were almost too breathy to make out, like an alien language torn from ripped lungs. "...F-Found you...!" The angel realized with a sudden flash of unexpected anger that the creature was laughing, dry rips through its throat, twisted, heaving form curled protectively, guardingly, over the boy, fresh wounds on its body ignored, dark blood dripping unheeded onto the blankets.

Valkyre stepped closer, slowly, bare feet carefully placed. The creature ignored him, intent on the still form in its arms. The angel was dismayed to see that Iris was completely still, eyes squeezed shut. He had made no noise, and he wasn't fighting the bent arms wrapped around him.

The hunter stepped around the side of the bed cautiously, then bent down and slowly pulled a long blade from the side of one of his discarded boots. The blade had no guard separating the cutting steel from the hilt, but that had been needed to keep the blade indiscriminate. The angel had no preferences about keeping the creature alive anymore- it would be of no use, he knew. His dark violet eyes were sharp and cold as he regarded the twisted form curled around the limp body of Iris, still whispering unintelligible words and touching the boy's hair.

"...Hey."

The creature whirled around as the hunter spoke, startled to suddenly find him to close. Valkyre held the blade low in his hand, out of sight. "...Get away from him."

It hissed, loosening its grip, scrawny limbs taunt as it tensed, unmatched eyes glinting at him in the darkness, breath hissing from its lips. "...Mine, mine," it crooned, body wavering back and forth.

Valkyre didn't bother to try and speak again, but lashed out with his leg. His blow caught the creature full in the side, sending it tumbling off the bed. The hunter lept forward as well, blade flashing, ready to finish

it off.

The angel was startled as the other suddenly launched itself at him, forcibly knocking him onto the ground. Valkyre hissed at the pain in his ribs and the spots that flashed before his eyes, the blood splattering on his skin. The creature was above him, howling as it slashed at him, blows he could barely dodge as he held it off one-handedly, trying to keep its clawed feet from doing equal damage, the unmatching eyes crazed, burning into him.

Valkyre hissed as it suddenly lunged forward and sank its teeth into his arm, sharp tips slicing deep into his flesh, slick spit cold on his skin. The hunter slammed his other hand into the side of the creature's head, jerking his arm away as he violently kicked the other with a blow hard enough to send it rolling off, keening, to bump roughly against the far wall. Valkyre wasted no time as he half-crawled, half-stumbled forward, blade's bare hilt still gripped tightly in a hand now slick with blood.

The eyes rolled up at him, the sickly green and yellow wild, raging. Valkyre ignored them and plunged the blade through the left side of the creature's exposed ribs, tip of the steel edge sunk firmly into the wood of the wall behind. The other still jerked on the end of the metal, a raspy breath broken and uneven as it escaped its mouth, blood splattering from between pale lips. Its body stilled, and it didn't breathe again. The angel stumbled away, absentmindedly flicking the dribbling blood from his fingers. He inhaled slowly, own breathing uneven. He had no idea what he'd just killed, but it unnerved him, this something that he couldn't begin to understand. He mentally shook his head, while physically, he wiped more of the dripping blood from his face. He couldn't bother with that now.

Iris sat on the bedsheets, curled up onto himself, body torn with ragged breaths. The boy was terrified, pained, sobbing dryly.

Valkyre crawled up slowly and wrapped his arms around the other, slowly, afraid something would happen, afraid Iris would push him away, or perhaps look up and not recognize him. But he didn't. The boy only sank gently into his embrace, breathing slowly steadying.

Valkyre closed his eyes, feeling the frantic beating of his own heart decrease, Iris' body warm against his own. He found that most of all, he'd been afraid not for himself, but for Iris. Suddenly, his world, all that he'd known and trusted, had grown from himself to encompass this boy as well amongst the new dangers and uncertainties that had suddenly materialized.

...So be it, he thought.

+--

AN: Gawd, I hate this chapter. Stupid descriptions, took me forever, and the thoughts and dialogue are pieces of crap. -_-; I was trying for something a bit... well, more authentic and mature, but it ends up really cheesy. Sorry.

Oh, and please don't reference anything to LotR. I do not need a mention of Gollum/Smeagol/wtvr, and do not think of Iris as an inanimate object, no matter how boring he may get sometimes. --;; Oh, how I suffer...

...:coughs loudly:: ...Yeah. It's hard to get anything original these days, though I do try... ...and fail. Well, whatever.

This chapter took me a long time, and I think I drew it out too much; I really don't like the quality of it, but I'm too fed up with it to go back and edit any more... Sorry! But, hopefully, the next few chapters will be a lot more interesting... I've got some, ahem, stuff coming up, rather interesting, I hope.

Super crunchy action! ...Like you aren't sick of the lame-@\$\$ fighting in here anyways! XP Sorry! I try, really...

Man, I'm getting so far with Iris, and I really don't want to give up! It's so amazing! ^__^-

Well, it's the new year, eh? I should make the resolution to actually FINISH a long-term story, ehehehe...

Thanks for reading!

13 - Dead

Iris

+--

Valkyre blinked open his eyes. He groaned softly under his breath, squeezing his eyes back closed. There were cramps in his neck and side, and his legs hurt from having been sat on the entire night. The angel opened his eyes again, taking in the soft glow of morning light, the familiar forms of the worn room, the peeling wallpaper and litter-like pieces of furniture.

In his arms, Iris stirred, mouth a small, almost pouting frown, breathing hitching slightly, then slowing as the boy opened his eyes and gazed up at the other. Valkyre paused, feeling his face heat up by their proximity, Iris' bare skin almost colored, almost warm. An edge of the bat tattoo was just barely visible on the boy's shoulder.

The angel made as if to move away, but Iris clung to him, cheek pressed to his arm, gripping him tightly at first, then slowly softening, almost peacefully closing his eyes. Valkyre sighed, then relaxed. He stared down at the tangled mass of the boy's silvered hair, suddenly remembering the demonic eyes he'd seen in him before. ...Blood red, they'd been, and so predatory, so animalistic... The hunter lifted his hand, wanting to touch Iris' hair, to feel the warm-cool skin. But he stopped, stared down at the black vine and leering skull and twisting, writhing serpents. He didn't want to touch Iris like that. He was afraid of scaring him, afraid of the hand before him that'd slain so many creatures, spilled so much blood. Yet nothing he'd ever done had had a purpose to it. Never.

Valkyre sighed again, dropping his hand. He paused, glancing around the room, suddenly remembering the night. ...He must've simply fallen asleep afterwards.

The hunter glanced at the far wall. That creature, whatever it was, still lay there, impaled on the shaft of the blade, outstretched arm withered and clawed, mouth still agape. Valkyre stared at the unmatching yellow and green eyes, blank and wide, that stared straight back at him, making him shiver.

"...Iris?"

The boy seemed to read his thoughts, for he pressed himself closer to the other, perhaps afraid as well. Valkyre let Iris lean on him, welcoming the touch.

"...Do you know... what this is?"

The angel gestured, rather vaguely, at the corpse pinned to the wall. It was daytime now, and the creature seemed more small and lean than hideous and dangerous. The leftover rags of what might've once been clothing were soiled and filthy, the bare torso, arms, and legs nothing more than stretched, dried skin covering the bare, jutting bones. Valkyre frowned as he stared at the creature; there was still something unsettling about the way its ribs were shaped, about how its fingers and feet curled like claws. A cross between humanoid and beast. Impossible, twisted creation.

The creature's hair was filthy yellow-white, in some places thick and shaggy, in others short and cropped as if simply torn out. Its skin was white, impossibly, deathly white, corners gritted with dirt. The deep cuts he'd delt it last night stood out blandly, the blood already dried and brown-black, flaking.

Valkyre looked away from the creature's unseeing eyes, wrapping his arm around Iris instead, seeking some small brush of comfort. He stopped.

The hunter lifted his eyes again and frowned, studying the creature. A cold shiver ran down his spine as he realized something. It looked like Iris.

"...Iris."

The boy looked up at him, eyes almost sad, almost full of feeling. Did he try to hold his emotions in, or did he try to let them out?

"...Was this... ..from the labs?"

Iris looked down at the bedsheets. "...Yes." A whispered reply.

It was what he'd suspected. But that didn't make any sense. Why would anyone release, or possibly send out a creature like this? Just to track them? It was strong, yes, but Valkyre couldn't see how it would help anyone. The thing, whatever it was, lacked any remote sign of sanity or rationalism. It was crazed, unstable. Not the type of creature you used to try and capture someone else alive, or even dead. The hunter didn't ask any more, but he pulled away from Iris, standing. He saw the boy look up, brows furrowed, as if hurt, as if scared or confused or lost.

Valkyre shook his head. "We... We have to go," he said. "We have to get out of here. If the lab's really still after you or whatever, we have to leave this town." Iris nodded wordlessly, slipping from the edge of the bed.

The angel paused, then stepped towards the corpse backed against the wall. He had not forgotten the bite wound in his arm, or the now mostly-healed cut across his face, along with the other minor scratches. The claws and the teeth, so sharp and jagged... he hoped his wounds weren't infected. Valkyre knelt down near it, studying the odd twist in its back and the dirt-crusting skin. The creature's skin was pulled back on its face to show the clear outlines of the skull, horribly defined and hollow. The hunter frowned, then reached over to grasp the hilt of the blade that ran through the body, a straight, clean plunge between the ribs and through the back.

Valkyre's fingers brushed the edge of the handle, then suddenly he hissed, stumbling backwards.

The eyes had moved.

The angel gasped silently, stared at the frozen, twisted face, mouth caught in cracking open as if to snarl or bare its teeth. Its body was still, but its eyes, sickly green and yellow, darted suddenly to the side, showing reddened whites.

Its eyes swiveled back, held the deep amethyst. Valkyre was breathing roughly, cold freeze of terror yet to crack from his veins. He stared at the creature as its eyes roved around wildly, sigh of a breath rattling between its lipless mouth. The angel stared at it blankly, raw, untampered thoughts running through his mind as he saw the fingers twitch, the leg jerk. Impossible.

It was coming back to life. But... that couldn't be. Valkyre stared at the end of the hilt. He'd struck through lung and heart, flesh and tissue and skin. Impossible.

The eyes seethed at him, lips moving, mouth drawing back into what could've been a snarl, what could've been a grin. Valkyre was frozen, unable to move, trapped.

The breathing came again, irregular and rasping, and flecks of fresh, bright red blood splattered the creature's mouth and the floorboards near its head. It hissed, claw-like fingers of its hand flexing now, quivering.

Valkyre jerked his gaze away at a movement from his side.

Quietly, calmly, Iris slipped forward, kneeling down. His hand was small as it reached out, body so impossibly fragile and thin, outline blurred and darkened by the impossibly soft morning light. Valkyre was so afraid for him, so afraid of that delicate body being crushed, smothered.

The boy reached over and pressed his palm to the creature's forehead, moving down to cover the eyes. Iris held his hand there for what felt like a lifetime, then slowly pulled away. The eyes were closed, the body unmoving. The arm that lay stretched out relaxed, going limp.

Valkyre stared at the creature. He'd been disbelieving when it had come alive, but somehow, with these simple movements... he knew for sure that it was dead.

Iris shuddered, then crawled over and clung to the hunter's side, body trembling. The other didn't say

anything, only slowly took up the boy in his arms. He let Iris rest from whatever he'd done, then eventually pulled himself and the boy to his feet, exhaling slowly.

"...We-We've got to get going."

Iris nodded slowly. Valkyre stepped away, going about and gathering up their possessions. The simple task he set himself to helped to steady his frayed nerves, settle his pounding heart.

He didn't know where to go now, having lost one of the safest refuges he knew of. Everything was spiraling out of his control, and the angel knew that he was dipping into things he couldn't begin to comprehend.

But that didn't matter anymore. They were already on the run, and he hadn't expected to be able to bed down and hide forever. He had no plans for the future, save to keep himself, and Iris, alive.

As they were leaving, Valkyre bent down and jerked the blade from between the creature's ribs. He wiped it down with a corner of his jacket, then slipped it back into its sheath on his boot.

He had a feeling that he would be needing it.

+--

AN: I slave away and I bring you another chapter! Shower me with love and adoration, with the comments I madly devour as my sustenance!! ...Before I wither away!!!

... ..:coughs loudly:: ...Sorry, had to get that out of my system.

Rather annoying chapter for me, and a little on the macabre side, ne? I'm not much for being scared of by writing though, movies and pics, but never really writing... Hm...

But, on the other hand, some rather interesting stuffos should be coming up in the next few chappies.

Hehe. ^__^- Found some loopholes as I was working, and I'm glad I caught them, so I could fix it before it was too late and all... Meh.

Charries... most charries I made are actually rather boring, so I'm working on their char. designs to see if I can't make them a bit more interesting...

I swear, I didn't mean it, but I think my writing is taking after Anne Rice... o_O [I'm reading vampire Lestat, gawd I love it.]

I need to cling to my originality... Sniffle... Hope I've still got it...

Well, thanks once more for reading. ^^-

... ..A-And I'm not completely lying on the need for comments as sustenance either! ::sweatsweat::

14 - Blood

Iris

+--

The building was nondescript, a derelict, off-white block matching the others crowded around it, slowly turning gray with the fading daylight.

Valkyre had stopped in front of it, his shadow stretching out over the bleach white door, Iris' on the wall beside it. The boy turned his eyes to the hunter, mildly questioning, hair and face shadowed behind the hood of the cloak. The rest of the street was deserted, silent.

Valkyre stepped forward. "Need to stop here quickly," he muttered. The boy only nodded.

The inside was plain, clean and sterile. It was designed like a doctor's office, area off to the side filled with shelves for paperwork and tables littered with pens, chairs lined up along the opposite two walls; a waiting room. No one was behind the counter.

"...Wait here," the hunter murmured softly as he dropped his knapsack onto the ground. Iris stood still. Valkyre headed off down a hallway with the ease and sure footing of familiarity. He turned a corner, rapped briefly on a doorway near the end, then turned the doorknob and let himself in without waiting for a response.

The room inside was rather small, tall exam table along the far end and another, lower one cluttered with papers by the door, underneath a row of cabinets. A woman set down the pen in her hand, sitting back in her chair to regard him, chewing thoughtfully on a polished fingernail.

"Well, well. Long time no see."

Her voice was smooth and flowing, eyebrows quirked in only mild amusement, obviously not really surprised or startled. Valkyre closed the door behind him, not replying.

"You've been away for a while now, haven't you? Work going well?"

The angel's mouth twitched. "I've quit," he stated. Unofficially.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Oooh, I see." She turned back to her paperwork, scribbling down a few more notes. Her hair, a medium brown streaked with blonde, fell down in luxurious waves from her shoulders. "I suppose you're in need of money again, hm?"

"Three bottles, Maeve." Valkyre said, leaning back and tilting his head to one side slightly.

The woman sighed, putting down the pen and brushing back her hair. "As cold as ever, I see." She got up and rummaged around in a cabinet, pulling out small glass vials and a syringe. "Well then," she stated cheerfully as she worked, slipping on gloves and running over things with an antiseptic napkin, "What're you doing now?"

Valkyre stared back at her blankly, and she sighed again. "C'mon, you're a client, why'd I spill a secret??"

The hunter shook his head. "You shouldn't care so much about other peoples' business," he muttered, holding out his arm. "...And I can't say because I don't know."

Maeve raised an eyebrow at her, then dabbed the napkin over his bared arm, fingers lightly tracing the tattoos. "I'm still guessing you're no longer in favor with the state," she commented, picking up the syringe. There was a pause as she studied the healing bite mark in his arm, but she made no comment. Valkyre barely flinched as the needle bit into his arm, on an exposed patch of skin between the curl of a serpent's body and inside a crescent moon. "Was I ever?"

The woman drew out the blood, too concentrated on her task to reply. When the stopper was at the top, she emptied out the crimson liquid into the first two bottles, each opening covered with a piece of rubber. Maeve wiped at a drop of blood from Valkyre's arm, then pushed the needle back under.

"We've been having problems with the blood lately," she commented, trying to open up a conversation again. "Some people keep turning in tainted bottles, not telling us about minor dilutions and somesuch. We've had to do tons of background checks and paperwork, and now we need to label everything we get."

Maeve filled up the second and third bottles, then wiped down the needle again. Valkyre pulled his arm back, lightly touching near the tiny puncture holes. "Pain in the @\$\$," the woman muttered as she scribbled down new notes on sheets of paper.

Valkyre pulled down his shirt sleeve, not replying. He wiped a smear of blood from his fingertips. He disliked having to come here, but he needed the money, more now than ever, and angel's blood was rare and expensive on the markets. He'd known Maeve for years now, and as long as he always had a relatively decent way to still earn a bit of gold, he was fine with the necessary relationship.

Maeve picked up the telephone next to her on the worktable and called the front. She dropped the receiver down again when she was done, passing Valkyre a quick, wry smile.

"Pick up the money up front, Valkyre. Hope you're enjoying whatever new occupation you have," she added, raising an eyebrow again in question. Valkyre only shook his head as he opened the door and stepped out. Nothing more than what was necessary.

The hallway was silent and spotless, all white and gray and sterile.

Valkyre's boots made muffled clumps on the smooth linoleum, but he stopped as he reached the turn. He glanced around the corner, strip of corridor showing the rows of chairs and white-wash wall, his knapsack leaning against the leg of a chair.

Something dropped into the pit of his stomach, some foreboding and dreaded acknowledgement he didn't acknowledge. He didn't even realize it, but suddenly, he was running down the hallway, boots slapping on the ground. Somehow, he'd already known, even before he ran out and halted in the waiting room.

Iris was gone.

+--

AN: Omfg! Cliffie!

...Bet you hate me now, huh? Well, I figure I need something actually INTERESTING like this to happen once in a while... ::sigh::

Well, lesse. Rather boring for the rest of the chapter, really... Though, wouldn't it be funny if it turned out that Valkie's afraid of women?? XD Jk, jk.

Weeeeell. Oh, just so everyone knows... I have midterms! XP Horrible! But, this year, I'm actually gonna study, see, so I'm afraid not a lot of updates for a while. I try to read over and fix up the bits I've got done, and I'll try to space out another chappie or two over the week, but probably not.

Midterms start next week Tues. and go to Fri! On Friday, I will officially be FREE of them! ^ _____ ^-

SO wait for me please, mmmhm.

Thank you!

15 - Lost

Iris

+--

The door slammed open. Maeve jumped in her chair, startled, pen clattering on the desk.

"Where the hell is he?!?"

Valkyre rounded on her, his fists clenched, dark eyes smouldering.

The woman stared back blankly. "...What're you talking about, Valkyre?"

The angel had a dagger up against her throat before she could blink. His lips were drawn into a thin, invisible line, eyes searching into her own, frantic.

"He came in with me! Iri- the boy, the boy with me! Where is he??"

Maeve held his gaze evenly, face calm, impassive. When she spoke, her voice was low and cool.

"Valkyre. You should know as well as I do that I have no real interests in your personal life. I'm neutral on issues concerning the state. I don't know."

The hunter held the blade up against her for an instant longer, judging her, considering. A pause, then he flicked the blade away. "...Sorry," was the only thing she heard as he left the office, leaving the door gaping open. Maeve remained where she was for a moment, then picked up the telephone.

The hallway rang with the echoes of his pounding feet. Valkyre couldn't believe it. He'd been gone for only a moment. How had someone managed to steal the boy away in that time?? ...He shouldn't have left him alone.

He jerked the front door open, running out into an abandoned street, dimming to a valueless gray with the fading sun. The hunter looked both ways, but there wasn't a hint of anyone on the streets. ...But where was Iris??

Valkyre heard a chuckle from behind him, whirling around.

A shape clung to the wall above the doorway he'd just exited, one hand pressed palm down on the bleached brick in front of it, as if that alone could keep it up. ...Which, perhaps, it did.

The angel blinked, startled. It was the vampire from the group of hunter's he'd run into at the abandoned church. The cut of the hair and the form... Yes, it was definitely him.

"Missing something, little angel?"

The vampire flashed a smile, showing perfectly white teeth, eyes amused, mocking. Valkyre hissed under his breath; how had they managed to track him here? At the same time, he was slightly relieved. He knew where Iris was now. And if he could beat him...

"What've you been doing, angel? I thought hunters turned in their bounties to the state. You're a little bit off-track."

Valkyre calmly removed the seal around his neck, tucking it away into a side pocket.

"Sorry," he replied, "I decided on being a rebel."

The vampire remained where he was, leering down at him. "Is that so now?" He cocked his head to one side, a bare blade strapped to his leg flashing briefly. "Is there something about him?"

The angel paused, trying to keep his face straight. "...What do you mean?"

The other shrugged. "It makes you curious, y'know? If everything they say about that kid's all true, and why his bounty so large?" The vampire's gaze narrowed, focused. "...Would you happen to know why, angel? What can he do, that makes him so special?"

Valkyre laughed. "You don't even begin to understand things," he muttered. The other hissed under his breath, body growing taut.

"Don't speak so strongly, angel. You're the one who's lost him!"

The vampire leapt from the wall, dagger whipped out and slashing down at the angel. Valkyre leapt aside, pulling out a blade of his own, instantly spreading his wings. They flared out around him, snapping out at the other, who dodged them nimbly, but left him unguarded as the angel darted forward. He slashed at the vampire's exposed shoulder and neck, but the other managed to counter his heavy blow, and both of their blades went spinning off.

Valkyre struck again with pure magic this time, the neon-bright light gathering in his palm and leaving a fading trail in the smooth sweep, forcing the vampire to block with a quick blast of his own magic, hastily drawn up and weaker.

It missed the main blow, but the vampire was sent stumbling back several feet, reeling. Valkyre was about to strike again, but something bridged on the edge of his perception.

He whirled around, but it was already too late. He glimpsed something dark flashing from above, heard the rustling of loose clothing.

Something hit the back of his head, and then everything went black.

+--

AN: Meh. More crappiola, this chappie was real short and kinda badly done...

Midterms still crushing me. -_-;

And, well, I can't blame it on you guys, but yesterday [mon.] instead of studying, I got bored and sat down and started typing! XD So you guys will have your chappies, but for now, I've got to get back to my studies, ehehehe...

I really, really want to introduce some charries soon... But it'll take time, and I kinda want to save the best for last... Plus, I still have a helluva lot of brainstorming to do. I'm just kinda coming up with the scenes for the next few chapters right before I have to do them, ehehehe...

Well, I'm sorry about bringing back old charries, but I'm just too lazy to introduce more... Yyyyup. ...Too lazy for anything today, really. Heh. ^-; [Next chappie, I'll name them! XD]

::falls out of chair:: Miiiiidterms suck out my braaaaaaaain!

...Thanks for reading, g'night.

16 - Taint

Iris

+--

Valkyre was awoken as he was pushed down onto his knees, bones jarred on the hard floor below him that rang hollowly of wood. He blinked open his eyes groggily, wincing at the dull, throbbing pain in the back of his head.

Pale yellow eyes glanced back at him, slitted reptilian and cool, amused.

"Hello there, angel."

The hunter struggled immediately as he recognized the eyes and the face as the vampire's, but he was bound tightly at the wrists, ankles, and knees with magic-enforced ropes that bit into his skin. He groaned in exasperation.

The vampire chuckled. "Sorry, but I'm afraid you're going to be stuck here for a while."

Valkyre paid him minimal attention, quickly trying to figure out where he was. The room was slightly cramped and mostly bare of possessions, faint murmur of voices and the clink of glass seeping up from downstairs. They had to be at an inn or bar then, in a rented room. ...Where was Iris?

Valkyre paused, dark violet eyes settling on a figure standing near the curtained window, silent and unmoving. The angel realized that this must've been the second attacker that he'd picked up on too late. The other lifted his gaze slightly, meeting the hunter's eyes. Valkyre was startled to see them, and at the same time to catch the other's aura- pale yellow and crimson red. Vampire and demon.

It wasn't really that the hybrid blood was different; he was used to seeing creatures of all types of crosses, but there was something... different about this one. The other blinked through dark lashes that matched his inky-black hair, hereditary from the bloodlines. He was dressed in all black, exposed neck and hands pale in comparison, arms crossed over his chest.

His unmatching eyes still held Valkyre's gaze- there was something cold and isolated about him, as if he stood apart from everything around him, somehow different. Perhaps he was, perhaps he was used to the abandonment due to his blood. The hunter was pretty sure he'd only recently joined the group.

"Ah, getting to know each other?" The other vampire had an eyebrow raised as he rose to his feet, walking over to a nearby dressing table that had a clutter of items on it. Valkyre flet like swearing out loud- it was all of his possessions, his hidden blades and weapons. Not like it would've done him much good had they still been with him; the other hunter had been thorough, binding up his fingers as well as his wrists. Stupid.

"...That's Raguel, if you ever care to be friends. But I doubt that'll happen, eh?"

Valkyre blinked as the vampire squatted near him again, holding out a piece of folded paper, wrinkled and bent but still clean and fresh. "Here's a little newsflash, just in case you didn't already know."

The angel stared at the print on the paper, then swore out loud under his breath, wincing. The vampire laughed.

A wanted post. For him.

A thousand gold for the black-winged angel that committed treason against the state for refusal to turn in the wanted bounty, Iris. Great. Just great.

Valkyre kept his teeth clenched, refusing to show any more emotion before his captors.

He was startled as he heard voices suddenly so close, the door swinging open. The other hunters came

in, the lamia dressed in a simple crimson dress that showed the sides of now-human legs, the werewolf closing the door behind them, a young man with unruly dark brown hair.

"Oh," he said, mildly surprised to see the angel glaring back at him, tied and backed up against the wall, "You guys really did get him?"

The vampire rose, folding up the paper again with a backwards glance. "Yup. Should we turn him in now as well?"

The lamia laughed from beside the bed, shaking her head. A leather bag jingled with coins in her hand. "We'll take care of that later, Asher. And, besides, we don't really even need the money, not after striking it this big tonight!"

She laughed again, sliding down onto the bed and sitting. "I think this calls for a celebration, really. Would you get us some drinks, Phelan?" The lamia fished around and pulled out a large gold piece, handing it to the were. He grinned, flashing a smirk slightly too wolfish, then left.

"Honestly, Asher," she continued, folding her legs, "Do we even need that birdy's bounty? It's hardly worth anything, not compared to Iris."

The vampire, Asher, shrugged and knelt near Valkyre, reaching out and grabbing the seal that he must've placed back around the angel's neck earlier. "We can always use more money, Ayra," he replied, fingers rubbing the cool black stone set in the seal. The lamia shrugged and sighed as she lay down on the bed. Valkyre glanced back at Raguel- the half-breed hadn't moved the entire time. His eyes remained cold and calm, ignoring them all.

"Besides," Asher whispered, right in the angel's ear, "It's not often I get to taste angelic blood..." Valkyre glared straight into the vampire's reptilian yellow eyes, but he didn't move. He knew it would be useless, and he blatantly refused to show fear or surprise before the others.

Asher let the seal stone slip between his fingers. Valkyre turned his gaze away as the vampire grabbed him by the chin and shoulders, baring his neck.

The angel tried to keep from wincing as the teeth sank into his skin, felt the sedative flushed into his veins as the canines found the blood. The vampire was pushing him down towards the floorboards as he bent over him, a feeling like raging fire as he felt his blood drawn into the other's mouth, searing and- Asher tore himself away suddenly, shoving Valkyre to the ground. The angel winced as his shoulder jarred on the floorboards, but he was otherwise unhurt, a warm trickle of blood running down his collar. The vampire, out of the corner of his eye, spat out a mouthful of blood and wiped his lips. "...Tainted blood," he hissed, glowering at Valkyre, who struggled back up onto his knees.

Asher had stood up and moved slightly away, regarding him with despising eyes. Valkyre glowered straight back, though inside he was startled; he had tainted blood? He had never really been checked, by the state or otherwise, about his actual bloodline- but he had always used the simple angel's seal, and nothing else had ever come up. He had always assumed he was half-angel and half-human, or something close to that... perhaps there had been a dilution of something else in the human blood? Before either of them had a chance to say anything more, Phelan, the werewolf, reappeared, laden with a tray of food and a bottle of white wine, and Asher forgot about him as he rose and joined the other hunters.

Valkyre looked away. Why were things suddenly coming up about him? He wondered briefly if it really was he that Maeve had been referring to with the tainted blood... Did she know? He couldn't remember if she'd seemed like insinuating, or just commenting.

The angel blinked, ignoring the voices of the other three hunters and doing his best to ignore the tantalizing smell of fresh food. He paused suddenly, then looked up.

Raguel was looking straight at him. Valkyre was caught by those eyes, eyes that were suddenly clear and focused; directed right at him. Something had broken the other out of his frozen, uncaring state.

Valkyre.

The angel blinked back calmly at the pale yellow and the crimson red eyes, wanting to silently ask him questions, wanting to know who he was. ...Why would he suddenly join these hunters? ...Why would they let him? Valkyre knew by the way they acted that Raguel was a new addition; one that kept to himself and remained silent, nothing more than background... but why did he join up with them in the first place??

Someone called out, and Raguel turned away and joined the others. Valkyre watched him move, slow and careful steps. ...Like he was afraid something would show through? Like he was holding back on something, putting on a pretense?

The angel turned his head and gazed stubbornly at the curtains over the window as he listened to the others' conversation. He eventually tuned them out, turning to his own thoughts again. He had to get out. Maybe later, when they went to sleep, or when they would try to bring him to the state; ...then again, maybe he should play along and go. They had gotten the bounty money- that meant that they must've already turned over Iris.

...No, he had to get out as soon as possible. The town they were in was much more stricter than the last, where Valkyre still doubted as to whether or not anyone had found the dead body in the inn, but it was definitely not a final location for Iris. If there was such of a large bounty on him, the capital was probably where he would be headed for, where they'd do... whatever it was they wanted Iris for in the first place. He had to get there first and take back the boy, before he was lost to the impassible security and hidden locations of the state.

Valkyre let out a sigh, absentmindedly watching as the four hunters finished up their food and wine.

Phelan was rising to get more wine, but Raguel produced a small bottle of whiskey and it was passed around. The angel avoided the laughing and the boisterous, cheerful voices, staring down at the drying splatter of blood on the ground. Again, he felt confused, unsure. ...He was tainted? How?

Eventually, the hunters settled down and the lights went out. Asher and the lamia, Ayra, were curled up against each other on the bed. Phelan was settled on a mass of blanket spread on the ground at the foot of the bed, and Raguel had settled into a chair next to the window again, arms crossed over his chest, dozing.

Valkyre, meanwhile, was getting cramps in his arms and sides, and his right leg was asleep, stinging of pins and needles. He waited until the room was silent, and most of what he could hear downstairs as well before he tried to free his wrists again. It proved fruitless; with the seal on, he had no more abilities than a normal human, and the magic-enforced ropes wouldn't give out.

The angel decided to settle on trying to get his seal off. He made to bend over and try to work the necklace over his head, but he froze. His amethyst eyes met pale yellow and ruby red.

He remembered now, the bright crimson eyes of Iris. ...Iris had demon's blood in him too, but why... why would it affect him so strongly as to change his eye color, and perhaps... perception? Behavior, entire personality? ...Like it was trying to come out, or it was overthrowing the other half of the boy- angel...? Valkyre had no more time to muse on his thoughts. Raguel was awake.

+--

AN: First note- I only realized this after I'd plotted out this entire part... I'm doing a lot of people with two-colored eyes, aren't I?? I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, and I didn't even recognize it until now... I'll try to stop it! So sorry! XD

Oh, and, yes, I should've uploaded this chapter yesterday... But, y'know, comments... they really help...
...:twiddles thumbs:: Really, it's hard to think a little click and bit of typing, but really, just a few comments and it cheers me up so much... Comment please! ...Really, I'm so hesitant to upload new chapters now...

Aaaanywho. So, now, we've got names and slight intros! Don't quite know about Raguel, he's not that cool... I don't think... -_-; Basic char. design had him as older, more lofty kinda person... I'll work on it. Psh.

Sooooo anyone here find it kinda uncomfortable to truss up a guy and leave him in your room?? o_O ...It's all in the fantasy, please, bear with. ^_^;

Thanks for reading as always, and see ya next chappie. [...Comment... please...]

17 - Half

Iris

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Raguel smiled.

"...Your name is Valkyre, isn't it?" he asked, rising from his chair, voice low and smooth, languid. The angel didn't reply.

The other's eyes flickered back towards the sleeping figures on the bed and ground. He looked back at the hunter. "They won't disturb us; I put the drug in their drinks."

Valkyre blinked up at him wordlessly, face kept carefully blank. He had been suspecting it, just a tiny possibility he'd taken and threw away again. He'd noticed that Raguel had spoken little and eaten less as well, but he honestly couldn't see how this would benefit either of them.

"...Iris."

Valkyre narrowed his gaze, and Raguel laughed, lightly. "Then it's all true, isn't it, Valkyre? You were with Iris... You know who he really is, don't you?"

The other paused, then stepped closer and kneeled before Valkyre.

"Don't worry, angel, I care about his release from the state as well." His voice was a mere whisper, almost slow and sluggish, but dangerous. The hunter held his gaze evenly, still refusing to speak. He found it hard to believe that Raguel would choose to take so long to show who he really was. And the idea of such of an ally didn't quite go over easily.

The other paused, unmatching eyes flickering down to the stain of dried blood on the floorboards. "...He said you had tainted blood..."

Raguel leaned closer and Valkyre couldn't help but wince as cool fingers brushed his cheek, pushing back loose strands of hair. Raguel brought his face closer, and the angel felt the light cold of the sharp teeth on his neck, but the other drew no blood and the teeth changed to the soft press of lips.

"...You're pure-blooded," he heard the other whisper in his ear, "...Purer of blood than any of us... Just like..."

Valkyre jerked his head away, hissing low under his breath. He averted his eyes, trying to ignore the faint hot flush to his cheeks. ...What was he talking about?

Raguel stood, moving away. He was getting something from the dresser-top table. When he turned around again, a small dagger flashed silver in the dim light.

"You need to get Iris back," he stated simply, tilting his head slightly to one side as he studied the angel still kneeling on the ground, unmoving.

"...Why are you helping me?" Valkyre finally spoke, careful to keep his voice low, eyes sharp and wary. Raguel only smiled. "You know who Iris really is," he murmured, "and you seek to protect him. I do the same."

He came closer, kneeling, dagger flashing dimly. "You need to go now and get him back, before he's taken away." He reached around Valkyre, bringing himself up much too close to the other for his liking, unmatching eyes gazing right into his, soft exhale of breath brushing over Valkyre's face.

The ropes broke, and the angel immediately grabbed the dagger, fumbling with bound fingers as he cut the ties around his ankles and knees, pushing himself away.

Raguel only smiled as he stood up, stepping back.

"...Go now," he murmured quietly, gesturing at the rest of Valkyre's possessions lying on the table. "I still have things to take care of. ...I'll find you later."

He turned away, silent.

Valkyre brought his hands before him, arms complaining from being kept behind his back for so long, and cut through the last of the ropes. He rose unsteadily on shaky legs, keeping his eyes on the other's still form. Still Raguel did not turn around, did not respond.

The angel retrieved all of his belongings and wordlessly left. He had more questions now than ever before, and he'd been unable to help himself from glancing back one more time at the still figure in the room.

But he would worry about it later. Only one thing mattered now.

Iris.

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AN: Mmn. Rather iffy chapter. But, heck, we've got some stuff happening, eh?

Thanks for the return of the comments, I feel much better now. :) It's sad though how the recent stories page has been down for eons... I need a way to publicize and all. Ehehehe. ^^;

I hate the lame-@\$ insinuations... I'm bad at those... I'll try to work on that, but I'm... kinda too lazy right now. XD

Next, perhaps, 2 or so chapters already typed up, so I'll try to clean them up and upload as soon as possible... every other day or somesuch? ...I need some chapters to fall back on, ehehe.

Awesome, we're at ch. 17 already [yes, we] and if I can keep this up, this'll be my longest [and, perhaps,] best story of all time! XD Not so much yaoi and somesuch, this is just the shonen-ai type of story...

Search for a plotline instead?

Thanks a ton for keeping up with me, guys, and I promise to always keep going. :)

See ya next chapter!

18 - Found

Iris

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There were four guardsmen in the room, standing stiffly at attention, matching gray-green uniforms only a dulled tint over the metal and steel that made up the floors, ceiling, and walls. A doorway led down to another floor under the ground, where the largest portion of the actual facility was; the cells.

Outside, it was a quiet and still night. In this section of the town, there were no boisterous bars and no glimpse of stragglers in the streets or alleyways. The starless sky was a blackened, sooty gray.

There was a sudden crash, louder than a gunshot in the utter silence. The guardsmen looked up, startled. A flash of white light through a high window from the west side of the building, and then the orange-yellow glow of fire. The men jumped up and rushed out as muffled alarms blared from a distance away.

As soon as they were gone, Valkyre slipped noiselessly into the room, dark violet eyes quickly checking over the room for any sign of danger. He waved quickly with his hand, and the wires of a security camera in a corner of the ceiling fitzed from the concentration of magic, throwing out a meager handful of sparks before the red light flickered off. The angel walked on quickly, boots making just faint taps on the metal stairs as he went down.

Upstairs, he'd merely set a distraction. He had to hurry before the guards returned. No doubt the fire was almost out by now.

Downstairs, it was darker, steel floors blackened with grime and dirt, lights dimmed and flickering.

Valkyre blended right in, slipping from shadow to shadow. He travelled down the hallway lined with cells, eyes flickering quickly past steel bars at the occupants inside, but he didn't falter, continuing on. No Iris yet.

The angel paused as he looked forward again. A guard stood against a wall near the end row, clearly outlined in neon and artificial yellow-white of a bare bulb dangling from the ceiling. A faint but strong barrier aura emanated from the bars and walls of the last cell.

A guard, a magic barrier. A dead giveaway.

The guardsman turned, startled, as Valkyre stepped forward into the pool of light cast from the bulb.

"Hey, what"-

The hunter's wing swept out and struck the guard heavily in the head. He held his stance for a moment longer, then crumpled to the ground. A hissing murmur ran from the few cells nearest; Valkyre ignored them. He stepped quickly into the light, then past it, reaching up to touch the bars of the last cell but stopping as he remembered the barrier.

"Iris," he whispered.

The boy was there, all right. The same still, lean form, shoulders hunched and head lowered so he couldn't see the face, the dull, silvery hair draped over the small figure. He looked so small and weak, still clothed in the same threadbare shirt and pants, legs curled up in front of him, metal cuffs around his ankles running along chains to heavy plates nailed to the wall. There were shackles around his thin wrists too, binding the two together, joined by a slightly thinner chain from around the boy's neck.

Completely unnecessary, crude.

"Iris," Valkyre spoke again, louder, trying to draw the other's attention. The form shifted slightly, chains

clunking heavily on one another. Finally, he looked up.

He shouldn't have been so surprised. But he was. Something broke in Valkyre when he saw Iris' tired eyes, blank as stone, sunken gray and emotionless. There was a smudge of dirt on his cheek, but he hadn't erased it. His hair half-hung over his face, tangled and soiled. But it was just how... absolutely apathetic he looked, like there was no recognition or realization. Like... he'd given up, ceased to care. About anything. About him, Valkyre. About himself.

"Iris, I"- The hunter broke off, startled. He hadn't noticed it before, shrouded by the boy's long, mussed locks of hair. The angel swore under his breath again.

A charm seal. It could hardly be called any type of seal at all; it looked like just a crude, child-made necklace of the oddest items put together- a murky-white feather with triangular bits cut from the edges and dried brown blood along the end of the quill, a tuft of ugly brown fur, a porous bone drilled through with a hole, a gray-blue piece of what looked like a snake's shedded skin.

They were, in reality, just as ugly as they seemed to be- they were magical bits of the different types of creatures they'd come from- angel, demon, were, all sorts of creatures.

It was supposed to serve like a seal, but it wasn't anything like a finely-honed, carefully crafted true seal made from the right stones. These were the raw essences of a being's magic, and the effect was supposed to be that it would subdue an opposite type of creature. But it didn't soothe as real seals did; it forcibly brought up one's blood to a physical object, which would rule it down only through plain contact and aura, which caused outright pain and shattering nerves as it pushed down the other blood. The charms were considered crude and only used if absolutely necessary; and, in this case, often enough on criminals.

And Iris' seal was a string of all of the charms put together- all of the bits of feather, skin, and bone torn from bodies- probably all dead by now. It had... to feel horrible. No wonder Iris was so still, so wordless. ...But still...

"Iris, please!"

Valkyre felt a sinking feeling as he tried again; the boy only blinked slowly, face still expressionless.

...What'd happened to him?

The angel hissed and whirled away from the cell, sweeping his wings behind him. He paused, alerted by the faraway pounding of feet and shouting voices. The guards were returning.

Valkyre glanced around the cell doors nearby. A hand gripped one of the metal bars, bright eyes glinting out at him. The angel sighed, then stooped down and jerked the set of keys off of the unconscious guardsman's form. He picked calmly through the keys, then walked over and stopped in front of the nearest cell block. Someone inside looked up at him, flashed a stained-tooth grin.

"Listen up," he said, voice low and smooth, but loud enough for the others around the hallway to hear, "I'm going to let you out." Murmurings ran around. Valkyre ignored the others' whisperings, only mildly blinking as the one in the cage before him shuffled forward, a gaunt face and stubble on his chin, dim lighting showing pale scars over his dirty skin.

"I consider this a favor to you all, so I expect a little favor in return."

He glanced around; some of these were just impure creatures trying to live, others were true cutthroats and criminals. He didn't expect any of them to really listen to him, but it didn't matter. He doubted any of them would really care enough to try and kill him; it would be completely pointless. He reached up and unlocked the first cell, pushing open the creaking door, stepping back.

"Take out the goddamned guards," he muttered under his breath. Valkyre moved past the cell and unlocked the next amid the burst of talking and cries around him. A few more locks, then he tossed the set of keys to the nearest creature that'd shuffled out of his cell.

The angel ignored the bustle, ignored the stamp and shout as the alarms nearby went off and the guards' shouts could be heard, footsteps coming down the stairway. More cell doors swung open; more

figures stepping into the dimmed lights; some of them might well've been a bounty he'd captured himself, but it didn't matter anymore.

Valkyre stepped back to Iris' cell. The boy didn't react, only remained slumped where he was, head dropped again. The angel frowned, then stepped back, glow of angelic magic gathering in his palm. A sweep of his hand before him and the barrier shattered with a blast that echoed and jarred Valkyre's bones, the steel bars bending and crumpling like they were made of paper, folded and twisted out of the way.

The hunter stepped inside quickly, reaching down and breaking the chains around the boy's body with a touch and more magic. The links made a light, hollow clink on the steel floor.

Valkyre paused and stared Iris, but the boy didn't even lift his head in acknowledgement. He paused, then reached down and ripped away the charm seal. The broken necklace clicked and rattled as it hit the ground. The angel saw Iris flinch, drawing in a quick, sharp breath. He looked up, blinking, eyes blank, empty. It seemed like forever before he finally spoke up. "...Val... kyre?"

The hunter sighed softly, then gathered up Iris in his arms, ignoring the sting and shiver as the boy's presences slipped over his skin. He barely weighing anything, body limp and still, doll-like. Valkyre stepped out of the cell, hands gripping tightly to Iris' cold, smooth skin, fragile as paper. He couldn't help it; he leaned down to study the young boy in his arms, cradled like a newborn infant, so delicate and precious.

Iris looked up, slowly, eyes half-lidded, bleary. He smiled, just slightly, softly, almost impossible to see. Valkyre felt his heart swell, and he realized why.

It was because he loved to see Iris smile. Just that rare, fleeting glimpse at someone inside the shell of myths and magic, that flickering candle of soul in the empty abyss of antithesis...

The boy reached up a hand, touched him just above the bridge of his nose, on the fading, healed wound of the knife cut from the night before. Valkyre trembled slightly as the fingers ran down and paused on his lips, soft touch like a fluttering kiss, sweeter than dewdrops. Then Iris dropped his hand, closing his eyes with a little sigh.

Valkyre shook himself mentally, stepping forward again. He halted at the figure before him, head cocked to one side, eyes a swirl of green-blue, cheery, mirthful. "Believe this belongs to your lil' pup," he quipped, holding out his hand. Something dangled from it, glittering. The tearstone.

The other cocked his head to the other side, then quickly looped the necklace over Iris' drooped head. He turned, and there was a brief stretching, ripping sound, tearing up the human cloth as the hindquarters showed and the hooves clipped on the ground, and then the centaur was gone.

Valkyre saw Iris' face settle, peaceful. He brought the boy's cool body a little closer against his own, then ran.

+--

AN: Loooooooong chapter to make up for anything/give you guys sustenance for a little while.

It's tough, coming back to school after the midterms... I'm suffering too, just so you know... got gym class and driver's ed. x_X Hope I don't crash!

Well, I don't really like this scene, it seems a bit... cliché... or something of the sort...

But I'm glad my commenters are still there, yes I am. :) I try to make Iris [and all of my stories for that matter] not too unpredictable, but also different than the norm... If you can tell what's going to happen from moment to moment, please tell me. -_-; Also, I try to keep things realistic [ha, in the fantasy category] and all.... I always hated stories with a million terms from a made-up world [why I could never read through a Tamora Pierce book] so this mysterious mass of... stuff will just be, 'the state' or 'the eastern continent' or shoot, I'm not gonna give them names, I never remember them anyways. -_-;

Rather iffy chapter overall though... I need something I'm better at writing with.

Also, yet another note... I have noticed now that the chapters are screwed up in the scrollbar... that pisses me off more than it should, [o_O] but just ignore and browse carefully... ^^; I'm hoping it's something that'll fix itself out in time... hopefully... Sorry if it's inconvenient for any of you. :)

I've been working ahead some in Iris, and I feel nice, so next chappie's due on thurs, got it? It's a shorter one, actually, but heck, this one's good, right? [Good as in, long. ^^;]

Well, thanks for the return of the comments, and please keep them up! I really do beg for attention... it's sad... I can't help it, I'm so sorry... [ego, the ego... must control the ego...]

Btw, this is definately gonna over-take Nocte chapter-wise. I just know it. And I'm still going strong!

^_____^- [very excited]

Thank you all! Ciao. :) ::bows::

19 - Purse

Iris

+--

"...Are you okay?"

Iris nodded, eyes not meeting, as he was dropped to his feet. Valkyre had wanted to get out much quicker, as word of the raid on the jail station was spreading like wildfire, but he needed to be prepared. He held on to Iris' hand this time as he stepped back into the white-wash waiting room.

Maeve, in the middle of conversation with a man behind the counter, looked up with expectation barely covered by mock surprise. "Ah, Valkyre."

The angel glanced around the room quickly, nervous. He had to get going, fast. The woman beat him to it, picking up the knapsack at her feet, high heels clicking on the linoleum floor as she handed it to him.

"You came for this, hmm?"

She smiled, then looked at Iris next to the hunter, eyebrows raised. "...I thought so," she murmured, giving Valkyre a look that made him frown, not quite sure what it was supposed to mean. "...Maeve, I"- She laughed, batting away his words with a hand tipped in polished nails. "Don't worry," she said, "I won't give anything away. You're more valuable to me as a client." Valkyre opened his mouth, wanting to ask her about the tainted blood, but she took his hand, pressing something into it. The hunter pulled his arm back, stared at the small leather purse in his fingers.

"You forgot your money, you know. You're much too hasty about things," she added with a sigh, chewing on a fingernail.

The angel started to pocket the purse, then stopped, frowning. He held up a small silvery key. "...What's this?"

Maeve rolled her eyes. "It's late, hun, you need somewhere to stay the night. Remember that old dump we used to use while the office was down? It's still there, and it'll be safe enough."

Valkyre made to speak again, then paused. Finally, he muttered, "I notice the weight of the purse only seems enough for two bottles..."

Maeve laughed, turning away. "Consider it the thanks, mmkay?" The man behind the counter was still studying Iris with raised eyebrows, but rolled his eyes at her. Valkyre nodded and tucked away the purse and key.

He gave Iris' hand a small, reassuring squeeze, and they left.

+--

AN: Bleh, rather boring chapter, [and extremely, pathetically short] but c'mon now, we've got to be SENSIBLE, right??

..... ::is greeted by a long silence::oh, well. It's hard to get by without food and supplies and all, so this is a necessary chapter. XP

Well, thanks for keeping up the comments, and congrats on a new commenter! ::beams::

^ _____ ^-

Not much left to say... Promise to have the next chappie up by... say, Saturday? Maybe Friday, 'cuz I feel like celebrating the end of another tortuous school week. :)

Thank you!!

20 - Mutual

Iris

+--

"Iris."

The boy turned to look at him, drooping shoulders and slip of the edge of his shirt showing the inky black bat tattoo, caught from flitting off his skin. He blinked wordlessly.

Valkyre sighed, dropping the knapsack into the lightly-furnished room and sitting on the edge of the bed, running a hand through his raven-black hair. "I-I... I'm sorry about... about..."

He sighed again in exasperation, staring down at the floorboards, slightly, smoothly worn. How could he put it into words?? He'd been so careless, so absentminded and over-confident he could handle a few hunters, a few warrants and wanted posts, could handle the entire goddamned state after him. He- Valkyre was startled as Iris suddenly stepped closer, wrapping his arms around the hunter, holding him in a surprisingly tight embrace, face buried into his shirt. The angel paused, then draped his arms over the boy's back, feeling the dry sobs through Iris' small, heaving chest against him, thin arms shaking. He slowly pulled the boy up onto the mattress with him. Iris' strength as he clung to the hunter's waist frightened him; how scared had he been? How hurt and despairing, how sad?

Valkyre bent over, almost unthinkingly leaning down and pressed his lips softly to the boy's forehead through the tangled strands of silver-washed hair, felt the warmed body against his own, beating of a similar heart, breaths from alike lungs, both just living beings trying to survive.

"...I'm sorry," he muttered again, breathing his words into Iris' hair, but it didn't feel right to talk. Valkyre closed his eyes and felt the body of the boy curled up in his arms, satisfied to wait out the empty, dry crying and the sharp, thin arms around his waist. He understood. He knew what Iris needed. To feel him; to know he was there, that he was really, physically still with him. That whatever horrible nightmare he'd come out of was over now, and he was safe.

Valkyre bit his lower lip, looking away from the boy in his arms. ...But he'd been wrong. Iris hadn't been okay. He'd failed to keep him safe.

"...Hey..."

Iris was quieter now, breathing more normal, grip finally loosened. The boy was sagging against him, tired. "...I... I'm sorry..." Iris didn't reply, only curled up more in his lap, drawing up his knees and hugging his clenched fingers to his chest.

Valkyre sighed, reaching down to run his fingers through the boy's mussed gray hair. He was startled to see the boy flinch, drawing away. The angel was surprised, and more so, hurt. It pained him that Iris doubted his trust in him, which made him regretful for the entire incident, which was, undoubtedly, all his fault.

Iris blinked his eyes up at the hunter, slow and almost sad. "...Valkyre..." The boy rose sluggishly, movements careful and deliberate, like he was afraid he'd slip or fall, though there was nowhere to fall on. Iris wrapped his arms around the hunter's shoulders and neck, colorless gray eyes staring back at the other. "...You promise?"

Valkyre blinked, smiling softly. "...Yeah," he muttered, though he didn't even know exactly what he was agreeing to, "I promise."

Iris leaned against him, closing his eyes. He looked tired, weary, like a child lost and left on the streets,

afraid and alone. Perhaps he was one.

"...I..." Valkyre reached up, and this time Iris only smiled softly as he touched the boy's hair, slowly and gently undoing the tangles and knots. The angel smiled back lightly, though Iris' eyes were closed. "...I missed you," he managed, weakly.

Iris only nodded faintly in his calm, wordless understanding.

+--

AN: Complete. Chapter. Of. Fluff.

... -_-; Gawd that kills me. I'm horrible at writing fluff. But, well... ...they've gotta do something, right?? I dunno, I'm just trying to make things as realistic as possible... ...Kinda... ::trails off::

Well, I wanna be happy, 'cuz this is chapter 20! Whoot! Beautiful! We've gotten so far, haven't we??

^_____^- Thank you all for the comments! Only 3 continual commenters, [maybe 4, 5??] but that's fine, as long as you guys stick around and boost my spirits so often... so wonderful! ^_^ ::gush::

Luuuuuuuuuuuv. Luv for everyone. Thanks for sticking with. :)

[Sry about the short chapter (again) of nothingness, the next one'll be better, I promise. (Hopefully)]

21 - Drop

Iris

+--

Valkyre stirred his hand in the water, testing. Warm enough. The building from Maeve was a nice one, still in order though it'd been abandoned for a good while now. The heated water was a blessing. "Iris." Valkyre called, softly but loud enough for the boy to hear, who appeared with his bare feet shuffling on the slightly stained linoleum floor. The hunter rose to his feet, sighing. "You should have a bath," he commented, unable to resist reaching out and running his fingers through the boy's hair again. "The water's ready, and I-I'll see if I have any clothes you could use for a while."

Valkyre lowered his hand, lightly touching the backs of his fingers to the bat tattoo on the boy's skin. He still didn't like it being there. "...Uh, well, go ahead, okay? I'll go get the clothes..." Valkyre trailed off and stepped out of the bathroom quickly, shivering at the change from the steamy, hot room to the cooler air of the rest of the interior of the building. The angel rummaged around and managed to find a pair of black pants and a slightly stained sleeveless white shirt. It would have to do, though the pants would probably be a bit too large.

His bag was almost empty by now. They'd eaten already, finishing off most of the food he'd had left. They would have to get more soon.

The angel peeked back inside the steamy bathroom, pushing the bundle of clothes and a spare towel onto the sink top. Iris was a hunched-up form turned light gray through the foggy steam, arms wrapped around his knees. "...Uh, make sure you wash well, okay? The clothes are right here..."

Valkyre tried to give a reassuring smile when Iris turned to look at him as he made to leave.

"...Wait." The angel stopped, wincing slightly. The boy's eyes were cloudy, looking scared, hurt. "...Don't leave me..."

Valkyre looked away, coughing slightly. "Uh... I-It's just a bath, you'll be fine, I"-
"Valkyre."

Iris' face was hidden in his knees, hunched over. The hunter immediately felt regretful for whatever it was that'd made the boy so scared, and he let out a small sigh of exasperation as he stepped inside, closing the door behind him. "You, uh, want me to...?" he trailed off, mentally cursing himself for being such of a soft-hearted, bumbling idiot.

Iris didn't reply, still curled up. Valkyre gave up; he'd need a bath sooner or later, so he might as well. The hunter undressed quickly and folded up his clothes in a neat pile, then eased himself slowly into the warm water behind the boy. Iris looked back at him, and there was a small smile of relief on his face. The angel blushed, awkwardly shifting around a bit, uncomfortable at being so close. Iris' back clearly showed the small rise of the spine down the center, paralleled with the two faded scars of the impossible wings. The boy's shoulder blades were also clearly defined on the alabaster-white skin over which the tangles of his silvery hair fell.

The hunter reached over and ran his fingers through the boy's hair, damp at the ends. Valkyre was startled at first as Iris leaned back against him, but the warm water was soothing on both his weary body and his jarred nerves, and he found himself relaxing. He picked up a small bottle of soap, easing down Iris' head towards the water to wet the rest of the hair before he set himself to washing it out. The suds built up quickly, letting out a lightly perfumed scent like mint and vanilla, cleansing and gentle.

The boy remained quiet during it all, but his face seemed almost peaceful when Valkyre snatched a glance; eyes closed, expression relaxed, mouth slightly agape in what could've just been a sigh, or could've possibly been a smile.

The angel grinned to himself as he worked the bubbly foam through Iris' hair, feeling the boy's warm body pressed against him, soft and delicate, unmarred.

"...Hey."

The boy blinked open his eyes, turning his head to look at the angel. "...You're okay, aren't you?"

Valkyre knew he was only asking it again, but the worry wouldn't completely leave him, and he sought the reassurance to try and ease away the guilt. Iris nodded just faintly.

Valkyre sighed, rinsing out the last of the soapy suds from the boy's hair, which, under the water, had been an even brighter and glossy silver. The hunter sighed, then tentatively put a hand on the boy's shoulder, smiling briefly as he felt the boy's small, warmed fingers wrap around his own.

"Iris... Can you... can you tell me what happened back there?"

The fingers squeezed at his, then slid away. Iris kept his back turned, not saying anything. Valkyre frowned, gently rubbing the boy's shoulder. "...Please? Can you tell me?"

The hunter drew his hand back slowly as Iris curled up on himself, wrapping his arms around his kneecaps, hunched over. Valkyre felt a pang of guilt seeing the boy like that, pulling back his hand and running his fingers over the tattoos on his own skin. The dark markings looked like they'd seeped out of his veins, black blood twisting into shapes, slowly stealing over his body.

He was almost too caught up in his own thoughts to realize that the boy was murmuring softly, in a faint, breathy voice he almost couldn't hear.

"...He was there... he saw me..."

"...What?"

Valkyre shifted closer, water sloshing around, licking at his torso but leaving him feeling cold and washed-up. Iris was still hunched over, and he noticed now that the boy was trembling.

"...The lab... from the labs... he saw me..."

"...Who?"

Valkyre dipped his fingers in the lukewarm water, rubbing the boy's side gently, and then his hunched shoulders, seeking to soothe the tensed, quivering muscles there. Iris wasn't responding.

The hunter sighed, then leaned over and draped his arms over the boy's shoulders, pulling him back slowly, gently, and pressing his lips softly to the boy's water-logged, silvery hair. He didn't know why he did it, but whenever Iris was hurt or sad, this was the only way he knew to try and bring him back from the edge he crawled ever closer to. Valkyre found words meaningless to this boy, and all he had left was touch, was feeling coming from deep inside, threatening to overwhelm and spill out. He held on to the boy tightly, pressing more light kisses along the boy's shoulder, neck, and ear. Iris' trembling slowly ceased, and the boy leaned back slightly into his touch, sighing softly.

"...He was... from the labs?" Valkyre brushed the boy's hair from his face, delicately touching the dry cheeks and brushing against the quivering, butterfly fluttering eyelashes. "...Iris, listen, please."

The boy opened his eyes briefly, emotionless again and mottled gray. He closed them again, nodding faintly. The water around them was still warm and steamy, but he remained colorless, untouched, skin gaining no pinker shade that hinted at crimson blood and beating life in his body.

"...What happened... I was careless. I-I'm sorry. I am. And I promise... I promise I won't let it happen again. I promise I won't leave you." It didn't matter if it was from the 'labs' he kept hearing, or the state; he'd decided to make sure that Iris was never hurt again. The incident had brought upon Valkyre the startling knowledge of just how much he needed the boy; without Iris, he'd been afraid, he'd been furious, he'd been worried and confused and hurt. He couldn't stand losing him again.

Valkyre wrapped his arms tighter around the boy, blinking open his eyes to see the soft stone gray

looking back at him, wordlessly. "...Do you believe me?"

Iris smiled, making Valkyre's heart melt. He smiled back, seeing the faint, quick nod of the boy's head, the gray eyes roving and Iris' fingers brushing against the tattoos along his arm. The angel stopped, stiffening. The boy remained oblivious, small, wet fingertips tracing along the swirls and arches and tiny spikes, leaving a warm, drying trail of water on the other's arm.

Valkyre shifted uneasily, turning his eyes away. He had given himself those tattoos, caught in an almost mindless sense of emptiness as he'd worked the ink onto his skin, but it didn't mean that he liked them. He hated them, hated himself for having been so weak and so dark, so trapped within himself and unable to run, to turn and escape.

"Valkyre."

The angel blinked, turning to look at the boy.

Iris leaned up gently and kissed him.

Amethyst eyes snapped open. Valkyre was startled beyond words, beyond expression. He did nothing as he felt the small, hot mouth against his own, slick tongue pressing between his lips, one thin and frail arm wrapped around his neck. Iris' eyes were closed, peaceful, body tipped to bend up towards him.

Valkyre let his lips slide apart, and he closed his eyes as well. The feeling was something soft and sensual, completely separating him from the lukewarm water and the steamy air, leaving him in a cold, empty vacuum filled only with this one tiny touch of mouth on mouth, this miniscule embrace that cancelled out the void, cancelled out eternity.

The boy was sweet, tasting like dewdrops hanging between laden blades of grass on invisible strands of spider silk, like pure and crystalline honey the golden amber of tree sap, like the scent of the night-blooming jasmines backset by the crescent, waxing moon. It was a slow, spinning descent into velvet darkness, milky smooth and endless, beautiful, burning and whirlwind strong, lifting him from the press of humanity on the cold earth, letting him spread dusky-pure, true wings and sift through the echoes in the wind that eased him into the air.

Valkyre felt Iris break away from him, part of lips bringing him back to the slowly cooling room and the harsh stone and steel of the city, leaving him cold and washed clean, empty.

He let out a ragged breath, too stunned to speak. Iris only smiled.

+--

AN: Chapter 21, officially tying this up with Nocte. :) But this'll be going further! A-And I still think it's good!! ^_^

First kiss, too. Gawd that took a while, eh? So sorry. Hope it was a good one. :3

[My writing seems a bit different, I blame it 'cuz I took a break between writing this and reading 'Dangerous Angels' by Francesca Lia Block, I swear, she's one of the best authoresses ever... gawd...] Well, anyways. A [haha] 'steamy' chapter, 'cuz we can have bishies, but they've got to be hygienic, eh?I sure hope so. o_O

Another note... With all of the updates, you guys are all completely caught up with the chapters that I've done. This ch. was fresh off my comp., unlike the older chapters that I finished earlier [probably 'cuz they were so short ^_^] So please be patient, I'll try to get up as many updates, but there's always school and all... Okay?? Also, I've got a little one-shotty stuck in my head, so let me write that down first. :3

Thanks for all of the commenters, I've got a sudden boost so now there's 5 continual, dependable commenters! Thank you all! Ohmigosh! I'm so happy!!! [was on the verge of tears earlier]

Oh, and something that I'd like to know... Would you guys prefer if I gave the chapters one-word titles or somesuch? I'm reading over some of the chapters of Iris, and I get confused myself on what's what and when, so would titles with one word [like with Nocte] be more helpful to you all?? I'll do that if you guys

don't mind, 'cuz it bugs me too now. Numbers can get dull. :3

Thank you all very much for the comments!!! I promise to always continue with Iris!! ::bows furiously::

22 - Wolf

Iris

+--

"Valkyre?"

The angel paused in rubbing down his slick black hair over his head with a towel, glancing towards Iris, who sat like a stiff, unmoving statue across from him on the bed, not even looking in his direction, gazing out sightlessly at nothing.

"...Yes?"

Valkyre sighed as he flipped his head back up, running his fingers through the moist hair to push it back from his face. He folded up the damp towel and set it aside.

Iris remained still, and the hunter moved over across the bedsheets to touch the boy's bare shoulder, running his hand over the long, silvery-gray hair, starting to dry out nicely after a similar bout of rubbing with the towel, but still dripping water at the ends.

Iris turn back to him, eyes lowered, not meeting his gaze. Valkyre wasn't sure if he could've stood those gray eyes anyways, at least not right then.

He hadn't spoken a word about the kiss earlier, and everything had suddenly become more awkward between them. ...Then again, were they supposed to be closer?? It was... something he didn't think of that way anymore. ...No, maybe... perhaps he looked to it...? He couldn't stop thinking about the soft, fluttering press of lips on lips, but... His entire life as a solitary bounty hunter denied him any reasoning from the emotions he was feeling. He couldn't...

Valkyre sighed and brushed back the boy's hair from his shoulder, trying to keep his thoughts away.

Why did it matter? And anyways, he wasn't really any kind of bounty hunter anymore.

The angel lifted up the soft silvery chain around the boy's neck, the tearstone shuddering and quivering as it was lifted from where it'd been, resting on the boy's bare chest. Valkyre fingered the cool, twisting metal links, trying to ignore the warm but alabaster-white skin beneath him.

He blinked, then let the chain drop. The seal settled down, dully glinting in the pale light. The angel closed his eyes.

He wasn't a bounty hunter anymore. He wasn't really making any money, and his meager stock of food was just about gone. Iris... He and Iris were nothing more than fugitives on the run, living off of whatever was nearby, whatever someone offered them.

...It wouldn't work for much longer. They couldn't keep running forever. ...What was supposed to happen? What could he do, to get out of this mess? He'd plunged in without thinking, and now he had no way out. The state had almost unlimited resources, and the bounty hunters would all like a chance at Iris if they had the opportunity...

He couldn't keep running from them. It was just impossible. ...When would it all end? ...How?

"...Valkyre?"

The angel made an 'mmn' noise in his throat, blinking and focusing on the present again. Iris met his eyes only briefly, and Valkyre gave him a soft, quick smile.

The boy reached up and touched the other's hand, which'd been resting just above his shoulder.

"...What is it?"

Iris didn't reply at first, but he rubbed his fingers along the black-tattooed back of the angel's hand, then

pulled it near the crook of his neck, hair pushed away. Valkyre stared down at his hand as Iris pulled his fingers away. It rested over the bat tattoo.

"...Valkyre..."

The angel didn't reply, but his fingers twitched slightly and his brows drew closer together, uneasy.

"...Can you do... another one?"

Valkyre blinked, dark violet eyes at attention, sharp.

"-Why?" His voice came out low but quick, almost demanding.

Iris only smiled, eyes lowered, not seeing him. "...A wolf," he murmured quietly.

The angel paused, then tipped the boy's chin up, making the gray pools of eyes look back at him through the dulled silver bangs.

"...Why, Iris? Why do you want these...?"

The boy blinked slowly, hands running up and pulling at Valkyre's fingers, the angel immediately dropping his hand. Iris smiled faintly, running his small, thin fingers over the black crescents and curling vines.

"...It..."

The boy sighed, almost inaudibly, then leaned over and rested against Valkyre, closing his eyes and lowering his head, arm wrapped around the angel's side. "...It helps," he murmured. "...Like you..."

His words trailed off as he looked back up, leaving the end open for Valkyre to fill in.

The hunter frowned, touching the back of his hand to the flitting bat tattoo. "...I-I don't know... ...I don't like this, Iris."

The boy only smiled and nodded slightly, closing his eyes again.

Valkyre sighed in exasperation, knowing it pointless but still asking, "...Are you sure?"

Iris didn't reply, and the angel sat quietly with the boy leaning against him for a while longer, running his fingers through the wet ends of the silvery-gray hair. It was drying out slowly, and even in the dim lighting, it was much prettier cleaned and brushed out, draping down the boy's back whisper-soft and smooth, surreal.

After a while, he sighed and slowly pushed himself away, pulling out the black, tipped pen from the knapsack at the edge of the bed.

"...You said... a wolf?"

Iris didn't reply, but he smiled lightly and turned his back, pulling over his hair and draping it over his left shoulder. Valkyre paused, then moved up closer and touched the smooth skin over the right shoulder blade. Opposite from the bat. "...Here?"

Iris remained silent, so Valkyre started, breathing on the tip of the pen to get the ink flowing. The angel was more careful this time, keeping the lean, thickly-furred form of the running wolf small and concentrated. The ink was dark and sank down into the white skin instantly, rush of black on a clean canvas, and the fur and legs grew longer, more elaborate and detailed.

He stopped, pulling away, and quickly set the pen back.

"...Iris..." Valkyre shook his head, frowning. "...This isn't..." The angel closed his eyes, but the boy had paid no heed to his words, and only crawled up next to him, making the hunter relax some and eventually sneak under the blankets, pulling them up over both of them, Iris curled up around him, small body warm and delicate, at ease.

"...It's okay," he whispered quietly.

Valkyre reached around and flicked out the light, sighing and tucking in the blankets around them. It was a bit embarrassing for him to be like this, for him to feel the press of warm skin and a fluttering, beating heart near his own, but it was also soothing, and somehow comfortable, despite whatever ran under the boy's pale surface.

He wanted to say something more; to say how much he was sorry, to ask a million questions, to make

promises and to reassure, but Iris' breathing was calm and slow near him, small fingers curled up, legs tucked under.

Iris was already asleep.

+--

AN: Gawd, I'm so sorry, it's been so long since the last update. I haven't given up on Iris, not by a long shot, but, it's just, I've been working on other stuff lately... Eheheh.

I've been working on an earlier-abandoned website layout of mine, and I've been hammering out the html these past days. XD I'm bad at it, but it's rather soothing and kind of fun, so....

Sorry though, and the website's mostly functional and to my satisfaction, so hopefully there'll be more time for Iris. :)

But as well, I've gotten less free time overall now that the third marking period's on to me, and I've got tons of schoolwork... [the most ironic of which is from my visual arts class, which I now thoroughly abhor] but, uhm, yah.

Please remain patient, I've got some plotting to do for Iris, but stuff should be happening soon! ...I-I just need a way to get it to happen... X3

Anyway, this chapter was a bit random and stuffed with pointless fluff [mostly!] but it's there, and it took me a while to proof-read [I type more lines than I read, often, when editing... isn't that weird??] But, well, it's chapter 22! This is my longest story ever, more than Nocte now, officially!

So thanks a lot to everyone for the comments, and please keep them up, because I need the support to continue! Thank you!

23 - Trapped

Iris

+--

Darkness. Tunnels.

He was running, feet echoing on silence, dirt laid thick over rusted steel, walls dripping like glittering, laughing stars.

He couldn't see the stars from here, couldn't see the crescent or the half or the almost-full but not quite moon. Where were...?

Where was Iris?

Spiders crawling along the walls. Paradoxes flitting past, light and dark and gray. Bloody red and burnished gold and moonlit gray. Sickly green staining brown. Where...?

Up ahead, glimmer of gray. Iris. Turning around to face him, eyes hollow. No expression.

He was reaching out his hand, trying to shout but wordlessly, nothing coming out. Choking on dust, on rising ashes, swirling around his feet.

Iris blinks, and his eyes are red, demonic, teeth bared. Terrifying, so much he stops running, frozen.

And then the boy suddenly collapses, red stain of blood everywhere, splattering.

He tries to jump forward, but he's unable to reach him, stopped by iron bars, staring into the cell, shapes flitting past him, shadowy and sped-up, all seeking to escape. Escape from what??

He's pushed down, eyes glinting down at him, teeth in a smiling face, and he fights back, stumbling to his feet again. His wings feel torn, feel like they're dragging on the ground. But when he tries to turn and see them, they're not there.

Iris.

He whirls around again, sees the blur of metal bars. Human world.

But he's trapped. He's on the inside, and Iris is the one standing on the outside, looking in, head tilted slightly to one side. Eyes gray again, faintly smiling.

He tries to speak, tries to go towards him, but he can't move, wings dragging, feet sinking into the dirt and steel. Humans' waste of the world. Destruction everywhere. Silent.

Iris smiles, softly, hand reaching up slowly, fingers touching his own shoulder. He's shirtless, and the black bat comes to life under his palm, flitting over his body, against his skin, trying to get out. The wolf crawls over the other shoulder, teeth nipping at the corner of the boy's eye, thick fur bristled. Howling, soundlessly.

Iris raises his hand, palm up, and the bat flies down his shoulder, rising, lifting itself from his fingertips until it's free, flitting away into the dark of the tunnel. The wolf lopez along his arm, rising muzzle-first from the palm, then forces its way out and dives towards the ground, huge and growling, hackles bared, thick fur stirring up the ashes. It vanishes into darkness.

The bars are shattering around him, stones crumbling to dust. Dark, inky midnight black, without the stars or clouds or moon.

Iris smiles, then vanishes in the darkness.

+--

AN: Ehehehe. I can't help it. I've got a thingy for sticking in random bits of stuffos. ^^;

It's just a dream, if you can't figure it out. Don't worry.

Well, this is real short and pointless [but I felt like sticking it up anyways, 'cuz it's snowed yesterday [A whole lot, too!]] and I'm seizing this opportunity! X3

Over a foot! Yah! Up to my knees! ::flounders and falls in the snow, then doesn't get up::

...Yuu. Snow.

So. I actually have most of the next chapter up, and I'm working on editing it. I'll have it up tmrw or the day after, to make up for this one's crappiness.

...And now if you'll excuse me.

Snow day~!!!! ::bounces off::

Thanks for reading, sorry for the short chapter, and see ya next! X3

24 - Journey

Iris

+--

Valkyre woke with a start, fingers curling up emptily on the bedsheets beside him, lightly ruffled and barely showing the signs of having been disturbed.

The angel shook off the last wisps of the dream, immediately out of bed and pacing across the room, panicking suddenly at the realization that he was alone. It was still dark outside, the sky an inky midnight blue dripped with smudgy-gray clouds that skudded past.

Valkyre glanced around the darkened, shadow-filled room, but he already knew that Iris wasn't there. ...Where could he have gone to at such of an hour?? The angel forced himself to take a deep breath and pause, closing his eyes and trying to relax. His fists were still clenched tight, but he breathed evenly and slowly, heartbeat settling down.

A long pause, then Valkyre blinked his eyes back open, exhaling softly. He looked slightly confused, but relieved. He'd detected the boy's presence, and he knew that Iris was still about the building. No one else, unless heavily hidden, was nearby, though that still didn't help his frayed nerves.

Calmly, the angel set about packing up. It was still twilight, yes, but most of the night had passed and daylight would come in a few hours. He searched the rooms and took a few things he was sure Maeve probably wouldn't mind of miss, and left behind some of his belongings he wouldn't be needing, but didn't want to permanently lose. ...Hopefully, he'd be back someday.

Valkyre paused, hand in the knapsack, feeling the smooth, slim form of the pen inside the pocket. He was tempted to leave it behind, to just put it away, tucked out of sight; suddenly, the object was nothing more than something he loathed, but his feelings were divided between himself and Iris. Clearly, the boy wanted the tattoos, though he couldn't understand why... but he hated them so much, the black marring the pure white on the boy's back.

...Was it something like that? Night and day? Did Iris seek to blur the undefined, endless expanse of white, to bring out darkness like what ran in his veins...? ...It made no sense.

The angel sighed, then sat down on the edge of the bed, leaving the pen inside his bag. He leaned back, shaking his head, needing to think clearly.

They would be going now. But to where?

Valkyre closed his eyes, contemplating. He'd found Iris in a popular city rather close to the state's capital, and they'd been flitting about since then rather randomly, only content on being able to get away from the public postings and the eyes that would recognize them. They needed somewhere more stable, somewhere safer.

The capital lay to the south of the continent, near the coast. There was desert to the west, and more large port cities to the east. Valkyre wanted to avoid them both, knowing too well the empty, barren landscape of the desert- it contained no sand or dirt, having all long since been washed away, and all that was left was nothing more than an endless expanse of sheer rock, hard and cracked, containing no water, no food, and no life. It would be suicide to so much as consider lingering along the edges.

And the port cities, though much wealthier, were also strictly enforced as city-states under the capital, and would no doubt be strongly guarded and patrolled.

...They still had the north.

Up to the north, the land grew barren, edged by the desert, but it was more distant and the capital, though powerful as it was, has a looser grip around the northern city-states. It would be a safer place, though harder to live in. ...But it could possibly work, just for now.

Valkyre blinked, sitting up. ...And even further north... ...there was the mountain range. ...And whatever it was that lay beyond.

Perhaps, just perhaps, if they were able to escape and be forgotten by the rest of the world... They could go there. The mountains were said to contain some of the last folds and hidden valleys of untouched, pure lands, but even Valkyre couldn't really bring himself to believe it. The range was dangerous, steep and fickle, almost inhabitable.

But if you could get across... who knew what lay beyond? Everything over there was simply myth.

...Maybe. Just maybe, if they could...

The angel sighed and stood up, shaking his head. 'They'. His own thoughts were already encompassing Iris, as if they would always stay together.

...Would they?

Valkyre closed his eyes and breathed slowly. ...He would try.

The angel looked out the small window by the bed, staring up at the dark sky. How was he supposed to get through all of this, with just himself and Iris?

...Raguel.

Valkyre scowled, glancing around at the shadows of the room, though he knew that the demon-vampire wouldn't be there. Still, he felt uneasy.

Raguel had said that he'd find him later... The angel sorely wanted to wish that he wouldn't. At the same time, he was still anticipating. Would Raguel really show up?

Valkyre didn't like him, and he still didn't quite believe that he could be a dependable ally, but he wanted to know what he had to do with Iris.

The angel sighed, then rose to his feet, slinging the knapsack over his back.

He'd think about it all later. They had to go.

+--

AN: A rather boring chapter of plotting-out-ness.... ...I need another word to stand for 'big, ominous, but undetailed and unnamed governmental thingy...' ^^;

Chu. Told you I don't like Raguel. ...Mmyes.

Okay then, gimme a break for a bit 'cuz I've got requests to do [kinda] and still lots of hmwk and tests, and 'cuz, well... ...I don't know what happens next! XD I need to plan it out!

Chapters could be taking a while now, I'm sinking down a bit... But not stopping! Nawp! Never!

So, keep up with me, 'kay? Commentos = happy me and more thinking/brainstorming and more writing and more UPDATES!

...That type of math is easy enough to figure out, ne? :)

See ya, and thanks.

25 - Beautiful

Iris

+--

Flickering lights, like the fluttering heartbeat of a songsparrow, clutched tightly but delicately between warm fingers, ruffle of downy feathers as they were stirred by the soft, sighing wind that swept and turned the buildings to stone, remaining immobile and still. The lights flickered.

Gray and black, steel and glass. Humans and others alike hurrying down the shadowed streets, the maze of towers competing to reach the sky. Dark, thick smog turning to the same dark gray of clouds, shredded bits floating on the intangible wind. Steel and glass striving to catch his eyes, begging to be seen.

Everything served a purpose. Everything.

Iris closed his eyes as a soft gust of wind blew over him, clouds in slow motion skudding past, newspapers and bits of plastic tumbling down the streets beneath.

The edge of the stone was beneath his bare feet, sharp and real, heavy and gray. His toes curled over the edge, the corner outside of a cliff that tumbled down to world below drawn away, one lined like a grid, buildings following the streets and curbs and cold black pavement.

The boy swayed slightly back and forth, but he blinked his eyes back open, smell of smog and asphalt and oil fading, dulled. Iris stared down at the city-scape, slowly absorbing the shattered-mirror windows of the buildings, orderly like the street's grid, the darkness fought back weakly and in tentative pushes from the streetlamps and other lights inside of the buildings, gray and patched white, black and brick and colorless.

Glass bits glittered brightly from beneath a streetlamp, waiting to be crushed to dust. Everything moved so slowly now, heavy weight of the inky night settling over their shoulders, making them sluggish, tired. Day would be a long time in breaking as dawn.

Another light sweep of the wind, nothing more than a sigh. Iris felt the tearstone around his neck bobble, tapping gently under his collarbone. He closed his eyes again, feeling the hot and cold and stiff and soft and stilled blood flowing through him. Subdued, but it wouldn't work. Not forever. Not ever.

"Iris."

The voice was familiar now, soft and low. Like another sigh of the wind.

The boy looked over his shoulder, saw the figure standing behind him on the roof, dark hair ruffled lightly, knapsack slung over his shoulder. The rich violet eyes held him, patient and understanding.

...Could he understand? Ever? ...Please?

The angel stepped closer slowly, boots crunching on the cement. Glitter again of glass.

"...What do you see?"

The city lay sprawled out before them, magnificent and uprising, defiant and triumphant. Defeated and battered, wasteland and darkness, confusion and coldness. Beautiful and ugly.

Iris didn't speak, but he stepped back just slightly from the edge, reaching out slowly and touching the other's fingertips.

Valkyre responded with just a faint twitch of his hand, smiling lightly, as if only to himself. Delicate, so fragile. Beautiful.

"...Ready to go?"

Iris smiled softly in reply, lowering his eyes and nodding slightly. Move on. Forget. Don't forget. Live. Ready to die, waiting to die. Live. Please.

The boy was startled as the angel suddenly stepped behind him and swept his light frame up into against his body, arms against the back of his neck and behind his knees, holding him gently and warmly above the ground, swinging.

Valkyre grinned down at the boy, eyes bright in the darkness, alive. More beautiful than the gray-black night.

"It'll be faster this way."

The angel's seal was already out of sight, and he spread his black wings that edged and blended into the dark. Ebony silk and velvet, eternal.

"...Okay?"

Iris didn't reply, only let his head rest against the other's shoulder, closing his eyes. He felt the tensing in the body around him, then the whirl and rush as they rose up into the air, weightless, travelling with the clouds, black on black on black.

Beautiful. Eternal.

+--

AN: Chapter of rather a lot of nothingness...

But good news! I've been plotting a lot of things out, and I have the next coupla chappies all thought-out and begun! Lotsa stuff are going to be happening, as I've decided to step up the pace a bit. :)

So new charries and plotline and super-crunchy-action! ^ _____ ^-

So be patient and keep commenting please! If a chapter is taking a while, and you have not commented, then comment! -And then the chapter will probably come out faster! :3

So a rather uneventful chapter, but hope you like it nonetheless. I'm trying to get out a tone for Iris. :)

Thank you, and see you next!

26 - Paradox

Iris

+--

It didn't take him long to realize that he was being followed.

Even so, Valkyre immediately cursed himself mentally for having been so lax. The angel glanced down at the ground beneath him, sweep of another city, this one more rugged, more empty and overgrown, more of a wasteland than sanctuary.

Movement. Incredibly fast, for travelling by ground.

He was low, perhaps too low. Dawn would be coming soon, and he'd have to land and hide, so he'd been considering this town. Where almost no one lived, he thought it'd be safe.

But someone was there. More than one.

And they were following him.

Darkness, their limbs a blur in the dark, flashing bits of what could be pale skin or metal or glass. Two shapes, limber and quick.

What he found was that not only could they keep up with him, which they were doing with quick, silent and blurred movements as they leapt from rooftop to top and over the streets, all-too quick to be human, leaps too high and too still, too impossibly silent.

Not only were they keeping up with him, but they were gaining on him.

A flash, a link like a spider-web cable, stretched out in an arc. As if between them.

Iris, curled up against him, shivered. The boy knew they were here; he'd gone still a while ago, brow furrowed, body shaking, shivering. He'd alerted Valkyre in the first place.

Iris looked up at the angel now, gray eyes sheltered, hurt. "Val... kyre..."

The other blinked, frowning. "...What?" He bent his head down, almost close enough to touch. The boy was scared, quivering. He was truly afraid of this, of them...

"...They... they're coming for me... They..."

Valkyre sighed lightly, feeling his heart tug. He banked his wings, starting to come down. They couldn't run like this. He had to land. They'd have to face the hunters.

"...It'll be okay," he whispered. "I won't let you go."

Iris was shaking his head, whimpering softly, eyes imploring, desperate. "Valkyre, no... ..don't know... ..They're not... they're..."

The angel leaned in again, pressing his lips just lightly to the boy's forehead, cold and clammy under his mouth. "We have to," he murmured.

He pulled away, then looked below him. The two figures danced like marionettes, following him easily.

The angel strived ahead, managing to pull ahead of them, aided by gravity as he folded his wings and dropped towards the ground.

Valkyre's ebony wings snapped open as the dirt of a clearing hurtled up at him, and his boots sank firmly into the soft earth, already pivoted and facing the direction the two hunters had been coming from.

The angel set Iris down gently, the boy still shivering and clinging to him. He was whispering things, shaking his head. "Please... ..don't, Valkyre..."

It was unsettling, but he had no choice. Valkyre turned away.

They were here.

Two figures, like twins, dropping gracefully from the roofs, landing half-crouched, both rising at the same time, mirror images. Too impossibly well-timed.

They came closer, smooth catwalk, identical in more than just movement. Both in black clothing, indescrpt. Pale, alabaster-white skin showing on their hands and faces.

Two. They stopped, and Valkyre tensed, trying to study and predict their movements, taking in the lithe bodies and the calm, steady steps. Inhuman. But not quite identical.

They were different now, he noticed. Different.

On the left, the figure was slimmer, more curved and with longer legs. Female.

Her hair was milky, colorless white, running freely down her back to knee level, straight and almost elegant. There was something underneath her right eye, but he couldn't make out quite what it was.

White hair of the pure angel. High cheekbones, of an elfe. Thin, long fingers of the fae. Dryad. Valkyre was mentally ticking off the presences he felt, and as they rose in number, he became more and more amazed.

...No opposites. Nothing like Iris.

But still... Impossible. So many presences, so many beings. Like being half. ...Half...

He already knew what to expect of her partner.

A paradox to her, the other was a male, of a stronger, slightly thicker build, but still slim and light. His hair was one of the only striking differences, of an inky jet-black, also running down to his mid-back, smooth and flowing.

He looked up, eyes flashing. Vampire. Demon. Harpie. Satyr.

They both had black eyes, colorless and expressionless. A line ran between them. A cable, a string.

Some type of material he couldn't make out, glimmering lightly. Held in their hands, between them. Like a lifeline.

Two opposites. Together.

Like Iris, yet not. Never.

Valkyre stared at them, feeling surprisingly calm despite his discoveries. He felt Iris, halfway behind him, gripping his arm, fingers clenched tightly, trembling.

Even before the boy spoke, words nothing more than a hushed whisper, he knew it.

"...They're from the labs..."

+--

AN: Mm, intro of new charries. They're not that big, but the idea never left me since my first scratch version of Iris, so, heck, they'll stay. We need something to happen.

Bad descriptions. Crappity crap.

Not much else to say. Next chappie- super crunchy action! X3 Sorry if it took a while, but there's finally gonna be something good. :)

[Well, at least, I hope it'll be good... but often, when you've been told about something, you come to expect a lot, and then you get a letdown...]

Thanks a lot for reading, and keep up! :3

27 - Disconnected

Iris

+--

"Iris."

Her voice was smooth, low and sultry, coaxing and teasing.

"We knew we'd find you again, didn't we?"

A glance to her right. The male didn't seem to react, only gazing ahead. When he spoke, his voice was straight-forward, almost monotone.

"You know you have to come back, Iris."

"You belong."

Taking turns speaking, voices just barely different, bodies still, matched.

Valkyre stepped forward, seeing the two sets of ebony eyes shift to him, as if seeing him for the first time. Judging.

"...Iris is staying with me."

The angel saw the male flinch, lips curling back to show white teeth, like the start of a snarl. He could almost hear a growling under the other's breath.

The female, on the other hand, seemed calm, amused. Cat and mouse, just playing a game.

"Well, now. Isn't this interesting?"

She looked at her partner, as if again expecting a response. "Wouldn't you say, Rheis? Our little Iris, with a..." She cut off, studying him, trying to pick out a word.

"...Angel."

Rheis, the male, had spoken up, still glowering through his black bangs, sharp teeth flashing. "...An impure angel, Eire. Pay him no heed."

The female, Eire, seemed confused for a moment, thin brows crinkling, then straightening out, face perfect, unflawed.

"Iris, darling, you need us..."

"...Don't die, Iris..."

"...Come back..."

"Come home."

Their speaking, back and forth, so smooth it was but a continued, endless sentence, made Valkyre nervous, unsettled. How did they do that??

The angel glanced at Iris. The boy seemed petrified, shivering, trembling.

Valkyre stepped forward again, magic building up in the palm of his hand. He knew his battle wouldn't have any place for blades of steel. The words bit into him, shaking him, but he refused to back down now.

"He's not going anywhere," Valkyre spoke, voice low, warning.

A blur of movement, and he barely had his arm up quick enough to fend off a blow, Rheis' leg immediately snapping back, splash of dark magic barely countered as the dark-blooded male struck at him again and again, lightning-fast and relentless.

Valkyre was sent stumbling back, dodging blows that tore up the dirt and raised dust as it sank into building walls, crumbling brick to pebbles. Something crackled in the air, static.

A scream, and the angel whirled around, startled. He'd been so completely occupied, he hadn't even managed to think about the other one, Eire, across which the cable was strung, impossibly untangled and spread between the two, perfectly straight.

Iris was the one screaming, the boy suddenly alive and thrashing, fighting back. The female had her fingers clenched around the boy's arm, and she was leaning over him, holding him down by the head, looking like she was whispering something in his ear, smile on her lips.

"Iris"-

Valkyre had looked away too long, and the blow caught him in the side, sending him crashing to the ground, choking for air as a booted foot came down hard over his throat, cutting off his air. Rheis was looking down at him, head tilted slightly to one side, grinning, watching wordlessly as he writhed below, trying to push him off but unable to do anything, the pressure on him crushing. The force was impossibly strong, the face leering down at him, wordlessly mocking, his vision starting to blacken and blur...

A flash of black, and suddenly, he was wrenched free, gasping for air, momentarily paralysed as the oxygen flushed out his lungs, bringing him back to life. Someone stood over him, black.

But it wasn't Rheis. The dark-blooded one was on the ground, snarling, rising soiled with the dirt and powdered with dust, hissing between his teeth.

Valkyre tried to sit up, tasting blood mixed with the grainy earth in his mouth, side aching.

Raguel looked down at him, unmatched eyes calm and perhaps faintly amused.

"I told you I'd find you again."

The angel stared up impassively, then tried to rise to his feet, flinching suddenly and guarding instinctively as Rheis suddenly lept up, snarling.

Raguel was suddenly in front of him, fighting off the blow, striking back with one of his own, movements impossibly fast, liquid and smooth.

Valkyre stared at him for a moment, at the flawless fighting before him, both pale-skinned men nothing more than blurs, Raguel's actions calm and collected, Rheis' becoming more and more erratic, frantic and desperate. Purple eyes widened momentarily, something flashing for nothing more than a moment. On Raguel's neck, on the back of it. Something blue-black.

"Traitor!! Get out of the way!" Rheis was snarling, hissing. Valkyre shook his head, forcing himself up and trying to ignore the words. He didn't have time to think about it now.

The angel took off towards Iris, who'd collapsed on the ground, curled up on himself, Eire's arms wrapped around him, still whispering things into his ear. Valkyre saw her long, fingernailed hand curled around the necklace. She ripped it off, and Iris jerked as if attached by a string, crying out softly.

The angel limped forward, wings outspread. Eire stared up at him suddenly, black eyes flashing, interrupted. She rose, still holding the tearstone in her delicate, thin hand, broken ends of the chain glinting silver and dangling. He noticed it now- the mark underneath her eye was a set of some type of thin, wire-like strands, melding back under her pale skin.

"Leave him, angel. You don't know who he is," she hissed, eyes narrowed. "You don't understand."

Valkyre shook his head. "I don't care," he replied, voice drawn taunt, magic spreading and thickening around him, power flickering between his fingers. "I won't let you hurt him."

Eire pulled away from the boy, steps graceful like a feline's, one foot in front of the other.

She laughed. "It's not about pain, angel. You could never know. You don't know anything!"

She darted forward, suddenly flaring pure, fallen-snow white wings, neon-bright magic lashing out before her. Somewhere else, Valkyre heard another set of wings unfurl.

He dodged the blow, striking at Eire's exposed back, but her wings blocked the hit, the black angel's magic like water on a lily leaf, splattering in droplets, bouncing right off and leaving no trace. Impossible. Eire struck back suddenly, bared fingernails barely missing Valkyre's face, negative-imprint trail left dissipating in the air.

The black-winged angel lashed out quickly, blow catching the female in the stomach, sending her doubled-over onto the ground, choking. Far off, Rheis stumbled.

Valkyre brought his wings forward, pinning the other down against the ground, struggling and scrambling at the crumbling dirt. She was fast, yes, but not quite as fast as Rheis. This he could hold, maybe.

...But it wouldn't work. He realized it as he looked back at where Raguel and Rheis were still fighting, endless and untiring, blurs of white and black in the slowly lighting sky, perfectly matched, like a new-born set of twins.

They'd tire. This wouldn't be able to end in time.

Valkyre slammed his wing into Eire's back again, her sharp scream threatening to pierce his ears, painful and shrill. Siren.

The angel lept away, then stopped suddenly, something brushing against his leg.

The cable. Whatever it was, the tie between the two, still there, now resting against the ground, trembling and jumping as Rheis' end continued to flit back and forth, jerked sporadically, unpredictably.

A link between them. Connecting the differences.

Pain across them, they both felt each other.

Valkyre brought his boot down quickly, pinning down a length of it to the dirt, a sudden yank at the male's end almost pulling it out right underneath him. The angel unsheathed the blade from his boot, only shift from blade to hilt in the light leather wrapped around the end, grip slicked with sweat. The cable, string, quivered beneath him.

Valkyre steadied his leg, holding the cord down. A sharp cry to his left. "Rheis!"

The angel saw the male suddenly become a blur, darting towards him, Raguel staring at him wordlessly, frozen. He had no time to think.

Valkyre sent the blade straight down through the center of the cable, hands slipping too heavily, too quickly over the guardless hilt, palms split open by the blade's edge.

He screamed.

Like fire and ice coursing, crackling through his veins, the electricity slashed through his being, unbearably searing and white-hot, flooding out his mind and body, leaving him empty and full of nothing but the pain, the endless agony that came through him and rushed out again, leaving every nerve shattered and broken, disintegrated.

Around him, he heard the other screams, echoing his own. Broken, shattered.

And then the images came.

Darkness. Steel. Neon red lights. Bubbles, water and tubes. Filtered green. Glass and metal and slabs of stone.

And the electricity, coursing through him. Another being, twin and self, linked. Two minds, together in the darkness, contemplating, chained, whispering softly without words. Eternity, waiting.

Purity, flash of white, then stolen away again. Pain returning. Unbearable. Digital, numbers everywhere, flashes and sendbacks. Neon green and white on black, blinking. Screens and static.

Ended.

Darkness.

+--

AN: Tsk tsk. And that, my friends, is why we DON'T try and find out what wonders wait us on the other side of the mystical electrical socket. :)

Yuuuuuuup. Well, a lot of action and some rather crappy dialogue, but this chapter's okay, ne? ...Is it?

o_o

Great. Now we have Raguel as... ..some... helper-kinda... guy... ..I guess he gets upped a bit in my

personal ratings. :) Just a little.

And so charries!

...But they're not so cool. I just like the idea. Digital, yum.

[In case any one can't quite figure it out, Eire is the 'light' half of all beings, and Rheis is the 'dark' half.

...Of a sort. Like, 2 opposite types, one would be perhaps considered lighter...?

And they are, apparently [ehehehe] of all types. Just 2 peoples. ...Yup. Don't know what I was thinking when I came up with this. :) Ignore the impossibilities of the wire. I... like... ...wires...]

One more charrie intro, I think, and then that should be all. I'm not good at making up [and then having to keep track of] multiple charries, so I reuse them. XD

Give me just a little bit of a break. Next chappie should be long. [The end of this chappie reminds me of what happens to my compy occasionally... ehehehe...]

Well, thanks for reading, and keep up with the comments, please! See ya!

28 - Distraction

Iris

+--

Raguel.

Valkyre knew it even before he'd fully opened his eyes, before he'd fully realized that he'd been listening to the voice, before he'd seen the ruby red and the pale yellow looking back at him, slight smile to the lips.

"Valkyre."

Behind the inky black hair, a bare room gaped back hollowly at him, cracks in the ceiling and stains along the walls. Glassless windows and a thin film of dust settled down with a sigh. Outside, it was light, gray-dusky daytime.

He sighed, trying not to groan at the same time. His body still ached, but it was something that was settling, easing back. Healing.

"How are you feeling?"

Raguel crouched before him, slight smile in his eyes. Valkyre sighed again, slowly pulling up his legs, which ached before settling into a dulled burn. "...Where..."

The angel glanced around him, and immediately saw the boy, a crumpled form leaning a distance away from him against the wall, head buried in his arms. The tearstone was back around his neck, dangling over a forearm. He couldn't tell if the boy was awake or still unconscious.

Valkyre let out a sigh of relief, closing his eyes.

"Valkyre."

The angel blinked, staring back at Raguel again. The half-blood tilted his head slightly to one side but remained wordless.

"...What happened back there?"

The other chuckled. "You tell me."

Valkyre stared back, pointedly pressing his lips together, waiting for a response. Raguel sighed and rose to his feet, crossing his arms.

"...I have to say, what you did wasn't exactly the smartest thing to do."

"Humor me."

Raguel arched an eyebrow, watching as the angel rose shakily to his feet. He offered no more help.

Valkyre sighed and touched his neck gently, but there was nothing more than a small bruise left. He glanced at the other, eyes wary.

"...Those two... Where are they now? What happened?"

Raguel shrugged. "They were both greatly stunned, but you did not kill them. I would not dare try to destroy them myself. I took you both and fled."

Valkyre blinked. "...What happened back there, though? When I..."

The half-blood smiled slightly. "You ruined their circuits, disconnected them. It was rather shocking for both of them, I suppose. No one else has ever done something like that to them, not since... Well, it was stunning, to say the least."

The angel stared back blankly, leaning back against the wall, momentarily breathless. "Then... those two, they're not..."

Raguel nodded, curtly. "You're right, Valkyre. They're not natural beings. They were formed in the lab." The angel nodded, slowly, then paused.

"But... They're just experiments. ...Why?"

"Why what?"

Valkyre stared at his hands, which were already mostly healed and cleansed of blood. "...Why are they after Iris?" He looked back up at Raguel.

"...The labs are after Iris, I know that. ...But why are they using experimental beings...?"

The other snorted, scowling.

"Using? They aren't using them at all. The labs have all been destroyed."

Valkyre stared back blankly, frowning. "...What? But then, why..."

Raguel stepped backwards, watching him, expression serious and taut. "The labs were dissolved by order from the state. They no longer exist." A pause.

"...Unfortunately, those two weren't destroyed along with the rest of the specimens, and now they seek Iris..."

Valkyre stared back at the other, slowly absorbing the information. He pushed himself away from the wall, and his fingers found the seal around his neck. Raguel had placed it there.

"Raguel."

The other blinked back, calm and quiet. He could see the tenseness in his unmatched eyes, the masked, guarded expression.

"When you were fighting... I saw..." A pause, cautious judging. "...On the back of your neck. You"-

"Valkyre!"

A hoarse, whispered cry from behind. Iris, the boy rising to his feet, pained and terrified expression in his pale gray eyes.

Eyes that stared at the half-blood before him, in recognition and fear and warning. Too late.

Valkyre whirled around on Raguel, blade flicking out into his hand. Too slow.

The other had drawn something out, something like an amulet dangling from a chain, and the angel saw too late the blow of pale magic through the core of the stone, turned to crackled blue and reflected, expanded through the piece, ice sweeping and freezing like shattered glass over the angel's half of the room, crystalline and sharp, petrified.

Raguel lowered his hand slowly, gently tapping the stone hanging by the end of the string with a thin fingernail.

"Frostbite."

Valkyre stood immobile, mind racing and furious but body frozen, unable to move, caught in the middle of an action, blade hilt still clenched in his hands. Frost glittered like opalescent scales on his skin, turned pale blue and cold, freezing cold.

Raguel sighed as he tucked the spell amulet away, stepping forward and almost delicately removing the small dagger in his hand. "I'm sorry about this, Valkyre. I had hoped that you could trust me."

Valkyre could barely move his lips, straining to see out of the corner of his eye. Iris stared back, eyes desperate, scared. The boy sat crumpled on the ground, unmoving, edges of the frostbite crystallized along his leg and hands.

Raguel sighed again, stepping away.

"You were right, Valkyre."

The half-blood fingered the collar of his black shirt, then slowly pulled it down, turning around so the angel could clearly see what lay at the nape of his neck, almost out of sight.

Blue-black lettering, stark and bold on his skin, like the tattoos that crawled over the angel's arms.

Numbers and letters, a series with a hidden meaning, a code.

"...I am from the labs as well."

Raguel turned around suddenly, hand dropping to his side. "Can you hear me out? You don't know what's happened, Valkyre. Let me explain."

He seemed almost pleading, almost asking, imploring. Almost weak and soft and kind, human. But he wasn't.

"I seek Iris as well. I am like the other two for that reason, but I am different. Can't you see?" He held out his hands, as if to emphasize a point, as if he were reaching out.

Valkyre kept his eyes steadily on the other, glowering. He refused to give in now, refused to compromise and make amends. He should've known, he had known it all along.

Raguel hissed under his breath, drawing back, then turning about and pacing the room. He walked to one of the open windows, staring out at nothing, filtered air making his pale skin almost warm, almost alive.

When he spoke again, his voice was reined back, calm.

"...Do you see the world, Valkyre? It's a wasteland. Everything's dead. Humans have destroyed and corrupted everything. They regret and they try to make amends, but all the trees have been cut and all of the lakes have all been drained. The soil has been washed away and the oceans are thick with oil. The skies are black as the earth, and all of the creatures are dead. There is nothing left."

He looked back, imploring again. "Can you see? Do you ever feel sorrow, feel pity for this broken world? It used to be so beautiful."

Valkyre managed to open his mouth, ice crackling down his throat. "How would you know??"

His voice came out harsh, rough and hoarse. He couldn't quite speak right, but he felt no true shift in his emotions or feeling for what the other was saying. Anger still filled him, rage like waves pounding the beach.

Raguel's mouth drew down, tight. "You're right," he murmured at length. "I don't know. But I feel for the ruined earth.

"Humans think pettily, and we've learned to think like them. They think of only their personal goals, of what they can achieve for themselves and their race. They continue to destroy, pretending and deluding themselves into thinking they're doing something good, that what they do will be worthwhile."

Raguel stared back at the angel, stepping towards him. "But they are all afraid of true sacrifice in the end, Valkyre. They're selfish creatures attached to themselves, obsessed with their mortality.

"Don't you see??"

Raguel was smiling, pacing the floor again, eyes never leaving Valkyre, boring into him. "That's where I differ. I have suffered. I know sacrifice. I'm willing to sacrifice everything I have, though I have nothing. Don't you see??"

Again. Desperate, trying to make him understand.

Raguel stepped away from him, suddenly. Focusing on something else.

Iris.

The boy drew closer to himself as the half-blood moved towards him, unmatching eyes staring down at his small form. They flickered back to Valkyre, testing, judging.

"He's the key, Valkyre. Iris." A smile on his lips. "Can't you see? He, the impossible. Created to restore the world. He will save us all. His blood, his..."

The angel stared back, startled by the idea. Saving the world?? Iris?

"...Wait."

Raguel blinked, watching him, waiting, almost patiently. Slowly leading him to the point, to the truth.

...No. It wasn't true.

"...How can that be?" The words hurt his throat, forced out. Ice crackled along his veins, numbing him. Valkyre felt tinges of drowsiness on the edges of his mind, drawn down by the cold, pushing in on him. No. He had to stay awake. He needed to know.

"What do you mean?"

Valkyre shook his head. "Iris couldn't have been created in the labs to save the world... Humans aren't capable of that..."

He saw the crimson red and the pale yellow eyes widen, surprised by something.

"Labs? You think?"

Something screeched suddenly, a high-pitched, keening wail, sharp, slicing through the stifled, silent air. Raguel jerked his head away, eyes widening further, cut off. He was across the room in moments, staring out the window in the general direction of the scream.

"...No..." Whispered words out of his lips. "How did... Already...?"

The half-blood jerked back suddenly, hissing.

The windowsill.

Valkyre tried to twist his neck around, barely able to glimpse it.

Spiders. From the corner of the windowsill, crawling in.

Raguel's face was drawn, eyes dark. "Not now," he hissed, glaring at the small creatures that clung to the walls, skirted away effortlessly on their multiple sets of legs, a black trickle from the corner.

"No, not yet..."

Another cry. It was different this time, an indiscriminate screech that could've been of anguish, joyousness, or hysteria. From the other side of the room, echoing around them.

Raguel hissed, darting over, eyes flashing, frantic and desperate. Afraid of something? Anger.

A softer sound, like mumbling, insistent, unintelligible chatter.

The half-blood snarled in fury, then suddenly leapt to the windowsill, crouched, looking around, looking up. A flash of movement, another cry, and Raguel had vanished, chasing something Valkyre couldn't detect, couldn't see.

But he knew what it'd just been.

The jails flashed back to him, the underground cells.

It was all just a distraction.

The angel struggled, building up the magic inside of himself and trying to break free, but the spell was still strong and held him in place, frozen. He craned his neck, trying to keep Iris in his vision.

Any moment now, he knew. Something was here for them. Distracting Raguel, stealing them both away.

The other two again? No, it couldn't be...

The spiders along the windowsill.

It was sudden and abrupt, a wave of heat washing over his body from somewhere behind, releasing him from the ice and the cold, thawing out his frozen body.

Something tickled his neck, something crawling over his skin. His fingers twitched, regaining feeling, but he was too late, too slow to turn around, to react.

Nothing more than pinpricks in his skin, and then darkness.

+--

AN: Very long chappie with some explaining and some other randomness stuffos!

...I have to admit, I kind of used Raguel as a partial outlet. I think the way he does about the world...

...and how it's kinda too late... But that's just me. ::mutters: baka ninjens...::

So. Lotsa stuff happening, and lots of blackouts. -_-; Those are getting kind of annoying, and poor Valkie's probably going to be scarred for life or suffer a concussion... ehehe.

But I need it to happen. X3

...By the way, no one minds a few bugs, right? ...I personally think spiders are sexy. XDddd [...uhm, don't ask]

Well, anyway. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to write this story without using the word 'insect', since technically spiders are arachnids and not insects; 2 not 3 body parts and 8 legs... ..Yeah. ::coughs::
Only someone like me sticks to details like that, eheheh. ^^; OCD...
Well, thanks a ton for reading, and see you next! ^__^- [Can you believe? Ch. 26-29, only 4 chaps, and I just barely fit them into the same notepad file! XD Such long chapters! So, if my updates are a bit slow, I hope you can understand.]
...My god. I think I'll actually freakin' reach the end of this story. o_o
THANK YOU ALL~! [Sorry, it's a friday and all...]

29 - Spider

Iris

+--

When he awoke, it was to darkness. There was a damp feeling around, rich and thick. Soil, earth. Something scraping, shuffling. Chuckling.

The angel groaned, body not quite responding correctly, mind still fuzzy around the edges. He blinked, but everything was still pitch black, his eyes not quite focusing on anything. Earthy lumps, a low ceiling. Soil. Underground? Where was he??

This was happening a few too many times.

Valkyre stiffened as he felt something skim over his cheek, and suddenly he was petrified, waking up to the myriad of tiny touches all over his body, tickling and crawling, bristles and hooks on his skin, a million alive creatures walking over him, over and under his arms, inside his clothing, against his flesh.

Everywhere.

He was horrified, not daring to move, flinching as a spider crawled through his hair and dangled by his ear, as if wanting to whisper secrets to him. All around him, all over him, a million sensations, creatures calmly travelling the landscape of his body.

A rustling above him, clumps of dirt falling to the ground.

Valkyre almost cried out as something suddenly dropped down in front of him, glint of golden amber eyes through a tangled mess of dark hair, leering smile on an upside-down face. Spiders fell to the ground, scuttled away.

Chuckling, bubbling laughter from the one that hung before him, hair falling back from his eyes, body dangling from something unseen on the ceiling, smear of dirt on lightly-tanned skin.

"Good morning, archangel."

Low voice, amused and taunting, slightly raspy. A different voice. Someone else, someone new.

The other dropped to the ground lightly, flipping around and landing evenly, silently in a crouch.

Light, amber-brown skin, turned to a sepia paleness in the dark. Dark hair, shaggy and uneven, tangled. The dirt-smear face tilted slightly to one side, surprisingly young and smooth, golden-black eyes glinting. He smirked, flashing sharp white teeth.

"Well?" He asked, moving closer, still on all fours. His bare shoulders and torso were pale and smooth, a pair of ragged pants turned color of the soil low around his waist, showing bare calves and feet.

On his left shoulder, at the top of his arm. More blue-black markings. Letters. Labs, he should've known. Another escaped experiment?

A spider crawled through the nest of the dark hair, leaving a trail of fine silk just over the eyebrow.

Valkyre hissed, trying to move away as the other crawled closer, eyes laughing at him, predatory.

He couldn't move. He was in an upright position, but he wasn't backed by anything. The angel's arms were held out on either side, bound, his legs sprawled before him.

Silk.

He stared at himself in dismay, trying to move but unable to do any more than curl his fingers. The strands were almost completely invisible, but strong as cords of steel, tangled thickly around his body and impossibly powerful, clumping to his skin. Even as he watched, little spiders spun more strands around him, dangling from his arms.

A tickling on his neck and the angel stiffened, too acutely aware of the tiny touches as a spider travelled slowly up towards his cheek.

Chuckling.

Valkyre clenched his teeth, scowling as the other drew closer, movements predatory, hands brushing his legs, reaching out with black-crescent fingernails to touch his face lightly, gently stroking his skin.

"You've pretty eyes, archangel." Another flashed grin, laughing golden eyes.

Valkyre jerked his face away, scowling. "Don't touch me," he growled, doing his best to glower. The fingers had left a tickling sensation on his skin, like there were more spiders crawling there, brought forth from the palm of his hand.

Laughter, low chuckling. The taunting voice, pulling Raguel away. Distraction.

Why did he call him 'archangel'? It was bad enough being an angel- Valkyre absolutely hated it when people called him that. ...And now what was this one going on about?

The face leered before him again, head cocked to one side, grinning.

"Who the hell are you?" Valkyre demanded, trying to pull back but finding no where to fall back on. The other pressed a hand to his chest, a spider crawling down his wrist and spinning back up again. Rough fingernails, blackened with dirt. Sharp, somehow, just slightly oddly shaped.

"Who do you think I am? What am I to you?"

Valkyre blinked, frowning. Were experiments supposed to be able to speak like this, to think like this?

"...What's your name?" He managed, trying to buy some time. His eyes were beginning to adjust to the dark, and he was searching, wondering how he could possibly get out of here. Wondering where Iris was.

The other scoffed, hand drawing back, scowling.

"You think like a human. They believe names are important."

He sat back, frown looking almost like a pout, scratching behind his ear. A spider escaped and skittered across his fingers, slipping down his neck. He ignored it.

"Some of us don't have names, archangel. Look at me."

He stopped, hands on the ground again, golden eyes staring into Valkyre's, harsh and serious.

"Do I look like I'd have a name? We aren't seen. Humans don't care."

He sneaked closer again, grinning, reaching forward to touch the angel's face again, tilting up his chin.

"Would you have a name for me, Valkyre? Hm?"

"...How do you know my name??"

He laughed, hand dropping but gold black eyes still holding his gaze, rimmed faintly in red.

"See?" He chuckled, grinning, circling around him, darting out of view then back again, surprisingly quick for moving around on all fours. "You do care about names," he hissed, "Just like a human does."

Valkyre sighed, closing his eyes, trying to sort out his thoughts. Did he still mean to kill him? His actions were so random, yet so careful. He'd avoided the subject, merely darting away again.

The angel blinked his eyes back open, not surprised to see the rich gold staring back, millimeters from his face. The other breathed over his face, a breath surprisingly empty, tasteless. Like soft, moist dirt and rain.

"...What are you, then?" His voice came out calm, even. "You're not a human either."

The other turned around, gazing out somewhere through the darkness, suddenly silent.

Valkyre stared at his back, at the prominent shoulder blades under the skin and the same label at the nape of his neck. The other's hair hung loosely from his shoulders, tangled and mussed, uncared for. He looked back, still smiling, but somehow sad and melancholy.

"I don't know what I am, archangel. You tell me."

He came towards the other again, resting against him, touching the angel's hair, picking through it thoughtfully.

"What am I to you, hm? A freak? A beast?"

He lowered his hand, showing a small spider crawling along it. It ran over his fingers, then was gently pushed up against the angel's arms, where it skittered off and ran along an invisible lifeline into darkness.

Valkyre looked back at him. The other's expression was almost warm, watching him for reactions, silent statements and questions.

"Do you understand us, Valkyre? We are no different."

His tanned hands touched the angel's face again, making him look at him, close enough to touch.

"I can see it in your eyes, archangel. You know."

The other moved away again suddenly, sitting down. He scratched underneath his eye, then picked at Valkyre's jacket, examining the pockets and stitches done into the fabric. Suddenly silent, contemplative.

The angel sighed, unable to figure out just how his mind worked. Ally or enemy? What was he getting at? What did he want?

...Iris, no doubt.

Still. His actions were unprecedented, uneven and random. Did he want something different?

After a long pause, Valkyre spoke up, voice soft.

"...Hey."

The other looked up, small hint of a pout on his lips. Valkyre held his golden eyes, trying to see into them. What kind of mind was there?

"...Corryn."

He blinked back at the angel, frowning, fingers stopping. A spider dropped to his shoulder.

"I-It's from long ago, from olden times" Valkyre muttered, immediately regretting his decision. "...It... It's a name."

The other was still for a moment, then suddenly flashed a grin, eyes alive. He loped over, bubbling chuckling to himself, leaning up against the angel, lips near his ear.

"You're giving me a name, archangel? Hm?" Voice excited, almost giddy.

He laughed again, touching Valkyre's shoulder, his throat. "Say it again," he whispered, breath tickling like spiders against the other's ear. Like a child, begging.

"Corryn."

Valkyre was startled as he felt the hot tongue suddenly run along his cheek, fingernails digging in just slightly too hard around his neck. The other's tongue left a slick, wet patch on his skin, nipping just under his eye lightly with his lips, still chuckling under his breath.

"I thank you, archangel. We are grateful."

Those lips touched his earlobe, fingernails sliding down his neck and over his chest, palm pressed down until Valkyre could feel his own heart beating, wondering if that was what the other was doing, if that was what he was looking for.

The words in his ear made him freeze, cold shivers running down his spine.

"You are kind, Valkyre. ...But did you think that would be enough to keep me from killing you?"

The angel let out a ragged breath, trying to calm his mind, knowing the other could feel his heart pounding.

He, Corryn, laughed, backing away.

"Scared now, little archangel?" Taunting, leering. Suddenly cruel again. Why was he so unpredictable??

"Are you afraid?" Fingernails coursing down his cheek, caressing. "Afraid to die?"

Valkyre lowered his eyes, not speaking back, but the other gripped his chin again, forcing him to look up. His golden black eyes were cold, amused. A spider dribbled from his hair, dangling.

"Well? Are you going to beg, archangel? Try to reason with me? Are you sad?"

Corryn grinned, reaching up and touching Valkyre again, pulling his fingers slowly over the other's face

so he had to close his eyes. The fingertips rested lightly against the backs of the angel's eyelids, fluttering.

His voice was a low whisper by his ear, Valkyre's senses brought to life again by the darkness, the spiders crawling over him and the thread binding his arms and body.

"You won't die, Valkyre. Not yet."

Another sting against his neck, and darkness.

+--

AN: Yeees~! And here is Corryn! I adore him. X3

He's a bit on the stereotyped side, I feel... but I tried for originality... His name was quickly picked and would've come later had I not gotten so pissed at saying just 'he' or 'the other' again and again... confusing too, so I threw in the name. X3

Corryn is actually Welsh... And you can probably guess what it means.

...Obviously, I luv spiders. X3 [If any of you are horribly grossed-out by this, I'm sorry, but I don't really know what else to say to you... o_O I-I just like them, so there's no problem here...? Just remind yourself it's not real~! XD]

Well, now you guys have to wait for me to lapse into another 'what happens next?' daydream, during which I will fiddle around with and eventually plot out something. XD I don't know how it's going! It's been like that for a while now... which is cool, and not at all bad. :) I'm still going strong with Iris!

...Though, I'm going to stop the catch and toss game that seems to be happening with poor Valkyre and Iris... ...They need to spin off on their own. Ehehehe.

Oh, and I've got a sickly, smutty one-shot in my head which I need to get out... So I'll be taking a short little break from Iris to work on it~!

If you're missing the smutty boy-on-boy action since Iris is only shonen-ai, go check this out as soon as I'm done it... Please? ::puppy eyes::Not like I'm very good at smut, but, wtvr. :P

...I luuuuuuuuv Corryn! [she should stop saying this now] X3

So, thanks a lot for staying with, and please be patient until I've got the next chapter spun out. :)

[hahaha, pun. ...Don't beat me with crowbars, normal wooden sticks will do. :P] Thank you!

30 - Bone

Iris

+--

When Valkyre awoke again, he knew it even before he opened his eyes; he could feel the other's presence through the black, whispering nothingness around him, like a candle lit in an empty room. It let him forget, if only for an instant, that he was still trapped somewhere deep underground, surrounded by damp earth and soil and the spiders skittering over his skin.

He saw Iris.

The boy lay across from him, half curled up on his side, eyes closed, gray hair falling over his calm face, body still but for the slight, gentle breathing.

Valkyre felt a sigh escape his lips. He'd barely had time to think about it earlier, but he'd been worried about the boy, terrified Iris wouldn't be there, that something would've...

Corryn.

The angel bit his lip as he suddenly realized that the other was next to Iris; in the dim light, he'd never seen the tanned form beside the pale alabaster skin of the young boy that seemed to glow in comparison to the rest of the darkness around them.

The other's eyes blinked open, not at all surprised. Corryn flashed a grin, golden-black eyes glinting through his tangled hair. His gaze held Valkyre's, even as he slowly moved closer and touched Iris' still form, drawing the boy's body up against his own, protectively.

Valkyre stiffened, immediately wanting to move and stop him, but he was still bound, immobile.

"Don't touch him," he hissed, scowling. The angel wasn't quite sure what made him so angry, but he wanted to get out of this, wanted to take Iris and leave this place, never see this other creature again.

Corryn cocked his head to one side, giving the other a feral, crooked grin.

"You care about him, archangel?" He picked through the boy's tangled hair calmly, brushing at a spider that skittered over Iris' ear, "That he cares about you as well?? You think you mean something to him?" Valkyre turned his eyes away, uneasy, frowning. "What... What do you mean?"

The angel looked back up as Corryn barked a laugh that seemed to turn into a cough, hands stopping, eyes turned dark. He was shaking his head.

"It's obvious that you're not the only one who wants Iris for his own. He draws people to himself, he does. But it doesn't mean he wants to, or that he needs them."

Corryn looked down at the boy resting against him, eyes still peacefully closed, breathing soft. "But do you honestly think you mean anything to him?"

Valkyre stifled back a response, biting his lip.

He was probably just falling for a trick, he thought, just being turned into a fool.

But he could see no reason as to why Iris would truly want to be with him. The angel had hunted him earlier, had then tried and more often than not failed to protect the boy, but even then, hadn't Iris wanted to die...?

Corryn chuckled under his breath. "Why should he care about any of us, hm? He has no reason to. We are selfish, and we have hurt him to reach our own goals. We are nothing, and stupid for thinking that we mean anything to him."

Valkyre wanted to protest, but he didn't know the right words.

The angel stopped as Iris suddenly stirred, reaching out and lightly touching Corryn's shoulder, pulling himself up slowly. The boy blinked, then closed his eyes, whispering something in the other's ear. Valkyre was more stunned by the action than in what might've been said; why would Iris touch Corryn like that...?

The other seemed to stop, listening. He tilted his head to the other side again, scratching idly at his cheek. His golden eyes found Valkyre's again, taunting.

"You still think you mean something to him, Valkyre?"

The angel clenched his teeth, trying to ignore the laughing eyes, the mocking.

"Iris," he whispered, trying to attract the boy's attention, at the same time struggling again to break the thread holding him down, feeling the creatures skittering quickly over his body, spurred by his movements.

The boy looked up at him, gray eyes unchanged, soft and hollow. Iris smiled, softly.

And then he closed his eyes and curled up against Corryn, sighing softly to himself, body completely relaxed, unconcerned.

Valkyre stared in disbelief, flinching as Corryn stole his gaze, own black-ringed eyes bright, triumphant. He was taunting him, wordlessly, trying to draw him forward again.

The angel sank back instead, breath hitching in his throat. He felt like he wasn't seeing anything, like he was somewhere else. He couldn't, didn't see, didn't want to care.

...Why??

Iris... ...Was it all just false, all along? No, it couldn't... could it? Valkyre thought of how much he'd done with the boy, how much they'd gone through... The fleeing, the sadness brought back up, the tattoos, the small smiles... ...and the kiss?

...But all along, Iris had always been so quiet, so emotionless. Was he made like that, or did he simply choose to be that way??

Valkyre felt a drop in the pit of his stomach as he suddenly remembered the small abandoned building, of Iris awake in the morning, calmly watching the spider skim over his fingers, over his hand and arm.

...Had he known, all along?? Had he waited for this?? Why? Why Corryn...?

"I've known him longer than you have, archangel." The other seemed to be reading his mind, grinning, arm wrapped around the boy curled in his lap, fingers lifting idly through the silvered hair. "Why do think you'd be anything to him??" Hissed words, narrowed eyes. Protective.

Valkyre was startled to realize something; in this matter, he and Corryn were alike. They were both protective over Iris, both wanting him. ...But who did Iris want?? Why were things suddenly like this?

Valkyre felt the despair weigh heavily on him. What was he doing here, trapped with an insane lab experiment underground...? Why did he need Iris so much? Why couldn't he let this go??

He felt betrayed, suddenly alone again. It was a loneliness that tore at him now, burned at him. A loneliness he felt he couldn't stand. He's been wrong all along... ...Had he? ...Iris.

The angel looked up again after what felt like an eternity of silence and stillness. He felt somehow jaded, apart from it all.

What Valkyre wanted most of all now was escape.

As to whether or not he left with Iris... He no longer knew.

"...Corryn."

The other blinked up at him, looking like he'd been about to doze off.

"Would... Would you let me down?"

It sounded pathetic even to his own ears, but Valkyre was obviously not getting down any other way. Corryn snorted, closing an eye calmly to let a spider crawl up his cheek and over to disappear in his dark, tangled hair.

"Why should I?"

Nothing less than what he expected. Still.

"Why not?" Valkyre countered. "What do you want me for? All you want is... Iris, isn't it?"

The other grinned, the truth glinting in his eyes but not to be given over so easily. "I know you're of some value, Valkyre. I know Raguel wants you, for one."

Valkyre blinked, surprised. "...Why?"

Corryn laughed, gently pulling himself away from the sleeping form of Iris, crawling with a smooth gait over to him, golden eyes gleaming in the rippling darkness. "He believes in his cause, and he thinks you're a part of it. I honestly don't think you're worth anything."

The other reached up, touched Valkyre's face lightly, thin fingernails grazing just underneath his eye. The angel didn't move.

"So why are you keeping me here? ...Why aren't I just dead?"

Corryn tipped his head to one side, grinning. "It's amusing," he confided, smirking devilishly. "But I don't see any point in letting you go."

Valkyre shook his head. "I can't escape, you know," he stated. "I don't know my way out of here, and I'm... ..I'm not leaving without Iris. So I know I can't just run away from you."

Corryn laughed again, brushing strands of inky bangs from Valkyre's face. "Don't try and fool me, archangel. I know you'll try to find a way out. Or you'll try to kill me." His eyes so cool and apathetic as he spoke, as if death wasn't something that concerned him at all. "And you don't know you can't run away from me."

Valkyre let out a sigh, trying to shift around just slightly. It didn't work.

"...You managed to trick Raguel. You escaped from the labs when they were destroyed. You're not weak," the angel stated.

Corryn chuckled, slipping around behind Valkyre, out of his view. "Is that so then?" his voice floated from behind, switching places, whispering against the other's neck, ear, over his skin. "You just want to put up a fight when I let you go?? Try and run anyways?"

Valkyre shook his head again, trying to see behind himself but finding only darkness, and shadows that just sometimes seemed to shift.

"You don't know who I am, Valkyre."

Suddenly right up in front of him, both earth-smeared hands gripping his cheeks, his chin, forcing him to look straight into those golden-black eyes through the dark mess of hair, the tattoo on the shoulder seeming to jump out from the tanned skin.

"You have no idea what I am."

His lips drew back in a snarl, teeth glistening in the dark, hiss between them, eyes bright. Corryn backed away, wide eyes staring back almost blankly, suddenly changed again, someone else. His hands dropped to the ground, his body hunching over, broken by shudders, trembling. Things moving, things alive. Spiders rushing away.

A sickly, wet crunch and rip, splash of crimson blood and tear of flesh.

Corryn lifted his head slowly, mouth agape, breathing heavily, painfully.

His back had ripped, and twisted, spindly limbs had sprouted, dark appendages slicked with blood, trembling in the cool, damp air, reaching down slowly one-by-one to tentatively touch the ground, the soil on the walls, the spiderweb strands.

"Look at me, Valkyre." Corryn's voice was harsh, breathy.

"Look at me, and tell me what the hell I am."

The angel could only shake his head, staring. Blood dribbled down the other's back from the open wounds, the shredded skin raw and fresh, bringing the tangy, salty smell to his senses, the metallic taste brushed to his lips.

One of the limbs jerked up, brushed quickly against Valkyre's cheek, leaving a stain of hot, slick blood.

He shivered.

"You gave me a name, archangel. Can you do this also?? Can you tell me what I am???"

He darted forward suddenly, lips almost pressed to the angel's ear, clutching his face and neck too roughly in his smeared hands, his body shaking. He was snarling, hissing. "Tell me what I am!"

Valkyre flinched, squeezed his eyes closed, not wanting to see the mutilated back, the terrifying apparitions rising from Corryn's body, the ugly branding on his shoulder and on the base of his neck.

"...I'm sorry," he whispered.

The other jerked away, pulling out of touch immediately, until Valkyre could feel nothing but the silence around him, and the rough breathing that seemed to come from everywhere.

The angel opened his eyes again, blinked them slowly. He stared at nothing, at Iris lying across from him on the ground, peacefully oblivious and asleep.

He felt something pulling at the silk threads of his arm, and he looked over.

Corryn met his eyes, expression calm again as he leaned over, fingers tangled in the threads, spiders coursing over his arms, to slowly part his lips and run his tongue along one of the invisible, gossamer strands.

It seemed to melt suddenly, the thread loosening and the lower end floated down, broken, in a ragged tangle over the angel's bare arm.

Corryn's fingers strummed over the other threads, touch almost delicate, like a musician's hand to the strings of his instrument. The strands melted away, as soft and easy to dissipate as clouds, as fog.

Valkyre flexed his fingers as they were freed, the rest of the silk somehow loose and wispy now, not like the steel cords of before.

The last ties fell away, and the angel drew his arm back. He bent it slowly, feeling the blood return to his limb, feeling regained to his fingertips.

"Do you think it's because of your pity?" Corryn murmured, switching around to the other side, tongue and fingers silently snapping more strands, golden eyes never leaving his face. "Because of the name, perhaps?"

His fingers slipped over the ground, soft earth yielding to the touch, threads along the angel's legs snapping silently. "Do you think I'm letting you go because of Iris?"

He finished, stepping away. Valkyre pulled his arms so his sides slowly, taking his time in pulling up his legs, then straightening them out again. He knew the other was watching his movements, and he knew he couldn't get away that fast. He tried to keep his gaze from wandering to the jutting, bone-like structures, drying slowly in their coating of blood.

"Or maybe," Corryn spoke up again, slinking over and touching the angel's cheek, making him look back up; "Maybe it's because you've already poison in your blood, and you won't last to the night."

Valkyre froze, staring back into the laughing, mocking golden eyes. Panic rushed into him, then flooded out again, leaving him cold, empty.

The angel tried to stare into the eyes, to see if it was true or just a lie to make him afraid, to make him tremble with a false, unanswered fear.

Corryn's eyes were laughing, but Valkyre couldn't tell if it were true.

The other sat back leisurely, and the angel knew then that it was a truly ingenious move; by saying so, he'd almost entirely guaranteed that Valkyre wouldn't be able to leave, at least not for as long as he'd said. No one could live with the possibility of death in that duration. They would have to know, and until they were told, or the night time as said had approached, Valkyre could not leave. And if there was truth to the statement, he might not ever leave.

The angel breathed slowly, unconsciously flexing his fingers, his hands, feeling. Nothing felt out of place, but he couldn't really tell.

Valkyre sighed in exasperation, then sat back slowly, gently easing his cramped body so the blood

could circulate again.

"...I'm not leaving," he stated.

The angel stared at the other, stared directly into the golden eyes ringed with black, at the blue-black letters inked into the skin, at the twisted deformations arching up from the torn back.

"...Tell me who you are, Corryn," he whispered.

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AN: I can't begin to say how sorry it's been for the impossibly long update. So much has been going on, and I have to admit, I have finally been hit by a genuine writer's block. It hurt.

Because of my stumbling and tripping over it, this chapter is obviously not up to par. It's loosely tied together and it jumps from one idea to the next, very roughly. I'm sorry, but I'm rather tired and sick of it to edit it out much more right now, so you get it like this. Crappy, but it's better than nothing, right?

I have pretty much gotten over the block though, and I should be progressing nicely, I hope. I'm trying, but there's school and homework.... ..the usual bothers, and the usual apologies. Sorry.

On the up-side, some very nice things have come about! This is chapter 30, and a really, really record number for me. Again I have to say, I can't believe how far I'm getting with this story, and I thank you all for sticking with me! Thanks a lot!

And for my recent birthday, Deffy [DefyDeath_DefyMe] has drawn me a beeeeeeeeeautiful Iris fanart piece! You all should really check it out!!! It's so pretty, and it fits with this story so beautifully. :)

Thank you Deffy, and thanks to everyone else for following with and reading!! I promise never ever ever to give up on Iris!

Thanks once again for waiting, I will try to whip up the next chapter as fast as possible, or if not, another one-shotty to keep you amused. X3

31 - Human

Iris

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Corryn laughed.

"Who I am?? Me?" He chuckled, shaking his head. The skeletal forms arching from his body quivered, trembled. "There's nothing to say, Valkyre. You see me. It is all I am."

The angel shook his head. "You've known Iris," he said, keeping his voice soft, low. "I want to learn about him, about you... ..About Raguel, about all of you."

Corryn snorted. "And I'm meant to believe this, archangel??" His voice was mocking, in disbelief. "You're getting desperate, Valkyre. Don't lie."

The other sighed, staring down at the black earth. He folded up his knees, fingers rubbing lightly against the hilt of the blade strapped to his boot. Valkyre looked up at Corryn, who merely smiled back, leisurely. "I don't know what's going on," the angel murmured. "And... if I am going to die, I want to know the truth." The other laughed, dryly. "Truth, hm? And what would you consider the truth? Would you believe it, coming from my lips?"

Valkyre stared at the golden-black eyes, holding them evenly.

"Why do you want Iris, Corryn?"

The other stared back, unblinking. He smiled at last, slowly, but it was sad and drawn, a hurt expression from a crumpled, distorted body.

"Look at me, Valkyre." Corryn came closer, movements slow, steady. His hair hung over his eyes, the splayed joints from his back jabbing quickly at the ground then twitching up again.

"I'm just a failed experiment, a freak put together on a human's whim. Do you see me??" Always asking that question.

A spider crawled along his shoulder, and this time Corryn snatched at it suddenly, grabbing it by its legs and holding it, jerking madly, up in the air. He shoved it in front of Valkyre, the angel flinching back from the beady eyes and scrambling limbs, the black body bristling with short, thin hairs. A red smudge showed on its abdomen, white on its back.

"You see it, Valkyre??"

Corryn's gold-black eyes, demanding, wide. It took all he had for the angel not to suddenly strike out, to hit the hand and the trapped spider away, to fight back and to run away, escape from this place forever.

Corryn stopped just as suddenly, drawing back. His grip on the small arachnid loosened, and the spider crawled off along his arm. Corryn pushed it up gently onto his other hand, running it along his fingers.

He seemed to have forgotten what he was saying, suddenly caught up in watching the creature skim over his fingertips, playing a game to keep it on his hands.

Corryn looked up after a moment, the spider still running along. His voice came out quiet, soft, almost gentle.

"How long do you think a spider has to live, Valkyre?"

His black-ringed eyes, so hollow, filled with that dark nothingness beyond desperation, of existence without purpose, of finite dawns and endless darkness.

"I'm a ruined attempt, archangel. I'm falling apart."

Corryn sighed, almost inaudibly under his breath. He raised his head, glanced back at the quiet,

sleeping form of Iris, a gray form on the ground.

"He saw me, Valkyre. He was not afraid. He understood me."

Corryn turned back to the other, eyes clear again, voice slightly stronger, expression calmed. "And when he's near me... When he touches me... ...It doesn't hurt so much. And I can forget, just for a moment, that soon I'm going to die."

Corryn sighed, gaze soft, almost warm.

"I'm a selfish creature, Valkyre. Just like anyone else, I want Iris for myself." He leaned closer, eyes unblinking. "But what about you, archangel? What do you want him for?"

Valkyre looked away, uneasy again. He didn't know what to say. What did he want Iris for?? He'd simply taken over the role of a guardian to a boy who might not even need it. ...And in the end, he didn't even know Iris, did he??

"...I don't know," he murmured. Valkyre raised his eyes again, staring into the golden-black. "...But I need him, too."

Corryn hissed sharply, pulling back. "And he'll go to you, archangel? Won't he?? Do you honestly believe he thinks anything of any of us?? We are nothing. We are earth-bound, we're weak, and we always end up hurting him. Iris has no reason to remain with us."

Valkyre took in a short breath, something inside of him jerking around painfully at the words.

Corryn was right. All-too right. The angel could tell, just by looking at the boy. He wasn't meant for this world. He should be somewhere else, somewhere alive, flourishing. Even his white skin, his loss of life; it was that of a creature caged up, forgetting colors and seasons and beauty.

And he, just like Corryn, was but someone holding Iris down.

He heard the other laugh, dryly. "You know what I speak of, archangel. You knew it all along. Iris was made for much, much more."

Valkyre jerked his head up, then paused.

"...You say he was made for something... Iris, he..."

Corryn laughed. "Ah, I'd forgotten. You're still ignorant on the details."

The angel breathed out a ragged, unsteady sigh.

"Then Iris, he..."

The other smiled, black-ringed eyes gleaming, blinking in the darkness. "Of course, Valkyre. Iris didn't come from the labs at all."

The angel felt another sigh of relief escape him. Yes.

He glanced at the sleeping form of the boy. Did Iris know himself?? He had a purpose now, didn't he?? A reason for existing? Would he want to live, now?

"Where did he come from then, Corryn?" Valkyre asked, barely able to hold back the impatience. He knew. He'd known all along.

The other smiled slowly, crawling closer, voice kept low.

"I was in the labs much longer, Valkyre. I saw many things. I saw Iris there, too, but he was brought in. Found by the humans. But of course Iris was not created there. Humans are incapable of such perfection, of such power." He chuckled, tilted his head back. "You see me, Valkyre?? I'm one of the little experiments that actually survived. Humans can never completely mimic nature. All of their creations are flawed, broken."

Valkyre shook his head slowly. "...Then... where did Iris come from?"

Corryn looked away mildly. "He is an organic creation. Created by the world, as all others are. I don't know more than that."

The angel nodded, then paused. "But when I asked him... ...He said he remembered the labs."

The other yawned, stretching, seeming now bored and tired of the interrogation.

"Chances are Iris doesn't remember anything more. He was born of the world, Valkyre, but no creature

alive can give birth to something like him. I doubt his life has been very long, despite his form. He was created by something else, Valkyre. He cannot be the age of even a boy."

Valkyre frowned, staring down at his arms, watching a small spider leave a trail of silk behind as it crawled past. "So... Iris was probably formed, in the body he is in now? Unaging?"

Corryn shook his head. "I know no more, Valkyre. Most of this is just theory, proposed by Raguel." The angel looked up sharply. "He came up with this? Raguel? He knew, or he...?"

The other shrugged, carelessly. "Raguel believes it all. He also thinks Iris was created to restore the world. I honestly don't care about that..." Corryn paused, then scrutinized Valkyre, eyes narrowed.

"Do you trust him, archangel? Trust Raguel??"

Valkyre sighed. "I don't know who to trust," he admitted. "...And that doesn't exclude you," he added as an afterthought.

Corryn barked out a sharp laugh. "Of course," he chuckled, "That would be wise of you." He calmed down, gaze steady and serious again. "You should stay far from Raguel though, for more than one reason. He's somehow played you into his plans."

Valkyre smiled back grimly. "And why should I heed your advice? I thought you told me I shouldn't trust you."

The other grinned in reply, flashing sharp teeth. "Yes, but it's an obvious decision. Unlike Raguel, I do not seek to kill the boy."

Valkyre stopped, feeling a cold fear flush through his veins.

"...He wants to kill Iris?? Raguel?"

Corryn sighed, but nodded. "Yes. He believes something of a sacrifice to bring back with dying earth." He snorted, rolling his eyes. "He's a fool, if you ask me."

The angel shook his head. There was a silence as he took in the information, then he lifted his head again, expression calm, collected again.

"...And what about you, Corryn? What do you want Iris for, if not to kill?"

The other snarled suddenly, curling back his lip, the gangly limbs jerking, flaring. "I am not a senseless murderer," he hissed. "I want Iris so I can stay alive. I have no intention of harming him."

Valkyre stared back blankly, blinking. He nodded at length, then looked away. He said nothing.

Corryn settled down at length, breathing steadying. "I don't need you to understand, archangel," he muttered under his breath.

The other made a 'hm' sound in his throat. "I won't form opinions, Corryn," he said, voice soft. He decided to change the subject, to find out anything more that he could. "...What about the other two? They... Eire, and the other..."

"Rheis," Corryn supplemented. He scoffed again, scowling. "Those two are nothing. They're more machine than flesh."

"But they managed to escape the labs," Valkyre commented, "And they want Iris. Why?"

The other shook his head.

"Those two are just puppets," he muttered. "They were made to follow programs coded into them. And after the damage they took while escaping, they've twisted around their own logic. They think their programs are telling them to get Iris."

He laughed again, dryly. "But of course, there's no place to bring him back to. Those two are completely mindless, with no purpose."

Valkyre sighed. "It doesn't make them less dangerous," he commented.

Corryn growled. "Of course, they are powerful. But they're human-made, Valkyre. And that makes them flawed. They can still be destroyed."

The angel paused. "Why were they created by the humans anyways, Corryn?"

The other shrugged. "They were unable to create a perfect being like Iris, so they sought to create two,

as they couldn't combine the opposite types. Eire's more of a failure, really, but Rheis was designed better. After all, they based him off of Raguel."

Valkyre frowned.

"Raguel? Rheis was...?"

"You're still so oblivious, Valkyre." The other smiled. "I was in the labs for a long time. I saw them bring in Raguel. He was of agreeable blood and fit, so they based the design of Rheis off of him. It's why the two are so similar."

The angel frowned. "But Raguel, you say he was brought in...? Then he wasn't made in the labs??"

Corryn sighed. "Of course not, Valkyre. You give the humans much more credit than they're worth."

He came closer, leaning over until he almost touched the other's face, his empty breath blowing over him. "Raguel was born what he was, then taken by the labs and... tested on. As was I."

Corryn's eyes were bright golden, rings of black spiraling to their cores.

"I used to be human, Valkyre," he breathed, smiling softly.

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AN: Another chapter at last. I'm sorry it's been taking a while, but I'm still/also an on-going artist, and trying to improve. I alternate between writing and drawing, and there's still lots of other online stuff I have to work on, so Iris will be in probably more spaced-out chapters for now, sorry.

Well, unless I get a major 'brain surge' for ideas as to where to go next... ehehehe.

Well! This chapter explained a LOT, ne?? ^_^ Man, I think I put in way more actions than I needed to, but, whatever. Just ignore it. X3

Most of the plotline ideas [roughly] are out, I should believe... So hopefully soon we can move on to action! I'm so sorry, this 'stuck underground with the wonderful little spiders' is getting a bit old, ne?

Thanks for waiting for me, and for the continual comments! ^_____^-

See ya next.

32 - Fall

Iris

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"You gave me a name, Valkyre."

Corryn cocked his head to one side, an empty, sad smile on his face.

"I used to have a name. I don't know what it is any more, but there is still the slightest chance it might've been the one you've given me, eh?"

The angel remained silent, not sure what to say. Human? Him? He should've known. He'd been able to feel no aura from him, but he'd just assumed that it'd been something to do with the labs. Then again, Corryn wasn't of any truly existing species, so he wouldn't really be able to have an aura...

"I doubt it," Valkyre murmured at length, quietly. Corryn laughed sharply.

"So you have no faith in anything, archangel?? No hope?"

"I don't believe in restoring the world," Valkyre replied, a bit too quickly. The angel lowered his gaze, staring at the earthen ground. His fingers ran over the damp, soft soil. How had Corryn found somewhere like this?? Valkyre had seen and touched soil only a few times before in his life. Everything else about the world was barren, empty wasteland.

The world truly did seem dead. But even so... The angel's amethyst gaze settled on the gray form sleeping on the ground.

He did not believe Iris could bring it back. And even if he could, if it meant hurting him... ...Valkyre wasn't sure he'd sacrifice the boy for it.

"What do you believe in then, angel with black wings??"

Corryn's voice was taunting again as the other drew closer, eyes bright through the tangled dark hair.

Valkyre only shook his head, watching him warily but making no move to draw away.

"I don't know what I believe in," he answered honestly. "I just... try to live."

Corryn seemed to sigh with him, briefly closing his eyes. When he opened them again, he was calm and serious once more, another sudden change in mood, in direction.

"What are humans like, Valkyre?"

The other shook his head, not giving the angel a chance to speak.

"I claim to be human, and I was. But I don't remember anything. I can speak, I can think, but I have no memories. Anything of me that was human is dead.

"And what I am now... ...It is barely anything more."

Corryn blinked, darting off suddenly to the side, chuckling softly again, circling around the other, who didn't move, though he followed calmly with his eyes.

"I don't want your pity of course, archangel. I just want you to know..."

The other leaned in closer, breath on Valkyre's cheek, stirring the inky strands of hair near his ear.

"...This is why I am not afraid to fight. And this is why I will fight... to keep Iris."

The angel closed his eyes, breathing slowly. He wasn't startled when the other suddenly placed a hand on his shoulder, but glanced over calmly to see Corryn smiling back at him serenely, chin propped up on his hand.

"You're brave, Valkyre. You aren't afraid of me."

The angel 'hmp'h'ed lightly under his breath.

"I know I'm not going to die," he replied. Corryn shrugged lightly, sighing.

"Of course," he murmured. "I know you're not stupid. But maybe," he added, looking back at the other, "You should be more worried. After all, you won't leave here without Iris. And I won't let you leave with him.

"Or," he considered, tilting his head to the other side, "Perhaps you'll simply leave here?? Without him?" Valkyre stiffened, but he shook his head.

No.

It didn't matter what'd happened between Corryn and Iris. It might seem selfish and heartless, but Valkyre was determined to leave with Iris.

The other snarled suddenly, jerking away.

"You can't win, Valkyre," he hissed, crouched between the angel and the still form of the boy, protective.

"You know nothing about Iris," he spat, "And you will only end up hurting him."

Corryn's eyes gleamed in the darkness, bright tarnished-gold drops in the dim light.

"Do you know what they did to me in the labs, archangel?? They tore me apart. They cut me, they drowned me, they drained my blood.

"I'm alive because I was strong enough, because I could become stronger and stronger. I had no real purpose, no meaning."

The skeletal joints rising from his back jabbed at the ground, flaring and drawing back again, agitated like the rest of his body, but seemingly with a mind of its own, a creature living off of him that he couldn't control.

"Iris gave me a reason to live. I survived for him alone. There is nothing else to me!"

Valkyre saw the movement, but he wasn't able to dodge it quickly enough. The bare-boned limb slammed against his body full in the chest, impossibly fast and powerful for the twisted, thin bone it seemed to be made of, smashing him against the wall of dirt, lifted a full foot off of the ground. He thought he heard a rib crack.

The angel grabbed at the blood-caked skeletal joint, struggling to breathe, trying to push himself up and at the same time push the limb away. Neither worked, the bone pressed up against him strong as a bar of steel.

He was glad now that he hadn't tried to take on the other earlier; it would've probably resulted in something even worse than this. Valkyre could clearly see now why he had been one of the experiments to survive.

Corryn stalked closer, other twisted limbs jabbing and cutting deep gouges in the dirt, face drawn back in that feral snarl.

"I lost him, archangel. You have no idea how painful it was. I could feel myself dying. And then... ..then I found him again. All of you, you seek to hurt him. I won't let you."

Corryn stood up on his legs, seeming suddenly unsteady, forced to remain upright. The bone joints stabbed into the ground, holding him up, but at the same time, fresh, dark red blood was leaking down his back. The angel could see the pain in his eyes, in his stiff movements.

Valkyre gasped as the limb pressed harder against his ribs, sharp pain shooting through his chest and his back. He couldn't breathe, fumbling as he tried to grab at the seal that was, unfortunately, also pinned down beneath the blood-stained bone.

"Corryn."

The voice was soft, almost inaudible, but both of them heard it, and Corryn froze immediately.

Behind him, Iris stared back at the two of them with blank eyes.

The boy seemed to study them patiently for a moment, then stepped forward wordlessly, reaching out and touching one of the twisted bones curved over into the ground. Corryn shuddered, entire body trembling. The limb pressed to Valkyre loosened just slightly, allowing the angel to gasp in a breath,

voice hoarse.

"I-Iris"-

The boy didn't reply, only moved forward and touched Corryn's shoulders, expression still hollow, even as he stared down at the startled golden.

Iris remained silent as he leaned closer, fingers playing along the bloodied dark bone, lowering his head until his lips pressed to the torn flesh of the other's back, hands stroking the stiff joints gently, soothingly. Valkyre felt the limb pull away, and the angel dropped with a muffled sound to the ground, too startled to move, able only to watch.

Slowly, the blood-stained bone folded up, bent onto itself, shrinking, melting into nothingness again, leaving a hollow void, leaving the form of Corryn small and crumpled, the black-ringed eyes tired through the matted hair and the dirt-smearred face, suddenly all-too human, so weak and frail.

"Iris..."

Valkyre watched wordlessly as Corryn turned around, slowly, hands trembling. He sank to his knees, shoulders hunched, breathing raspy, broken. Like all of the power he'd shown earlier, all of his fury and strength, had been drained, sucked away, leaving a negative void, an emptiness he couldn't fill. He seemed like just a hurt, weak child, reaching up and touching Iris' arm, curling up against him, face burrowed in the boy's shirt, leaving Valkyre to stare at the torn and ripped flesh of the other's back, splattered and slick with drying black blood.

The angel wanted to speak up, to stop this, but he couldn't bring himself to break this moment, to intrude. Iris... ...Iris and Corryn...

He stared on wordlessly as the boy closed his eyes, calmly, then slowly wrapped his arms Corryn's shuddering body, hands brushing lightly over the torn, scarred skin, staining themselves in the darkened blood.

Valkyre felt that something in his chest clench almost painfully, and he made as to move forward, to pull Iris away from this dangerous, unstable creature. What was this flare of emotion? ...Jealousy???

The boy looked up at the angel, then smiled gently. He shook his head.

Valkyre bit his lip, but he stayed where he was. What was Iris doing??

The boy touched Corryn's shoulder, leaning down and whispering in the other's ear, quiet words that the angel just barely made out; "Let us alone. Let me talk to him," Iris breathed, seeming to sigh more than speak.

Corryn jerked away at the words, face torn in anguish, in hurt.

"Why???" He demanded, desperation showing in his eyes, voice cracking. "Why him?? What's he to you?!?"

Iris only smiled faintly, enigmatic and hollow. "Please," he murmured quietly. "You have to."

Corryn shook his head stubbornly, frantic. "No," he hissed, "You don't know that. They'll hurt you, all of them. You can't trust them!"

The boy sighed gently, closing his eyes. The other stared back blankly, last shreds of hope fading from his eyes. Corryn's shoulders slumped, and he crawled to the side, gaze still lingering on Iris, pleading. The boy ignored him, empty gray eyes settling on Valkyre. The angel stumbled to his feet, stepping over to the other slowly, carefully, eyes flickering to Corryn, who stood where he was, seeming helpless, obviously wanting to rush forward but held back... by Iris? Did the boy somehow hold power of him?? It didn't make sense.

Valkyre touched Iris, felt the familiar cool skin and the dulled, misty presences sliding beneath the surface. The angel forgot about everything else then, wrapping his arms around the boy as he sat down. He sighed gently, closing his eyes. Iris' hand was light and soft as it brushed his face, cooling on his flushed skin.

When Valkyre opened his eyes again, Corryn was nowhere in sight. The angel blinked rapidly, looking

around through the darkness. No sign of him.

"Valkyre."

The boy looked up at him with his usual empty expression, then he dropped his hand and curled up against the other. Valkyre sighed, touching the boy's hair.

He was relieved that Iris was next to him again, and that the boy was no different. But a greater part of him was still worried, still confused.

"Iris?"

The boy blinked open his eyes to briefly regard him. The angel sighed, looking down at his own hands.

"What's... Why do you... ..Corryn, he..." Valkyre scowled at his inability to put the questions in his head into coherent sentences. Why did Iris help Corryn? How could the boy convince him to go away?? He just didn't know how to phrase them right, his endless questions about Iris... ..Did the boy know he himself wasn't from the labs?

"Valkyre."

Iris smiled up at the angel, drawing his attention back. His voice was still so soft, so light and gentle.

"...I don't know what I'm here for... but I saw him, and he was hurting..." Iris sighed. "I couldn't do anything with myself, but his body, his pain... ..I could help him. Just by being there."

The boy smiled gently to himself. "I don't know if I have a purpose, but he... gives me one. I can help him, so I do. It's enough... for me."

Valkyre stared into the empty gray. He could tell, just by looking, that the boy knew. Iris knew in truth what he might be, but he still thought himself without purpose... ..Did he?

"Iris... Do you still want to live?"

The boy made no reply, only gazed down at nothingness, at his own slender, pale hands. "I'm afraid of dying... without purpose."

"You do have a purpose!" Valkyre touched the other's cheek, making him look up at him. "You were created by the world, of course you were. I should've known that no humans could create you. And... so there has to be a reason for it."

Iris looked away, face tinged with sadness. "...But I... what can I... What am I to do... with what I am? ...Time is... too short..."

Valkyre felt a dread fill the pit of his stomach. His voice was uneven, raspy, speaking words he didn't want to say.

"...What... do you mean?"

Iris looked back up at him, and the angel felt his heart ache at the sad, hollow smile, a smile he'd seen before.

"...I'm like him, Valkyre. Like... Corryn." His voice was so small, so weak. So frail, a porcelain doll about to shatter, turning to dust between fingertips, to ashes.

"...I'm falling apart, too."

Valkyre trembled. He shook his head in disbelief.

"No," he muttered, "No. ...How can you?? Why? You're not made in a lab, you"-

Iris silenced him by simply closing his eyes, sighing softly. "I'm not supposed to exist, Valkyre. I'm not. ...And inside of me... I'm being torn apart. ...It hurts... and..."

"...Sometime, it will kill me."

Iris. So silent, so quiet.

So small, so weak, so hurt inside.

To be torn apart by yourself, from within. By your own blood. Knowing your own death, knowing eternity of nothingness. Lacking meaning. To die.

No. Iris.

+--

AN: My god. Another chapter, finally out! I have to say, I'm so immensely sorry about this, but there's been school and work and the usual crapiola, plus a brand-new little addiction called the PS2 and Star Ocean. Eheheheh. ^^;

I have done some daydreaming/brainstorming though, [heh] and the next few chappies are planned out, so as long as I can keep myself going, I should be able to get some more work done. :) I try to refrain from using the PS2 during weekdays, okay?? XD

Really though, my stories... It's not insofar as I don't know what I'm going to do, but simply that I have a series of events, and I just need to 'fluff' it up and link them all together. You can't believe how difficult it can get [or you can] when you get down to the details and all... So many things come up! X3

Ah, you can't believe how sick I myself can get of certain situations my chars end up in, so I apologize, as my writing has not been up to par again as of late... I think I'm really bad with this dialogue and explaining and crap. -__-; I like action scenes somewhat, but it can't always just be movements, so the rest has to be there...

By now, the term 'archangel' is getting quite a bit annoying and sounds weird... ..::sigh::... ..luckily for me, most of the basic facts are out, so there should just mostly be action to pick up to. :)

Once we get to something nice and fresh, and bring in the chars and the plotline, I hope I can get my writing up to something better. :)

Surprisingly, I think we might be near a half-way point or something for Iris~! I mean, I'm looking ahead at how many scenes I still want to write out, and how many have been written out, and, really, 32 chapters are a lot! O_O I'm so surprised at how far I've gotten!

Thanks to everyone for sticking with, I really love to see the comments, to see the people reading this; it's pretty much completely what's keeping me going!

Oh, and never you worry about me quitting writing. :) I've got a little notepad chock-full with my story ideas, as I haven't been able to keep them all in my head. Seriously. :)

So even if/when Iris is finished [it will be a freakin' damned miracle and turning-point in my life, I freakin' SWEAR it...], there will always be more goody [hah!] stories for you all. Mmmhm.

Ah, I'm sorry, I'm rambling again [and for quite a lot, too! O_o]...

Usual thanks all around. See ya next. :)

33 - Earth

Iris

+--

"What..." Valkyre shook his head, unsure of what to say. "How...?"

Iris smiled emptily. "I'm not supposed to exist," he murmured. "It... It doesn't matter who made me. I can't... keep going. Like this."

The angel breathed out slowly. His voice shuddered. Valkyre touched the boy's hair, seeming suddenly to fragile beneath his fingertips. Then, all along, Iris knew, and it still hadn't mattered...? What did he want? What purpose?

"...Then do you still... want to live?"

Iris didn't reply at first, only curling up tighter in the other's lap. His breathing was almost inaudible, soft exhalations barely stirring the air.

"...Iris?"

The boy looked up at him, expression empty again. "...Sometimes," he murmured. A tiny flash of a smile as gray eyes brushed against dark purple, then nothing again, wiped of emotion.

The angel stroked the other's hair, sighing, in part out of relief and part still in frustration. The silence seemed to stretch between them, thick and stifling. The dark earth around them was quietly shuffling with sound, but none of it seemed to reach them.

"What... makes you want to do so? To live?"

Iris smiled at him again, hinting at a soft, warm emotion, hidden somewhere deep down, but he said nothing.

The angel stared at the young boy, at the shadows that he hadn't noticed before under the eyes.

"I..." Valkyre shook his head. It didn't matter for now. Nothing had truly changed, and it was pointless for him to be worrying so much.

"...What should we do now?"

Iris closed his eyes briefly, smile still faint on his lips.

Live.

It wasn't spoken, but Valkyre could feel it, a wordless, unheard shift in the air between them, letting him know the answer was already there, long-since spoken.

As long as they kept moving, would Iris continue to live?

"Leave."

The angel blinked. "...What about Corryn?"

The boy blinked, apathetic. "...Get past him. He'll hurt you if you stay."

Valkyre sighed, but helped Iris up and stood.

"Wait." The angel watched as the boy walked off a pace, then returned quickly, pulling out of the shadows a familiar knapsack. Valkyre stepped over and took it from the boy, looking it over. Everything still seemed intact.

"How did you get...?"

Iris sat down on the ground again, hugging his knees to his chest. He smiled, faintly. "I asked him to keep it," he murmured.

Valkyre opened his mouth, wanting to speak, to ask. How was it Iris could get Corryn to do things like

this? ...Was it because Corryn truly cared about what Iris thought? Did he seek to be seen as equal before the boy, as a... protector?

The angel felt a cold chill run down his spine, and he shook his head lightly, pushing away the feeling. ...If Corryn truly cared about Iris, why didn't he listen?? Why... how had they ended up on the wrong sides, pitted against each other? Could it all just be because of... Jealousy??

"Valkyre."

The angel blinked, bringing himself back from his thoughts. Iris was holding something in his small, pale hands, and somehow, Valkyre already knew what it was. The black pen looked like a coiled snake in the boy's hand, made of pure black ebony in the darkness, dripping with venom.

Abruptly, Valkyre shook his head.

"No."

Iris watched him calmly, pen still in his hands, unmoved. The angel sighed in frustration.

"I'm not doing it. I... it shouldn't be. ...It's too dark here, anyways. Why do you want this, now?"

Iris sighed in mirrored response, leaning in closer, resting his head against the other's shoulder. "I don't want it," he murmured quietly. "I need it."

Valkyre wrapped his fingers around the boy's thin hands, touching the smoothed surface of the black pen beneath, writhing like a creature about to jump from his grasp. "...Why?"

Iris only shook his head. "Hurry," he whispered.

The angel pulled away, stared down at the empty, emotionless alabaster face beneath him. He frowned, but the boy didn't respond.

With a final, surrendering sigh, he slowly pulled away the pen, rubbing his fingers along its sleek surface, wanting to throw it away into the darkness and never find it again.

"...Where?"

Iris raised his arm, turning it so the veins beneath the skin at his wrist and forearm stood out, blue and purplish through the pale, white flesh.

"A snake," he murmured, looking almost content. "...And a hawk."

The angel touched the boy's cheek, forced him to stare back into his eyes. Iris gazed back, showing nothing, and Valkyre could pull away no answers. The boy only smiled.

This time, he was careful, and the snake remained a thin shape, twisted in loose coils from the center of the boy's forearm back along the shoulder, tail end whisking at the flickering bat further back. The angel realized the darkness didn't really matter, faced with the boy's light, almost translucent pale skin.

The hawk was opposite, a small shape caught in mid-dive, wings half folded, just barely avoiding touching the wolf at the far edge of the boy's back, talons tucked and sharp, hooked beak prominent.

It didn't matter how small they were. Valkyre felt a heavy guilt over himself as the boy pulled his shirt back on, the snake's sinuous body showing along his left arm, a dirty crust of black on the pristine, pure white-gray of the skin.

...What was he doing??

"Valkyre."

Again, Iris brought him around, eyes calm, empty gray leading down to fathomless pits that the angel couldn't bring light upon, couldn't into nor comprehend.

"We have to go."

Valkyre looked around him, realizing that he'd, over time, adjusted to the darkness, and was now able to hazily make out the shapes around him.

The entire place was a mess of catacomb-like structures, crumbling earth lining walls that branched off haphazardly, at random. More than one probably led off into a dead end. The angel peered down some of the tunnels, but had no idea as to where they were, or to where Corryn had gone.

Valkyre closed his eyes, reaching up a hand to touch the seal around his neck, fingertips rubbing lightly

on the smoothed stone at its core. The view he saw was different now, one he followed emptily with his mind and not his body, in flickering, grainy images. Darkness all around, image after image, broken only by the shredded, jutting clumps of soil, all one and the same. But the light came, and the black specks turned to white, condensing into a clear, colorless core.

The angel opened his eyes again, blinking slowly. He paused, then shook his head, clearing his mind. Valkyre took Iris' hand, so small and thin in his own, coldness seeping in around the edges of his glove. "Let's go," he murmured quietly.

They ran, loosing track of everything in the winding, twisting darkness, everything but for that flicker of light and that guess at sunlight, or moonlight, either welcome from the darkness.

It was an odd thing, that. Valkyre had thought he'd always love the dark. He could hide in the darkness, could be seen by no one while he could watch everyone else, innately, unafraid of being seen, unafraid of what they would think of him. In black on black, in empty abyssmal space, no one would see scars or closed hearts or tattoos on your skin, sunk into your flesh, devouring you alive. You could forget. Your body could be feather-light, you could be powerful as the crushing waves of the ocean, you could be someone, anyone.

But the darkness left out beauty, left out realization, left out dawning. It left out life, existence. And he was yearning for it again, in a way he hadn't done so since what felt like an eternity.

How odd.

So here he was, running through darkened tunnels like on a star-fallen night, lost without its crescent sliver of moon.

He needed fresh air. There was earth here. There was promise of life, of living creatures not born of man nor grown under their overly-protective, tender care. Here was existence.

But he couldn't stand it. It was too dark. Nothing would grow here, ever.

Someone deep down, the angel knew too that even the spiders couldn't survive here. They weren't here just for the purpose; they were linked to Corryn, somehow.

And if he were to stay here, no matter what he'd gone through at the labs, no matter what he could survive without, it wouldn't be living. Never.

They needed to go. Needed to escape, get out of here.

Where?

Mountains to the north? Perhaps. The coast, far from the cities. Where the cold made it too hard to live, for humans?

It didn't matter.

Soil in dark clumps on the ground turning to smears and dashes beneath his boots. Valkyre stared at them, then finally realized the image for its worth.

Light. It was growing lighter.

...Maybe, sometime, they could return. They could use the soil, grow life again, treat it preciously.

Maybe...

Of course, the world was not his concern. Earth was not native to him, and he didn't know how to take care of it, to ensure it was not drained to empty, rocky sand-like grit. It wasn't for him to do.

Light, growing brighter. Speckles of green along the edges, giving life to nothingness, to earth again.

Hope, so slim? Maybe. Just maybe.

Escape. Escape to somewhere, to anywhere, it no longer mattered at all.

Of course, he should've known. Even before he rounded the corner and the light cast a pale, watery shadow behind him, he should've known. He did inside, somewhere, staring down at the shadow that stretched down towards him.

Corryn crouched before him, golden-black eyes glinting through the shadow cast over his face, darkened and accented by the hair that fell over him, black-on-black in the eternal shadows.

"Valkyre," he whispered, "You've gone too far."

+--

AN: Man, finally another chapter done. I'm not quite admitting to a writer's block, but it was simply that I haven't had the chance to get around to the work! So much stuff to do, as the fourth marking period is drawing in, and there is so much for me to do!

Well, I'm swinging back into Iris some though, and I'm hoping to get some more work done throughout now and spring break [which is only 9 days long, unfortunately], though I'm afraid a great deal of that time will also be given to Star Ocean, ehehehe... Sorry!

I've also got some loosely-done up ideas in my head, and a bruising sore to get back onto TC, if only I can manage both stories at once... we'll have to see. :)

Oh, and some news! I have got new fanarts done for Iris! A lovely pic of Valkie and Iris-kun, by DefyDeath_DefyMe, as a birthday present, and another giftie from SenayDragon, of sweet little Iris-kun. :) I love both pieces to death, thank you both so much!! [I have them saved to my computer and in my screensaver, I'll have you know. X3]

Oh, and Senay? I have a reason for not doing the dragon as a tattoo, so sorry, but, well, it didn't work out... as in, I have a little problem that gets in the way, and I need to solve it first beforehand, as I can't seem to come up with the right... ...yes. ^^;

I'll work on that. Don't be insulted, in any way! [I have an utter fear of somehow accidentally insulting someone or somesuch, ehehehe...]

Ah, I'll cut off the raving early now. Sorry for the wait, and hope they won't all take so long! ^_____^
Thanks!

34 - Pity

Iris

+--

He'd wanted to say things. Wanted to try and reason with him, to try and explain. To make him understand, to be able to understand himself.

Valkyre had thought himself immune to others' pain, to others' suffering, seeing it all the time all around him, leaving him with an empty core, jaded.

But he found that he did care. He didn't want to fight, didn't want to have to kill again. Corryn and him, they were both after the same thing, the same goal... weren't they? Why couldn't it be done in peace, for once...?

But, of course, nothing ever happened that way.

Corryn lunged forward, bared teeth flashing white through the dirt-smeared face and the tangled hair. The angel shoved Iris back against the wall, keeping himself between the two as he blocked the boy from the first blow.

Corryn's rough fingernails dug straight through Valkyre's arm, small smears of black blood leaking out around the edges. The angel pushed himself away from the wall, immediately jerking his head back to avoid the fingers of the free hand that sought to tear at his face, seizing the moment afterwards to send the other crashing to the ground with a kick in the torso.

Valkyre tore off his seal, in the same movement crouching down and pulling out the blade strapped to his boot. Corryn was fast, he knew that now, and he couldn't just fight him bare-handed, unfair though it may seem.

The angel looked up, but saw nothing except the black tunnel stretching away in front of him, gaping. He darted to his feet, whirling around, only to face nothingness again.

The crumble of dirt was the only thing that saved him as Corryn suddenly dropped onto him from above, snarling, teeth snapping in front of the angel's face. Valkyre struck out with the blade, feeling it bite through skin and flesh even as he tumbled to the ground, something painful ripping at his side, small grainy pebbles turned to sharp corners of flint as they dug into his back and bare skin.

The angel jerked to the side, flaring wide his wings, just managing to throw the other off of him. He darted to his feet, drawing his wings in around himself, a hand running over his left side coming away slicked with dark blood. The smell of it burned his mouth and tongue, burned red into his vision.

Valkyre struck with the blade as Corryn lunged forward again, but the other twisted away, a blow meant for the neck only grazing off of the shoulder. The angel flared out a wing in counter, the full weight of it catching the other straight in the chest and sending him to the ground again, dark feathers rustling quietly as they pinned the other down for a moment, then backed away.

Valkyre took the chance to catch a breath, free hand clutching at the torn wound in his side, mentally trying to push away the pain. Corryn remained still, lying sprawled out on the ground.

Slowly, cautiously, the angel stepped closer, frowning. He doubted that he could've defeated him so easily, even if the other had suffered a broken rib or two; it still didn't seem enough to stop him, seeing the power he'd possessed earlier.

He was right. Almost directly over Corryn's still form, the golden-black eyes snapped open as he twisted to life, striking low at the angel's legs so the other had to jump backwards, set off guard.

Corryn darted to his feet, leaping forwards. Valkyre was already prepared for it though, crouched low on the ground, and the blade flashed in the darkness.

There was the sickeningly wet sound of organs ripping, of blood splattering on the ground. Corryn's eyes went blank, body still.

The angel stared up the bare hilt of the blade, seeing the flat steel end split apart the flesh of the other's stomach, the tapered, sharp tip blackened with blood peeking out from the other end of the body.

Valkyre breathed out a slow, shuddering breath. Above him, Corryn choked in a likewise attempt, blood splattering and leaking between his lips. His head drooped, gaze coming down to stare into the dark violet, his own fading, dulled.

"...I'm sorry..."

Valkyre's voice cracked as he spoke it, so breathy it almost couldn't be heard, drowned out by the silence and the muffled dripping of blood.

The other rasped for breath again, flecks of blood and spit dripping from his chin. "...Valky..."

The angel looked up, fingers still clenched too tightly over the handle of the blade, his amethyst eyes searching for through the golden, black-flecked eyes.

"Valkyre... ..you..."

Quick, broken breaths shuddering from his form. "...Huh... ah..."

In utter shock, he watched as the cracked and bloodied lips split, curling back into a grimacing smile, showing red-stained teeth.

The angel slowly found the eyes again, tearing his gaze away from the silently mocking, rasping mouth. Corryn's eyes were startling, suddenly flooded black on black, showing absolutely nothing, reflecting no light, boring down into him.

The smile split wider, and drops of blood fell onto Valkyre's face, hot and salty as they dripped down his cheeks. His voice came out raspy and hoarse, but impossibly clear and strong.

"...My turn, archangel."

He hissed with surprise as cold, clammy hands grasped his own, blackened fingernails digging into his skin. The blade bit deeper through flesh and tissue as the other pulled himself closer, fresh blood splashing to the crumbling ground, steel length humming as it passed the body and met the faint light outside again, stained in new black blood.

Corryn snarled, shoving himself closer, fingers grabbing and digging into the angel's neck and shoulders, slashing suddenly at his face, at the exposed skin.

Valkyre twisted himself away, flaring his wings as he managed to work a leg up, kicking the other away. The blade ripped out of the body, falling with a muted clang to the ground, forgotten. Corryn stumbled to his feet, still baring his twisted, grimacing smile, unminding of the leaking blood spilling from his torso.

The angel drew a smaller blade as the other, unbelievably, darted forward again, black eyes burning into him, never leaving his face. His movements were still quick, showing no sign of the wound he'd just gained. The shorter blade bit deeply across the other's collarbone, but Corryn didn't even seem to feel it, batting aside the dagger and colliding into the angel, sending the two crashing to the ground.

Valkyre tried to push him off, but the other latched on to him tightly, fingers curling in around his neck, teeth snapping millimeters in front of the angel's face, blood splattering everywhere. Valkyre gritted his teeth, then worked up his hand to the other's body, fumbling around to find the weeping, ripped wound. His fingers slipped through the blood and fluid, but he found the tear in the flesh and his nails dug into the soft interior, prying apart the fresh, sensitive skin.

Pain. He needed to get Corryn to wake to the pain, to break out of his pure fury and rage.

In response, the other smiled at him, chuckling wheezily.

And then he leaned down, ignoring the fingers now crushed between his own body and the one beneath him, and he sank his teeth into Valkyre's shoulder.

The angel screamed, the blows he struck onto the other to no avail, unphasing the gleaming lifeless black eyes and the claw-like hands still scratching, tearing at his skin, the crushing jaws twisting at the fibers in his shoulder, setting his body afire, destroying all other thought.

And then, suddenly, the weight over his body was pulled off, and his failing scream was drowned out by another, much worse shrieking, fingers dug into his body twitching, breaking their grasps.

Valkyre dragged his body back, pulling his bloodied hand free, tearing the scrabbling fingers away from himself. He blinked the blood from his eyes, staring.

Corryn was writhing, howling senselessly, eyes staring upwards at nothingness, face contorted in pain. Pale, thin arms clutched each other across his chest, Iris' pale face showing just over the other's shoulder, eyes squeezed shut, small, frail body holding tightly to the other's form, as if a frail branch could hold back a flood.

Valkyre breathed out raggedly, only barely aware of himself trying to stumble to his feet, bloodied hand fumbling inside his jacket for another blade.

Corryn's shriek turned to a weak, hoarse cry, his body slumping. He shuddered, hands closing around the wound over his torso, as if just realizing its existence for the first time.

Pain. He'd felt it again. Iris had brought it back to him.

Corryn whirled around, ripping the boy's frail grip away from him, shoving him onto the ground below himself, his fingers leaving merciless red crescents in the white flesh.

"Why?!?"

His voice was a snarl, blood staining the boy's white skin and dirty-white shirt, eyes flashing in the dark, enraged. They were as before again, golden with retreating, fading black.

"Stop it."

Corryn jerked his head around to face Valkyre, but he was too slow, dragged down by the wounds and the sudden weakness that had overtaken him.

The long, tapered blade split through between his ribs, just barely grazing his spine, pinning him down into the ground, the blade tip embedded in the crumbling earth less than an inch from Iris' muddied, blood-stained shirt.

Corryn cried out hoarsely in pain again, ignored as the angel dragged the boy away from him, holding the frail form closely to himself.

Iris seemed not to feel it, small hand grasping Corryn's twitching, tanned wrist. The boy's face was still expressionless, a small exhale from his pale lips as if he wanted to say something.

The other stared back blankly through clouded golden eyes, mouth opening and closing listlessly, gaping, breathing raspy, uneven.

The hands fell apart. Valkyre drew the boy closer to himself, own hands trembling as he touched Iris' arms and shoulders, checking to make sure that he wasn't hurt.

"Are you... all right?"

The boy nodded faintly in response, closing his eyes.

"Val... kyre..."

The angel stared beyond Iris at the limp, still form. Corryn's eyes stared back at him blankly, blearily.

"...What did you... do to... him...?"

Valkyre's eyes fell with the other's on the boy's arm, where the black coils of the snake showed darkly against the pale skin. The angel opened his mouth, but he didn't know what to say.

"...Helping."

Iris' voice was soft, soothing in the rasping, burning silence. He had a calm, content look on his face, gentle smile touching his lips. "He's helping me," he murmured quietly.

Corryn's eyes went wide for a moment, ringed in white. "...What...?"

Valkyre exhaled slowly, then rose slowly to his feet, pulling Iris up with him. He didn't know what to say,

too numbed by what'd just happened, unable to think clearly. But Corryn was immobile now, and he, they, needed to escape. Now.

"No..."

The other's form trembled, shuddering. He seemed to curl up onto himself, still run through by the blade, eyes frantic, pained, begging.

"Don't tell me... ..you, you..."

Corryn's voice was cracking, weakening into whispers, senseless mutterings to himself.

"...Do everything... did everything just to... ..no..."

Valkyre tried to force his feet to move, tried to step away. Iris leaned over, reaching out his hand as if to touch the other, but his own fingers were trembling, shaking.

"...Don't... no help... ..don't pity me, I don't want it..."

Corryn wasn't seeing them anymore, wasn't even able to focus on Iris, gray-white figure before him, small thin fingers extended as if to help, to pull him to his feet, though he couldn't possibly stand.

"Don't tell me it was all because of pity... ..I don't want it..."

His eyes were unfocused, blood leaking unnoticed from his lips, staining his face and the sticky ground beneath.

The small hand reached for him again, and he saw them. He snarled, spitting, lashing out, unable to truly move, still impaled to the ground.

"No! Don't touch me!" It ended in a feral snarl, the golden-black eyes flashing in the dark, clawing at nothingness, soil crumbling between his fingertips.

He hissed and spat, eyes wild, desperate. Hurt and crushed inside, broken.

Valkyre drew Iris back to himself, holding the boy close, feeling the shuddering, scared breaths, feeling the pain inside. Something ruined, snapped.

Wordlessly, the angel pulled himself and Iris away, stumbling down the tunnel, leaving behind the senseless mumblings, and, eventually, the soft, muffled crying.

Alone and together, the two stepped into the silent, cold moonlight.

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AN: Man, I suck. ^^; Fav charries are bashed about quite frequently, I'm sorry to say, and I seem to end up doing it a lot. Eheh.

I also have that thing for non-pity, though I love pitying charries, I'm guessing they don't like it. And I don't really like chars that just BEG for pity, y'know?

But lemme tell ya- it hurts like hell to be hit by a wing, of any bird. O_O I got hit by a goose's wing once, I had a bruise on meh leg for a week. ;_;; So never underestimate wings. Yupyup. ::nods solemnly::

Well, another chappie up. If I can keep this up [as this is spring break and my CHANCE to finally get in some more work] I'll finally be able to get on [decently] with the plot! XD

Thanks for all of teh help, and the comments! New commenters are also always welcome too, but just please comment so I know you're there!! :3

We're finally moving on. :) An' don't worry, Corryn ain't gone. He can't be that cool [by my standards] and only last one [long] scene! ^____^~

And now I bow and apologize profusely for my over-use of the brackets. X)

Thanks for reading, and see you next time!

35 - Continue

Iris

+--

They stepped out into thick, stagnant marshland. Valkyre looked around in surprise, glancing back at where they'd emerged. Sharp, jagged rocks were strewn about the landscape, and they seemed like nothing more than a pileup behind them, easily hiding the entrance it held. The soil was sandy and crumbling, too pebbly and rough to hold life, steeped in blackish water. Rotted snags and stumps of trees jutted out of the landscape at twisted angles, too decayed to be worth burning.

The angel shook his head, pulling himself and Iris to a flat sheet of rock, where the wet ground didn't suck at their feet. Above, the sky was miraculously clear, showing faint flickerings of stars and a dimmed moon that seemed reluctant to glow any brighter in the darkness. Still, the air was clear, fresh and slightly scented by the evening, bringing a gentle relief to the stifled air they'd left behind.

Valkyre looked around, trying to get his bearings. Swampland... near the coast? He closed his eyes, but he couldn't be sure if he smelled any hints of the faint tang of salt water. The rot and slow, earthy decay overpowered him.

The angel opened his eyes again, then bent down at the edge of the rock, staring into the muddied water. It wasn't much, and it probably wasn't healthy, but he cupped what water he could and did his best to rinse the blood from his hands, hating the metallic smell and the sticky feeling it gave him. He pulled off his gloves and stuffed them away in a pocket, rubbing at his palms, where the blood had leaked under.

He stood after having wiped half-heartedly at his face as well, rubbing his hands to get out the grit and black smears it gave him in return.

He sighed, then wrapped an arm over Iris' shoulder. His moist fingers brushed away a speckle of drying red-brown blood from the boy's cheek. "...You okay?"

The other tilted his head to one side, not quite seeming to hear, or simply not paying attention. Valkyre pursed his lips. "We have to get going. I... we've got to leave here."

Iris nodded, just faintly, and the angel carefully picked the boy up before flaring his wings and rising up into the air, closing his eyes momentarily and relishing in the feel of the cool, free air on his face. The knapsack, earlier adjusted to rest against his hip, bounced lightly with the movements.

Far above the ground, Valkyre stopped and studied the silver-black landscape below, trying to figure out where they were. A faint shimmer far to the east was probably the ocean indeed, though so far-off as to really not be taken into account, though it did give him a blurry bearing as to where they were.

North of them, to the west, a faint glow showed, metallic and brashly bright, though dimmed through distance.

Valkyre didn't particularly enjoy the idea of returning to a city again, but he realized that it would, hopefully, be safer than out on the barren lands. They could need somewhere to stay, somewhere hospitable. Even if it were to be dawn, they were tired and needed to recuperate. And amongst the scattered crush of people, hopefully, they would be harder to find.

The angel beat his wings again, this time knowing direction, able to relax now, mentally, having decided on which course to follow.

After a while of silence and the steady, muffled beat of wings, Valkyre looked down at the boy in his

arms. Iris was awake for sure, his gray eyes staring out at nothingness, breathing shallow and gentle, but steady.

"...Iris?"

The boy's eyes flickered to him briefly, blinking slowly.

"...Corryn... was he..." Valkyre fumbled for words, not sure how to phrase it. "...Did you... I-like him? I mean, he..." The angel cut off his words, not liking how they'd come out. His face flushed, just slightly in the dark.

Iris smiled, faintly. He shrugged.

"I wanted to help him," he murmured quietly. "Maybe it's not like that, but... he's not bad. He's just... afraid. Sometimes."

Iris closed his eyes, breaths coming in small sighs. When Valkyre was just about sure the boy was asleep, he spoke up again. "...And... he's sad inside. ...He doesn't want to die."

The angel closed his eyes as well. "No one wants to die," he muttered, then blinked open his eyes again, realizing what he'd just said.

Iris didn't seem to react to it, eyes still shut, face calm, just the faintest traces of a smile on his lips.

"Mmn."

Valkyre sighed, then turned his attention back to where he was going. Ahead, the city lights were becoming the brazen, sharp neon he was used to, the sharp rectangular buildings a blatant contrast to the softer, rolling organic land around.

In his arms, Iris seemed to have fallen asleep.

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AN: Damn me and my obsession with detail. ;___; I am so sorry.

Completely crappy short little chapter of filler, but, heck, I just had to put in the detail. I am such of a horrible person. XD

Well, as spring break [for me] is coming to a close, I'm really taking the time to cram in the work and try and get a few more chappies done. :) [You all should be so proud of me, I've barely touched the PS2 since! XD] And so, expect at least an update per week. Remember though, sooner you comment, sooner I bring out next chappie. :3 I've got, I think, 2 chappies after this one done already, just needing proofreading! So comment! X)

Oh, and as well, another little one-shotty is brewing, so I might take off a bit of time for it. [But I'll still update, no worry. :3] This one should be softer, and hopefully shorter. XD

Oh, oh, and another fanart alert! [Sorry about this, but I can't help it, it makes me so happy! XD]

DefyDeath_DefyMe has drawn my adorable little Corryn-kun~! [Rating R though, so you know... ^^:] But I luvs it! And it is so pretty! ^_____^- Take a peek! A-And leave a comment, too! X3 All of these fanarts make me sooo, so happy! Thank you all~! :)

Well, that's about all, I'll try to keep my notes thin. Best just to get to sit back and enjoy. :3

Thanks for reading! [Promise next chappie will be a bit longer! XD]

36 - Scar

Iris

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The city streets seemed to be, for the most part, empty. Though the moon marked the time to be past midnight, the sky was still dark and empty of light through the sifting gray clouds, proving the dawn to be still far off.

Valkyre's boots thumped on the paved, rough cement ground, dragging with his slow steps. The angel rubbed at grit on his cheek with the back of his hand, frowning. Iris leaned against his other side, only blinking his eyes open every now and then, sleep obvious in his dulled gaze.

Silence, save for their own soft scuffling. Valkyre kept alert, searching for somewhere to stay; an inn perhaps, as the abandoned building along the fringes of the city had been beyond much use, and unsafe with the figures that slouched at the corners, glaring at him through unkempt hair and drawn faces gritted with dirt and dust.

They passed under broken, flickering lamplights, shadows fluttering between darkness and stale neon light and doubling between, each copy fainter than the other. The quiet sounds were enough to lure Valkyre into a half-sleep, numbing his mind and dragging at his already weary limbs.

The footfalls had been silent, muffled and too brief to leave a lasting sound, and Valkyre hadn't noticed them at all. He only caught the shadowy, quick movement out of the corner of his eye, snapping awake and whirling around just fast enough to try and block the blow. "Angel!"

The figure crushed down onto him, the blade biting deep through the angel's forearm, splashing fresh blood along the steel. Valkyre kicked out on reflex, catching the other in the side strongly enough to force him away. The angel darted to the side, dodging another blow thrown back in counter. He already had a shortened blade in his hands, hilt hard and stiff under his bare palm.

"-I'll kill you this time, angel, for sure."

The voice was raspy and out of breath, growled out. Valkyre stared back at the figure, confused. That voice, it'd seemed... familiar, somehow. Just barely...

The other was crouched before him, slicked blade held out in front, ready to be used again.

Bright, pale burning eyes glared back out at the angel, half-hidden by uneven black hair. The rest of his face was hidden by a black length of cloth, barely leaving enough room to see the eyes at all. His clothing was ripped and torn, patched together in places hastily, and ill-done. The palms of the hands as well were bound in dark leather straps, the pale fingers that showed already lightly splattered with the rich, dark crimson blood.

"Who... who are you??"

Valkyre bit back the end of his question with a hiss as the other darted forward, blade splitting the air. The angel crossed the steel, and the sharp ring of metal on metal sounded in the silence. The figure struck at him with his free hand, pale eyes glowering behind, but Valkyre pushed back the blow and the two broke apart.

There was hardly a pause before the other came at him again, snarling. Valkyre dodged the blatant strike, frowning. There was a limp to the other's step, an uneven gait that broke his rhythm and made him unsteady. He was weak too, in other ways, probably from overworking himself without rest.

The angel dodged another heavy but obvious strike that landing on nothing, smashing his own blade at

an angle near the hilt so the other lost his grip, and the steel edge struck the paved ground, harmlessly bouncing aside.

The figure snarled, lunging at him again, and Valkyre ducked down, swiping with his blade and feeling it bite the other's calf, scraping on bone. The impact was rough and irregular, and the other screamed in pain, giving the angel the chance to grab him by the arm and twist him around, throwing him onto the ground.

Valkyre's blade hovered millimeters in front of the other's face as he tried to struggle up, stopping the attempt. The angel stared down at the sprawled form, frowning.

He'd predicted the wound correctly, as his blow had only gone over something else that'd already been there; the source of the limp, an older injury that'd not healed well, or had enough time to do so.

His dark violet eyes searched the other's, meeting pale, glowering yellow. Valkyre started, surprised.

The other twisted away at the opportunity, rolling off to a crouch. The blade sang out sharply as it bit at the cement, flat of the steel length pressed to the other's cheek, sharp edge nipping a light, dribbling wound from his ear. The black cloth over the mouth had been torn down, revealing the face.

Valkyre leaned down to it, frowning.

"...Who... ..Asher??"

The vampire glowered up at him, lips twisted back into a snarl. Startled, Valkyre pulled back the blade, stepping away. The other darted back up, still scowling at him.

The angel shook his head, too surprised to know quite what to say. "What... what happened to you??"

The vampire's pale eyes flared, enraged. He was the same person, but it'd only been barely recognizable. A thick, ugly slash line crossed his face from somewhere up in his scalp all the way down across his cheekbone, just missing the other's right eye and leaving a red, angry scar all along its length. The face was also dirty, smaller scratches and cuts already as fading scars marring it, overhung by ragged, unkempt black hair. He was different, so completely different than the person he'd been when Valkyre had last seen him.

"What happened??" The vampire mocked his words, scowling. "Don't play stupid with me, angel. I'm just taking back what you stole from me..." The pale yellow eyes darted to the side, away from Valkyre.

Pressed back against a building's wall, Iris stared back calmly, tilting his head slightly to one side.

"What? What're you talking about??"

Asher snapped his gaze back, glaring, as Valkyre pushed himself between the two, protectively. The vampire's lips pulled back in a false smile, sharp teeth glinting. "Do you forget so easily, angel?? Or is your partnership not as well as I thought? Hmm?"

The vampire raised a hand to his pale lips, which were marred with a small cut not yet healed. His thin fingers remained over his face, as if to cover the larger, deeply-drawn scar, but when his yellow eyes met the other's, and he let his hand drop, scowling. Asher spat at the ground, and the spittle was tinged red-pink.

Valkyre stared back at him. Something wasn't right. The hunters... there were three of them, weren't they? ...But the angel hadn't detected either of the other, and Asher didn't act like he had anyone else to fall back on. Where were the other two??

"Enough."

The vampire shifted his footing, still unconsciously favoring his hurt leg, whose leaking blood was sticking to his torn pants. Valkyre drew up his blade again, feeling the splash of blood on it sliding down the hilt over his bare fingers. He shook his head, frowning.

"I don't want to fight you, Asher"-

"Shut up, liar!" The vampire stepped forward shakily, snarling. "If you won't fight me, then you'll die, and die a coward!"

Asher lunged forward, ready to strike with nothing more than bare hands and teeth. Valkyre dodged the

obvious blow, snapping out sharply with a kick that struck the vampire in the same hurt leg again, bringing down the flat of the blade in the same movement and heavily striking the other in the back of the head.

Asher slumped forward, caught on Valkyre's arm, unconscious.

The angel sighed to himself, sheathing his blade with his free hand while cautiously looking around, waiting for another attack. None came.

Valkyre frowned, chewing on his lip as he stared down at the ragged form in his arms. He wasn't sure why he hadn't killed Asher, but what the vampire had said was too confusing, and he needed to know what he'd meant.

Sighing again, in resolution, the angel draped the body over his shoulder, surprised at how light it felt. Iris appeared at his side again, not showing any opinion to his decision, but pausing to peek at the still face. The boy's fingers made as if to touch the heavy scar on the face, then pulled away again. Iris frowned, lips turning down just slightly, brow creasing.

"...What is it?" Valkyre asked, looking back at the other. Iris shook his head, then stepped ahead. The angel sighed, then followed.

+--

AN: Yes, as you've probably noticed by now, I have a tendency to bring back charries. X) I guess I just take too much time describing them; they keep coming back~! But, well, charrie intros are just about over, and we've got lots of stuff to bring back now. XD

Man~! So much work to do, and so much to plan out. I mean, I've got this part down I suppose, but for some more, I'm confused again. I'm working on it, I swear!

But, well, thanks for the wait, guys. Things'll be a bit tight now 'cuz I've got AP tests and a big project and then finals, but hopefully I'll find a breather inbetween! Phew!

Thanks for reading, I luvs you all! XD See ya~!

37 - Ally

Iris

+--

"I am going to kill you."

Valkyre raised a brow as he stepped back into the inn's room, rather calmly noting the vampire struggling to stand, leaning against the corner and breathing heavily. The furniture was untouched, and Iris was perched on the edge of the bed, blinking back dully.

The angel closed the door behind him, sighing as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Asher scowled at him, managing to push himself away from the wall and face the other, though his leg was still clearly unsteady. Valkyre had bound the vampire's arms tightly behind his back, and now reconsidered his choice of having not tied up the legs as well.

"You don't seem to be in the best position to say that," he commented on dryly. It'd been hard enough getting a room without raising too much suspicion, and the angel really didn't need any more annoyances for the night.

"Try me," Asher hissed, stumbling as he pushed forward.

Valkyre sighed again, quickly stepping to the side and tripping the vampire as he tried to whirl around, solidly pinning down his legs as he fell heavily to the ground. Perhaps it was a bit cruel to be playing on weaknesses, but the angel was honestly too tired by now to care about morale.

"-D-Damn you! Get the hell off of me!"

Valkyre glared back at the other as he kneeled, scowling. "Keep shouting," he muttered, "And I'll gag you. So shut up, and try to act sensibly."

The vampire snarled back at him, but bit his lip and cut back his words.

The angel sighed, partially in relief, and relaxed his grip. He searched around in his pockets, eventually drawing out a thin, short knife. A flickered gaze caught the vampire's startled pale eyes, watching him suspiciously.

When Valkyre bent down though and touched the other's right pants leg, Asher struggled to fight back, snarling and spitting out more half-coherent curses. The angel ignored him, and the fabric split easily with a faint rip under the keen edge of the small blade.

"What're you- L-Let go of me!!"

Valkyre frowned as he held the legs pinned down, rather surprised at the weak effort the vampire gave forth, despite his foul words and his obvious contempt. It only proved that the other truly was weakened, though by what the angel still didn't know.

He paused, blinking, as he pulled back the black cloth and saw the wound. It was deep and burned an angry red, a thick cut that laced itself all the way over his calf, leaving a trail of ruined and jagged scar tissue over the pale skin. The dark crimson blood of the earlier cut stained over it, a smaller incision that had nonetheless dug into a part of the heavily-scarred and poorly healed flesh. A wound like this would've no doubt crippled a human, and the bright red showed it to be still rather recent despite the vampiric healing speed, and could easily be seen as quite a wonder that Asher was still able to stand at all.

"...What the hell happened to you??"

The angel was already moving on, studying the depth of the wound and the angle at which it was

delivered. The vampire's struggling and curses were ignored as Valkyre cut up the other pants leg near the knee, sitting back slightly and frowning as he saw the other end of the scar; a smaller wound along the other leg that matched the cut of the first, proving it to have been quite of a large and heavy blow. Valkyre looked up, studying the other's strained face. Calmly, he asked, "...Are there any other wounds?"

Asher scowled at him, baring his teeth, but started suddenly as Iris stepped down, walking over to them. The boy leaned over and studied the scars impassively, expression still blank.

"...Be damned if I tell you," the vampire muttered through gritted teeth.

Valkyre looked up sharply at the words, then carefully studied the other's body again, looking over the torn and shapeless clothing, powdered in dust and dirt. The angel leaned over, pinning down the legs under his own. His fingers ran roughly over the other's torso, then stopped at an area where a rather small rip in the cloth had been loosely stitched together. His eyes flickered and caught the flinch in the other's face at the movement.

Without another word, Valkyre tore apart the loosely-done stitches, then sat back suddenly, drawing in a sharp breath.

Between two of the lower ribs, with a dip upwards showing that it'd been aimed for the heart instead, a thick hole gaped back at him, edges ragged and the same angry red as the scar on the legs, the newly-healed flesh deeper down still only working at covering the bare wound.

For the first time, the angel detected the slight hitch in the breath as the vampire inhaled sharply, surprisingly first to look away.

Asher let his head drop on the floorboards, twisted to the side so his face couldn't be seen. He started and tried to jerk away suddenly though as Iris knelt next to his head, reaching out tentatively with a hand as if to touch.

"Hold still," Valkyre murmured calmly, still studying the scar. It had been deep, and bent upwards, and there was quite a high chance of it having pierced straight through to the other side. Such of a wound...

"D-Don't need you to tell me that," the vampire hissed through clenched teeth. The angel smiled ruefully, scoffing. "Then what were you doing, attacking me in such of a"-

"Don't touch me!"

Valkyre looked up, finding the snarl directed at Iris, who was leaning over the other's face, thin fingers brushing aside the hair, free hand holding down the head gently, but perhaps just slightly forcibly.

"...Iris..."

The boy's fingers touched lightly on the vampire's nose, then traced their way up to the scar between the eyes, soft fingertips running gently along the length of the red-marked, jagged path. The small hand stopped suddenly, flinching, and then the boy drew back suddenly, stumbling away.

"Iris? What is it?"

Valkyre pushed himself away from the other's remarkably still body, stepping over quickly to the boy, who'd drawn himself up into a corner, small hands wrapped around his drawn knees, shivering.

"...What's the matter?"

Valkyre hurried to his feet, making his way over the the other. The boy stilled underneath the light touch against his shoulder, small clenched fingers loosening slightly.

The angel knelt beside him, frowning. "...Iris?"

"...Raguel." The name was breathed out, raggedly. "It... it's Raguel."

Valkyre bit at his lip, frown deepening. "...What?"

A sharp bark of a laugh sounded from behind him, and the angel looked back at Asher, who'd struggled onto his side, lips curled back in a mirthless smile.

"Don't tell me the little wretch is afraid of his own ally," he breathed out, voice rasping.

Valkyre turned around abruptly, grabbing the other by the hair roughly and dragging him up, ignoring the

snarl in protest.

"Don't you dare call him that, you"- The angel cut off, biting hard at his own lip, glaring down at the other. Asher stared straight back, pale yellow eyes seething with the same anger, the same fury.

"...What... what do you mean by that?" the angel demanded, fingers tightening their grip in the messy, unkempt black hair.

The vampire flashed a dark, pained smile back, chuckling faintly under his breath.

"Raguel, of course. I know he works with you two, don't you deny it."

The pale eyes narrowed, burning clearly through the pain.

"After all, it's thanks to him, Phelan and Ayra are dead."

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AN: Ah, another chapter at last. Eheheh. Lots of work as of late, but maybe I'll get a brief spell of time before the finals are crushing down, and so that'll hopefully mean that I can get some more work done. Don't worry, I've still got plenty to go on Iris! And I don't plan on giving up anytime, at all!

Hmm, for once, I really don't have that much to say. But I will try to get some more work done, as I've got both this and TC to really hack at. So expect updates from either, as I really, really want to get more of TC done. :3

Hope this chapter is enough to keep you all satisfied for just a little while longer! Be patient, please! XD
Thanks for reading! :D ::bows::

38 - Nothing

Iris

+--

"What? ...Dead?"

Asher bared his teeth in a cold grimace, sharp fangs flashing. Valkyre let go immediately, pushing himself backwards, away.

"Yes," the other hissed, "the same night we caught you, and you escaped. And, of course, it's only through sheer carelessness that I'm still alive, when they're dead."

Valkyre was shaking his head. "Wait. I don't understand. Why would Raguel want to kill you? I... I suppose he might've seen you as enemies, but..."

Asher's pale eyes widened, surprised.

"You honestly didn't know?" The vampire studied him more carefully. "You're serious. You really didn't know what he was going to... what he did??"

The angel sighed. "Of course not. Raguel wanted Ir..." he paused, glanced at the boy still crouched on the ground, face turned impassive again. Valkyre shook his head. "No," he muttered, "We're trying to avoid him as well."

Asher blinked, gauging him. "That still doesn't explain why he killed them," he whispered. "And just because you don't know everything Raguel's doing, it doesn't mean you're not in league with him. Why should I trust you??"

Valkyre scowled, but was cut off before he could retort.

"Raguel... wants death."

Iris looked to the angel briefly, then drew closer, curling up against the other, blank eyes blinking dully, then lowered his gaze, face pressed to clothing.

"He doesn't see life in living... creatures. ...In humans, and things like humans. All of it... is death to him. Life... is only the world."

Valkyre blinked, letting his hand rest on the top of the boy's head.

Asher snarled, glowering. "Are you trying to tell me that's why he killed them?? That's a poor excuse, little"-

"Watch your tongue," Valkyre snapped back, scowling. The angel stared into the pale yellow eyes that glared straight back at him, and as he did so, he noticed the almost-hidden recoil of pain. Valkyre was startled to realize that, truly, Asher had cared about the others.

...It wasn't a completely obscene idea, then again, but bounty hunters were mostly individual in their doings, and relationships tended to remain distant and fragile. Teams were formed only when hunters sought greater strength in numbers, or in more varied abilities.

The angel sighed, lightly shaking his head. "This is becoming pointless," he muttered, then looked back up at Asher. "It's best not to speak more of the dead. I... I'm sorry about your loss, Asher. I understand that you and Ayra were"-

"Fool! It wasn't"-

Valkyre blinked with faint surprise as Asher bit back his sudden words, scowling, suddenly jerking his head away to avoid the other's gaze.

"...Yes?" The angel quirked a brow, mildly amused. The other was biting his bottom lip, face flushed just

slightly, hiding something.

"...It... it wasn't Ayra," the vampire muttered at last, pale eyes flickering briefly to Valkyre's before they were cast down again. "I... she wasn't..."

Valkyre paused, realizing with a mild pang of guilt that he'd probably intruded onto territory best left alone. And yet, the sudden sparked idea was too much for him, and he asked, quietly, "...It was the other, then? ...Phelan, was it?"

Asher's head jerked up, sharp eyes glaring, but the vampire was the first to back down, glancing aside. "...Yes," he muttered. "Phelan and I... he was..." The other trailed off, uncomfortable silence settling down over them.

The angel took the time to reflect, startled at this new, rather haphazardly gained information. Phelan, the werewolf.He and Asher were opposites, and yet...

Valkyre broke the silence finally, after what had felt like a suffocated eternity. His voice was quieter, respective.

"...Is that why you hate Iris?"

The vampire looked up sharply, scowl pulling at his face. "Of course," he hissed. "You have any idea what it's like, angel?? We only wanted to be together, but everybody, everything, even the world itself denies it! We couldn't even touch each other without feeling pain! Why?!?"

"...And then... this... boy, this..." Asher glared at Iris, whom only stared back, impassively. "...This child, he has it, in his body?? He was born, born able to break this barrier between bloods??? It... we..."

The vampire's lips drew into a thin line, brows drawn together.

"Forget it," he hissed. "...This doesn't matter."

Valkyre sighed, leaning back.

"...I'm sorry, Asher. I... I really am."

The angel focused his gaze on the other, surprised suddenly to see the familiar sharp grin creep back onto the other's face.

"If you're sorry, you'll let me go. You've made a fine fool of me already."

Valkyre arched an eyebrow, but shook his head, recovering quickly from the change in mood.

"Sorry," he muttered, "but then you'd only fight me again. I suddenly seem to know you too well, it seems; you would only want to kill me anyways, even if you know it's not my fault."

Asher laughed. "Let me loose, and we'll see how well you know me," he shot back.

The angel shook his head, then slowly stood, stretching out cramping muscles. "That'd be downright unfair," he muttered. "You're too hurt. I'll give you some advice- take what hospitality you can get, and use it well. Your wounds are serious, and you'd do better to heal before you try fighting me or anyone else, for that matter."

Valkyre yawned, stretching his arms in front of him, watching idly out of the corner of his eye as Iris slipped onto the bed, quiet and unresponsive as usual.

"I don't need your advice," Asher snarled under his breath, "So don't talk to me like you're my mother..."

Valkyre 'hmm'ed softly, dropping his arms. "Well, fine then, stay awake the night, if you really want," he sighed, stepping aside and quickly flicking off the light.

No sooner had he turned his back to slip into the bed then he heard the hastened scuff on the floorboards. His reaction was faster, and already planned out, having earlier seen just the briefest twitch in the tense ropes tied to the vampire, and he now easily blocked the blow, using Asher's own strength to pull him off balance as the angel rolled onto his back, pinning down both of the other's arms on either side.

Asher, above him, gasped sharply in pain, the angry red wound in his chest moving with his ragged, quick breaths, visible between the ragged torn shreds of clothing.

"Asher."

Valkyre stared up stiffly into the narrowed yellow eyes above him, glowering down, the words momentarily cutting off his weak struggling. Their faces were close, the vampire's unkempt hair falling down into Valkyre's eyes,

"...You said before... that I had tainted blood. What was that?"

The vampire hissed, snapping his teeth, and the angel twisted the other by his grips on the arms, sending Asher thudding heavily to the floor right beside the bed. Before the other could struggle back to his feet, Valkyre unceremoniously pinned him down under his boots by the arm, only partially taking care as to not cause more damage to the wounds.

Asher, forced to accept that he'd been beaten, stilled, though he still scowled, teeth clenched tightly.

"...Well?"

The vampire glanced up at the angel, seemingly only realizing what'd been asked earlier, then looked aside, still frowning.

Valkyre sighed, but stopped as he heard the voice below, almost inaudible.

"You... it was..."

Asher shook his head, scowling. "I don't know," he admitted at last, grudgingly, twisting his head to glare upwards at the other. "Why do you care?"

The boot pressed down harder onto the small of the vampire's back, making him cut off his words with a sharp hiss.

"Elaborate, please? I'm getting sick of not knowing anything, apparently about myself as well."

Asher shot him a death glare, then paused. "You didn't know about it??"

Valkyre rolled his eyes in dismay. "As far as the records go, I'm a pureblooded angel. But I've got reason to doubt that as of late."

The vampire scowled. "Records?? And where the hell did you get those?"

The angel frowned. "What do you mean?" After a moment's hesitation, he lifted up his boot, reaching down quickly and grabbing the other about the wrists and heaving him up onto the edge of the bed. In the dark, it was hard to see the vampire's expression clearly through the dark tangled hair, but there was a flash of white teeth, curled up in a small, knowing smile, twisting the rough edges of the scar on his face.

"Sit still, for once," Valkyre muttered, still holding the other by the wrists, but loosely. For once, Asher seemed to relax slightly, not fighting back.

The vampire chuckled. "You're just playing around, aren't you? You can't seriously not know this much."

The angel tightened his grip just slightly. "Tell me what you were talking about," he demanded.

Asher only smiled back, unperturbed again. "We weren't stupid, you know. Ayra always did background research before we went off on the hunt. We check for everyone's weaknesses, like all good little hunters do. And guess what we found on you?"

Valkyre stared back calmly, trying to remain unperturbed, unaffected, though his lips were drawn tight, and his hands felt clammy under the leather gloves.

"Absolutely nothing."

The angel blinked, mouth creasing into a frown.

The vampire's pale yellow eyes glinted in the dark. "We found nothing. There are no records. According to the state, you don't exist."

Valkyre breathed out slowly. Well, then again, he'd never actually checked for himself. He remembered, briefly, a dispute with Maeve that'd ended abruptly... she'd known, hadn't she?

"Your turn."

The angel looked back up. Asher shook his head, the jet-black strands over his face falling back.

"Care to explain? Not a lot of people get away from the state nowadays, at least, not ones born in the cities." The yellow eyes narrowed, focusing on him.

"Are you from...?"

Valkyre frowned, shaking his head.

"No," he muttered, "I shouldn't have been born far from the state..."

The angel closed his eyes, the inn room fading from his mind, dropping away.

Dark rooms. Shredded floorboards. Staring down at his own hands...

No. He'd been... older. Not... not nearly a newborn. His hands were small, but developed. Dirty fingernails, pale skin, smeared in black...

And then... Camael.

...He didn't know.

Valkyre blinked open his eyes again.

In the end... he didn't know. He didn't know when he'd been born, where, how... His parents were dead.

Camael was gone.

He knew nothing about his past.

Sins... real or imagined, he didn't know. Everything... started with that one fragmented memory.

No records. Camael hadn't ever reported him to the state.

Nothing.

Valkyre breathed out slowly, then glanced back at Asher. Surprisingly, the vampire hadn't tried to fight back during his brief relapse... The angel noticed the gritted teeth, then glanced down again at the torn clothing, at the deep gaping wound between the vampire's ribs.

No, he'd had enough. The angel doubted that Asher would have much more to tell him, and besides, it would be best to get some rest for the night...

"Could we consider a compromise?"

The vampire glanced over, frowning, arms still locked behind his back.

"I'll let you go, and you don't bother me. If you're still insistent on fighting me, fine. But wait until you've healed some. And admit it, we both need some sleep."

Asher paused, then smirked.

"You'd trust me, angel?"

Valkyre kept his face calm. His grip on the other's wrist tightened for a moment, then he pulled his hand away completely.

Miraculously, the other didn't move. After a pause, though, Asher brought his hands back around, rubbing his wrists. His pale yellow eyes stayed alert, staring back at the other.

Valkyre ignored him, leaning down to undo his boots. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other start slightly at his movement, then relax again. It was like a game then, each side faking, testing nerves.

The angel paused, then leaned down, sifting around through the pack placed beside the bedside table.

Valkyre sat up again, the familiar pen in his hands. He feigned disinterest, tapping the tip of the pen experimentally against his right fingertip, then pressed down enough so the ink would flow.

"Hm... Asher?"

The vampire looked up from where he'd been watching his actions suspiciously. "What?"

Valkyre smiled, leaned forward quickly, and pressed his fingertip to the other's forehead, right above the jagged scar. The magic pulsed out quickly, a short but strong burst, and the vampire's startled yellow eyes faded, then closed. Asher slumped over, and the angel calmly lowered the still body to the floor.

On the pale skin of the forehead, a small black insignia showed, glowing faintly.

It wasn't often that Valkyre resorted to magic like this, but the trick that Camael had taught him from long ago proved to be the best solution to his current predicament. The magic was made strong by the physical form of the symbol, and the mark would fade away before Asher would wake up, hopefully sometime much later.

Sighing, Valkyre made to put the pen back into the pocket, then paused, a thin, small hand resting on his

sleeve.

Iris glanced over at him, colorless eyes mildly amused.

"Keep it. With you."

The angel reached out, as if to touch the thin, fragile wrist, then paused. "...Why?"

"...You need it."

Still that tiny, barely visible smile. Valkyre paused, then tucked the pen away into one of the inner pockets of his jacket.

"...Fine."

He breathed out a sigh, pulling off his gloves and throwing them haphazardly on the table, then shifted down under the blankets. He reached out, touched the boy's bare shoulder poking out through the crooked shirt, then stopped abruptly.

The touch... the skin...

Iris' aura. Something about it...

"...Iris?"

The boy was staring at his hand, but looked away at his quiet query. "...Yes?"

"You... you seem..."

The boy only closed his eyes, smiling lightly. As if he knew. As if he knew, and it didn't bother him.

"...Different. Something..."

Something... different. Not necessarily wrong, but... a different aura, slightly. Most definitely still Iris, but the skin, the touch...

The blood. Something different as soon as it registered. Something... like the tearstone, but not quite...

Something pushed down, away...

"...It's okay. You don't know?" The soft quiet voice. Gentle, calm.

Valkyre frowned. "You know what this is, Iris?"

The boy opened his eyes, leaned against him, curling up, small fingers touching, gripping lightly, skin so cold. Already, the feeling fading. Only the boy left behind.

"Don't be afraid. It's okay. ...Don't worry."

The angel sighed. He knew that he would worry anyway... something... was changing...? With Iris?

Valkyre closed his eyes, curled the boy closer to himself, letting the darkness settle down.

He fell asleep to the double heartbeat against his body, the small form tucked against him, his eyes closed to the smudge of the bat tattoo on the boy's neck.

+--

AN: Zohmygod. I'm so freakin' sorry.

Two whole months since the last update. I feel so downright horrible. ;o; I'm sorry!

It's just, it's hard to work on things back in China... there was so much else to do, and so little time!

But, well, I'm about to go back, and I just realized how freakin' long it's been.

I'm still gonna need more time, it seems. I was mauled most violently by some writer's blocks, but I managed to stagger through this one... However, I haven't planned too far ahead [heh] and I need to brainstorm some more... I've been fiddling around with some other plotlines as of late... And I'm still scratching and re-writing the parts of TC, which are killing me with the repetition...

I was reading back over Iris [as I am so horrible, and I've got so many little details of my own that I've forgotten about and need to check up on...] And I realized that my style has changed a bit, and I've lost some of the 'dreamy' kinda 'nonsensical details' stuff, settling down with a more tangible style of writing...

I hope it's okay! As well, the chars have also changed in behavior somewhat I believe... I'm trying to work on that, too, settling them down...

I'm sorry, but this really is a long-term work, and I hope you can all bear with as I try to hammer it out. Anyway. This chapter should give you some more yummy [but useless, heh] details, and I'm trying to move on to some stronger plotline, I really am. ;o; [I hope the length of it made up for it, though it's mostly useless actions-description and dialogue...]

Thanks to all of you that still comment! As long as you comment, I promise to keep going. ;o; ::bows down repeatedly::

As well, I have gotten a real fanbase set up, it seems! SenayDragon has drawn my beautiful Iris-baby, and so has DefyDeath_DefyMe, with Valkyre included too! ^_____^- They really cheered me up, and got me going on Iris again, both of you guys! Thanks a ton!

Hope for next chappie sometime soon! Promise not to quit!

39 - Seal

Iris

+--

Valkyre blinked open his eyes to mellow golden sunlight streaming through the dusty windows, everything in the room cast alight and suddenly too sharp and too bright in his eyes.

The angel jerked awake, sitting up abruptly, hands touching nothing in front of him. There was a brief moment of weightless fear like a dropping stone, until Iris moved, cocking his head to the side, still sitting quietly in a mildly disheveled heap at Valkyre's side.

The angel breathed out a sigh, then shook his head. ...How had it gotten so late? Had he really slept right through the night and morning? The sunlight on the floorboards of the room were already bright and focused, narrowing as the sun passed slowly overhead. Too late, almost noon.

How long had he been asleep??

Valkyre sighed, raked a hand through his sleep-mussed hair, exasperated with himself for having let this happen. Why, who knew how many things could've happened while he-

The angel jerked into movement, snapped fully awake, staring down over the edge of the bed.

There was nothing.

Asher was gone.

Valkyre immediately whirled around, glancing quickly over the room, but already, his body told him that there was no danger here. He couldn't find the vampire's aura, not in the nearby proximity, anyway.

Then... Asher was gone. He'd simply left...?

He relaxed some, settling back, trying helplessly with his one hand to comb back his hair. The angel paused then, shifting his legs slightly, casting a quick glance at the boy. Iris blinked back, wordless.

"...Did you see him leave? ...Asher, I mean..."

Iris hesitated, then smiled softly. "Yes."

Valkyre frowned.

"Why... why didn't he... do anything? Why not... try to attack me, or something like that?"

The boy shrugged, looked away, staring at the dust motes that lazily swirled about beneath the windows.

"...He didn't hurt you," Iris murmured, "But he still said... he was going to follow you. ...To fight you again. Sometime."

Valkyre blinked. "Asher told you this?"

Iris smiled, looking back.

"...Some. Some things... you know. You can see them, right? You... can tell."

The boy shifted, moving forward, small hand reaching out, touching Valkyre on the arm, gripping lightly but tightly, his skin so cold, so lifeless.

The angel reached forward, touched the cool fingers, pulled them into his hand, hoping to feel them warm against his own fingers and palm. The aura on contact... it wasn't so different now. He couldn't even tell what the difference was. It didn't matter, did it? Iris, whatever he knew...

He stopped suddenly, abruptly.

"...Iris."

The boy blinked back at him, wordless.

"You..." Valkyre paused, feeling like it would hurt, not sure how he could say this.

"You... Do you know... where we.. you... where we're supposed to go?"

Iris stared back.

The angel took in a deep, slow breath, briefly closing his eyes.

"Do you have any idea where to go? What to do? ...All this time... don't you know?"

The boy looked down, looked away, brows furrowing, as if hurt, pained, making Valkyre immediately regret what he'd said, regret the harshness in his words. And yet...

He needed to know.

Iris gave no reply.

"Don't you know?"

Against his own burning ache, asking it again, his voice oddly still and emotionless. How badly he needed this.

The boy shook his head.

Valkyre's breath hitched, then he breathed out, slowly. No. No anger, no frustration. Why was he feeling this, then...?

...He needed it. He needed direction. He needed somewhere to go, something to do, needed to know what was required of him, what he existed for.

He existed for Iris, now. It was all.

But what did Iris live for??

The angel paused, leaned forward, tightly clenching the boy's hand, startled to see the other flinch, just slightly.

"I... I'm sorry," he muttered, pulling the boy's hand against him, reaching out and touching the shoulder, the cool skin.

"It... it's okay. Just... we'll find a way."

Iris looked up, lips parted now, breathing softly.

Valkyre paused, feeling caught between his emotions. He closed his eyes, breathing in sharply.

Abruptly, the angel leaned over, wrapping his arms around the boy, and pulled him over, pressing the thin, frail body almost fiercely against himself.

Everything he'd ever lived for was now suddenly in this singular form. How small his world had become. How many unknown things he'd run into. How much he'd learned, and how many more mysteries were opened to him.

So... small. Everything he'd ever wanted, all settled into one material, impossible form.

And so... frail. So brittle, like fine china or porcelain. How easy to shatter. How scared he'd been, so many times, how dangerously close he'd come to losing it all.

It... really did frighten him. If he lost it, if things changed in a way they couldn't ever be changed back... it scared him.

Before, he'd cared for nothing, only petty material goods, only for surviving until the next morning. Now... there was something more to it. It was so much different, this feeling, this need, this living he was carving out of the unforgiving brittle earth.

And yet...

Iris. The boy in his arms, so still, so unmoving. Like none of it mattered.

Iris had wanted to die. He still might.

So empty to all those around him, hollow, uncaring.

Iris...

Valkyre felt his fingers tighten, listening to the slow, soft heartbeat against his body. The cold, cold form resting against him, pulled tightly to him.

"Iris..." His breath stirred the pale gray hairs next to the boy's ear, the angel's head tipped down to almost rest on the other's shoulder.

"Iris, do you... really need me?"

Valkyre pulled himself back upright some, staring at the boy, Iris' face was turned away, pressed against his shoulder.

"Do I mean... anything to you? At all?"

The angel hated himself for this, but now, with Asher gone, with his ribs and body still aching slightly from his fight with Corryn, with the day already gone so far... he didn't know where to go. Didn't know what to do.

How long would they go on running? Forever? There had to be an end to all this, and desperately, feebly, Valkyre was searching for an ending that wouldn't lead to nothingness. Something that could end with him alive, with both of them alive.

"...Yes."

Sort whispered voice, a small hand working its way up to tangle itself in the angel's sleeve, gripping tightly.

"You're... here for me. You... don't just want... to use me."

Valkyre let out a long, slow breath. His fingers worked their way through the boy's light gray hair, stroking. Iris relaxed, grip loosening just slightly, weight resting on the other.

"You're..." The boy paused, then looked up, a small, almost timid smile on his face. "You're my guardian... guardian angel."

Valkyre stared back in surprise, then smiled. ...So he was.

"And you and I... we're... the same. Right? We... need each other."

The angel blinked, hand hesitating. Again, speaking of how they were the same. Same...

Of course, he was... right.

Alone... but together.

It was okay.

As long as they were together, he could do it. They could... survive.

Iris' fingers were thin, slender, lightly wrapping around Valkyre's shoulders, held close against him, the soft smell of the boy and the light, sighing breathing warm against the other.

The angel leaned close, closing his eyes. He thought of the kiss. What did Iris... mean by that? Why... had he done it?

Valkyre had rarely ever been touched like that, been so intimate. It was something alien to him, and something he'd never dared to tread on before.

And yet, here he was... And somehow, nothing at all felt wrong about it, only, perhaps, reluctance to cast himself into the unknown... afraid he might do something wrong...

Iris was leaning against his shoulder, lips just barely touching his neck, making the angel's entire body shiver, the small hands brushing at his shoulder blades through the fabric of his jacket.

"Valkyre?"

The other 'hm'ed softly, eyes still closed.

"...Who drew your wings?"

The angel's eyes snapped open, body going rigid. Valkyre paused, blinking, then sat up straighter, the boy's hands slipping away from his back.

He touched Iris' shoulder, meeting the soft gray eyes, nothing more than mildly inquiring, like he was hardly interested.

And yet, he knew, Iris only spoke thoughts that mattered...

"...Why do you want to know?"

Too sharp, too harsh.

The boy didn't look away, but didn't reply either, simply staring back at him.

Valkyre sighed, finding his own gaze drifting apart, glancing down at the rumpled sheets he suddenly

found his hand curled around.

"...It... was Camael. Back... when he first found me."

Dark rooms. A single candle, casting his lone shadow against a dark, dirty wall. Somewhere cold, underground. Empty rooms, skeletal remains of chairs, tables, splintered into the hard stone floor.

"I'm not sure why he did it... but all he told me... was that it was to help me. ...Somehow."

The rough hands on his bare back, fingernail tracing the contours on his skin. He couldn't... remember it too well... he'd felt different then, something about the dark... an awareness...

And then, the pain.

"I think... it was probably... more something... mental. Something to materialize what I felt... to help me through... the time."

No. Camael had helped him.

It'd hurt, but it had all been to help.

...Had it? Had it even really hurt? He couldn't remember.

Something dark had been dripping down his back, down to the ground, dripping quietly, something warm... something dark...

"I don't... hate him for it. He always told me, it was something he had to do... I had no reason... to hate him for it."

Harsh, sharp words. Telling him to keep his mouth shut, remembering the taste of his own blood from where he'd bit down too hard on his own lip... fingers dug in, clenching, so tightly. Pain... had it really hurt... that much?

Something... movement, his own hands beneath him moving... whirling around, something burning inside...

And... more pain. ...Worse.

And darkness.

Valkyre blinked his eyes, adjusting them to the brightness again, as if he'd really been somewhere dark, somewhere alone. Silence around him, suffocating, as if he'd really heard only the dripping...

Iris, staring at him.

The angel frowned, shaking his head. "I... what...?"

The boy only smiled, softly, almost sadly, and came up against him, leaning his light frame against the other's body. Valkyre slowly relaxed, finding the silence for once bearable, almost welcoming.

As for what he'd been thinking... no, remembering... It was rare for him to think back that far... but indeed... it was...

...Nothing. It was all the past now, and it didn't... matter.

"...Valkyre?"

Iris, fingering the fringes of his jacket, eyes cast low.

"...Yes?"

Instead of replying, the boy only pushed his fingers inside, then pulled them slowly out again. The angel already knew what the boy was holding, without having to see it.

The pen.

Valkyre stared at Iris, mouth set into a fine thin line.

"...Why are you doing this?" he asked, quietly.

"There's a reason, right? It's not just... a drawing." His voice rising, almost demanding. "There's something... more to it, isn't there? ...Iris?"

The boy was silent, bowing his head slightly. It set the angel on end, but then Iris lifted his gaze up again, and smiled.

"Yes, there is..." The boy's eyes dropped again, small fingers rolling the pen around on his palm.

"All of them... inside of me... this... makes it hurt less. All of them, they... they're..."

"They're sealed away."

Valkyre finished the sentence, studying the boy's face carefully for response. Iris looked up and smiled.

"...I'm not sure how you do it, but you somehow take the different bloods inside of you, and when a tattoo is drawn, the element- the species, they... are somehow... sealed away? In the image?"

Iris only tipped his head to the side, probably the closest he'd come to a shrug, and one that told Valkyre absolutely nothing.

"Well... something like that... right?"

The boy paused, then touched the angel's arm. Cool, soft, hinting at nothing.

"...It's not... me."

"...What?"

Valkyre blinked in mild surprise, but the boy only ran his fingers down to the angel's wrist, then gently pushed the pen into his palm.

"Will you... do it? Now?"

Valkyre studied Iris for a moment, then let out a sigh of exasperation.

"...Okay. If only it's to help you."

The boy smiled in reply, then quickly pulled off his shirt, leaving it in a scrunched pile in his hands.

Valkyre paused, gaze taking in all of the tattoos so far... bat, wolf, snake, hawk...

Yes, it made sense now. Opposite pairs... done quickly together, if possible, to keep both auras repressed, so neither could spark up too strongly... Vampires, weres...

What was there? The species...

Valkyre paused, then reached forward, touching the boy's bare shoulder, fingers purposefully avoiding the fluttering black wings of the bat tattoo. The angel closed his eyes, pausing, sifting through the auras he felt.

The demon aura stung through his palm as he concentrated it, swirling darkness that sucked at him, somehow oddly familiar... Valkyre winced, pushing it away, flitting on. Brushing over the soft, resonating angel blood, then searching deeper... dragon. Centaur... Siren...

The angel stopped, pulling his hand away.

"...Centaur... and siren?"

"...Okay."

Valkyre paused, then smiled, faintly.

"Fine. Afterwards, let's get something to eat... and then... get going."

The angel reached out, touched the boy's hair, brushing it from his face.

"It doesn't matter where we're going," he added, "As long as you're... with me."

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AN: Wow. Talk about a long chapter of nothingness. >>;

Okay. Lesse. Kinda cheesy ending, and for once, I didn't describe the tattoos! Why?? Because I'm tired and bored and this chapter's run on too long. Seriously, I need to figure out how to cut back on the excessive details. -_-;

Well, I've got more chaps plotted out, so if I can just steadily keep my butt in the chair, I can work on them. There should be more action soon too, so sorry for all of this nothingness... ::sigh:: Quite the pain, it is. Sorry.

Also, I realize that the chapters are really spaced out now and infrequent... I'm so sorry. Right back from Maine though, and I think I'm settling down, so if I can just stay focused, there should be more chapters soon.

Thanks a lot for the comments, and I'll keep posting! Try to cut out more of the crap-details too! XD

::bows::

40 - Purpose

Iris

+--

"Valkyre."

The angel blinked, looking up from the half-eaten plate of food in front of him. Iris, sitting across from him, also had an unfinished meal before him, the drops of perspiration on a glass of cold water trickling down and seeping into the creases and splinters of the wooden table.

Around them, the few other people in the inn supplied a quiet din of conversation, everyone minding their own businesses in the smoky, dim-lit interior of the room.

"...Yes?"

Iris blinked slowly, gaze seeming just slightly unsettled. The boy tugged at the edge of his shirt, fingers rubbing on the frayed, loosening strands. The pull of his hand had revealed part of the boy's collarbone, the pale white skin seemingly ethereal amongst the dark browns, blacks, and muddied yellows of its surroundings.

And, of course, marred itself by the black ink that swept in a miniature crest of flowing hair from the mane of a horse, caught in mid-gallop, thin but strong legs sharp and angular, lifted in the flow of motion. The tail was another brushstroke-like sweep to the side, as of now mostly hidden by the shirt.

A seal for the centaur.

And on the opposite side, higher-up edging on the shoulder, the simple yet elaborate design of a fish, sleek body arched, fins fanned out and tail trailing behind.

Siren.

Both opposites, both seals to subside the boy's auras... It left Valkyre to wonder though; why have them drawn separate? Why not all at once?

And would they help Iris, truly, as he said they would? Could they...

...Could they keep him from dying?

The angel still felt uncertain about what he was doing, not sure just what he was getting himself into, somehow feeling like there was still something more to it all than what Iris was telling him...

And of course, a certain type of fear of looking forward. Soon, there'd be that one other pair of opposites- the angel and the demon.

And as for how they should be drawn...

All that Valkyre could see was the image of the black curving demon wings carved upon his own back, its dark shadow cast over him, haunting him again and again...

Would it be like that... for Iris?

Somehow, it didn't seem quite right...

"...Valkyre."

The angel blinked, shaking the thoughts from his head. He pulled his gaze away from the wooden planks of the table in front of him, of his own hands clenched tightly together; dark, work-roughened hands, trembling slightly, veins showing faintly purple-blue under his skin.

"...Hm?"

Iris' eyes were still the same blank gray, but they flickered now, glancing quickly to the side, to some space behind the angel-

Valkyre froze, then cautiously, slowly, peered behind him.

There, leaning against the small bar countertop, three individuals conversed quietly to each other, relaxed. The angel stiffened, faintly sensing their auras. Another were, a half-blooded demon, a harpie... Strong species.

And obviously those of hunters.

One of the three's eyes flickered, passing straight over Valkyre, settling on Iris, still as a statue, unmoving.

Valkyre drew in a sharp, silent breath, forcing himself to avert his eyes, staring back down at his still-clenched hands.

Great. Hunters.

The angel bit at the bottom of his lip, cursing himself for again letting down his guard.

Of course. Of course the bounty would still be out there, and of course there would be hunters after them... And yet, Valkyre hadn't even really thought of the possibilities of other hunters, having been too concerned with Corryn and Asher and all that he'd been dealing with...

The angel let out a small, silent sigh, relaxing slightly. Well, it shouldn't be too difficult... Valkyre had no want to start another fight now, so if he could only find a way to get away from-

An aura brushed at the back of the angel's mind, making him cut off his thoughts abruptly, startled.

Footsteps, slow and methodical. Valkyre felt himself freeze up, as if incapable of moving, mind pausing, hesitating, refusing to stumble its way over this one thought...

"...Hello, Valkyre."

The angel snapped back to life with those words, looking over to see Raguel standing beside their table, dark clothes and jet-black hair melting into the smoky interior of the room, the contrasting pale face accentuated with the two different-color eyes, gazing down at him calmly, unperturbed.

Before the other could react, Raguel shifted and smoothly slid into the seat next to Valkyre. The half-breed glanced over at the angel, smiling faintly.

"I see you're still doing all right."

Valkyre tensed at the words, entire body on end, mind racing as he tried to figure out what the other would do next, what he was trying to get at...

As if reading his thoughts, Raguel sighed, briefly closing his eyes.

"Calm down, Valkyre. I only want to talk with you."

"...About what?"

The angel was surprised at the words escaping his lips, forming themselves into something apathetic, as equally calm and collected as the other's.

Raguel's brows arched, lightly.

"You view me as an enemy, then?"

The ruby-red and the pale yellow eyes flickered, away from the angel's face. Valkyre paused, trying to loosen the tense grip of his fingers.

"You... I can't trust you. You want Iris'... You want him... dead."

Raguel blinked, twice.

"You..." A pause, the arching eyebrows furrowed. Then a light chuckle, the other shaking his head.

"Valkyre, what has he been saying to you? He... that is..."

"-Corryn."

The half-breed blinked again, startled. "What?"

Valkyre paused, remembering that the name had been from his own lips, given away whimsically.

"He... That's his name. Corryn."

Raguel frowned.

"Him? A name?" He scoffed, frowning. "He doesn't... What lies has he been telling you now, Valkyre?"

The angel managed to pull his fingers apart and calmly crossed them, sitting back, careful to keep what little space between them clearly defined.

"No," he muttered, "you'd mentioned it before. You want Iris' life, you want him dead."

Raguel let out another sigh, frowning.

"Valkyre, relax. I'm not here to kill anyone." A pause, the double eyes flickering away, settling briefly on the boy sitting passively across from them. Iris' expression was empty, but the thin arms were wrapped around each other almost fiercely, just slightly trembling.

"Valkyre."

The eyes flickering back, holding the angel to their gaze.

"What about you? What are you doing all of this for?"

"I..." Valkyre opened his mouth, then closed it again, biting down on his tongue. He... what? All he'd been doing was running, fighting. And for what...

"Iris... I'm..."

"Valkyre. What is Iris to you?"

The angel balked, hearing the question reversed. "He... I..."

Raguel smiled, white teeth flashing in the dark gloom, the sharp points of his canines reminding Valkyre of what the other was, of what he was capable of...

"Let's put it this way, Valkyre. What is it that matters to you? Whose desires are you following- your own, or..." Raguel's eyes flickered away, glancing at Iris, who stared back, blinking impassively.

"Or... his?"

The angel looked away from both of them, staring down at his own hands resting limply on the tabletop. What he wanted? What who wanted? All this time, he and Iris had been running, endlessly, flitting about... and yet, who had been leading, and who following...?

Valkyre didn't know. Hadn't it been mutual? As to whose desire it was that had driven them forwards... it was something that'd been mixed, intertwined... at least, that was what it'd seemed like...

Iris had never spoken of what he wanted to do. The boy had always been so silent... seemingly uncaring...

Did Iris even want of anything?

"Iris."

Valkyre glanced up sharply. Raguel ignored the angel, leaning forward calmly on the tabletop, attention now centered on the boy.

"Iris. I think I have something that'll interest you."

The boy's gray eyes blinked, glancing over. Valkyre paused, realizing now that he'd been played into a trap. The question had been a way to pull him into the ploy.

There was no way he could selfishly say he would do what he alone wished, without care for the boy's own desires. And here, Raguel had found something Iris wanted... and if it bode true and Iris followed it, Valkyre would be forced to go as well, even if it was a trick, and even if he knew of it.

"...I know what you want, Iris. I know how your mind works."

Raguel's voice was cast low, inaudible to the rest of the occupants of the bar, including the hunters that were now watching the half-breed quite intensely, eyes narrowed.

Iris was leaning closer in, attention caught, straining to hear the words as well, making Valkyre's stomach turn over, sickeningly.

"I know, Iris. You want meaning. You want to have a reason to live. You want to know what you are made for. You want a purpose in life. ...Even if... it means death."

"-Raguel!" Valkyre raised his hand, as if to strike or at least to stop. The other merely glanced over at the angel passively, just barely registering a faint surprise.

Valkyre's teeth ground against each other, the flare of anger rushing deafeningly through his blood, his

body trembling.

And yet...

The angel's gaze shifted, the dark violet meeting pale gray.

Iris shook his head, the movement so small and subtle as to almost be unseen.

No.

He... Iris... he'd fallen for it. No... this was really what Iris wanted, enough to make him shed his fear, abandon any care in who he was now associating himself with, unconcerned with his own life...

...And laying Valkyre aside.

The angel sank back down, arm dropping limply again to the table, defeated.

This really was what Iris wanted.

Raguel paused, eyes still trained on the angel, impassive. After a moment though, he leaned closer, hand reaching out, touching Valkyre's shoulder. The other stiffened, but did not move, locking his gaze with the two unmatched ruby and pale yellow eyes.

"Will you still follow through, Valkyre?" The slight hint of a laugh in his voice, already knowing the answer. The angel felt his jaw clench, and it took what felt like all of his strength to pry them apart, to speak back in more a low growl than in actual words, tongue feeling wooden and thick in his mouth.

"Raguel, you... you still plan on... killing him."

The half-breed's hand pulled away from the other's shoulder, his eyes flickering, blinking rapidly.

"...No," he replied at length, frowning. "...I am not discussing this to find an opportunity to kill Iris. I merely wish... to help him. Lead him to what he deserves to be able to claim his own."

Valkyre flinched, lips drawn tight, silently sucking in a sharp breath. "...And what would that be?" he whispered, almost in a hiss.

Raguel only smiled.

"There was much that happened to Iris in the labs, Valkyre. And there is more to the boy than either of us can know.

"There was much the... men knew of him. And everything they learned about the boy, they recorded, as humans do, always obsessed with immortalizing their work. They know what he is capable of, Valkyre."

The eyes were narrowed, sharp, focused on him completely.

The angel frowned, lowering his own gaze.

"...And this... we would be going to...?"

Raguel smiled.

"The labs."

+--

AN: Jesus, the chapters seem to be getting really far-spaced. >>; I'm trying to keep up with it, but I've been so busy~!

Well, the return of Raguel! I forgot what I've been doing the last few chapters [or at least the time in between, heh] so I think the characters should be brought back. :D

I have the feeling I forgot to put something into this chapter, but so far, I think it's okay. (heh...)

Man! It's chapter 40 already! I can't believe how it's all just going along, and I have to say, thanks. :D I think everyone's already seen it by now, but I feel like the Valkie pic is a celebration.

Well. I'm off on a short trip to the beach [again, urf, I just seem so busy this summer >>;] and school will be starting in about 10 freakin' days [;o; no!!] So, uh, hope I can get some more work done, but it might be quite slow. :/

Thanks a lot for reading, and I promise to keep it up~! Mucho goodness should be coming up soon! Like, actual action! XD

Ta~

41 - Labs

Iris

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Valkyre hated the place the moment he stepped inside.

No, it'd been before that. Seeing the small, squat building clinging to the dusty, rocky ground, splash of dirty white and steel the only difference from the empty landscape around them. It'd been no trouble to escape from the other hunters, and the city was already long since out of sight, out of mind. They'd travelled hours to get here, the angel having grown steadily more nervous the entire time, made no better by the tense, stretched silence between himself and Raguel, who'd only paid him minor heed as he flew ahead on strong, steady strokes of his inky-black, hooked demon wings.

Outside, the building was obviously in disrepair and crumbling, the sharp corners and edges, clearly manmade, all being roughened down into the same shapeless blocks as the pebbled hunks of stone all around. Entire sections of the area had completely crumbled, sliding down into the dust of the cracked ground with inaudible sighs.

Raguel however had managed to find an entrance to a large section of the infrastructure that was still mainly upright. Valkyre cast the half-breed a sharp glance, frown drawing his lips tight, but Raguel only sent back the faintest of smiles and stepped inside.

The angel followed, cautiously, one hand tightly gripping the thin, light fingers of Iris. The boy had his face set, gray eyes still revealing nothing, but the small hand trembled, clenching fiercely to the other's palm.

He was afraid. There were painful memories in this place, but Iris was still willing to step inside, to return to his hurt and fear.

Iris truly wanted to know who he was.

And, this time, not even Valkyre could stop him.

The angel felt a sense of... loss, perhaps. Fear. Maybe because Iris, so passive, so quiet and silent, had finally stepped forward, loosening himself from the other, no longer so dependent, no longer like a mindless doll...

Valkyre shook his head mentally. No. Whatever it was, he'd follow through. He... He knew Raguel had drawn Iris into his hand, but he couldn't bring himself to tear the boy away. Finally, something that held meaning to the empty-eyed boy... And he didn't want... to hurt Iris, not now, not in this fashion.

Valkyre was going to stay by him, no matter what.

The angel looked up in time to see Raguel slip through the darkened doorway, the interior of the building immediately darkening beyond visibility, contrasted sharply by the light soil around slowly turning to sepia tones as the sun slowly began to sink down to the horizon, signalling the late afternoon.

Valkyre hesitated for just a moment, then stepped inside as well.

Though musty and untouched, the sharp smell of disinfect and iodine still registered to the angel's senses, and he felt his skin break out in goosebumps. Cool air swirled around sluggishly from lower down, kept cold from the hot sun that baked the landscape outside. They had been travelling west, after all, and nearing the edge of the wasteland desert, the temperature constantly rising.

Valkyre's boots clattered loudly on the dirt-swept steel floors as he made his way down the entrance hall, eyeing the scratches on the faceless metal and crumbled pieces of the wall, gaping small and large

holes alike, some showing plaster flaking apart from separate rooms...

"Valkyre."

The angel looked up sharply, seeing Raguel standing at a doorway further down. The other's face also seemed slightly strained, lips drawn tight.

Valkyre picked up his pace slightly, careful to skirt the rubble and ruin as his view dimmed, the light that'd seeped in from the entrance growing fainter and weaker with each step.

"...Do you know where to go, Raguel?"

The half-breed stepped past the doorframe, heading down another long hall, this one lined with doorways.

"Hmph. You forget that I've been here before. The research rooms and databases are further back on the right wing."

Valkyre closed his eyes briefly, willing his feet to follow his commands and his tongue to stay in his mouth. He hated the place. The smell, the square, sharp shapes, the dark hallways. The broken glass and the smashed walls...

The darkness. The splinters under his fingernails, the black sticky stains on the ground.

Up ahead, Raguel pushed open a door, only to nimby jump back as a miniature avalanche of broken edges of plaster and groaning metal crumbled to the ground. Somewhere near the doorframe, a twisted wire sparked, casting the hallway, Raguel, and the ruin into scattered bright white light.

...Camael, the candle whispering silently to itself.

Valkyre's own shadow flickering, dancing on the dirty wall.

And from his back...

The angel's eyes widened suddenly, a cold sweat covering his body, his feet glued in place, an image burned into his mind.

His back... his... ...the feathers... his... wings...

"Valkyre."

Wings...

The angel blinked, blinked again. He blinked a third time, and things finally came back into focus before his eyes, Iris' empty gray cores staring straight back. The boy had loosened their grip, stepping in front of Valkyre's trembling body, staring up at him, small light hand now on his shoulder, pressing to him lightly but insistently.

The angel shook his head, glanced around. Raguel was coming back to them, almost melting into the black around if not for his pale skin and colored eyes.

"...Are you okay?"

Iris' voice, soft but... caring. Concerned.

"I... I'm..."

"Valkyre? What is it?"

Raguel now, stopping, studying him carefully, fine eyebrows arched.

The angel swallowed dryly, then shook his head, finally breaking his limbs out of their freeze and stepping forward again.

"...Nothing," he muttered, wiping at the sweat on his brow.

Dream. Dreaming.

He was confusing reality with his dreams.

He'd been young. Who knew what he'd really seen, and what he'd only imagined?

Valkyre followed Raguel into the room, skirting the pile of crumble still settling its dust, only to realize that it was merely a passage again to somewhere deeper, further inside the compound.

The angel edged along, fingers finding Iris' hand again, hoping the boy wouldn't notice the shake to his own limbs in the dark, in the stilted air and the tense, thin atmosphere.

Valkyre blinked sharply, trying to focus his eyes and adjust them to the dark. He closed his eyes momentarily, only to open them again and realize that what he'd thought were merely shiny steel walls were actually windows.

And there were small enclosed spaces on either side.

It was like a row of... cages. Of glass.

And in the one right next to the angel, there was something sprawled in its center.

A body.

Valkyre froze in his steps, chills running down his back. A leg. An arm. A...

He ripped his gaze away, forced himself to push ahead with his legs, fingers tightening their grip roughly around the wrist in his hands, refusing to look to either side.

"R-Raguel-!"

His voice was hoarse, choked. The other turned back, merely glancing at him before stepping on, expression void of emotion.

"Ra...!" Valkyre stumbled on, hearing small gasps from Iris, running breathlessly behind him. Running with him along this hellish corridor, images whirling past, each clawing at his vision, demanding his attention.

The angel pulled his hand from the boy's, his blood still thundering in his ears. He reached out, sharply grabbing Raguel's shoulder, whirling the other around, pinning him against the glass, which rattled and clattered at the movement.

"Goddammit, stop!" Valkyre's breathing was rapid, his eyes not seeing the pale yellow and deep red before him, but other shadows and images caught as if from a nightmare film still playing before his eyes, images from mere instants ago.

"What... What the hell is all this??"

Raguel stared back at the other, face completely empty of emotion, not even minding of the angel's fingers digging sharply into his shoulder, of the arm pressed heavily over his chest.

Calmly, he said, "This is the lab, Valkyre."

The angel pulled his arm back sharply, scowling. "This... this is madness," he hissed, eyes trained on the half-breed, not daring to look anywhere else. "This..."

Raguel moved suddenly, almost too quickly for Valkyre to see, abruptly bringing his face inches from the other's, eyes narrowed, sharp and bright, his pale, sharp canines flashing as he spoke.

"You think I like this, Valkyre?? You think I want to be here??? You have any idea what I see here???"

The angel stared back, stunned by the sharp ferocity and the bright, glowering eyes that bore straight into him.

Raguel, seeming to have caught up with his emotions, turned around abruptly, letting out a ragged breath.

"H-Hurry," he muttered, stepping away again. "We should get what we need and leave as soon as possible."

Valkyre hesitated a moment longer, still surprised. Raguel... he was...

"...Valkyre..."

The angel glanced down at Iris, whose small fingers touched his limp arm, looking up at him imploringly. Valkyre let out a soft sigh, allowing himself the tiniest luxury of reaching out, touching the boy's cheek, brushing at the soft light hair.

"...C'mon," he murmured, voice barely audible. "Let's get going."

He could see the fear in the boy's eyes, knew that he'd seen the same things beyond the glass. ...But there was no turning back now, and Valkyre swore to bring Iris through this all, safely, no matter where they ran.

If only he could know how long it would be.

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AN: I hate my chapter endings. So cheesy. >>;

Well, another chapter! I've got some more insinuations in this one, and soon to come up, action~! Hopefully something quite interesting will happen quite soon too, I hope. It's been in my head so long, I can't wait to get it out!

I'm sorry to say, but Raguell's personality is rather hard for me to define as of now, so his actions may seem a bit vague and odd. I'm not sure whether he should be more well-rounded, or perhaps more evil-like and aloft... it's a tough decision.

Well, anyway. More character recycling coming up, and, seriously guys, this is just so cool, how far we've gotten. Well, school's going to start soon, so work might slow down... then again, it might speed up, depending on how interesting the plotline is [laugh] (And, well, it's pretty interesting right now, just so y'know. ^_~) and schoolwork and whatnot.

Thanks to all who comment, and I promise to turn out some more chapters soon~! ::bowgrovel::

42 - Shatter

Iris

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"...It's here."

They'd entered a large room deep in the compound, the exact dimensions impossible to tell with the tall rows of bookshelves that ran in neat orderly lines along either side of the entrance. The cases faded into darkness, the black floor littered with loose papers, yellowed and crinkled and moth-eaten.

Further on, glimpsed in slices from between the bookcases, were a row of computers, fat and square. Valkyre began to make his way towards the machines in the back, but stopped once he realized that Raguel wasn't following. The angel glanced back at the other, frowning.

"...What is it?"

The half-breed's eyes flickered over the room, nervously, even as he took a step forward, in the same motion glancing behind, back along the hallway. Raguel shook his head, stepping forward again, but slowly, cautiously.

"...It's nothing. But we should hurry. I have a bad feeling about this place..."

The angel gave a sharp, curt nod. This, at the very least, they could agree on. He let his aura sweep around the area, but couldn't detect anything else. Still, it did nothing to settle his nerves.

There was actually quite an area of open space between the bookshelves and the row of computers, and again the angel found himself staring down the dark ends of the room, trying to find an end. The lights above were broken, the shattered glass crunching noisily beneath his booted feet.

Valkyre began picking up scattered papers from the tables, flipping through the sheets, staring at data logs and long strands of sequences that meant absolutely nothing to him, filled with sciences and diagrams of things that should've long since been banished and forgotten.

He glanced up once, startled to find his own reflection in front of him, until he realized that what was behind the tables of computers was not actually a black wall, but instead a thick sheet of glass. He paused, studying it, but could not see through the glass, which had a silvery tinge, as if indeed a mirror. The angel eventually turned back to the papers sprawled out before him.

Raguel, on the other hand, had begun to investigate some of the computers. Most were broken, but a few still held promise, once swept clean of the rubble around them and the thin film of dust.

Valkyre watched the half-breed work for a while, then turned back to the pointless information on the sheaf of papers in front of him. The angel dropped the packet in exasperation, then glanced around. Leaning against some of the bookshelves' sides were some metal drawers, and on closer inspection, they contained rows of neatly organized files, clean of dust and grime. Valkyre pulled one of the drawers open, flipped through the folders inside, but found them most of them to be just logs and dates.

He switched to another drawer, and another, until the labels changed from dates to a series of digits and alphabetical numerals, all still incomprehensible... The angel sat back on his heels, reflecting. Raguel... he'd had a label on the back of his neck. So had Corryn.

Yet Iris had not... proof indeed that he'd never been formed in the labs, yet then again, neither had Raguel nor Corryn been born there... Why hadn't they done anything to Iris?

Why didn't he have a label, an identity...?

Valkyre pulled out a random file, flipping open the manila folder. More information. Specifics on blood

type, weight, weight change over a period of time, lung capacity, an excruciatingly precise and detailed bank of information.

No name. Just a specimen number.

And after that, just more pages of meaningless data. Bodily reactions to tests. Chemicals.

...And on the last page... an expiration date.

The angel dropped the folder, slamming the drawer shut. Worthless.

Iris, standing next to him, stirred, bending down to pick up the papers. Valkyre stared, blinking, watching the boy fingering the crisp white pages, eyes blank. It occurred to the angel then that Iris probably didn't even know how to read.

"Valkyre."

He turned around, looking for Raguel, whom he spotted further back, lit by a weak electric glow from a monitor screen. One of the computers had worked.

Valkyre quickly rose, touching the boy on the shoulder and glad when the small hand grasped his, the manila folder forgotten.

"...What is it?" he asked as he approached, almost tripping over the debris as he made his way over.

"Have you found something?"

Raguel shrugged. "It's a database. I'll see if the information is here..."

Valkyre frowned, watching the other's pale fingers nimbly work on a stiff keyboard, eyes scanning rows and rows of files and data.

"...Raguel..." the other didn't reply, but the angel continued, knowing he was still heard. "This place... it isn't quite... right. The way it's all..."

The half-breed paused, looking up. "...What do you mean?"

Valkyre glanced around at the dark uneasily, at the shattered glass and the overturned chairs, littered paper...

"It doesn't seem like somewhere just abandoned," he said. "This place looks like someone attempted to completely destroy it..."

Raguel shook his head, fixing his gaze back on the flickering computer screen.

"The state wanted the labs all shut down," he replied, fingers beginning to move over the keyboard again. "The... people... here, they tried to keep it running anyways. I'm not sure on the details, but disputes and arguments started breaking out.

"When the labs still continued to work, the state decided that they had to be shut down manually."

The angel frowned, contemplative. "...By what methods?"

Raguel paused, then looked up with a smile.

"They put down the place by force. There was little real danger to the... staff, as most of the members had simply heard of the ploy earlier and escaped. So there were few... human casualties." He paused, blinked briefly, then continued.

"A prime force the state saw fit for taking care of this nuisance was to take advantage of the abilities of magic-users."

The half-breed looked away then, glancing down at his own pale hands.

"In particular... angels."

Valkyre paused, then glanced around the room. Indeed, the room looked like it had perhaps been sacked, but the breaking of the glass was obviously something that hinted at magical-use rather than physical action. After all, he'd found almost no bullet shells or blood about the place. Still..

"As well... I remember they had a few demons."

The angel looked back sharply. "Demons? ...The state sends out bounties on demons all the time, and if not, they... are often targeted by the black market." Valkyre almost swallowed back the last few words, watching Raguel carefully for a response, though no obvious show of emotion broke through the other's

expression.

"...They came here for a special purpose. They had to have been."

The angel let out his breath slowly, crossing his arms over his chest. "...What do you mean?"

Raguel looked up at him, and smiled.

"This is mostly hypothesis, but I believe they were searching for something. Something that the labs had, that the state wanted..."

Valkyre paused, then let the information slowly soak in.

"...Iris."

Raguel nodded shortly, then turned back to the computer. Valkyre pressed his knuckles against his lips, thinking. The state, wanting Iris long before the actual bounty came out... Then, when Iris himself escaped, they set out the bounty on him... of course. It made sense, and it gave a logical reasoning for the disintegration of the labs.

And yet... in the end... why did they want him...?

"...Here."

Raguel straightened his shoulders, clicking on something on the screen, then scrolling down along a file. Valkyre peered over the other's shoulders, eyes hurt by the sharp contrast and the small font, trying to make sense of the letterings. He personally didn't know many of the words, but then again... he remembered nothing before Camael had found him. And as for a knowledge of reading... he'd only learned the basics, and gathered up a weak vocabulary and rough understanding of most words as he'd gone along.

"What is it?" he asked, hand instinctively running out, finding Iris', firmly gripping the small, thin fingers that curled around his palm in response.

"...His file. His information, and what they recorded should all be..."

Raguel stopped, blinking. There was a gleam of sweat on his brow, his eyes frozen.

Valkyre glanced over at the screen again, then frowned. The neat rows of information and words had turned to a garbled mess, utterly incomprehensible and broken with letterings and symbols.

The half-breed suddenly scrolled down, the little letters flying up, and then ran into row after row of broken lines and dots, nothing more than fragments...

"...It's... not here."

The angel stared at the senseless black and white, blinking.

"...What do you mean, not here...??"

Raguel was shaking his head, teeth gritted. "The data's... gone. They erased it. The... the state! They"- Iris gasped sharply, suddenly. Valkyre whirled around, reaching out, grabbing the boy by the shoulder, body tensed, immediately alert. He glanced around the room, along the row after row of bookcases, casting deep shadows over them. No. They couldn't see anything. Something...

The darkness was consuming around them. Utterly silent, but it felt like... there were flickerings.

Indeed, he felt it... brush of auras, so faint against his own, but undoubtedly there, and nearby...

Valkyre trembled, suddenly realizing just how close the other presences were... somehow, they'd snuck up on them, caught them completely unaware... So close... In fact, they very well could be... right in the room.

The angel glanced to his side. Raguel's eyes were equally alert, the half-breed having turned his back to the computers, his entire body tensed and ready on instant's notice.

The silence deepened, enclosing around them. Valkyre breathed shallowly through his mouth, eyes darting around, hand running down to the dagger tucked to his belt.

And then, he heard it, so faintly at first that he thought it had to be only his imagination, his stressed mind playing tricks on him.

It started out as a soft hum, a lilting, tuneless melody that rose steadily in volume, defining itself as one

from a feminine throat, continually rising in pitch, becoming something high and piercing so it made the angel wince, recoiling slightly.

The note broke in a sharp shriek, followed by broken, bone-chilling yet eerily feminine laughter.

A blur of white, and then something dropped from from a bookshelf top down before them, swaying to its feet.

Eire.

She smiled at them, silky white hair falling over her eyes, unreflective black eyes contrasting the white of her face, her lips.

"We found you again, Iris."

Valkyre grabbed the boy by the shoulder, pushing Iris behind himself. His hand rose instinctively to his seal, feeling the familiar, reassuring cold stone threaded with gold. His eyes were glancing around, constantly searching... Rheis. He had to be somewhere nearby as well...

Valkyre paused, then stopped, staring at Eire.

She was dressed in black again, the same outfit. She was like a photograph taken in monotone; silvery-white hair, lifeless black eyes, a black long-sleeved shirt that made her pale white hands look as if detached, tight black pants that hid her ankles...

Eire smiled. "Iris, come home." She held out her hand, tipped in milky-white fingernails. "You remember home, don't you?"

The angel blinked, staring at her.

The cable.

There was no cable.

Valkyre started, glanced around, nerves grinding, on edge. Where was Rheis?? There wasn't a cable between them... that... that meant... that he could be anywhere...

"Raguel!" Valkyre shouted, but his call was muted by the sudden, thunderous smash of glass from right behind them, exploding shards flying everywhere, tinkling on the ground.

Rheis' black blur of a body caught Raguel off-guard, knocking him to the ground as both tumbled to the floor.

The angel had no time to mind though, as at the same instant, Eire shot forward, hands outstretched, neon-bright swirls of angelic energy flowing from her palms.

Valkyre snapped off his seal, immediately flaring his wings and darting ahead as well to meet the blow.

The angel's right wing blocked Eire's first blow, spanning out in front of her with a muffled rush of feathers, momentarily blinding her, able to see nothing but the whirling mass of wing.

Valkyre crouched down and slammed forward, hitting Eire heavily in the stomach just as she tore the wing away, snarling. The light-blooded female was sent flying back, saved only from smashing into the nearby bookcase by flaring her large, luminous white wings, then dropping from midair into a crouch as Valkyre launched himself towards her, his own magic gathered in his palms, clenched in his fists.

Eire lept forward suddenly straight towards the other, stretching out her own hand, palm open, glowing white. Valkyre's fist connected straight with the center of the other's hand, but then a sudden blast of bright light lit from the palm, sending out a huge pulse of pure angel magic that sent Valkyre hurtling backwards, crashing into a jumble of tables and chairs.

The angel gasped in pain, flashes of red momentarily blotting his vision. He stumbled to his feet though, gritting his teeth, feeling something sticky travel down the back of his neck and knowing it was his own blood. His fist throbbed in pain, leaking blood as well, and his arm felt as if fire were coursing along it.

There was a heavy thud to his side, and Valkyre glanced over to see Raguel stumbling to rise, leaning against the side of the bookshelf he'd just been thrown against, loose books and papers dropping to the ground from the impact.

Rheis darted forward, trying to strike another blow, the half-breed only able to counter it weakly,

stumbling backwards and being pressed against the wooden shelf, struggling to hold the other back. Valkyre hissed under his breath, teeth clenched, then darted forward. His wing swept out, aiming for the dark-blooded male's shoulder, but Rheis detected his movement and jumped back deftly, stopping the blow with both his hands, his black hair flying over his eyes, a grin on his face.

Rheis' fingers dug into the angel's wing, then he suddenly twisted and turned, dragging Valkyre off his feet, whirling him around and slamming him into the wall of glass that Rheis had just broken through himself, the angel thudding heavily to the ground in an opposite room amidst a raining shower of glass. Valkyre groaned, fingers scrabbling in dust and crumbled plaster, skin slit with the tiny shards of glass littered everywhere. His entire arm hurt now, the knuckles of the hand that he'd used on Eire torn and bloody.

Everything... hurt. Eire's sudden counter had been surprising, showing more power than he'd imagined the female capable of since their last encounter. He couldn't understand it though, the broken cable... He thought they'd needed it. Now, suddenly disconnected, they seemed like perhaps they were even stronger... Was it? Or had things somehow changed...? Rheis hadn't even spanned his wings this time, though Eire had...

There was a sudden heavy thud, and the angel looked up in time to see Rheis snarling as he pushed himself off a splintered table, engaged with the black blur of Raguel.

Valkyre let out a pained breath, glad that the dark-blooded male would now be engaged, at least for a while. It would give him a chance-

Someone screamed, and the angel's violet eyes widened in shock and, then, realization. He dragged himself to his feet, teeth ground together against the pain, and somehow still managed to stumble forwards, dragging behind his wings, one of which felt like it'd been pulled from its socket, muscles all stretched until they broke. But, of course, that didn't matter now.

Iris.

Valkyre managed to grab the edges of the broken window, vaulting himself back into the room. His wings slid back into nothingness, as they were going to be nothing more than a burden to him now.

A dim brightness, glowing. Eire.

She was tangled with Iris, hands grabbing at something the young boy was trying to pull away, her milky-white wings curled around them both, flared and fluttering slightly with her movements.

Something snapped, and the white-winged angel stumbled backwards, triumphant. Valkyre realized then that she'd just torn away the tearstone, the broken links of the chain scattering to the ground.

Iris had fallen to the ground, letting out a small cry. There were fingernail-shaped crescents on his arm where the other's grip had dug into his skin.

The boy's weary gray eyes blinked open, widening as they saw Valkyre, the soft loose hair drifting over the boy's face. The angel realized what a mess he must seem to be, dripping blood everywhere and covered in glass, a licking of his lips reminding himself that there was probably a bruise on his cheek as well, and a cut in the corner of his mouth.

Something dropped to the ground right beside the boy's face then, bouncing once on the hard black floor. The tearstone.

Iris' eyes widened, the boy trying to rise, hand reaching out...

Eire's heel came down hard on the small, clear stone, and it shattered in a sharp crackling, like of glass, the threads of gold snapped and bent, the silver chain skidding about along the floor like a writhing snake, then stilling.

Eire smiled, drawing her leg back. Nothing was left but chipped bits of stone, scattered on the floor.

AN: Fufufufufu. Super-crunchy-action! Much randomness! Much beating and violence! Much excessive details and descriptions!

Uhm, I probably cut off this chapter at a bad place, but truth is, I wanted to give you guys some interesting action, as all it's been so far for a long time now were endless descriptions and rambling. Also, as some of you have noticed, I've gotten around to giving each chapter a one-word title. Why one-word? Because it's quick and simple, so it's like a summarization of the chapter. It's a little too... less, at times, but it's a good, quick snapshot of a chapter.

Mostly just so I can track what happened in which, for all the frequent times I go back to re-check a detail. ^^; Oops.

So, there. Might be a bit confusing at first, but it sure as hell should be less stale than just dull numbering, so here ya go.

Well! I've finally got myself back into the groove of Iris, so expect some more chapters! I promise to try and keep it up! [Though, school wants me back... ;o; It starts... thursday! ::wails::]

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! ;o;

43 - Burning

Iris

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Valkyre snarled, stumbling to his feet, launching himself at the light-blooded female. This time, the magic in his palm gathered, then shot out in a zig-zagging line that snapped and doubled back on itself, striking Eire between the collarbones, sending her skidding back a few steps, but not enough to make her lose her balance.

The angel darted forward immediately, snapping the blade from his boot into his hand, blood-slicked fingers curling tightly around the stiff, leather-wrapped hilt. He slashed at the other, but Eire only lept backwards, wings flaring brightly for an instant, then vanishing as she was pushed into the confines of the narrow ally between bookshelves, the cases looming above them, as if enclosing them in.

Valkyre swung the blade sharply, cutting upwards, the hot blood pumping through his veins making his eyes lock on to her thin, fragile neck. He pushed magic into the slice of steel now, and though Eire managed to dodge the physical blow, the magic struck her instead, missing her neck but slashing through the fabric of her shoulder, leaving an angry black smash of magic on her pale white skin. She screeched, then lept up suddenly, vanishing over the tops of the bookcases.

Valkyre was left suddenly alone, breathless, his arm trembling with the pain, the effort. The angel glanced around, but there was no sign of the other, and his vision was much too limited here.

Valkyre began to back out, eyes still scouring the tops of the bookcases, heartbeat pounding heavily in his ears, the gaps glimpsed between the dusty voluminous books all seeming to contain flickering shadows and dancing black eyes...

Too late, he heard the lightest shift of clothing. The angel whirled around, seeing the long fingernails, the white magic glowing as the hand darted towards him, aimed at his neck...

And then they stopped.

Valkyre was frozen for an instant, stunned. Small hand around Eire's arm, fingers clenched tightly... and...

His eyes.

Sharp and narrowed, the eyes that glowed through the boy's disheveled gray hair were blood-red, cold and focused.

Valkyre was frozen in place, blood feeling like it'd frozen in his veins. ...When was the last time he'd seen those eyes? Iris... he...

Eire hissed, teeth flashing. She made as if to pull her arm away, but the boy held his grip, and in one smooth movement abruptly twisted her limb around painfully, half-dragging the light-blooded female to the ground, arm pinned behind her back. Eire shrieked in pain, struggling.

"...I..." Valkyre stared in dumbfounded amazement, unable to pull his gaze away from the boy's cold, calculating gaze, the small fingernails digging into Eire's pale smooth flesh, knuckles gleaming white. His face... his eyes... burning, bright, narrowed, filled with anger, hate...

"I... Iris-!"

The boy stopped, snapped his head around at the words, staring at Valkyre, ruby-red eyes wide, the angel's face reflected down to his cores. Iris blinked, sharply.

The angel took a small, hesitant step forwards, reaching out with his sticky, stained fingers.

The boy seemed to draw away from him slightly, confusion in his dark ruby gaze.

"...Iris?"

His eyes seemed to cloud over, the boy drawing into himself, as if to try and find something he'd forgotten, name something he'd lost...

Eire seized the opportunity to tear herself away, snarling, her other hand whirling around with a swirl of angelic magic glowing brightly in her palm.

Valkyre saw the splash of light, pulsing, humming with the power it contained. His body acted for his petrified mind, legs pushing him forwards, darting between the light-blooded female and the boy, the arm with the blade in it swinging out.

The steel edge of the blade bit and slashed along Eire's forearm, thrown up to guard against the attack, but her other hand still swept around, the palm catching Valkyre full-on in the chest.

Both the angel and Iris were sent flying back, the boy's limp body hitting and skidding over the black, dusty floor, Valkyre on the other hand slamming against an expanse of bare wall between the tables of computers and slumping over.

Pain blotted out his vision, splattering black and red over his eyes. The angel felt like his entire body was on fire. The impact of the heavy cement wall had been nothing, nor the back of his skull hitting the sill marking the border between the glass walls and the normal plaster...

But his chest felt aflame, the burning feeling consuming him, turning him inside out. His veins felt like tunnels for searing fire and his left arm seeming to accompany it, trembling continually, quivering. His breathing was ragged, pain exploding like bright sunbursts behind his eyes, pounding at his skull. Maybe that impact had hurt some.

The slightest gasp of a word, the soft exhale of a breath.

The angel blinked his eyes open lethargically, sharply inhaling a broken lungful of air as he tried to hold back the pain in his ribs, his chest, feeling blood trickle down below his scalpline, warmth seeping just behind his ear.

Iris.

The boy's body had rolled as it landed, facing the angel, the thin, gaunt arms struggling to push the frail form back up, the sifting gray hair falling over the boy's eyes and face.

And yet...

"...Val...kyre."

The boy looked up, eyes half-lidded, tired and almost sleepy-looking.

And gray.

The same stone-gray, empty gray eyes that Valkyre knew, that he recognized as the eyes of the one being his world now centered about, the one thing his hands could protect.

That he'd failed to protect.

Iris smiled.

Valkyre gasped out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, the pain inside of him ebbing, pulling back just slightly.

And then, there was the flaring of wings.

Iris whirled around, seeing Eire walking towards them, illuminated white wings unfurled, a small swirling, wisping ball of yet more angelic magic in her hand. Her other arm hung limpy at her side, the fabric of her black shirt slashed to ribbons, the wound at her shoulder glowing angry red-black from Valkyre's blow, the lower half of her left forearm showing the gaping wound from the hit dealt by the blade, dark blood dripping on the floor.

Valkyre choked in a breath, holding it in as he tried to push himself away from the wall with his good arm, the fires in his ribs blooming back again, making him wince in pain, gritting his teeth. He almost slipped, hands wet and sticky, and would've collapsed if he hadn't managed to push himself back,

leaning on trembling, half-bent legs.

In front of the angel, Iris had also risen to his feet, if somewhat shakily, his thin legs seemingly bound to collapse at any instant.

Eire stopped, standing in front of the boy, gazing down through her long, slightly mussed white hair, fingers tightening around the magic in her palm.

"...Don't..." The boy's voice was ragged, gasping.

"Don't... t-touch... ..him..."

Eire's faceted black eyes blinked, twice.

She smiled then, and closed her eyes. Her right hand relaxed, magic dulling slightly, gathering lazily, sluggishly.

Then, abruptly, she snapped her wings around, as if to hit him. The boy flinched, arms raised, and at the same time, Eire brought up her arm again with the pulsing magic. Her long, slender fingers found their way to the boy's face, fingertips poised on the scalpline, palm's center over the boy's forehead.

The white-winged angel was smiling, but her black eyes raised, found Valkyre's, locking on to them.

The pulse of magic blasted out.

Iris screamed, body jerking suddenly upright, head snapping back.

Valkyre, frozen, suddenly saw black and white whirl around the boy's form, stretching above into the air, humming with power but restrained, light, crisp, otherworldly, like the sudden feeling of dew-laden grass and moist air flooding a musty, stale dry room.

The wings were there, haloed glowing arched white, feathers ruffling silently, and dark velvet-edged curves of angular, ridged black, unfolding into the darkness...

But it was only an image.

Even as he watched the wings rise into the air, Valkyre could stare straight through them, translucent like frosted glass, and see Eire, face still impassive, smiling.

Iris' small body slumped, and the wings broke off, dissipating like mist before a cool, sweeping wind into the air.

The boy's body crumpled to the ground.

"You-!"

Valkyre's paralysis snapped away, and the angel grabbed at the slippery sill under his hand, pushing himself fully to his feet. He lunged forward, snapping a small dagger out from a sheath strapped on his waist, stilling his trembling hand on the hard hilt and singing thrum of metal.

Valkyre lunged at the light-blooded female, feigning a strike to the left, which Eire fell for, dodging to away from the suspected blow and leaving her side off-guard. The angel spun around, blade slashing out. The steel edge bit through the fabric over her stomach, sank deeper, deeper, digging itself into her waist, her side, Valkyre's glove and fingers slicked in fresh hot blood, splattering over his hand.

The small dagger's blade finally emerged, having bit straight through her side, flinging droplets of blood through the air, leaving a gaping, slit wound.

Valkyre stood there for a moment, stunned at his own action, startled by the other's lack of reaction. The angel looked up into the other's face, where the stony black eyes glinted back at him.

Eire smiled, light, chuckling laughter bubbling from her throat. Her wing swept in then from the side, striking Valkyre heavily in the gut, almost lifting him up in the air.

The angel doubled over at the pain, gasping heavily, stumbling backwards. He felt himself slipping, falling, the wing still driving hard into his stomach.

He landed hard on his back, gasping breathlessly at the impact, seeing nothing but swirling black and bursts of red in his vision, faintly hearing the scraping shuffling of the wing being drawn back.

His chest was aflame still, burning at him, feeling like the blood inside of him was boiling, seething, pumping itself furiously through his veins, screaming to get out...

The angel had his eyes squeezed shut, trying to force down the pain, the burning fires... His eyes snapped open suddenly at a cool hand on his shoulder, pressing against him softly, lightly.

Eire's long hair tangled, drifted over his face, her pale pale skin and black eyes burning into him. The wires in her cheek marred the otherwise alabaster, stone-smooth skin, weaving themselves through her flesh and vanishing again beneath her eye. The light-blooded female was crouching beside him, hand on his shoulder pinning him down, wings spread over them both, surrounding them in milky-white tainted dark.

Valkyre tried to get his hands to respond, tried to push feeling back into his functional arm, to feel the hilt of the dagger he only hoped was still in his hands. His body screamed in protest.

And then, Eire leaned down further and kissed him.

His pain exploded, shattering, his vision turning purely black, the burning sensation inside of him drenched suddenly, replaced by a vacuum that sucked up the poisonous, ice-edged shards of glass throughout his body and smashed them all into his heart and empty cavern of a chest, pain sizzling and crackling through him like electricity, snapping along and shattering each and every individual nerve in his body, down to his core, draining him dry, swirling through him with the force of an uncontrolled hurricane, snapping his bones, crushing his veins, his heart, his lungs...

His heart beat once, thumped loudly, echoing in his ears, jerking his entire body upwards, snapping his eyes open.

Eire pulled her lips apart, sat back, the blood from her wound leaving a warm, wet stain on the other's body that he didn't, couldn't feel, her senseless smile still on her face, black eyes widened, empty, gaze like...

...Like that thing they'd fought at the inn. The creature with two different colored eyes, that didn't die through a blade to the heart. That looked...

His heart, seemingly with great effort, beat again, sending pain starbursting over Valkyre's entire body, making him gasp, inhalation of air feeling like razor blades sluicing down his throat, stabbing themselves through and through his lungs. He wanted it to stop. He wanted the burning to do away, the ice to dissipate, wanted his heart to stop, hold still, leave him...

Hot, burning, boiling blood flooded through his veins. His head throbbed, his wounds screaming out as if with voices, as if through torn, hoarse and bloodied throats. The blood that slicked down over his skin seemed to scald him alive, like melted metal or acid, bubbling away his flesh.

Eire was smiling, standing, turning away from him, glowing white wings ringing her, the one arm still dangling uselessly.

Valkyre gasped, groaned as his heart beat again, the pain flooding through him afresh, ripping him apart muscle by muscle, nerve by nerve. Burning, flaming, all-consuming, never stopping...

Like there was something dark crawling over him, talons digging into him, something coming back up from some black, hidden pit, laughing as it tore him apart and dragged him down. Something... familiar... something returning...

Eire was bending down, grabbing something, arm locked tightly around it...

...Iris.

The boy was still conscious, struggling, gasping, weakening.

The gray eyes, wide and frightened, locked on Valkyre's dulled, unseeing violet. The angel saw the gray, felt he should remember something... he struggled, wanting to move, to rise, to grab the gray back and crush it tightly against himself, knowing it would all be his own, the one thing he'd sworn to protect...

The pain overrode his wants, tearing at him viciously, consuming him from the inside out. He wanted to give up, wanted to lay back, tell his heart to stop... to die, to let it burn away, let him loose it all to emptiness, sinking into soft velvet and shattered glass rather than facing this pain one more time...

"VALKYRE!"

His eyes snapped open, body flinching, feeling himself struggling to fight again, his heart giving out a heavy, slow thump that echoed throughout his entire form, throughout his complete, broken being. Iris had screamed. The ceiling was crumbling, littering the ground all around them, collapsed by a deafening blast the angel hadn't even heard.

Eire had flared her wings, crouching down. The boy was wrapped around by her arm, Iris' gray eyes wide, scared, pained, mouth wide open, one thin arm reaching out for Valkyre, for his guardian angel protector...

And then he was gone, along with Eire and the black streak of Rheis, plaster and dust and mortar crumbling all around, showing a night sky painfully bright and pinpricked with glittering, glaring stars, winking and bobbing.

Valkyre felt like something had died inside of himself, a final flickering flame trying to hold up against the eternal, unending waves of pain, and all he wanted was to rise, to fly, to find the boy, the gray, and take it all back...

He was struggling, working his arm behind himself, trying to push himself up, trying to blot out the sharp bursts of pain... he managed to half-rise, then his heart pounded one more time, and he screamed, from pain twisting and mingling with the raging fires and endless burning, from pain that curled up his heart and crushed it in its cold sharp palm, from something much, much worse that made his vision blur again and something warm and hot slide down his face, skidding away as he felt himself falling, falling backwards again.

And, finally, the darkness and nothingness that he'd so wanted consumed him, closing him up in a black, velvety purse of empty shells and swirled images, of gray eyes and red eyes and neon-white and black and wings.

+--

AN: I am now officially over-descriptive.

...Majorly. >>;

That then resulted in Valkyre getting bashed around a bit more than I'd wanted. ...At least, I think I didn't want that to happen... ^^;

Hurm. I had to cut out parts of Rheis and Raguel fighting 'cuz there was no good way to put it in without it feeling like a slideshow movie, so I'll have to save it for later. Oh well.

I also realized that this is the first time I've used caps for an entire word.

...I think it deserved to be.

And, Astri, I know, Iris really is like a Colette. >>; Damn, I didn't mean for that to be happening. Luckily, this should be the last time. ^^;

Well, that's all for now, duckies. Thankya all, and see ya~

44 - Separated

Iris

+--

Unwillingly, Valkyre felt himself being dredged up from the murky darkness, where the world was muffled, silenced, empty, devoid of feelings, of warmth or cold, of anything and everything.

And swirling with dreams. Candles and dripping and shadows and wings...

But he was returning to his body, dragged away from the soft black oblivion he so wanted to sink into. Valkyre felt the ground pressed beneath his cheek, his shoulder, his leg. He blinked open his eyes, slowly.

Darkness all around, little pale slats and diamonds signifying loose papers scattered about the ground, wooden splintered pieces of tables lying in haphazard, jagged piles. The black blurred, merged, then pulled itself back into focus before his eyes. A blotch of pale white became a hand.

Valkyre blinked once, twice. The hand moved, dropped to the ground, palm pressed on the cold black ground, long thin fingers curling up, knuckles forming bony ridges.

Raguel leaned down, head tipped slightly to one side.

"...How are you feeling?"

The half-breed now sported a blue-purple bruise under his left eye along with a dried smudge of blood from cracked lips. There was a powdering of dust in his hair, off-setting the inky black, and the fabric of his dark shirt was ripped at a shoulder.

Valkyre blinked, trying to register what he was seeing. Carefully, slowly, he tried craning his head. He was on alert, afraid of suddenly being overwhelmed by some burning fire, some slamming, thrumming force that'd rip his aching body to pieces and scatter it along the ground.

There was nothing. His ribs hurt, his arm hurt, his head hurt, but... it wasn't the same kind of pain. This was aching, dulled pain after the initial wounds, damage that his body was already pooling its strength into to fix, to heal.

Valkyre paused, then tried to move his arm, slowly, cautiously, curling up his fingers first, wincing as he felt the small shards of glass still dug into his flesh, eventually pulling around his arm, leaning on an arm that throbbed and burned at the effort as he tried to prop himself up against it.

His head ached terribly, a repeated, resounding thrum that felt like something alive was pounding against the inside of his skull, screaming to be let out.

The angel managed to half-raise his body, crouching on the ground, hands trembling, palms flat out against the floor, his breathing ragged and fast, the air slicing through his lungs, his throat.

"Wh... What..."

Valkyre swallowed dryly, glancing around. Everything was in ruins, the ground sprinkled with glass, dark silhouettes shaping themselves out as bookcases and broken computer monitor screens. It was dark, empty, silent.

And yet...

The angel paused, then looked back down at himself. His hands, smeared with dried, flaking brown-black blood, were cast in a soft, gray-blue light. A piece of paper pressed underneath his palm ran more meaningless rows of characters and numbers, leaking clotted, dried blood.

Valkyre stared down at the tiny raised bumps of the letters, all clearly visible, but with no meaning...

The angel blinked, then raised his head.

Above him, through the rip in the ceiling, edged in a jagged, rough circle of ceiling plaster and brick, the gray-black sky was glinting with cold, distant tiny stars, like a reflection of the shattered glass littering the floor. Thick steel-gray clouds blotted out areas, drifting slowly past.

It'd been a long time since he'd seen the stars. They rarely showed, through all the smog and the lights of the cities... and through this hole, this hole to the sky...

"I...Iris!"

Valkyre's voice was rough, throat cracked. He stumbled, trying to push himself up onto his feet, almost crying out as he felt his legs buckle underneath him, his brain screaming, throbbing painfully.

The angel felt himself fall, then suddenly halt. Cool hands pressed against his shoulders, supporting him up. He glanced down, staring at the dark glowing red and pale yellow eyes through the inky bangs.

"Valkyre. Calm down." Raguel's voice was low, hushed. His face was placid, expressionless. "You shouldn't try to move yet"-

"Iris!" Valkyre grabbed the other by the shoulder, pushing away the pain, shaking the half-breed. "Where is he?? Why didn't you go after him??"

Raguel only stared back impassively, face devoid of emotion. The long, thin white fingers on the angel's shoulder tightened.

"Stop it, Valkyre. You know I wouldn't have gone after him and left you here. Calm down."

The angel flinched, jaw clenched. A moment of tense silence held them, facing each other down, then eventually, finally, Valkyre gave in and pushed himself away, easing himself gently to the ground. His body still ached, but he was healing, slowly, tediously.

How pointless.

The angel glanced over at Raguel, who'd settled himself down next to him, arms crossed over his chest, gazing out at nothing through his dark, inky bangs.

Feeling Valkyre's eyes on him, the half-breed glanced over, pale yellow gaze flashing, catching the dim reflection of the silvery moonlight.

"You need to rest first. Don't worry about Iris." Raguel looked away again, staring up through the hole in the ceiling.

"...He'll be all right. After all, those two don't really have anywhere to go."

Valkyre paused, licking dry, split lips. He frowned, staring down at his ripped, sticky hands.

"...Eire had mentioned something about home. What was that?? I thought this lab was where..."

Raguel gave a sharp, curt shake of his head. "No. This isn't the only lab. Iris stayed here for a duration, so I'd suspected that they might have had the information." The eyes turned dark, overcast. "...I shouldn't have come here, without knowing for sure..."

Valkyre exhaled sharply. "...This isn't the only lab, then? Where are the others? That's where those two will go, right? And they'll take Iris there??"

Raguel sighed, expression clearing slightly. "...Yes," he replied at length, as if reluctant to answer.

"They'll be... I think I know which compound they'll be at."

The half-breed's gaze shifted sharply, holding Valkyre's violet. "But don't attempt anything stupid. Wait. They can't really do anything once they're there, given no programming. You need to heal."

Valkyre scowled, distinctly feeling like he was being treated like an immature youth. "...I heal fast. I'll be fine. We still need to hurry."

Raguel sighed, still shaking his head, the faintest hint of something like a smile on his lips.

"Don't be so hasty. It'd be best to work out a plan first."

The angel leaned his head back, staring up at the broken edge of ceiling tile, black against a lighted, soft blue-black sky. Not often the heavens looked so lovely. His head throbbed with the movement, and the angel momentarily found himself overcome with dizziness, feeling like the world was spinning beneath

his body, for just an instant, before it all settled and righted itself.

Valkyre scowled, pressing his hand against his forehead, rubbing at his temples. Somewhere, at the back of his head, a bruise was throbbing.

"...I'm sorry."

The angel glanced over, eyebrows raised. "...What?"

"For allowing you to get so hurt. I never knew that Eire..."

Valkyre laughed, short, harsh. "Yeah, well, neither did I," he was muttering, eyes cast down. "...Last time we fought, she never showed that sort of energy... It was..."

Raguel turned, looked away.

"...You're right," he said. Valkyre looked up, curiously.

The half-breed frowned, glancing down at the paper-littered floor. "...It's not... what I'd expected at all. But I think I have a reason as to why.

"Eire always did have power, I know that. But her build was never meant to release all of it, at least, I hadn't thought so. I think that, instead, she found a way to give up much of her energy to Rheis, through their... connection. And, after you broke that link... Eire's energy was all her own, and I think that... somehow, she managed to harness and control it.

Raguel paused, looked back at the angel, shadows cast over his eyes by the mussed, dark hair.

"Didn't you notice a lack of coordination? Those two can't communicate as well anymore. And when I was fighting Rheis... when Eire broke through the roof, he didn't even notice until she'd already vanished outside. I don't think they're connected very well at all anymore."

Valkyre nodded slowly, digesting the information. It was a good assumption, and fit the facts.

They fell into silence, each busy with their own thoughts.

The angel leaned his head back cautiously, gently, wincing with the effort. Up above, a swirl of ugly gray clouds were smearing the sky. ...Could he remember which way Eire had gone?? ...No, no memory, everything had just faded away to black...

Valkyre let his gaze drop. He closed his eyes, sighing. Raguel was right; he had to think things through first, instead of attempting any irrational acts. If everything was as Raguel had said...

The angel winked open an eye, glancing briefly over at the half-breed. Dark and silent, brooding. Even though Valkyre himself was rather like that, he didn't trust others who acted that way. They were never the kind to directly express their motives, and you never could know what they would do, or what they were thinking.

Raguel... what exactly did he want with Iris?

...With himself, Valkyre?

The angel closed his eyes again. Raguel had mentioned... staying with him rather than going after Iris.

Valkyre blinked, opening his eyes again.

Why? Why him? What was there to protect?

Valkyre frowned, trying to think through the throbbing headache. Raguel only wanted Iris to revitalize the world... whether or not that was truly possible... right?

...What did he, the bewildered ex-bounty hunter, have to do with the whole matter??

Valkyre turned his head to observe the half-breed. What could he be thinking...?

"...Raguel."

The other looked over, not seeming startled in the least. "Yes?"

"...I know what you did to Asher and the other hunters."

Valkyre paused, wondering if he'd phrased it right. Perhaps it wouldn't be best to tell him that Asher was still alive.

The half-breed blinked, twice.

"...And, Valkyre?"

"Why did you do it?"

Raguel closed his eyes briefly, nodding.

"Ah. Then you've met the vampire, I suppose."

Valkyre flinched, invisibly. "...You knew he wasn't dead? Why did you let him live, then??"

The other's face remained impassive.

"Did you know what kind of relationship he was holding with the werewolf?" He countered, shaking his head.

"Yes, I knew."

It was the half-breed's turn to look over now, questioning. Raguel bore down on the other's violet gaze, own eyes cool and hollow.

"What they wanted could never have worked. It never should have. Only you"-

He cut off, frowning, looking away. When he began again, his gaze was averted, defensive.

"I... I had to feed, anyways. And it's not exactly as if I got out unscathed; that vampire left me a deep scar on my shoulder in retribution that won't fade with time."

Valkyre stared back blankly. Of course, even if you were only half-vampire, you still had to feed... and it did make a little sense now, but... still...

Well, for one thing, he could understand Asher's hatred quite well now. And yet Raguel...

Valkyre sighed, looking away. He didn't need visual proof of any scar to know that Raguel could back up his explanation. The angel was tired of these mind games, whether just fabricated by his own defensive instinct or real.

Valkyre paused, then faced the other again.

"Raguel."

The other nodded lightly in response. The pale yellow and the dark, ruby red gazed back at him, revealing nothing, hidden behind the black bangs.

"What is Iris for?"

Raguel merely smiled.

"That depends. What do you think, Valkyre?"

+--

AN: Jesus, this chapter took so long. And I'm so sorry, but Junior year is just oh-so hard.

...That's a lot of 'so's up there, so I'll stop with that.

Anyway. I seem to suck at conversations, and it sorely shows. For some reason, I find that one poor little excuse for Raguel's killing of the other hunters funny.

'And, well... I was hungry.' Is basically what it translates to, heh.

So, anyways. Trying trying to get some more work done, so please bear with me. Can you guys believe it? Almost a 1-year anniversary for Iris! One whole year, working on this one story!!

...Man, I'm slow. XO I'm so sorry!

Oh, and there will be a few small glitches in the story that I can't quite fix now, so I'm just trying my best to cover them up. Someday, when I finish this, I'll go back and revise it a lot. But, well, for now, this is the best I can do! Sorry!

Ta everybody, and see ya later~

45 - Secret

Iris

+--

She was scared.

Eyes black as velvet nothing, almost pretty. Like Valkyre's hair, like his wings.

Not so pretty.

She leaned over, touched him, held on, eyebrows drawn together in pain. Iris remained still, slumped like a doll.

It hurt. Angel, angel, singing in him, at him. He felt black like something other than Valkyre, like something much much worse than black-winged purple-white angels rising in him, bubbling.

Dark and seething, coiling and stringing itself out along his body, his blood.

Hold it back, hold everything in. Just like Valkyre does.

She's so scared.

Her face is confused, torn, still smeared with blue-black-brown-red blood. He did not reach up to wipe it away.

Soft, soft crooning. And yet it hurt, and yet she held on.

Iris looked away, tilted his head where the soft, tangled white hair covered him, twining along his cheek and making his own hair look dusty, dark and grimy.

All around, there was nothing more than one broken machine after another. Wires still spat out tiny fireballs of lightning, crackling. Soft glows breathed out green, blue, red shades onto the black, onto the crumbling floor and walls and ceiling and wires and room...

Screams were still echoing, even if everything in here was long since dead. Valkyre would not have heard them. But he did, and so did Eire, and so did Rheis...

Where were all the men? Where were the bright white lights, shining down on him, turning him translucent, ghostly ghastly, ready to fade away into nothingness, into preternatural silence, always held back by steel and cement and plastic?

Such quiet.

She was still crooning, eyes vacant, empty. Shuddering breath, swirling lethargically through the air. No hurry. Hurry.

Where was Valkyre??

Make it stop. Make it go away. Leave him, don't come looking.

Don't die.

Soft footsteps, silence breathing.

Rheis stared down at him, jet-black eyes behind the jet-black hair cold and hard.

But not so empty.

He was full, he was clashing, he was crushed, broken.

So lost. So confused.

Both of them.

But he was different. Eire was different.

What now? No commands, no clean white starch and flowing lightning.

No orders.

No existence, no reason.

Rheis' gaze shifted to the other, black eyes narrowing in discontent, lips turning down into a scowl. His pale, pale hands were curled up into fists, clenched, trembling. Smoldering.

"...Do something," he hissed suddenly, sharp teeth glinting in the light, glinting like pretty white wings and steel and bloodsplatter. So demon. How Iris wanted to reach out and touch that, feel it resonate, forget he was angel, forget he was anything at all. Forget he was everything.

Rheis snarled, whirling around, pacing the floor, arms crossed over his chest in a rather familiar gesture, scowling.

So lost. So confused.

Like rebirth, like a child.

"Think, will you???" he spat out suddenly again, black eyes still centered on Eire, furious, tone fiery. "Do something! Speak!! Prove to me you're even alive!!"

Eire only chuckled, humming, under her breath, and held Iris closer against herself. Still waiting for the white and the lights and the commands that would never come.

Rheis snarled loudly, eyes flashing, then turned and vanished.

Iris knew that he would not be coming back. He'd seen it in that last glance of black, pitless eye. No coming back. No home here. Little broken chords scattered, spitting out their little tiny fires, bubbling and fizzing as they turned cold on the ground.

Rebirth was so beautiful.

And then Eire was laughing under her breath, reaching out, almost tenderly caressing the boy's dry, flawless skin. Iris didn't respond, though he shivered, feeling the fingers on his cheeks.

"I know," she whispered, in more a singing voice than in actual tones, "I know your secret. I know what you're for... I won't tell him. He forgot."

She was smiling, fingering the gray, dulled hair.

"Would you like to know?" she whispered against the boy's ear, feeling Iris shiver, this time at the words than at the touch, at the breath of cool nothingness against his hair and skin.

And then the small, thin-fingered hand reached up, curled around her neck, dragging her down under his own gentle, light, light pressure. Gentle, porcelain, but nevertheless demanding, pulling, pulling her down, closer, close. Tiny balled fist, fingernails digging into skin.

"Tell me," Iris breathed. "Tell me... why."

The boy was smiling, gray eyes distant, settling past the other's face, past the waves of her blood-dribbled hair, past her laughter and her black black empty eyes, behind her. A little spider was crawled along the wall.

Eire smiled then, laughing, and leaned close, and whispered into his ear.

+--

AN: Okay. I am now officially multi-tasking. I officially hate November.

And I can now officially be deemed insane. :D

1. I promise to get SOMEWHERE in Iris by the anniversary. I do.

2. I promise to get a special GIFT for DD_DM (and possibly lump it into one that includes all my wonderful readers/reviewers >;

THANK YOU ALL~ KISSU~~~ =3=

46 - Side

Iris

+--

Valkyre was running. His footsteps echoed loudly on the steel-plated floors, ringing around and around his head along the narrow hallways and the closed-off plaster and metal walls.

This lab was even larger than the last, sprawling out over the ground in a twist of hallways and floors that overlapped and built on each other, creating a downright impossible-to-navigate maze of steel and glass.

But he'd found his way. The angel had felt it; he'd felt just the slightest pulse, just the faintest brush of aura. Iris was here, somewhere.

He had to be.

Around another corner, his boots almost slipping out from underneath him as he whirled around, feeling like he didn't even need to touch the ground, sure that if he could only get there, stretch out his wings, take to the air, if he could only reach the end...

A pale hand shot out in front of him, making the angel skid to a stop.

Raguel suddenly appeared in front of him, shaking his head.

"Quiet," he whispered. The ruby and pale yellow eyes glanced behind, at the end of the hallway.

"Careful. Eire and Rheis... they might still be about."

Valkyre paused, then nodded in agreement. He'd been foolish to want to run ahead, with such utter disregard to common sense.

They proceeded slowly now, careful to remain silent. On the ground, there was a littering of glass off on one side from a smashed-in window. Ahead, there was a faint flickering of light.

Valkyre felt his heart beating faster, and he tried to sift through the things he felt right now, trying to find something that would tell him that Iris was here, that he could save him. He'd been so careless, so stupid, letting him get captured again. If only he had the time, if only he had the chance...

Valkyre brushed at a stray hair that'd blown across his face. His fingers touched his skin, felt nothing, coming away empty.

The angel froze in his steps, staring down at his gloved hand, where for just a split second of an instant, he'd seen...

A glimmer of silver.

There had been no hair over his face. It'd been...

Thead.

"Raguel!"

The half-breed glanced over sharply, startled. "What?" he asked, both of them still speaking in hushed undertones.

Valkyre paused, shot a glance down towards the end of the hall.

"...Corryn."

Raguel blinked back, confusion written on his face.

"What?"

Valkyre paused, then remembered that Corryn... well, that he didn't really have a name. Rather, none that Raguel would acknowledge.

The angel contemplated trying to say something more, but then only shook his head, deciding it would best to simply let the matter drop.

Valkyre stepped forward again, this time with much more caution. However, he knew that the careless act had already been done, and chances were that Corryn already knew they were here. Along the walls, when one looked carefully enough, were thin, impossibly light lines of silver mimicking the scratch-marks and lines on the impeccable steel walls.

The interior of the room was visible now, nothing more than a few crooked tabletops scattered with papers and various electrical machines, all long-since broken down. However, a light bulb somewhere up ahead was still fizzing, flickering on and off.

Valkyre paused at the entrance, glancing all around. Nothing moved. Slowly, carefully, cautiously, he stepped inside.

The floor was tiled a marbled gray-white, even and smooth.

Over in the corner, a white shape lay, sprawled out on the ground. Valkyre's heart skipped a beat, seeing the crumpled white. Over the light, faded-polished floor, a stain of dark red blood splattered over the marble white.

He stepped inside further, then stopped, seeing the long, wavy white hair that swirled itself around the figure, wreathing it as if with a gauze.

Eire.

The angel felt himself breathe out a sigh of relief.

Until he realized there was another figure, crouching by Eire's head. A tan hand was reaching down, dirty fingers tangled in the white, white limp hair.

Corryn.

The other glanced up, golden black-ringed eyes sharp, finding him instantly, centering on him. A grin cracked apart the pale lips, flashing the whites of the teeth.

"One little birdy fell out of the nest, angel."

Valkyre moved his feet slowly, stepping fully into the room. He glanced around, quickly. No one else in here. No windows. No way out.

And Eire was quite clearly dead.

Corryn paused, fingers briefly tightening their loose grip around the silky-smooth hair, then let it go. He paused, then moved over a little, actions slow as well, careful and gauged.

"She's still smiling," Corryn commented.

Valkyre studied the other carefully. His tanned, scarred back was bare, the dark hair falling over the eyes and shoulders, fingernails short and chipped.

"...Did you kill her? Eire?"

Valkyre whirled around. Raguel had silently entered the room, standing still within the doorframe. His dark ruby and yellow eyes were hard and cold.

Corryn only shrugged, then grinned.

"You can decide that for yourself," he replied, looking away. "It doesn't matter to me."

A pause, and then he was fixing his gaze back in Valkyre.

Corryn moved slightly, taking a step to the side. It was only for a moment, but the angel saw the other's side. A large, angry red scar flowered out like bright, hot blood from Corryn's chest, where Valkyre's blade had dug clean through and bit into the soil. It was a wound that reminded the angel of Asher's, one that had been meant to kill but never quite accomplished its goal.

"...What are you doing, Valkyre, with... him??"

Corryn's golden-black eyes darted over to Raguel, making no attempt to mask his spite and venom.

"I..." Valkyre started to speak, then stopped. He didn't honestly know. But Raguel... no, he couldn't be trusted, not really, and yet...

"Valkyre. Angel."

Valkyre blinked, looking back. Corryn had stepped closer, still keeping an eye on the half-breed, still keeping his distance.

"...I've thought things over, Valkyre. I want to ask you..."

Suddenly, he lept up onto a tabletop, clinging against the edge, rocking slightly to and fro. Raguel flinched, crouching down just ever-so-slightly, but Corryn paid him no heed.

"Angel," he whispered, "We've more in common than you think. You even know that... he, he's going to kill Iris. And you know I won't."

He leaned closer, golden-black eyes serious, narrowed.

"Let me help you. You can do whatever you want. I just... want... Iris. Safe. You know that."

He paused, glancing sideways again at Raguel, shiftily regarding him out of the corner of his eyes.

"Valkyre."

Corryn hesitated, obviously having trouble deciding. Then, slowly, tentatively, he held out a smudged, tanned hand, almost grudgingly.

"I... I know," he said, "that Iris... likes... you. And I don't want... to hurt him."

His fingers began to curl up, then spread open again.

"I want to help him," he said. "Will you... let me?"

"Valkyre!"

Raguel called out suddenly, sharply. Corryn hardly flinched.

The angel paused, frowning. He held up a hand, silencing Raguel, staring into the golden black.

Corryn? Join with him?

Of course, Corryn wouldn't kill Iris. That made him, in one sense, safer. And he was simple, honest. Unlike Raguel, swathed in so many layers of black and grays and red and yellow that Valkyre could never hope to peer down into his soul, to understand his motives.

Valkyre stared at the hand proffered. The fingernails were caked with dirt, short and blunt. He was nothing more than a lost child, after all. Broken, wanting the only thing that meant something to him. He'd do anything to get Iris back... To get Iris...

Valkyre looked up into the golden-black-ringed eyes, meeting them fully.

He shook his head.

"...No."

Corryn blinked, hand drooping, taken aback.

"...Why?"

Valkyre sighed, shaking his head.

"I know you too well," he said. "You only want Iris. And right now, you want me on your side, because you want to eliminate Raguel. You won't take him on alone, not with me as well."

Valkyre paused, glancing between the two. "But," he added, it's not exactly as if I'm on his side. I'm not... on either."

The angel sighed, then looked back at Corryn.

"I'm sorry," he said, "But I know that your interests don't really lie there. You'd just kill me afterwards."

The other blinked back, expressionless.

"And besides," Valkyre added, "Iris isn't even here. I... I'm searching for him."

Corryn flinched, eyes flashing. And then he was pulling back, shaking his head.

"Traitor," he hissed. "You're a fool, angel. And you'll die like the rest of them. Like broken little dolls."

He was circling around them, golden eyes flashing.

"You'll kill him," he snarled. "You'll kill Iris!"

And then he was leaping towards the doorway, and in a moment he was gone, swallowed up by the shadows.

Raguel had done nothing to stop him, only looking to Valkyre and shaking his head.

+--

AN: Oh holy~!

This is officially deemed the shoottiest chapter ever. OFFICIALLY.

I'm so goddamned sorry. But I just... I tried, so many times, but I just couldn't get this chapter to come out in any kind of decent way at all.

So this is all I've got. I'm sorry.

It's terribly, impossibly hard to be working on two stories at the same time, because the styles are so unbelievably different, and my writing style itself has changed so much.

So, I apologize muchly, muchly. The next chapter will be pretty much the same crap, but I'm hoping that a few scenes down, the interesting stuff I really want to get written down will finally solidify decently.

Until then, please bear with. I'm sososo sorry. :<

Thank you all~ ::cries::

47 - Opposite

Iris

+--

"Raguel."

The half-breed looked over from where he stood, leaning back against a wall. "Yes?"

Valkyre paused, staring down at his boots for a while, undecided.

"I..." he muttered at length, "I'm... leaving."

Raguel paused, cocking his head slightly to one side, then merely nodded, closing his eyes.

Valkyre frowned, startled at how calmly the half-breed had taken the news.

"I... It's not because of... because..."

Raguel only smiled slightly, shaking his head.

"I understand," he replied, voice cool and steady. "You don't need to explain. I know you'll find the way, eventually."

Valkyre nodded, stiffly.

It wasn't because of what he'd said to Corryn. And it wasn't really about trust anymore.

It was just...

Iris was gone.

And he had to go find him.

And this was something that Valkyre knew that this was something that he had to go do alone.

"I know, Valkyre. But..."

The angel looked up, surprised. Raguel was walking over, movements slow and careful, feet stepping around the debris and broken bits of glass that lay scattered over the ground. Along the wall, the broken machinery rested in its crumbling shapes, sharp and jutting.

"...There's one thing... before you go."

The half-breed was right next to Valkyre now, and he laid a light, pale hand on the angel's shoulder.

"There's just one thing... I need to ascertain."

Valkyre blinked, startled. When the other had touched him, it seemed as if his headache had flared back, throbbing sharply just behind the front of his skull, making him wince.

"What...?"

Next thing he knew, Raguel had leaned closer, closer, so close his inky black hair brushed the angel's cheek. Valkyre felt the half-breed's fingers tighten on his shoulder, felt the puff of cool breath on his skin, making him shiver, closing his eyes.

He felt the sudden cool lips on the side of his neck like an electric jolt to his body. The angel's eyes snapped open and he jerked himself away, one hand going instinctively to the seal around his neck.

Raguel only stood up straight again, smiling, touching a finger to his lips.

"It's true," he murmured, tongue darting out for just the briefest second, warm, hot red like blood.

"Wh... What?"

Valkyre felt his face flush, mentally admonishing himself for having let his guard down so much. Of course he shouldn't have trusted Raguel at all, and that was no doubt still a factor for why he was leaving, why he should leave right now, should find Iris...

He was backing away, glancing backwards to figure out where the doorway was. The angel wanted to

leave this room now, with its dead mechanical-organic Eire and Raguel, whom he never should've trusted in the first place.

How foolish he'd been, travelling with him. A moment's hesitation back there, and Raguel could've bit straight through to his veins. A second longer, and he could've been dead.

"What... what're you talking about??"

He no longer really wanted the answer, though. He saw the sharp ruby red and pale yellow eyes narrow, that smile spreading on the lips. It reminded Valkyre yet again that Raguel was part vampire and part demon, and that plenty of consequences could occur from just that dangerous mixing of blood. Not to mention... certain requirements. It'd been a world ago when Asher had told Valkyre that his partners had been slain... And Raguel probably...

The half-breed only smiled back.

"You hold that seal of yours in your hand so dearly, Valkyre. Be careful."

The angel swallowed hard, feeling the cold stone and thin gold loops dig into the palm of his hand. He dropped the seal stone, feeling it fall down, pulling at the chain around his neck.

His seal? What of it? Dear...?

Valkyre only shook his head. He was backing up, he was through the doorway now, glad that the shadows were falling over him, hiding him from view.

Raguel, his eyes were so dark, and no matter what, the angel couldn't get the image of that tongue flickering between the lips... lips that'd rested on his neck an instant ago, right above his vein, right over his blood.

And then Valkyre was running, and then he was gone, gone from the narrow darkened halls and Raguel and Eire and empty cobwebs.

Outside, he gripped the seal around his neck, feeling the cool, responseless black stone in his palm, and pulled it off.

The angel paused then, groaning slightly, pressing a cool, slightly trembling hand to his head. The headache still hadn't gone away, and in fact, it only felt worse. Perhaps he wasn't as healed as he'd thought he'd been.

Valkyre shook his head, pulling his hand away from his face. He tucked the seal into his pocket and flared his wings.

There, again, a sharp pain. What was wrong with him?? Maybe he'd damaged his wings somehow...

But there was no way the angel was going to stay behind here. Pushing away the sharp sting and doing his best to ignore the headache that throbbed at his temples, he beat his wings, lifting up slowly into the air, and began to fly.

It wasn't until the remnants of the labs had faded from his view that he realized what'd gone wrong.

When Raguel had touched him... when demon touched angel...

He'd gotten his headache.

And that was not the physical pain that should've happened instead.

This wasn't opposites touching.

+--

AN: Okay, here's another chapter I was kinda half-way forced to grind out. I'm hoping things will go more smoothly from here though, because things are really starting to build up into what I wanted.

I'm afraid I might not get to reveal the big spoiler on your b-day Deffy, but if not, then it'll be the post right afterwards, I swear~

Thanks everyone for your dedication, and for the comments! I seem to have picked up a few new readers along the way, and I'm glad you guys have decided to stick through with this immensely-long

and constantly-shifting story of mine!! :)

Oh, and a quick note about the previous chapter: I gave up on using 'archangel' for Corryn. I just hated that to death.

I'll have to come up with something different that Corryn can call Valkyre that's still pertaining to 'angel' but not... the word 'angel.' ^^; (I think I'm going to either use Seraphim or 'cherub.')

Thanks again~ Next chapter [or maybe even the one after that, depends on how much I can get done ;)] is promised to hit on the anniversary of one whole year of IRIS! THANK YOU ALL~

48 - Camael

Iris

+--

Less than an hour had passed before Valkyre could take it no longer.

The headache had gotten worse, had turned to a throbbing, pounding that resounded through his skull, over and over again until he was sure he'd just pass out, still in flight. And that wasn't all.

His entire being was trembling, sharp pains flashing throughout his body making him half-double over, even in midair, gasping. He felt like he was on fire, like something was burning him from the inside-out, heedless of flesh or bone or sinew, wanting to bubble out from underneath his skin.

Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

But at the same time...

Something else.

He'd caught just the slightest hint of it, just the faintest, faintest brush of a whisper of an echo of an aura. Somewhere, ringing.

And that's why he'd kept on flying, trying to find that signal again. It didn't carry the signature of any of the others he'd met, not even the hunters or Maeve or anyone else.

But... something... made it tell him, deep down, that this... was it. Was...

There was something lacking, something different, something new... but the brush was soft, the image it played onto the backs of his eyelids dim, glowing white-gray.

Something familiar.

So he'd headed for it. He still whispered the word 'Iris', over and over again inside his head. But, somehow, he knew that this was different. Something else.

And, luckily, over the vast emptiness around him, over the wasteland stretching to his left... A city had appeared.

Small, quaint, and run-down. No one showed on the streets. A quick check barely managed past a throb of headache told Valkyre that there were indeed still inhabitants in this town, but few.

No one lived near the wasteland of the west, not anymore.

That was nothing more than an endless stretch of dust and, not far beneath, solid, flat stone. Nothing but stone, for mile after mile. No cracks. No dips or hills. Just unending slabs of rock unable to make more than a hair's breadth of shade along its layers.

No one went through there and came back. No one bothered trying. It was suicidal.

And it was, it seemed, slowly spreading, year after year.

And all the people did was push back, deserting the area.

Letting it run.

The angel shook his head, bringing himself back to where he was. The future was none of his business. Below him, the scattered pieces of building stopped abruptly, fading out. Valkyre banked, sharply, wheeling around to land.

He dipped his wings, feeling the wind rushing past him as he dropped from the sky, angled carefully, wincing as a bit of a sudden turn left him momentarily blinded by the sudden grinding of pain against his brain.

He flared his wings just in time, catching air, but then gasping and wincing as pain jolted sharply through

his body, bursting from the center of his back where his wings materialized themselves. His feet hit the hard ground, which he managed to hold for a split second, before his legs collapsed underneath him, unused to the strain of suddenly having to deal with gravity, and the angel stumbled and fell over onto his hands and knees, gasping sharply in pain.

Valkyre crouched on the ground, head drooping so low his hair almost brushed the dirt, panting hard, clenching his teeth as the waves of burning heat and throbbing pain washed over him, his entire body shaking uncontrollably, sweat starting to bead on his brow.

The angel stared down at his clenched fists, at the dirtied folds of his gloves, feeling the blood rush to his head, amplifying the throbbing, the pounding as the blood came and left his skull.

What was wrong with him??

It felt like forever, but slowly, slowly, the headache receded, just slightly. Carefully, cautiously, Valkyre lifted his head, looking around.

No one in sight.

Slowly, he heaved himself up, then pushed off on his palms until he was standing, if wobbling somewhat and stumbling backwards a few steps. The headache continued.

Valkyre braced himself, flexing the muscles in his legs, trying to get them to cooperate properly. Inside, it felt like something was ripping him apart. Like something was burning clear through his skin, screeching.

He couldn't take it much longer, this pain. This, this... He felt like he was going to break, like he wanted to. Like all he wanted to do was just lie down and hope it would all go away, that he could kill himself so the pain would stop, so-

Valkyre froze.

Aura. Iris. Someone. Aura.

The angel jerked his head up, suddenly. A sharp migraine made him regret it, but... He'd felt it, right then. One quick, brief burst of presence, and then nothing. Like it'd lost control for one second, then returned to control, shielding its aura around a barrier again, sealed. Like a box with something glowing inside, bright and white, which peeped open for less than the span of the blink of an eye, flashing out its brightness, before snapping shut.

Familiar. He'd felt this before. He knew it.

Where was it??

Valkyre was lurching forward, walking, one step after another, pushing away the pain, ignoring it. It-he... was here. In this city. The angel let his feet lead him on, boots powdered in dust, crunching, grinding on dirt packed down so tight it might as well be the lifeless slabs of stone just to the west. His body knew where to go. Around a corner, down along streets, abandoned, boarded-up buildings passing him on either side, skeletal and empty, mere husks.

He knew who this was. He should.

And yet... it didn't seem to make any sense. And it didn't seem possible.

White, glowing light.

He headed towards it, empty, mindless, only feeling each step as the impact, as the drag of gravity, sent sharp bursts of pain through his bones, up his legs to his thighs, spreading, flaring over his entire body. A thousand needles, a million insects chewing at his flesh, a monster inside writhing, clawing at him, screaming to get out.

Hands digging into the floorboards, splinters under his fingernails. Screaming. Sticky red.

No, no, don't remember. Don't ever remember, Valkyre...

And then... there it was.

A church.

Valkyre felt a smile strain his chapped lips, though he couldn't for the life of himself figure out why.

A church. A church still intact, with all its stained glass mosaic windows still complete. Just for him to walk into.

And he... he was inside. Valkyre knew it, instinctively. He was inside.

The angel stumbled up the stairs, reaching out a hand, touching the polished wood and smooth brass handles. He leaned against the wooden door, resting his forehead on the warm, soft wood. Oil. Soft, faint scent of oil. Of people, opening this door and walking through so many times it'd polished the oak all on its own. Had worn down the brass handles into something that molded more perfectly to the hand than anything machine-created could ever do.

Valkyre stepped back, blinking open his eyes. He reached out, fingers wrapping around the metal that sucked at the warmth from his hands, and he pulled the doors open.

Inside, it was dark, dry, and silent.

The door's creaking echoed through the abandoned building, the pews still neatly arranged on either side frosted with a thick layer of dust.

As he stepped inside, the angel's footsteps resounded, bouncing along the magnificent, high, arched ceilings. It sounded like ringing, like the thumping of primordial drums, of clanging steel muffled in oily cloth.

So quiet. So peaceful.

Behind the angel, there was the scuff of feet, fast and furious along the ground. Quiet, softened by the dust, but still sharp enough to echo around the silent cathedral.

Valkyre whirled around just as the heavy oaken door slammed shut, the dark figure in front of it leaping up suddenly, fingers finding perfect places to grasp in the smoothed wood, dancing fast as a flitting bat as it climbed the doorframe and then the smooth stone above that with ease, pounded at on all sides from the reverberations of the door's slam which'd set the dust whirling, released from its slumber.

The angel tipped his head back as the figure leapt, stopped, and clung to the decorated ceiling, crouching, facing down. Black hair fell around a pale face, the inky dark mess fading into the same black clothes, shapeless.

But before he could quite figure out who it was, Valkyre was stumbling backwards, shaking his head, his vision blurring and doubling.

The figure from the ceiling dropped.

The black rushed at him, growing impossibly large impossibly fast. The hair whipped away from the face, showing pale skin and glowering yellow eyes, the white skin off-set by an angry slash over the bridge of the nose, swirls of black curling away from it, darting back and forth in intricate shapes and lines and dots-

Black lines???

Valkyre barely managed to raise his arms in a futile attempt to block the blow, noticing the flash of a steel blade too late.

The impact made his feet buckle, and the angel just about collapsed onto the ground, gasping. He'd felt the impact, knew that something had dug right through his arm, even though he couldn't feel it yet.

But then the pain flared up, belatedly like it would with such a sharp edge, burning all along his arm. Blood splashed out, soaking through the fabric of his arm. He cried out, gasping. It felt like the blood was burning straight through his skin, setting fire to every inch of skin it touched, searing as it cut mercilessly through his flesh, bubbling, devouring.

Asher, on top of him, leapt away, tearing out the blade as he did so. Valkyre barely noticed, stumbling backwards, free hand gripping his right wrist tightly, but afraid of touching it, of touching that blood, even if it was his own blood, this blood that was swirling, curdling, seething as it ate at him...

The vampire was making for him again. Valkyre managed to block the initial blow somehow, grabbing the pale wrist that held the knife, by some stroke of luck able to hold it away from his body, to keep it

from cutting his skin again, of letting that blood flow.

Asher growled, furious, and then, whip-lash fast, his leg struck out. The vampire's blow caught Valkyre full-on just at the bottom of the rib cage, and the angel was sent flying backwards.

His limp form thudded heavily onto the ground, skidding, and Valkyre gasped silently at the pain, at the blood that was splashing everywhere, his head exploding with white and entire body going stiff with the red-hot pain.

And then Asher was on top of him, snarling, stained blade flicked around to be grasped in the palm so the blade almost bit into the smallest finger, the thumb over the hilt.

Valkyre saw the sharp, finely-honed edge come down towards his throat, saw the blood smeared over the dark blue steel.

The angel closed his eyes, knowing he didn't have the strength to fight back, knowing he'd never win this, not with the condition he was in...

And then Asher stopped. The dagger point so close it touched, pressed itself into the angel's skin, and it was enough for Valkyre to hiss sharply, recoiling, wanting to hide from the blood that burned into him, the blood that splashed his vision and screamed at him, like shadows eating away at his flesh. It didn't matter if it was Asher, if it was from a blade. All he wanted was to get that blood away from him, get it all out, take it away.

He was almost ready to kill himself on that blade, if only it would take away the burning...

"You sonofadog."

Asher's voice was low and harsh. He glowered down at the other, pale yellow eyes hard and narrow.

"I should kill you right now," he hissed, "You goddamned bastard."

Valkyre stopped, for one brief, frozen moment staring up in startled realization at Asher's face, forgetting the words, forgetting the pain, forgetting the blood and the dagger balanced on his throat.

He stared at the black sigils scrawled over the vampire's skin, edges framing the ugly, harsh scar that ran over the other's face, framing but never quite touching, flaring out in elaborate swirls and sharp curves, doubling over itself, punctuated with carefully-placed dots.

Sigils that he recognized, meaning 'seal,' meaning 'obsolete,' meaning 'refrain.'

Sigils that Valkyre had used himself.

Sigils that he'd learned from only one person. From...

"You lying bastard," Asher was whispering, leaning over him, black hair falling on either side of his face, shaking his head. "You sorry, pathetic... you took away the only thing I ever had."

The blade trembled, dug into Valkyre's fragile skin, drawing blood that made the angel hiss sharply until he clenched his teeth shut, wincing.

Belatedly, through the haze of pain and recognition... he realized the truth.

The aura he'd felt hadn't been an accidental slip.

It'd been on purpose. It was a trap.

It'd been to lead him here.

To...

"Asher. Stop."

The voice carried over the expanse of the hall with the force of a wave, silencing all else, echoing and rebounding on itself. The voice was deep, well-aged, of a timbre and tone that Valkyre recognized instantly.

It left him stunned, unable to speak.

Impossible.

It was impossible.

How... how could it be? After all this time, and now, suddenly, here before him...

Asher, however, was not impressed. He knew the voice, and the words spoken made his eyes flash,

pupils dilating.

The vampire whirled around, snarling.

"Why?? This is my kill!! He"-

Asher's words broke off promptly, cut off by the vampire's own sharp screech of pain as he doubled over, keeling, tumbling off of the angel's body. The blade clattered harmlessly onto the ground, blood on the steel mixing to an ugly gray with the dust.

Valkyre was already working himself up onto his shoulders. That voice... he had to know...

He glanced over, staring at the vampire. The sigils along the heavy scar over his face blazed, burning, Asher's fingernails digging at his own flesh, scrabbling hopelessly.

And then, suddenly, it stopped, sigils fading back to black, and the vampire lay still, breathing heavily, chest rising and falling.

"Valkyre."

The angel whirled around at the voice, staring down along the aisle to find the source, which stood in the very center of the raised platform, the giant cross behind him rising up into the sky, into the ceiling, perfectly aligned.

"It's been a long time."

He was smiling.

Valkyre gasped, disbelieving. He tried to move forward, tried to pull himself up onto his feet. Somehow, he managed to rise, forced to brace himself, standing there wobbling, like a baby learning to walk for the first time. It wasn't the first time he'd felt like this, standing before him.

The angel tried to scoot his foot just the slightest bit forward, but it refused to budge. Blood dripped down his arm, and his entire body ached, screaming.

"Ca... H-How...?"

A groan at his side. Asher was pulling himself up, hissing sharply. The vampire glanced over his shoulder, glaring at the figure standing there, alone.

"Asher. Don't forget the deal we made."

The vampire hissed, black hair falling over his eyes, then nodded, sharply, resentful eyes still glowering with hate.

"...Go outside. Find the boy."

Asher paused, then left, shaking his head, one hand still against his face. The door slammed shut heavily behind the vampire, quivering.

Valkyre turned his attention back to the man, feeling like his legs were going to give out any second now. A voice was screeching in the back of his head, demanding. Something... so familiar about it all. About his pain. About... him.

The figure under the cross nodded, slowly. He lifted his arms to either side, still smiling. Valkyre stared back blindly, bluntly, unsure of what he was seeing, blinking to clear his vision.

And then the aura swept over him, the closed box shattering.

And from the figure's back, pure, glowing white wings lifted themselves into the air, rising, curling up slowly, like infantile seedlings, tasting the world. Then they flared out, full and wide, pure white, flawless. Perfect.

Valkyre felt his feet slipping out from underneath him, felt his vision blurring, fading. He tried to speak, tried to find his voice again.

"Ca... ...Camael."

And then everything faded into darkness.

+--

AN: Thank you everybody for everything. Sorry for the drama and the rather rushed writing.
THANK YOU FOR A YEAR OF DEDICATION, SARAH~

49 - Demon

Iris

- For the Iris I know -

+--

There was a candle.

There was darkness, the quiet, dank yet arid silence of somewhere underground.

There was a shadow.

Valkyre blinked his eyes open, slowly, wearily. His vision refused to focus in the dark.

The throbbing pain came back, but dulled, somewhat. A faded memory of the actual sensations, tingling in the back of his mind.

The angel ran his tongue around inside of his mouth, which tasted stale and dry.

...Drugged. He'd been drugged.

He could tell by how lightheaded he felt, by the dullness. He tried to move, and it took an eternity for his body to respond. His fingers twitched just slightly under his command, but refused to shape themselves into a fist.

Dangerous. He knew his situation was dangerous.

And yet...

Valkyre paused, then tried to move his arm. It stung. His neck ached, and he bent his head back, groaning slightly. Where was he?? The candle, a candle sitting alone, base formed by its own dripping wax, stood on a table next to him, casting warm light over his body.

Below him, stretching along the dirt ground and then up against a hard concrete wall, his shadow danced and flickered like a thing alive.

...What was going on? What was he doing here??

Valkyre glanced around, then down at himself. He was slouched in a chair... no, a stool, as there wasn't even so much as backing. He wondered how he'd managed to stay upright. The angel shifted his body slowly, testing his limits, trying to figure out how much of a response he could gather from his limbs.

Every movement made the headache a little more severe, a little closer to becoming truly physical again.

Footsteps.

Valkyre froze.

The door opened, and dulled gray-white light splashed over the room. The door creaked as it shut.

Footsteps down the stairs, echoing.

Something about this all... something...

So familiar.

This'd happened to him before.

This room. The candle. The stool, the footsteps...

Valkyre stared dully ahead, watching his shadow flicker and skid to the side from the breeze that'd made the candle's fire writhe, almost going out.

"...Camael."

His voice was soft, quiet, acknowledging.

He knew who this was.

The angel glanced over his shoulder, slowly. Camael smiled back, hands crossed, regarding him, head tilted slightly to one side.

He looked hardly any different now than he had all of those years long ago.

His hair was still the healthy dark brown it'd been years ago, but was now heavily streaked through with silver, cropped short in front but tied back behind the neck. His eyes were dark, circled now with shadows, and marked by fine lines and wrinkles around them. The nose and jaw were prominent, as they had been the last time Valkyre had seen him. The face was clean-shaven, skin dark and tanned.

"Valkyre."

His voice was low, deep and strong. Camael blinked, calmly, dark eyes catching and bouncing back the red-yellow candlelight.

"...That's an interesting name to pick."

Valkyre looked away, staring back at the wall.

"...Why?" He asked.

He heard footsteps behind him, and then the heavy weight of Camael's hand on his shoulder. Valkyre winced, slightly, then glanced down at his right arm. It'd been cleaned and bandaged, neatly. The white cloth wrapped around his arm glowed in the dark, contrasting the black swirls and sigils and snakes laced over the rest of his skin, brought alive by the shifting light.

"Why what?"

Valkyre paused, then shook his head. This feeling... the rough, work-hardened fingers on his shoulder... It was anything but comforting, but at the same time... there was a feeling. An air of calm.

This was his master. This was the man that'd taken him in from the reeking decay and death of his home when no one else dared. Who'd cared for him, taught him how to wield a blade, how to harness his energy, how to make being to make a living for himself, to begin a new life.

This was the man who'd left him seven years ago, turned his back and cast him out alone to care for himself. Who'd never even said goodbye.

Guardian, savior, traitor... none of these words fit him.

Valkyre closed his eyes, trying to push away the aching throb that threatened to take over his mind and body.

"...Why... did you call me?"

He heard Camael chuckle from behind him.

"That's an odd way to put it. ...But correct."

A pause.

"Because I'm here to help you, Valkyre," he replied at length, taking his hand off of the angel's shoulder and moving aside, hands laced behind his back, staring at the small candle flame burning itself up.

"...And, of course, in return, I'd like you to help me as well. Equivalent exchange, I would believe."

Valkyre watched the candle wick as well, studying the patterns the flickering light cast on the tabletop.

Black and foreboding, his pen rested on the gnarled wood, casting a shadow as dark as itself.

Camael reached down, touched the pen with two fingers.

"You still carry this with you."

Valkyre looked away, staring down at the ground. Warning. His entire being was cautious, screaming something at him.

This was Camael, his master.

And yet... he was afraid.

"What..." His voice came out weak, almost cracking. The angel steadied it as best he could, taking in a deep breath. His body still ached so much, still burning inside.

"What's... happening to me?"

Valkyre stared down at himself, turning over his hands to stare down at his naked palms. His gloves had

been taken away, as well.

"Why... do I feel... like this? What's wrong... with me?"

Camael came over, pressed his large, dry hands on Valkyre's shoulders, leaning over him. His voice was quiet, whispered close by the angel's ear.

"You've lasted longer than I thought you would," he murmured, breath hot. "But all dolls fall apart in the end."

The hands dropped over Valkyre's shoulders, circling around in front. Camael's right hand touched the center of Valkyre's chest, closed its fingers around the bobbing black seal stone.

There was a pause, and then Camael tore it free, pulling back from the angel.

Valkyre gasped, sharply. The pain flooded back, the darkness gathering itself around him. He half-doubled over, breathing raggedly, trying to keep the air pumping through a windpipe that seemed to want only to close itself on him.

His vision doubled, blurred, the shadow stretching out from his legs dancing, fighting against its tie to him. Like little demons, dancing, alive. The headache returned, pounding, drilling into his skull. His entire body was shaking, uncontrollably, and the burning, the burning...

He was going to fall apart.

Camael was right.

Behind him, the voice went on, calm and smooth, unperturbed.

"...Do you remember this, Valkyre? All of this?"

A finger traced its way down the angel's bare back. Valkyre froze, a cold shiver traveling down his spine. His wings. Demon wings.

He felt the strong, heavy finger trace its way along a curve, sweep back down, following the sharp bone.

"Do you remember, Valkyre?"

The angel did not reply.

The darkness, his shadow. The candle.

His bare back. A pen on the table.

Pain.

He felt like he'd be going crazy...

The angel's eyes opened wide, taking in nothing more than darkness.

This was just like the last time. Just like...

When he'd gotten his demon wings.

A hand came up, touched the side of his face, one finger pressed lightly against his parted lips, feeling his breathing, feeling the coldness of his skin. Feeling his heart racing underneath the pale, easily-punctured skin. Felt the raging inside, the hot dark burning that consumed him.

"You've been a shadow these past years, Valkyre. Incomplete."

The hand dropped away, leaving him alone, leaving the dark black heat to consume him again, unabided.

"Haven't you ever felt like something was missing?"

A sound then, a sound that Valkyre recognized too well.

The sweet, sharp singing of a finely-honed blade coming out of its sheath.

The angel glanced back, startled. Camael smiled, setting the small hollow sheath of wood on the table.

The candlelight turned the blue-gray blade hot yellow and red, swirling as if something were alive beneath the metal.

"Do you still trust me, Valkyre?"

The angel looked away, staring blankly back at the wall, watching Camael's shadow engulf his own. A warm hand laid itself in the center of his back.

"...Show me your wings," he heard Camael say, through the haze of pain and fire and darkness that

threatened to consume him. His image on the wall was blurring, gone, dissolved in dark.

Valkyre wasn't quite sure why, but he listened, and obeyed.

He gathered his strength, centered it where it was needed. He felt the sparse energy he had flare up, felt it materialize, spread from his back, arching up into the air, the individual feathers rustling and scraping on each other as they formed, hushed in the silence.

The candle's fire flickered, wavering, pushed and pulled and molded by the wind he generated out of nothing, then slowly steadied itself.

Valkyre winced, feeling the dark burning eat at the bases of his wings, feeling it flare up sharply throughout his body.

His black wings trembled, then sagged down, drooping sadly. He didn't have the strength to hold them up.

Camael's hand, which'd remained on the angel's back throughout, now pulled away. Valkyre quivered slightly, feeling Camael come up behind him, feeling the warm breath on the back of his neck.

"Good, Valkyre."

He felt the breath leave his skin, going stiff as the sharp, honed edge of the blade touched his skin, pressing down just slightly, but not yet enough to draw blood.

"Now, let me show you your wings."

The blade slashed down his back before Valkyre had a chance to realize quite what was happening. A second later, it split through the skin on the other side of his back, two parallel slashes for two demon wings carved into his flesh.

He gasped aloud, feeling the blood splash out of him, staining, streaking down his back, painful, searing...

He felt it.

Something dark, something alive. Something screaming out from every cell of his body, every drop of his blood.

Something materializing, pushing itself at his veins and through his bones and muscles and skin, releasing itself from confinement somewhere far, far down, somewhere that'd remained hidden and locked away all this time.

His vision died, faded utterly to black, his body alone, falling through fire, searing, burning. The flames licked at his blood, drowning in it, tearing through his form. Like great, thin hands clawing their way out from inside of him, discarding the angel's body like nothing more than a hollow, empty shell left to blow away in the wind, left to be turned to charcoaled ash by the flame.

Crimson blood was staining, turning black, spilling over him, dark as ink, swirling sweet as wine and painful as liquid fire dripping between his shoulders, curling around his form, embracing him, consuming him.

There was the long, wet sound of something ripping. Valkyre's vision flashed red, flashed black-webbed and cooling, dancing in the night air. Fire and shadows played, intertwined.

He felt something rise out of his body, growing, pulling apart the broken skin, tasting the fresh, cool, muffled air, stretching, veins pumping, folding velvet-soft and slicked and dark.

Something hung above him, clinging to his body, arching up into the sky. Black blood leaked over the stiff, soft feathers of his angel wings, staining them sticky black on black.

Slowly, Valkyre blinked open his eyes.

Candlelight.

Blood and ink and fire, dripping down his back, down along whorled and smoothed wood, drying up in the dank soil.

His shadow.

Valkyre stared at his shadow, still playing along the wall, flickering at the edges.

He saw the jagged edges of his unkempt hair, saw his bare, sloped shoulders that merged into the ruffled, soft feathered wings that wilted at his sides before becoming part of the uneven, bumpy raw ground.

Camael had stepped aside.

And, from the center of his back, from some point along his numb flesh that he couldn't right now locate...

Wings.

Demon wings.

They arched up, smooth and elegant, bones edged by the tight, closely-hugging skin, jutting up to the pointed, tipped talons. They sprawled out to either side, possessing a life all their own, the skeletal joints that flared down webbed by a thin, dark, velvety membrane, whispering softly to itself.

Valkyre stared at them, disbelieving. He was frozen, caught on that image in front of him, tangled in cobwebs, staring at the image that had to be a lie.

"Wh..."

It was more of a weak, shuddering breath than an attempt at a word.

"Wh-What...?"

He heard Camael laugh, softly, behind him.

"Do you see yourself, Valkyre? This is what you are."

His shadow moved with his footsteps as he leaned over, resting a hand square on Valkyre's shoulder, maneuvering around the wings, the two pairs of wings, the impossible thing that was Valkyre himself, that was...

"You are Iris," he whispered in Valkyre's ear.

"You are antithesis."

+--

50 - Remember

Iris

+--

"...No."

That was the first, last, and only word that Valkyre could form in his lips, could utter coherently.

The candle shivered.

A wave of darkness swept over him, something he hadn't ever felt before yet instinctively recognized, something primordial, something that'd lain inside of him all along. Something with a mind and teeth and burning eyes and claws.

Something that could see the darkness, could sense in a completely different way, could smell the wood and wax and burnt air in a way he never could've as... as an angel.

Valkyre shuddered, shivering, drawing in on himself. The brush of his skin on skin was loud, thundering, deafening. The candle's light hurt his eyes. His fingers twitched, trembling, as he stared down at them, and there was something about the way his chest and stomach felt, like they were warping, changing, his each inhalation drawing in deep, heavy breaths, a million things besides just air funneling down his lungs.

And, watching over it all, his wings sprawled up against the wall, impossible.

Valkyre paused, then slowly, tentatively stretched his hand over his shoulder, fingers trembling.

They touched wet, slick leather, touched something soft and smooth yet hard and reptilian, almost like scales. Something like bat's wings, something he felt and knew, now, was truly real.

No trick of the eye. No illusion.

No.

His hand dropped, Valkyre too stunned to think of anything else to do. What was going on?? What... what was he...??

A million jumbled, confused thoughts ran through his brain. Pain throbbed behind his temples, though much weaker, almost nonexistent. As if somehow, this freedom, this unacknowledged release of the black, pounding darkness inside of him had... somehow...

"You are Iris."

Camael's words echoed, rebounded, tore their way through his skull like a hurricane. Valkyre winced, flinching visibly, almost raising his hands to his ears. The words hurt.

Camael paid no notice, however, and went on.

"Rather, you are an embodiment of what Iris stands for. And of what it is that he stands for."

It was a stream of words now, a stream of words buffeting him, tearing him to shreds. Valkyre felt a sudden flare of anger, of hatred he couldn't find the depths of, the answer to.

Angel, angel, it screamed in his head. He wanted to rip it- Camael, himself, everything- apart.

"Iris is the organic. He is the impossible created by the world itself, though to what purpose, is all up to the perceiver."

Valkyre stared into nothing, staring at the wall with his impossible, new vision in heat and wind and sound. Everything hurt his eyes, his senses. He wanted it all to go away, forever.

"And you... are the man-made. The creation from the sentient."

Valkyre blinked, twice, three times.

"...Wh... What?"

Camael was moving, each step pounding heavily in the ground.

He stood to Valkyre's side now, and he smiled.

"You are the impossible, created entirely from the whim of mankind. ...In a sense."

Valkyre listened. He tried his best to understand the words, to process them past the heat and the cold and the darkness that flooded up within him, boiling over.

"Your mother and father were foolish. But it was their folly that led to what it is that is happening now. ...To... what has been destined to happen."

He lifted up his head, intently. ...Mother? Father? Valkyre hadn't ever even known so much as his parents' names.

"...What...?"

Camael smiled, the image of a calm, patient teacher lecturing his pupil.

"Your father was a demon, and your mother an angel. The two were in love."

Valkyre froze, felt what saliva he had left in his mouth dry up, leaving him thirsty, parched, dehydrated all of a sudden. ...What?

"You should know, Valkyre, that from all the races in the world... None are more human than the angels and the demons. In thought, in actions, in whims. Fallen angels, after all."

Camael smiled, beginning to walk again, pacing. The silvery-brown hair fell over his face, shadowing his eyes.

"Despite the knowledge, despite the pain, despite the downright impossibility... they remained together, and attempted to have a child."

The dark, nearly black eyes glanced over at Valkyre, holding on to them.

"...And they succeeded, of course."

Valkyre blinked back, numbly.

Himself? Angel and demon? Since... his birth? Since even before?? How could it be possible...?? No, it wasn't, it couldn't...

"Your mother even survived the birth, though how that happened, I do not know."

Camael walked over until he stood in front of Valkyre, smiling placidly, looking thoughtful.

He continued, mercilessly, progressing towards the finish of a story that Valkyre, with a lurching wave of dread, realized that he did not want to know.

"...They thought it a miracle. They thought you were a blessing, a portent of a new code to live by, a world where opposite races need no longer hate themselves. ...Of course, they were wrong."

Valkyre shivered, trying to remember. A father, a mother? ...A family, parents?

The very idea was alien to him, and he could recall nothing. Nothing, but...

"They soon realized their error. I don't really know what happened, as I was not there, of course. But they recognized their mistake, and tried to remedy it.

"They bound you with a seal, particular to you, honed. They decided to seal up your demonic half, and pretend you were a normal, pure-blooded... angel."

Camael smiled, then stepped closer, leaning down, dark eyes piercing into Valkyre's, glinting in the dancing, shifting candlelight.

"Haven't you ever wondered why your wings are black?"

The candle shivered.

Camael stepped back, slightly, but kept his gaze locked on the other's.

"You can't ever hold down someone's blood. The demon's half leaked out anyways, though it was greatly restrained. And, of course, one of the first things to be affected by the bloodstream... would be your wings.

"Even though you, as of then, had your demonic side repressed, it still had an effect on the rest of you,

particularly since young age. And it stained your wings black."

Camael paused, tilting his head slightly to one side.

"And your hair too, I believe," he added. He reached forward, touching Valkyre's bangs, pulling gently at a few strands, holding them up against the light.

"There's a slight tint of violet in your hair..." he murmured, tanned, lined hand rubbing the individual strands of hair between them. He let them drop.

"Your parents were too soft-hearted to kill you. ...Selfish, too."

Camael sighed then, shaking his head.

"They were too idealistic," he said.

"And, of course, that led to their destruction."

Valkyre felt his blood, hot as it was, run cold.

No. He didn't want to know. He wanted to stop Camael right now, silence him for good. He didn't want to hear...

"Your seal broke," Camael continued, relentless.

"And that was when our lives overlapped."

Camael paused, stopping, watching Valkyre intently, unblinking, shadow still dancing wildly behind him, cast into life by the candlelight. When he continued, his words were slow, carefully-chosen. This was where his reality had interceded, and here was what was truth and tangible, what he'd experienced and seen for himself.

"I had felt an impossible aura suddenly flare up. Intrigued, I'd searched for the cause. ...I found a house, filled with death and decay. I entered, wondering what had happened.

"Inside, everything was shattered and broken. The furniture was smashed, the glass of the windows broken. There were signs of a struggle, clothing torn and thrown on the ground."

Camael stepped closer, eyes intent, viewing a scene from sometime, somewhere else. Something that Valkyre didn't want to see, didn't want to hear.

"...And there was the reek of the dead, of rot. Everywhere.

"I found your father first, lying in the hallway, mangled. His skull was smashed in. ...There was blood all over the walls."

Valkyre wanted to shout, wanted to scream. He closed his eyes, trying to fight away the voice, fight away images that were coming back to him, images that he shouldn't remember...

...That he didn't remember, not as an angel.

...But as a demon...

"Your mother was in the bedroom. Neck broken, I believe. ...She was covered in blood."

Camael's voice was hollow now, emptied of emotion.

"...And then... I found you."

Valkyre stared into the dark eyes. Into the eyes of the man he'd deemed his master, of the man who'd taken him in from a house of death, from the cold bodies of the parents that...

"Your hands were stained with their blood."

...His crime.

His sin.

Valkyre felt an empty vacuum where his heart should've been, felt nothing but cold and darkness and a bottomless drop into eternity.

He'd killed them.

His own parents... with his bare hands...

...Hands stained black-red, digging splinters of rough wood up underneath his fingernails, feeling pain, feeling blood drip from his own wounds, unable to understand what was going on...

...What was going on...

Camael nodded, emotionless.

"...The rest, of course, you know. I took you in. I returned later and buried both of your parents."

Valkyre looked up blindly. He felt no compassion, no wave of thankfulness to that last phrase.

Only empty, cold bitterness.

"...Why..."

His voice found himself again, forced its way along his windpipe, breathy and hard. His words were a whisper, hoarse and dry.

"Why... didn't you... ..kill me...?"

Camael merely smiled, eyebrows arching slightly.

"Come now, Valkyre. I knew there was more to you than simply death."

He shook his head, clearing away some thought perhaps, then continued.

"Of course, you were still a trouble. I had to deal with your demonic side before it destroyed you."

Camael stepped closer, eyes distant again, seeing something else.

"...I realized what your parents had attempted when I found the seal, crushed, under a table. I took matters into my own hands then. A seal was too deficient, carrying too high of a risk of letting out the demon again."

He paused here, then smiled.

"I think you know what happened next, Valkyre."

Valkyre stared straight ahead, watching the candle flames.

Yes.

He remembered now.

The dank, the dark, the candle. The pen lying on the table.

And cast in front of him, on the wall...

...His wings. His two pairs of impossible wings.

Impossible...

Camael stepped to the wooden table, picking up the pen, observing it calmly under candlelight.

"The glyphs carved from the magic I learned to wield are quite powerful. Even for a mere human to attempt to control. And were quite effective as a seal, when you knew what you were doing. ...It was a sufficient way to lock away the demonic blood, though I knew it would never last forever."

Camael dropped the pen gently onto the table again, stepping back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"So. Now you know."

Valkyre stared ahead blindly.

No, he didn't know. He didn't know a goddamned thing.

He wanted to shout a million questions, wanted to deny anything and everything that Camael had just told him. He wanted to burn away, catch fire from that tiny candle and dance like his shadow.

He wanted to curl up and will everything else away, wanted to fade into shadow and emptiness.

No, he didn't know a thing.

Hadn't.

And his parents had been killed by his hand and he remembered the blood, but oh he couldn't remember a single happy moment or what his mother's face looked like, or the laugh of his father's, and he didn't remember his wings, his wings...

And yet...

He did.

He remembered.

He remembered arms around him, warm and soft. He remembered light and heat and pretty violet eyes smiling down at him, though he could remember nothing more of the face.

He remembered a shadow, arms crossed, in the far corner of the room.

Of pale hands that never touched him, though they longed to.
Of dark red eyes hidden behind dark hair all swathed in dark clothing, silent, elegant.
He remembered tears and screaming and crying and weeping and shouting.
He remembered laughter, faint and blurred like an old, grainy sepia photograph out of focus, fading away.
He remembered dark gray curtains. Polished wood smelling of sweet somethings he couldn't place.
Clean white dishes bordered in blue and decorated with small, violet flowers. His father had loved his mother's violet eyes...
He remembered the black bubbling darkness inside of him, of startled red eyes and white and thin, nimble fingers...
...And then blood.
Dark, black-red blood, everywhere.
Splashing, sticking between his fingers, pooling underneath his nails...
And then...
...Darkness.
Splinters.
Shapeless forms in the room. Ripped clothing. Stained blood roses, blossoming from the mangled cloth.
Pain.
Fear.
Tears, running hot down his cheeks...
...Or had that only been blood?
And then, of course...
...Camael.
'Come with me.'
The hand, extended to him. The low, quiet voice, those dark eyes...
'Don't look at me like that. I'm not your guardian. ...But I'm going to have to take care of you.'
And then... more darkness... and silence.
Valkyre blinked, staring back emptily at Camael.
Something started to trickle down his cheek, something warm and hot.
...It must've been blood.
He heard Camael laugh, a short, low sound, more a chuckle than an actual laugh. The other leaned closer, reached out a rough, work-hardened hand. It brushed his cheeks, came away moist.
"There we are," he heard Camael whisper, leaning so closely now that he could feel the other's breath, the candlelight flickering between them, every hardened, aged line on the other's face in clear focus.
Valkyre smelled blood, smelled warmth and heat.
He wanted to kill something, everything. Wanted everything to go away. Die.
"Look, Valkyre."
Camael's fingers pulled back from his skin, not touching but still levitating just above.
"Can you see yourself, Valkyre?" Again, that hint of laughter in his voice.
Valkyre stared into Camael's eyes, dark like obsidian.
And he saw his own reflected eyes.
...They were blood-red, crimson, pupils tiny and dilated, hard like smoothed cores of ruby, burning.
Demon eyes.
"You're the demon," Camael whispered, dark eyes narrowed, laughing.
"Welcome back."

AN: Thank you all for your patience, and I'm sorry this took so long. ...I am. I was just... so... busy... >>;
Anyway, there. Big chappie of explanation-eded-ness. Yolui~! 8D

Man, what I notice to be the problem now is that I have nothing to call Valkyre. I used to refer to him as 'the angel' and I even managed to work around Eire, but now, he's not technically just an angel anymore so I can't even use that to help me. XD

But, whatever. I'll have to figure something out. (Though anything you guys (or just you, Deffy XDDD) can offer will help! ...Greatly!)

I'll try to bring out plenty more chappies, but I can't guarantee it because things are slowing down again. I need something more interesting to keep me going. :<

So, sorreh.

Oh~! And, btw, we've hit chapter 50, darlin's. :DDDDD

Enjoy, and I'll try to grind out some more chappies soon as possible~

Luv ya all duckies~

51 - Simple

Iris

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Valkyre's hand acted like it had a will of its own. It snapped around, movement so fast his own eyes shouldn't have been able to follow it, couldn't, and yet they did...

His fingernails, which seemed longer than the last time he'd checked, all pointed towards Camael's laughing face and the dark eyes, wanting to rip out those eyes, tear away that vision, shred the tough, leathery skin beneath his nails, feel the blood and the pain and the heat.

It was unbelievably fast. Valkyre felt a surge of power rise up from somewhere deep down that he couldn't locate, something new and pulsing flaring up from an abysmal place down inside, sheathed in ice and dark fog.

However fast it was, though, it wasn't fast enough.

Camael jerked back, one arm easily snapping out and catching Valkyre's rampant hand at the wrist, his strong, hard fingers clenching so tightly that Valkyre felt like the bones were being crushed. His earlier wound from the fight with Asher burned hotly, blood feeling like it was bubbling up to the surface of the cut.

The touch sent sizzles of electricity through Valkyre's veins. It had hurt, in a way that shocked him down to his heart, sent his blood pounding, rushing along his veins.

He snarled, no longer in control of his body, lashing out with his free hand. The table was knocked over in the movement, candle falling slowly, slowly.

Valkyre's clenched fist met an open palm, Camael catching his curled fingers cleanly with his hand. Another flash of pain.

Valkyre wanted to rip him apart, wanted to rip apart whatever it was that was touching him and whatever it was that hurt him so. His wings flared, snapping open in the closed space, stirring up a wind. The candle sizzled out on the ground, leaving them in darkness.

...In a darkness that Valkyre had no trouble seeing in.

He could make out Camael's form, could see his face, the line of his nose, his dark, narrowed eyes.

Valkyre hissed, tried to strike out with a wing. It hurt his back, ripping at soft, tender flesh, but he didn't care.

Get away.

Get the angel away.

Camael dodged, then twisted around Valkyre's arms, swinging him around, slamming him down onto the ground, all in one liquid, smooth motion that proved he hadn't lost any of his vigor over the years.

Valkyre gasped sharply, feeling a knee dig into the center of his back, right between the demonic wings that ground against his insides, sharp and painful and still leaking blood.

"I think we could stand for a bit more control, Valkyre."

Camael's voice pounded into his skull. Valkyre snarled, trying to twist around, but the other grabbed his arms, working them behind his back, thoroughly pinning him in place. The ground was rough but soft, made of dirt, and clung to Valkyre's cheek.

"Relax."

Valkyre let his head drop onto the cold ground. He tried to breathe, tried to concentrate only on the air

pumping in and out of his lungs. Tried to ignore the pounding in his mind, or the echoing sound of his own voice, or the million tiny sensations he felt now, that he'd never felt before.

"Now."

The grip on his hands loosened somewhat, knee lightening.

"Try to keep yourself in control. Otherwise, you'll just go berserk like last time, and it may hurt more. Quite a lot more, to be honest."

Valkyre stilled his heart, stilled his breath. He wanted dead silence, but even the quiet insisted on having a voice. The air continued to brush over his face, light and stuffy, yet moving nonetheless in a pattern that he could almost track now. It whispered in his ear, spinning out a tale on fabric softer than silk. He felt Camael pull away his knee, felt the fingers only loosely curled around his wrists, just in case. He didn't try to get up.

The earlier flash of action, of fury and hatred, had vanished, leaving him confused, lost, and empty. He didn't know where the emotions had come from, flooding throughout him in an instant, gone in the next. He closed his eyes, breathing, thinking of nothing else.

But there was still the pain, still the sharp stinging where Camael's fingers touched his bare skin, able to imagine where the contact was, a rough fingernail just brushing against a coil of a snake twined around his wrist.

"...An... gel."

"...Hm?"

Valkyre swallowed, hard, feeling the dryness travel slowly down his throat. He tried again, attempting to make his voice sound regular again, not some bestial, raspy thing ripping out from between his lips.

"You're... A-Angel."

"Ah."

Camael sighed, then, rather suddenly, let go of Valkyre. The other didn't respond at first, merely resting on the ground, still trying to calm down his heart. He heard Camael step back, listening to the clothing rustle.

Slowly, meticulously, Valkyre pushed himself up on his arms, sitting back. He winced, feeling his wings moving, relocating to fit his new posture. The feathers of his other, dark angel wings sighed into the dirt, getting stained. Valkyre paid them no heed.

"So you noticed."

Valkyre swallowed again, on nothing. He nodded.

Camael was an angel.

Of course, that was impossible.

Camael was- had been- a human.

When Valkyre had been taken in, it'd been by human hands, to a human voice.

He'd never doubted that Camael understood much more than any human should've, but he had been a complete, full-blooded, simple human.

...And yet...

Earlier, he'd seen wings.

And now, he felt angel...

"...Impossible?"

Valkyre glanced up, blinking. Camael had read his mind, and he smiled, seeing that he'd been right.

"Of course not. Not when you've dedicated your life to the arcane and the impossible."

"...H-How?"

Camael sighed, again the teacher lecturing the pupil.

"You know I use the sigils to amplify the weak, tiny amount of power humans are given, right?"

Valkyre nodded wordlessly.

Camael turned then, facing away from Valkyre. The other watched as Camael raised a hand, doing something to his front shirt. The laced string slid out, and Camael shrugged the shirt down over his shoulders.

Valkyre stopped, staring.

"You see now? With a bit of understanding, with the right tools available... You can do unimaginable things."

Angel wings.

In sigils. In black ink, scrawled over Camael's back. Flaring, elegant, curving angel wings, each feather meticulously detailed in a way Valkyre haven't even believed was possible. They arched all the way up to the tops of the shoulders, then angled back, vanishing somewhere far down Camael's backside. The edges were marked clearly with designs and patterns Valkyre had never seen before, detailed swirls and sharp angles that he knew held something potent, something archaic and potent, but of exactly what, he didn't know.

Even in the dark, they were clear and crisp-edged, even on the tanned, scarred skin.

The secret to becoming an angel.

No...

"...How did... you...?"

Camael shrugged the shirt back over his shoulders, hiding the black-lined angel wings burned into his dark, tan skin. He nodded lightly, head tilted to one side.

"As you've seen, Valkyre. Nothing is impossible. And there's really not so much more to it."

A pause, the words fading quickly into the sluggish, damp air.

"However..."

He took a step closer, dark eyes carefully watching Valkyre, running along his slumped silhouette, straining to make him out in the near-complete black. He began to walk, starting a slow circle around Valkyre. Camael's eyes lingered on the demonic wings that pulsated faintly, still drying out in their first taste of bitter air, shifting slightly with Valkyre's each slow breath. Blood pulsed, rushed, danced maddeningly underneath his skin.

"I've answered all of your questions, Valkyre. Perhaps it's time you answered mine."

Answered all of his questions?? Valkyre's thoughts were far from answered. He felt like a doll trapped in a maze, surrounded by the spun-out threads of endless questions and demands he couldn't understand, that no one would explain to him. His world was ripped apart, shattered. Utterly destroyed.

Nothing at all had been answered.

He still wanted to know.

And he still didn't know anything.

"I've only managed to catch up to you now, Valkyre. I know, distantly, how things have been going, but..."

Valkyre blinked, looking up sharply. "...Distantly?" he echoed, voice almost lost to the silence.

Camael paused, then smiled.

"Of course. I would never have simply turned you out on your own. You're too valuable to me. So... I had someone keep in touch. Loosely."

Valkyre stopped, frozen in his thoughts. Keeping track of him? All the time, ever since he left Camael... He ran through a list of the people he'd met throughout his life, snatching up loose cords then throwing them down again. How? Who?

"I have to admit though, I'm rather surprised you accepted her proposal to the practice so easily in the first place."

"Maeve."

The word slipped out of Valkyre's mouth the same instant the thought formed itself coherently in his

mind, shaped itself into a name and a face.

At the same time, the threads tied themselves together, forming an unbroken circle.

Maeve could never have given him money anyways, if his bloodline was... what Camael had said it to be. What he'd shown him now to be. ...She must've known.

So simple, so subtle.

What a fool he had been, never seeing it.

How oblivious he'd been to himself.

Slowly, Valkyre found himself scrolling through all of the other recent new acquaintances he'd met. How many others knew, had known all along?? Asher. Raguel, surely. Corryn, perhaps...?

His sudden list narrowed to one, ground to a halt.

...Iris?

Valkyre glanced up at a movement from Camael, his train of thought broken.

"Wait. I don't understand."

Camael's eyebrows arched up slightly.

"Oh?"

Valkyre paused, then shook his head, slowly.

"Why did you... send me away in the first place, if you only wanted to find me again? What are you doing this for?"

Valkyre hesitated, swallowing hard on nothing but his own dry, thick tongue stuck in his mouth.

"...What do I mean to you?"

Camael merely smiled, sighing empathetically.

"Ah, you're finally catching up. Very nice, Valkyre."

He walked closer to the other, close enough so Valkyre almost backed away, feeling the shift in the air like the current of water underneath his fingertips. He'd never felt a sensation like this before, not from such of a slow, calm movement.

"Do you think it is just coincidence?? Hm?"

Valkyre blinked, uncomprehending.

"You are born, the inorganic creation of a whimsical love between two mortals. And at the same time, he... Iris. Iris is born as well, the organic singularity of every blood, formed by powers so much farther evolved than we can ever entertain. Perhaps beings that have never evolved at all. Does that not seem like something more than mere coincidence to you? I hope I haven't raised you to be the kind of person who maintains such of a nihilistic view."

Organic singularity? Iris, birthed by... something other than a mere mortal? ...By something other than even man and their machines??

"This is destiny, Valkyre. You are playing the role assigned to you. You are strictly following the path paved out before you, by something no mortal, no soul, no event now or ever can ever change. This is destiny."

Camael continued, relentless, unstoppable.

"Your path led you to Iris, of course. I knew it would, and I was right. The two of you are kindred like no other, after all."

A tinge of laughter at the final statement. Valkyre stared back at Camael, blindly. He could see nothing, nothing but the image of himself, something otherworldly, something alone. ...And somewhere, the quiet, calm shades of gray, of Iris... A soft, gentle light...

And yet...

Camael.

He had known all along.

And in the end...

"Then... you..."

No. No master, no guardian, no teacher.

Just the plastic mannequin doll of an angel.

"You're... just after Iris."

Just like everyone else.

Camael shook his head.

"No, Valkyre. You're too belittling of yourself."

He smiled, sympathetically, but Valkyre no longer felt any warmth. Only a fake expression of fatherliness, of the deep, impassable trap Camael had played him into, sinking him lower and lower with each word, without hope of escape.

"You have led me to Iris, no doubt. But don't forget that you are like Iris yourself. And in the fate written out for that... boy, you will play a role as well. You are significant, of your own."

Valkyre stopped, feeling like what was left of him had been torn apart. What had been left of the angel shredded, dirtied like his feathers sinking into the moist soil, black and dull.

Like all there was left was a demon, vibrant, sharp, ready to begin a new life by tearing apart the pain and hatred and abandonment, ripping apart the past, forgetting everything.

A part of him wanted to do that.

Wanted to be left behind, wanted to be ignored.

Wanted nothing.

In the end, he was nothing...

Asher.

A sudden feeling from deep down inside, some other sense he hadn't known about before. Not the feeling of an aura, or smell or hearing. But he knew. Like a blinking bat of the eye, and suddenly a new shape had come into focus in front of your vision, plain as day.

Valkyre's head rose, and he listened. Camael was silent as well, though he continued to watch Valkyre.

A quick glance over.

"...It's... Asher."

Footsteps sounded, just ever-so-slightly. They were approaching, kept to almost silent, but easily detectable to Valkyre's ears.

Sure enough, it was the vampire. The door opened at the top of the stairs to the basement, and light flooded down, blinding for an instant.

Camael was already making his way over in long, sure strides, stopping to stand at the bottom of the staircase, bathed in light.

"Well?"

Asher's silhouette fell over the sharp angled black and brown of shadows and wooden planks. He took a few steps down, glancing around cautiously. His gaze froze on Valkyre, on the black, demonic wings which shivered and trembled in the first taste of real light. The vampire's eyes widened in utter shock, tiny black pupils narrowing to mere specks.

Valkyre found some kind of unknown happy revelation, realizing that he could see the other's eye pupils this clearly from such of a distance. At the same time, he had the distinctive feeling of being somewhat like an animal in a display.

He held the other's startled gaze evenly, eyes carefully reading the sigils carved meticulously along either side of the heavy slash drawn over the vampire's brow. Immunity. Repress fire.

Camael shifted his footing, drawing both of their attentions back.

"Well?" he repeated, just the slightest hint of agitation to his tone.

Asher paused, glancing back now, and Valkyre could see by the way his eyebrows were drawn down and the way he stood that he did not want to speak right now.

The vampire shook his head.

Camael blinked, seeming slightly startled.

"No? Not at all??"

Asher paused, then nodded.

"He's not here," he muttered, low under his throat. "Nowhere close."

Camael stopped, gaze dropping, obviously contemplating something. After the longest stretch of silence, he merely dismissed Asher with a wave of his hand, then began to make his way back over to Valkyre.

His dark eyes were fathomless, unreadable.

His booted feet passed by the extinguished candle, lying in the dirt.

And in that instant, Valkyre realized that he no longer viewed Camael as his master, or as a guardian or teacher of any sort. Not any more.

Because now, he knew exactly what it was that Camael wanted.

"It seems I still have another question you need to answer for me, Valkyre."

Valkyre stared straight ahead, silent. He already knew what it was.

How simple things were in the end.

Camael's eyes were narrowed and hard. He hadn't expected this to happen. His plan had been spoiled.

"...Where is Iris, Valkyre?"

+--

AN: Auuuuuuuuugh.

I hate talking. I suck at dialogue.

Anyways, another chapter up! More is explained! (Is it?)

Soon, we'll be off outta this boring place. And boring stuffy old Camael. :p

'Kay hunnies?

Thanks again to all who comment, you've really kept me going!! ::bows::

52 - Longevity

Iris

+--

He should've known.

All along, and in the end, things were just so simple. So selfish, the world was. And he was no exception.

Valkyre held Camael's hard, sharp gaze.

"I don't know," he replied, voice even, unfaltering.

Camael blinked, once, twice, judging him, dark eyes cold and hard. Like those of a stranger, of someone he held no affinity to. Yes, that was right.

Now, they were more like enemies, like rivals.

Camael shook his head, lips stretching into a smile.

"Don't lie to me, Valkyre."

He laughed, standing back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You know. Maybe you don't even realize it now, but you know it, deep down. I know you do. You've known since before you were born. This is what you were created for, you know."

Valkyre wanted to laugh as well, wanted to scoff and snarl and throw Camael's words in his face.

Destiny?

This wasn't destiny. This was just chance, just the way things unfolded. This was life, this was reality.

Valkyre didn't believe in destiny.

Camael shook his head, as if predicting Valkyre's thoughts, cutting them off.

"Valkyre, you can't stop what's already been set in motion. Even Iris knows this. It's the beginning of the end, and you're a prime player in the show. That's why you have to stay with Iris, why you want to."

Camael paused, glancing back towards the doorway out.

"You should be going soon, then," he announced, rather abruptly.

Valkyre blinked back, dumbly.

"Your equipment is upstairs."

Camael began to walk away, but slow, methodically. He bent, then picked something up off the ground.

Valkyre's eyes picked out the object before Camael had even fully closed his fingers around it.

The pen.

Camael held it out like a knife blade, or a poisoned thing. Valkyre took it, held it in his hand, feeling the ivory-smooth surface sing underneath his fingertips like it never had before. This pen was more than just a device to draw on a surface with; this thing was alive, pulsating, beating. There were things it wanted, things it demanded of him.

Valkyre blinked, pulled his eyes away.

"Why?"

Camael stared back, unperturbed.

"Why what?"

"You're letting me go so easily," Valkyre stated, holding his gaze, searching.

Camael smiled, ruefully, tilting his head slightly to the side.

"It wasn't like I was ever keeping you prisoner, Valkyre. I was merely the tool to reveal you to yourself."

"Now everything is set in motion, and it's time for you to go. I also suggest that you make haste."
Valkyre was caught gazing into the other's eyes now, searching for the truth. Camael was hiding things from him, he knew.

But now he did know exactly why Camael was sending him off.

He wanted to get to Iris. And to achieve his ends, he would use Valkyre as the tool. He'd been doing so since the beginning. He'd known all along, of course. Camael had never been the kind of person to give such acts of generosity without wanting something back in requisite.

"I have one more question, Camael."

Valkyre halted at his own words, the ringing of the name used so blatantly seeming improper, even whispered softly in this black nothingness of dirt and wood and shadow.

"Yes?"

Valkyre stared back unblinkingly. This was not his master; the name no longer held any power over him.

"What is Iris for? To you."

Camael paused, then he smiled.

It was a smile that Valkyre hated instantly, because in that second, all of the false images and memories and elevated forms of Camael were stripped away, leaving the ugly truth at the core.

When he responded, his voice was different, altered. The truth behind the layers and the silence and the calm detachment.

"Can you ever understand, Valkyre? What it's like, being a human?"

"Of course, you might. Now."

Valkyre blinked, frowning.

"What?"

"Don't you realize what is happening? I told you to hurry, because you might not survive much longer. Opposite bloods will still clash, even if you managed to be born, and eventually, it'll destroy you."

Valkyre stared blankly ahead.

He could feel it.

He could feel the fire in his veins, feel the heat building up deep down, even though his skin was cold to the touch. That would be due to the demon's blood.

His sentence was already written out, dictated.

Like Corryn, he was going to die, and he knew it.

Like Iris.

"How does it feel?" Camael's face, close to his, sneering slightly.

"Knowing what it's like, being a petty mortal? Jealous of angels now, Valkyre? Of all the other races with such longevity that we could only dream of, knowing we'd die before they even realize we're gone, knowing we're just a blink of the eye to them."

Valkyre stared past Camael's shoulder, staring at darkness clearly defined for him in shadows and textures and crumbling earth.

Maybe he should've felt something. Maybe there should have been some reaction, like sadness or anger or overwhelming despair. But there wasn't.

Instead, he only felt an emptiness.

"This is how I've felt, Valkyre. A mere mortal, a mere human, walking among angels and demons and vampires. Like an ugly moth next to unaging, unchanging, beautiful, perfect immortals. Next to gods."

Valkyre looked into Camael's dark eyes, and he saw the desperation, saw the built-up contempt and hidden anguish. Hatred had broken him, in the end. Envy.

"So you found the easy way out."

Valkyre's words were harsh in the darkness that was his newfound light. Camael flinched, face hardening, drawing back.

"No," he said, shaking his head.

"The easy way out is death, is acceptance. What I'm doing is not that. Not at all. I've always been trying, but whatever I did, it was to no avail. Even now, even after completing an age-old experiment of mine, and even altering my own blood, even giving myself wings"

Camael was shaking his head.

"That was not what I wanted. I don't want more power than I need. I don't want these fake wings."

"Then the longevity."

Valkyre found himself surprisingly distant, indifferent to it all.

Something had altered the way he thought, had altered the way he digested information and processed it through. He accepted the news calmly now, and knew which responses were required of him to achieve what he wanted.

And he could read Camael, so easily.

So simple, the world seemed to be.

Camael, though, was shaking his head, a smile on his lips.

"No," he laughed, "no."

He stepped back, spread out his arms.

"Not longevity, Valkyre. Immortality."

The crossbreed stared back emptily, showing no surprise.

"And that's what you want Iris for."

Camael paused, then nodded.

"Catching on quickly."

Valkyre felt a smile on his lips.

Slowly, carefully, he rose, joints aching slightly, back sore. But he rose easily, and his wings supported him, a weight he didn't mind carrying. He glanced back, staring at the blood-stained demon wings rise and fall slowly with his breathing, gazing at the area where his skin had rent and let through the skin-sealed bone of his wing, hard and solid as stone.

He turned back to Camael now, and the wings folded inwards to him. To his surprise, Camael almost seemed to shrink slightly, almost flinch. As if he was afraid.

His angel wings, distant, furred themselves around him. Valkyre still had now idea how exactly the two pairs managed to both come from his tiny body, managed to remain supported by him, but it was irrelevant now.

He lifted his gaze, stared at the man he once regarded as his former master.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "I think I've known all along."

+--

AN: Ahh, more cheesy drama-y stuff. So sorry.

Well, things are still going rather sluggishly, and to be honest, I don't really have the next few chapters tamped down real well, but I figure I can work them out as I go along. I always do, anyways.

...Somehow. >>;

Thanks for reading, see ya all next~

53 - Deal

Iris

+--

Valkyre stepped out into the dim light of afternoon which was bright as midday to his dilated, dark-adjusted eyes. He found himself in a small alcove-like back room from the chapel, the windows plain and frosted, the furniture scarce.

To his right, Asher leaned back against the wall with his arms crossed, face hidden behind his dark, tangled hair.

Valkyre glanced over, caught the pale yellow eyes through the shifting black strands. He saw the other's gaze linger, running over the curved, arched wings that rose from his back, sweeping up and then pulled back down, folded close to his body to fit through the doorway.

Asher's face flushed slightly as he noticed that his interest had not gone unnoticed, and turned away, chin to chest. The vampire stared ahead at nothing for a while, but then eventually glanced over at Valkyre again.

When he spoke, his voice was harsh and rough, so soft it was almost audible.

"Your parents."

The vampire blinked rapidly, looking away, making himself seem distant, unaffected.

"They're not fools. They're not."

Valkyre took a step forward, past the other. The membranes of his demon wings brushed against each other, the feathers of his angel wings rustling. It was a sound he couldn't quite get used to.

He blinked, eyes refocusing.

Maybe he should've shown some compassion, but he felt drained of all emotion, of anything but apathy and emptiness. He didn't really care anymore, not about Camael, not about Asher, not about any other enemy or former friend out there.

Back still turned, he spoke.

"What was the deal?"

The crossbreed glanced over his shoulder, saw Asher look up, confused. The black marks over his face seemed as if to burn, bright and sharp on his pale skin, unable to be covered up by the dark inky hair.

Valkyre's voice held no intonation, utterly flat.

"The price. Camael sealed your wounds. What does he ask for in return?"

Asher's pale eyes dropped, staring down listlessly at the floorboards.

He didn't respond.

Valkyre ignored him. The question was a statement, deep down, and it was a harsh and cruel one. The crossbreed no longer cared.

He found his equipment lying on a small mattress stacked into a corner that no one obviously inhabited. He pulled on his shirt, feeling the fabric slide on and through and inside his wings at the base, where the solidarity of the demon wings remained yet still turned astral, mist-like. It was two sensations at once, nowhere near the subtle fading of his regular angel wings. He paid it no heed, slipping on his jacket, systematically checking his pockets.

Valkyre paused, glancing down at the objects still remaining on the dirty white mattress, absentmindedly fingering the bandages bound tight around his forearm. He paused, a fingernail flicking underneath the

corner of a strip of fabric. The crossbreed glanced down at his arm, at the browned, dried blood. Without really seeming to think about it, Valkyre dug a finger, two, then eventually three under the loosening strip, pulling it towards him. The bandages unraveled, and he unwound the remainder of the cloth.

Underneath, his skin showed, dusted with dried flakes of blood and crumbly smears, perfectly fine. Just the faintest trace of a light line down along where the gaping wound had been.

Valkyre regarded it quietly, then tore off the remainder of the bandages, letting them scatter in coils and folds on the floorboards.

He bent down to the items still left out on the mattress, picking through what he would be using and what he probably would not. He strapped a blade tucked away in its sheath back onto the side of his boot, tucked another knife into his belt. Maybe he'd need them, maybe he wouldn't.

The crossbreed smoothed out the sheet, then stopped. He reached over, picking up his gloves. He lifted them up, feeling the familiar weight in his hand, then stopped.

Underneath, black on dusty white, his seal sat nestled comfortably in the folds of the mattress's loose sheets, giving away nothing that glanced off its black, polished surface. The golden threads spun around it glistened as if wet, forming a watery, platinum cage.

Valkyre stared at the seal for quite of a while, as he slowly pulled on his gloves and felt the familiar leather creak slightly between his fingers.

The new, particularly rational and apathetic part of his mind, which now quite clearly dominated his actions and thoughts, knew the object was worthless to him now. No seal will ever rid a creature of their blood, or forestall their end.

He knew this.

But something old, something faintly familiar and warm and alive fought it, insisted on being heard. Memories were tied to this little piece of imbued stone, symbology and meaning and connection to another past, another life.

After a pause that seemed to last forever, Valkyre leaned over, picked up the seal, and tucked it into an inner pocket of his jacket. He heard it clack lightly against the black of the pen.

"He told me to die."

The crossbreed glanced over his shoulder at the vampire, wordless, face expressionless.

Asher ignored his blank gaze, holding the dark red eyes clearly, sharp and focused and alive.

Something, somewhere, deep down in a hidden cavern, throbbed, faintly.

"I wanted him to give me the time and the strength to complete my last wish. He gave that to me, but in return, he made me swear that I would willingly die when I was done."

Asher's expression was unflinching, mirroring Valkyre's with his cold emptiness, but his eyes were bright, asking of something, telling another, silent story.

"I'm not afraid of dying," he stated, voice soft, low.

"And I don't care what you think about me. This was my choice."

Valkyre turned away, stepped to the door that led out into the rest of the church. He didn't look back.

"I'll kill you," he said, "If you want me to. When you're done."

And then he'd opened the door and stepped through, and then he was gone, through the heavy wooden gates of the church and out into the deserted city and among the buildings, and then he had left the town behind, everything blurring to nothingness around him, the only focus in front, somewhere.

Up ahead, the endless, broad stretch of the wastelands extended its blurred horizon as far as the eye could see.

Valkyre knew.

He couldn't, didn't bother to attempt to pinpoint exactly how, or why, but he knew.

Out there, somewhere, was Iris.

And Rheis, and Corryn, and Raguel. They would all follow as well. As would Asher, and Camael. Valkyre lifted his wings, flaring them out to either side, both pairs, feeling the wind whip around him, creating eddies and miniature twisters of the dust and the air. The wings stretched, relishing in the newfound freedom, leather creaking and joints shifting in new ways he hadn't felt before, angel wings soft, rustling quietly, hushed. The calm presence that still held for him his last link to who he used to be. He beat his wings, first the demon and then the angel, once, twice, three times, feeling the wind whip by his face, feeling everything else shrinking away and the sun warming his skin and his hair swirling up around him, and by then, he was up in the air, and he was flying.

+--

AN: Rawr. Asher is cute. :3

Now, uh, I think you guys'll have to excuse me for a while. I've no idea what should happen next, to be honest. o_o;;

But, but, I should still be able to get something up sometime. I promise.

Thank you all who read, and a (belated) happy holidays too~

54 - Dual

Iris

+--

His past.

Valkyre blinked slowly, eyes burning faintly from the dust and the heat and the brightness. Ahead, the endless desert of stone. Here, even pebbles were hard to find. His boots ground against the relentless rock as he stepped over them, layers pooling out of nowhere back into nowhere, shapeless, edges crumbly. The heat sizzled around him, and a bead of sweat dripped down to his chin.

Flying had been nothing more than a brief dream. Hed felt power up in the air, riding thermals in a way hed never managed to as an angel, feeling the muscles and the tendons in both sets of wings stretch and relax and work jointly in a way hed never imagined they couldve. He was fast, faster than before, and there was something to the gusty sigh his demonic wings made that he liked, and hed eaten up the miles beneath him in a flash, senseless, but it was never quite to last.

His back had begun bleeding, and the pain had come back. His head had pounded with a deep, heavy ache, and his fingers were trembling. The sun had burned at his wings as if setting them afire.

All reminders that he was going to die, that his body was in the end not nearly as strong as hed thought it would be. Wasted thoughts of the future and of living out to some fake pretense of longevity.

So hed been forced to land, and now the once-effortless miles towered before him, a barrier between his sad, conflicted little body and the jagged, rising chain of mountains far to the horizon, barely distinguishable through the heat waves.

Family.

The crossbreed lifted his head, gazing outwards at the far away, impossibly distant smear of black that marked the northern mountain range, nameless.

He didnt need a family. He didnt need a past.

He didnt need these memories.

Valkyres steps were loud in the silence, but even sound was swallowed up by the sweltering heat and raging eternity. There was nothing to prove that he existed, nothing to show that he was still on this world, in this life, playing his part in his story.

He couldve been nothing. He couldve been a speck of dust blown away into the black abyss of eternity and space and endless stars and fiery dying novas.

There could be no such thing- no such person- as Iris.

And maybe it could all just be a dream, and maybe this pain just wasnt real.

A small, tiny part of him, somewhere, still dumbly, stubbornly clung to this ideal.

That he wasnt some hybrid freak created by foolish whimsical near-immortal mortals, that he wasnt something that was going to die, that he was just the black-winged angel bounty hunter from so so long ago searching for a way to survive, Maeve only a familiar face and not a traitor and Camael nothing more than a blur of memories and no one- almost no one- else worth remembering, and every other goddamned memory just blank and black and empty.

He wanted to go somewhere, before all of this, back when what he understood and what he cared to know and what he was was still all under his control.

Before this huge mess with the labs and with impossible things and with Camael and angels and

demons and vampires and blood.

Before this dark black thing had pushed itself up inside of him and curled his fingers for him and twisted its way down every vein and artery in his body, this thing which cultivated its black, ripping wings from his back and shattered his rational thought and mind and world and threw him, tiny, insignificant Valkyre, into oblivion.

Back before Iris.

Valkyre- the new Valkyre, the emptiness and the cold and the flawless precision and the silence and the demon- paused, lifting his head slightly.

Iris.

No, there was a whole new set of memories.

There was confusion and pain and a whole new world and a cool hand and softness and empty eyes and, somewhere, deep down, an infinite sadness. There was a birth of knowledge and death and life and reason and all of it beyond his grasp.

There was the tattoos and the pen and the black ink and the blood and all of the things he felt beneath. There was eternity in a shard of broken glass, breathed out in a sigh.

Valkyre lifted his gaze from the ground, staring at the black line of mountain so distant.

He didnt know what to make of his memories of Iris. Everything thatd happened with the boy had been a paradox of the good and the bad, of things he wanted and things he never wanted to even so much as recall in a dream.

But there was a person in those memories, somebody he still wanted- needed- to find.

Valkyre the demon reasoned it was optional, a task to possibly complete, an obstacle in his course.

Valkyre the angel no longer had enough voice to say, to fully gather his thoughts.

But Iris was out there, and he was heading for him, and that was all there was to it.

As for the other memories, the newly resurfaced ones of violet eyes and black shadows and splinters, he could do without.

Valkyre didnt want to think of it, didnt want to recall the scenes and the people and the emotions connected with him.

The demon had no use for love or warmth or happiness or sorrow. Emotions of the past were nothing.

His mothers face, blurry but for those endless violet eyes he mirrored but no longer His fathers dark hair and pale complexion and silence and resign The small rooms, the hallway, the bedroom The quilts and pillows and curtains and rugs and scenic, long-gone landscapes painted and framed on the walls The voices filling the rooms, the soft murmuring and harsh shouting and sweet, melodic laughter and light, wavery singing and smooth, silky voices and backgrounded undertones and whispers

Those memories were a blur and disconnected, a childs mind remembering the most meaningless of things. A favorite toy, a torn corner of wallpaper, the city streets of somewhere distant, clogged and dirty, skyscrapers teetering on their solid four walls.

Those were all broken up images like a shattered mirror.

Underneath, all he could recall clearly, like the black backing made of ebony wood, was the end of that life.

All he could see enough to claim his own were the memories he wanted the least.

Blood stains and shouting and shattering. The clatter of kitchenware and ripped clothing and frantic footsteps and slamming doors. Screaming.

He didnt remember the fighting. He remembered the blood splattered along the hallways though, and the crumpled black form lying down against the wall. He remembered broken wood and his mothers violet eyes opened wide that meant nothing to him in that instant.

He didnt want to remember, but he did.

Valkyre paused again, blinking, shaking his head slightly. The sun beat down on him, heat soaking up in

his black hair and clothing and wings, bringing him back to his current time and reality and split second of being. There was hardly a headache now, just the faintest, distant feeling of throbbing that couldve simply been mistaken for the blood still pumping through his mind, of his heart still furiously working. The crossbreed glanced down at the ground, where there wasnt even enough of a crack for insects to find a holding. He let a weak, stifled breeze blow hot air over his face, then he quickly flicked out a blade from his side.

Valkyre held up the small, honed-smooth slice of steel, tilting it until he could catch his reflection. Through the blue-gray of the blade, his eyes seemed at first colorless, dark as midnight, but then eventually resigned themselves to violet.

He blinked, but they remained the same, staring back at him.

Valkyre snapped the blade away, listening to the metal slide against the sheath. One of the few comforting sounds he heard anymore.

His past was done. Itd been there all along, and it would not affect him. He wouldnt let it.

Valkyre began to walk again, focusing his gaze on the black smear so far ahead.

There was the present now, and there was the future.

There was Iris, and there was little else.

And if there was to be an ounce of reassurance drawn from the fact that he still maintained the eyes of his mother, if he still remembered everything of who he was and maintained clear realization of who he had become So be it.

He wasnt Valkyre the angel or Valkyre the demon.

He was both.

+--

AN: Ahh, a complete chapter of senseless ramblings. Heh.

Well, hope you guys like whatever there is to give. Im still kinda struggling to come up with something decent to happen next, but I promise to keep on going because, well, itd be just dumb to stop when Im so far. :)

Thank you all~

55 - Goodbye

?Iris

+--

A spider skittered along on the flat surface of stone, zigzagging between light and shade cast by the overhang of rock.

Valkyre watched its movements, face expressionless. The crossbreed was reclining in the shadow of a jagged slab of stone thrown over several others, forming something akin to a cave, though shallow and artificial. His wings rested behind him, folded up, soft dark feathers and sharp black bone brushing against the stone roof and slabs of rock.

In front of him, the endless passage of the wastelands stretched out to either end, a vast expanse of stone that he'd somehow crossed, a black speck with no regard to day or night or heat or cold.

That he'd made the journey was no surprise; Valkyre hadn't expected to die like a dog out there, had known that he wouldn't. Not while he still had a reason to live.

With a sigh, the crossbreed glanced upward.

Corryn's black-ringed golden eyes stared back, the other's chipped fingernails scrabbling at the sheer rock above, sun burning through his dark hair, showing the tips to be dark brown.

When he spoke, his voice was low and calm, with the slightest lilt as if he found something innately funny.

"I've been waiting for quite a while, angel."

The other swung down nimbly, swift hands finding impossible purchase on the sheer rock. Corryn slid into a hunched squat next to Valkyre, elbows on his knees, head cocked to one side.

"Well?"

The crossbreed looked away, blinking slowly.

"...I'm not an angel," he stated. "...Not anymore."

He glanced back out of the corner of his eye, regarding the other calmly. Corryn merely shrugged, disregarding his correction.

"So, you've finally found out."

"...How long did you know?"

Valkyre turned his attention back to the endless desert and the horizon marking the edge of the world. Somewhere, far beyond all of that, lay his past life and that of angels. But it was all behind, and it would do him no good to look back on it. Of course, he was only resting here. He'd move on soon enough.

"I knew ever since I met you. Most of us probably did. The one scent a human never smells until the day he dies is that of his own."

Valkyre didn't bother responding. He'd already known the answer, to an extent.

The crossbreed glanced over at Corryn once again. The heavy wound to his chest had faded to a jagged starburst scar of white, the markings along his back half-hidden by the lank, tangled hair. His dark skin had gotten even darker in the sun, accented with his nearly-black hair, only the bright gold and pale whites of his eyes sharp and contrasting through the tangled strands of the bangs that fell over them.

Valkyre looked away. He had no need to keep the other within view or anything of the sort.

Although he couldn't quite explain his premonitions to himself, he knew that Corryn was not particularly dangerous. Not at this moment, at least. There was something of a rival in him, yes, but he knew that

there was something... perhaps, almost like camaraderie. Not quite, of course, but in the end, Corryn was particularly simplistic, and Valkyre could trust to know what he was thinking more than he could anyone else.

The crossbreed lifted his head, gazing up at the cool, crisp blue sky. The sun razed the area around itself to the same blinding white, and clouds were somewhere further ahead, gathered and pulled together at the crowns of the mountains.

"...Iris."

He caught the other's black-rimmed eye, blinking sharply, drawn to immediate attention by the mere word.

"He's here, isn't he?"

Corryn grinned. "Of course," he replied, voice smooth. "It's why we're all here."

Valkyre jerked his gaze away from the empty sky.

"...Why?"

Corryn blinked back hollowly.

"Why did Iris come here?"

The other barked out a short, sharp laugh. It rang in the shadowed, shallow dip of the shattered rock, then faded out once it hit the heat and the light and the sun.

"To die." Corryn's golden eyes were glinting with laughter. "To live. To save the world. Whatever you think, angel. Whatever you want."

Valkyre paused, then shook his head.

"That's... not right," he murmured.

Corryn sneered back, smile falling from his lips.

"Oh? Not right? What is, then, in this black little world? What's right, and what's wrong?? Don't give me any of your petty human morals. I'm not a fool."

Valkyre merely shook his head again.

"It's not right," he repeated, "What we think of Iris. We're shaping someone up on our own, and that's not who he is."

The crossbreed glanced over at the other.

"He should be able to live for himself, don't you think?"

Corryn remained silent, gaze lowered, face hidden in his tangled hair. A black smudge of spider skittered over his hunched shoulder.

"Iris doesn't need any of us, in the end. He's never"-

"Shut up!"

Corryn lashed out suddenly, chipped fingernails swiping at nothing, still too far distant. Valkyre didn't flinch, only stared into the other's eyes. Corryn's hands were trembling, empty fingers curling in on themselves. He glowered at the crossbreed, lips curled up into a snarl.

"I know that, Valkyre. I know. I know that he doesn't need me, or want me. I know it's all just fake. ...I know." The gold-ringed eyes were narrowed, sharp and cold, as if he'd been dealt an invisible blow somewhere, burning with a wound Valkyre couldn't see. "Don't think I'm so much of a fool, angel. I know the truth."

The crossbreed let out a sharp breath of air.

"Then are you the selfish kind?" he asked. "Do you not care? ...Do you want Iris, or do you want him to be happy?"

Corryn laughed, without emotion.

"There's no such thing as happiness for him," he hissed sharply. "Ever since his creation, ever since his sentience, he was doomed to this. He can never be happy."

Valkyre remained apathetic.

"Then that justifies your using him?" he asked.

Corryn lunged forward suddenly, snarling. His fingernails dug into Valkyre's shoulder through the clothing, sharp and fierce. His golden eyes were bright, smudges of black darkening.

"Don't," he hissed. "You don't know a single goddamned thing, angel. Demon. You think you know the truth, that you know what's right. That's just because you're too human."

Valkyre didn't move, even though he could feel the pain shuddering along his arm. He lifted his hand, placing it around Corryn's bare, tanned wrist. He gripped it tightly, holding it in place, letting the other know that he could crush bone if he wanted to. Corryn ignored it, still shaking his head.

"Don't lie to yourself, Valkyre. In the end, we all live and die for ourselves. No other. It's the truth."

Valkyre didn't respond. Corryn's fingers had loosened, and the crossbreed took his time, slowly working the hand off of his shoulder, calmly prying it away, finger by finger.

"I know," he said.

Corryn blinked, then suddenly jerked his hand away. He paused and stared down at his hand, palm-up. Valkyre watched a spider crawl along to the edge of the shadow cast by the stone, touch a limb over into the light, then shrink back and skitter away.

The crossbreed blinked then, feeling a pressure on his forearm. He glanced down to see Corryn's hand there, resting almost casually, crescent slices of white fingernail the only thing distinguishable from the dark skin. Underneath, the tattoos on Valkyre's bare arms seemed to shift, pale skin and black ink mixing and merging.

"You're not... ..Iris."

Corryn's face was hidden, eyes shadowed by the tangled curtain of dark, unruly hair. He felt something, Valkyre was sure of it. Something... that could push the pain away. Something that could make him believe, just for an instant, that he wasn't doomed to die.

"...But... Just for... a while."

And then Corryn was curled up on the stone, hand still resting on Valkyre's forearm, head brushing up against the crossbreed's hip, the hair falling away from his face showing his eyes to be closed.

Valkyre didn't respond. He stared down at the other for a while, then he simply returned his gaze to the blatant, empty landscape.

Perhaps, then again, there was a little bit of time for reminiscing. For a final goodbye to the past.

For a brief, short second of oblivious, simple peace.

+--

AN: Sorry for the wait, as I've had this chappie up on my computer for a while now, heh, but, well... I was having some trouble with my plotline. ^^;

(A quick note, if anyone should find a stray plotline somewhere, please send it back to me~ XD)

Anyways, midterms are cracking down on us, but actually, I think I can still post. I've got a coupla more chapters up for ya guys, so stick around for some pretty regular updates. (Though some are a tad short...)

Thank you all who comment!! Don't fight, please! XD;

56 - Peace

?Iris

+--

Peace. Quiet. Solitude.

...No, he was not alone. The world seemed so distant, but no one was ever utterly alone.

Arms wrapped around him, soft and supple, like tender branches, curling over his shoulders.

Iris leaned back against them, eyes closed, smiling lightly, folding himself into this intricate, braided cage of long entwined fingers and warm supple arms.

“...I’ll protect you. I won’t let them in.”

The boy didn’t respond. Out there somewhere, Valkyre was lost. Corryn was sitting on the edge of a stone cliff, gazing out at nothingness, waiting for any other stragglers or strays, saying goodbyes. A vampire lived only for revenge, forgetting love and pain and life.

And the others... all of them... were coming. Coming here. Following him.

This was where it was all going to end.

A soft humming, lips pressed into the back of his head, mouth tangled and imprinted through Iris’ tangled hair.

“...Are you afraid? ...Don’t be. I’ll protect you.”

A voice like the rustling of leaves. Greens and browns.

So soft and warm, this hidden corner. He was ruining it. He would bring about destruction.

“...You can’t.”

The arms around him stiffened, trembling slightly.

“...I-I can. I will. I’ll protect you. It’s my duty.”

Iris smiled to himself, softly. He tipped his cheek to the side, letting it rest against bare skin and shoulder and coarse, unruly hair, like tangled vines.

“...I’m still waiting... for him. You know that.”

The hand gripped at his clothes, tightening into a ball.

“I’ll protect you. From all of them. I will.”

Iris sighed, a small and hushed sound.

“...You know you can’t,” he murmured softly, sinking down against the skin. “Your”-

“I-I’ll try.”

His voice was breaking, weak, reminding Iris again of how young he really was. How old he was, yet so fresh and young, inexperienced. How little he knew. How much it would hurt when he lost what little he had, when he lost all of his whole little universe.

He was the frog at the bottom of the well, seeing only a tiny circle of sky and thinking that the whole wide world.

Iris didn’t bother responding. He knew he didn’t need to, and he knew that words had limited power here, on one who had not heard spoken words in so long. They were alike, the two of them, in that sense.

“...I-I’ll protect you.”

So like Valkyre.

And yet, not.

His angel was still so far away, still wandering around, searching, seeking. Fighting himself, slowly understanding. Rushing by at the usual, human pace, always reminded of death at their heels, striving so hard for meaning.

Iris could wait. He would.

Iris returned to his peace, to the arms around him and the soft drifting fall into eternity and the dreams of black angel wings, granted only in sleep.

+--

AN: Ohmaigawd, I haven't written a freakin' thing in so long. o_o; This is a bit of an old, short chapter, as I'm kinda, really, quite, busy with midterms. Sorry! X<

Anyways, just drabbles. Next chapter should have something a bit more substantial... after which, expect things to jump around a little. I'm a tad confused. >>;

Well, hope you guys like!

And, as always thank you all who comment~ I luv you all~

57 - Fool

?Iris

+--

“You’re a fool, you know.”

Corryn yawned as he spoke, baring a small, surprisingly vivid pink tongue, shaking his head. The mussed state of his hair didn’t affect him at all, as it had long ceased to for those who no longer had the time nor the energy to care about personal looks.

Valkyre stretched, muscles going stiff. Pain spiked through his body along his spine, aching near the wings, but it was muted and he ignored the discomfort. It was nothing.

“Fool for what?” he asked. Dreamtime was up.

Corryn scratched his arm, picking a little at a small line of ridged scabs, purposefully glancing away.

“For trusting me. At all.”

Valkyre scoffed, lightly.

“Why didn’t you attack me first, then?”

Corryn’s hand dropped to his knee, limp. His golden eyes were distant, gazing out on the road behind them, at the vast stretch of nothing.

“You’re saved,” he replied, at length, glancing back just briefly, a grin on his lips. “...For now.”

The crossbreed arched a brow. “What? From you?”

Corryn made a face.

“I’m here to wait,” he said, “For whoever else comes. It’s your turn to go.”

Valkyre stretched out his arms over his head, feeling the muscles tense then loosen, feeling the strength he still held in them. He ached all over, to be honest, but this was something he had experienced before. He could push down the pain.

Of course, his previous experiences all stemmed from damage he’d taken that could be healed; now, he wasn’t so sure how this pain could ever go away. Power flowed in and out of him, some restricted, some unstoppable, in ways he felt like he couldn’t control. This was different. This new blood burned him, internally. And he couldn’t hold it back, forever.

“...Like who else?”

Corryn shrugged, feigning carelessness.

“Camael is not my problem. Nor is that foolish vampire.”

He paused, glancing over at Valkyre, eyes smiling.

“Raguel... we’ll see. I still think feuds should be left to be properly settled, or else the story gets boring.

And...”

Corryn glanced back out into the open, sprawling wasteland.

“Rheis. If he even shows up.”

Valkyre blinked.

“Then Rheis isn’t dead. ...Where has he been?”

Corryn chuckled.

“The little black batty is falling apart, Valkyre,” he hummed, “And he was starting to doubt himself.

When you do that, you’re going to slip up.”

When the other glanced over, his eyes were bright and excited, almost feverish.

"It should be fun."

Valkyre sighed, then stood, slowly.

Rheis... Rheis was breaking apart. He knew this, took it in. It was nothing surprising.

However, it was probably less the inorganic aspects wearing down, than something more basic; a conscience, perhaps. After all, hadn't it been mentioned that Rheis had turned out much more... organic than Eire? He had been based off of Raguel... And now, with no sense of direction, with no orders to follow...

"You seem to be looking forward to it. Is it because you want the satisfaction of taking out both Eire and Rheis yourself?"

Corryn merely made a face, sticking out his tongue.

"You decide," was all he would say, neither objecting nor admitting to Valkyre's blatant accusation.

Valkyre stretched his legs, wings curling around him. It'd never occurred to him to pull away his wings, to draw them back into his body; it felt... right, somehow, feeling this weight dragging at his back like it hadn't ever done before... and also, he supposed, because he wanted to... ..show them. To show the world, and to show himself, what he was now.

Because there was no longer any time for doubt or questioning.

There was only moving forward.

Corryn seemed to be following his chain of thought.

"You should go now, angel. Go find Iris. Say your last words. I'm not allowed to kill you until after."

He grinned, flashing sharp teeth and glinting, mirthful eyes, his black hair falling over his face.

Valkyre frowned, forming his hand into a fist, tightening and loosening his grip, testing his strength.

"...Don't call me... that."

The crossbreed glanced up through his black hair at the other's face, which was still set in a leering grin. "I'm... not..."

Corryn laughed, shaking his head.

"You're a fool, Valkyre," he chuckled, "And you still think like a human."

The other shook his head in exasperation, then stepped away, his violet eyes narrowing to adjust to the brightness that reflected from every slab of stone as he moved away from the shadow of the stone, fading now, slightly, as the sun began to set.

Corryn called after him, in that childish yet impossibly sagacious, aged tone of voice.

"You're still Iris' angel, Valkyre."

And then his voice and his words and his silhouette were all gone, swallowed up by the shadow as Valkyre stepped out into the sunlight.

+--

AN: Another chapter. Hoo boy. Um, I haven't gotten a word written past this. XD; I know, I know, I'm sorry!! ::ducks::

Anyways, midterms are over, so hopefully, somewhere between the crush of homework, the burning need to draw (I haven't drawn anything in even longer, o_o;;) and the alternate writings, musings, and time-wasting, I will try to get some more Iris done. I'm sorry. XD;

THANK YOU ALL~

58 - Forest

?Iris

+--

Trees.

A forest, built of wire and string, tangled and frail, yet persevering nonetheless, hardened and callous, yet so brittle.

Valkyre hadn't seen trees before, hadn't seen such a forest. And, to be honest, he wasn't too impressed.

The trees were thin, hardy things, gangly and misshapen, like tangled bits of spiderweb spiking outwards and upwards. They seemed hollow and rough from afar, like a breeze could cripple them, topple them to the ground. There was but the sparsest, dried crackle of leaf cover, and the ground underneath was black and cracked.

The crossbreed stared down at the dusty, dark soil, boots scuffing at rough pebbles and tiny clods of dirt decorated with pale, white roots, shriveled and grasping at clumps of earth.

Too little water. Too little sunlight, too cold, too thin air, too windy. Not the right kind of trees, from what Valkyre had learned; soil too weak.

In the end, the forest was dying, like all others.

Valkyre stepped down, the sides of mountain rising to either side, enclosing him in this tiny, bottled valley with its dying trees. The gaunt, thin trunks were emaciated, but soon, there were enough to crowd out visibility. The crossbreed took it all in, glancing between branches and around slanted, toppled logs. He didn't like the way roads vanished here, didn't like how all sense of direction would be lost once one entered. He didn't like the feeling of exposure, didn't like all of the hiding spaces he saw ahead.

But Iris was here, and that was all that mattered.

"Valkyre."

The voice was low and soft, intending not to startle. The crossbreed glanced over his shoulder, where Raguel stood, a black shadow rising from the ground, sharp and silent.

Valkyre felt his body stiffen nonetheless, fingers twitching, ready to grasp a blade, tense.

The other walked over, slowly, relaxed yet alert, each movement carefully gauged. Raguel stopped, averting the other's wary eyes, staring out into the dark gray shadows of the forest. When he spoke, his voice was the same measured, low tone, barely audible.

"...So now you know." A pause, the unmatched eyes flickering back over to the crossbreed, judging for a response. Valkyre gave him none.

"...What do you plan on doing, Valkyre?"

Raguel turned his attention fully onto the other now, eyes sharp, demanding.

Valkyre held the dark red and pale yellow gaze unblinkingly.

"I don't know," he replied, words simple and short, almost choppy. "I'm not sure what to believe in now, or what to follow. I..."

"You don't see what I see, do you, Valkyre?" Raguel cut him off, glancing away, what could've almost been a sneer on his face fading into thin, set lips. The half-breed stared out into nothingness, into broken branches and shadows that danced and flickered though the light hardly changed, breathed into life by something else.

"You cannot tell me you're blind, Valkyre. Do you see all of this death?" Raguel waved a pale, thin hand, shrouded in black, at the gangly trees and the caked, dusty ground.

"He can change this. He has the ability to."

The half-breed's eyes were sharp, accusing. "Iris. He can end it all. This decay, this is what all of the sorrow, all of the pain, all of the hatred and coldness and broken bodies come from. This is why the labs existed, why you were born, why humans have become mere shells, insignificant and worthless, why angels and demons are stranded on this wasteland. And... he can change all of this."

Valkyre said nothing, merely listening. Raguel was staring solely at him now, eyes accusatory, fingers clenched.

"He can do this. Iris. He can bring everything back, he can restore the world. And he knows this. And yet... He doesn't."

Raguel glanced away again, unsettled, eyebrows drawn.

"He's... He does not, because he is afraid. He is selfish, as all beings are."

"No."

The half-breed looked up, sharply. His eyes were defiant, angry. "Oh?"

Valkyre shook his head, slowly.

"No," he repeated. "Iris is not afraid of dying. He's not a coward."

Raguel bared his teeth, nothing more than a flash of an angered snarl. Yet, in that instant, Valkyre noticed for the first time the raggedness of his looks, how his eyes seemed just slightly sunken into his face, his features lean and gaunt. He was tired, and had probably not fed in quite of a while.

He had the look in his eyes, of someone resigned, knowing he was at his end. Just as they all did.

The half-breed scowled at Valkyre, pale fingers clenched tight, veined in sharp blue.

"Oh? Then why does he continue to run away?? After Eire told him what he was created to do, why did he disappear, even from you?"

Valkyre frowned, eyes dropping from the other's pale, furious face, staring down at nothing. The crossbreed paused, contemplative, then shook his head, sighing.

"How do you know he's been running away at all?" he asked, calmly. "How do you know he's not come here... ..to save this world, if he can?"

And yet, Valkyre felt that distant, lonely something stir inside of him, something he couldn't name, yet felt so familiar to him, like a lost fragment of himself. Would Iris leave him now? Did he really want... to die? For a world, for an assumption, for a myth and a false, fairy-tale story? Reality did not work like that. Stories didn't have such brilliant, self-sacrificing endings here, in this bleak wasteland.

Raguel was silent, blinking, thinking it over. After a pause, the half-breed glanced over at the other again, eyes calm and collected once more, distant.

"But what is your role now, Valkyre? Would you truly let him die, if he himself chooses to?"

The hint of something akin to a smile flared for an instant on the half-breed's lips.

"Perhaps," he murmured, almost inaudibly, "It is you I should be wary of, instead."

Raguel took a step away, shaking his head.

"And not only me," he added, glancing up, unmatched eyes meeting the crossbreed's dark violet, locking on to them. "Perhaps you need to be wary of yourself, as well. What is it you want after all, Valkyre?"

Valkyre shifted, one hand running down to his waist, fingertips brushing against the reassuring feeling of a leather-bound dagger hilt, but Raguel was merely shaking his head, stepping backwards.

And then, he flared his wings, sending the dust on the ground whirling and crumbling, the black webbed wings enormous compared to the thin, wiry black body. And then he was gone, leaving Valkyre alone with the dying forest and broken trees.

+--

AN: Blah blah blah, trees. 8O Sorry it's so boring, really. Couldn't come up with anything better. God, Iris is like a lagging computer as of now. XD;

I've been kinda busy as of late, and I've got other things to work on (in particular, scratching up a decent work of art SOMETIME in the next month or so, Jesus) so I'm afraid things might be a bit slow. Then again, I tend to make a brilliant hypocrite.

Sorry for the crap-tastic chapters. I'll try to really draw my thoughts together and solidify them, then hammer out the rest. We're so close to the end, guys!!! :O

Thanks for everything, and for a new reader!! Yay! 8D ::bow::

59 - Bound

?Iris

+--

Valkyre heard him long before he saw the flash of honey-colored skin or the tangled strands of dark hair. He heard him first, because even when he was standing right in front of him, Valkyre had not been able to see him.

A rustle, a mere scrabbling of one paper-dry, crinkling leaf against another. But in the stifling silence and the oppressive shrubbery and foliage of the decaying forest, the crossbreed's every nerve had been on end, and Valkyre had balked and frozen stock still at the sound of his own shadow more than once. The voice was like an empty thing, like a memory or imagined sound. After it had spoken, the words hung in the air, slow and sluggish, but was soon swallowed up by the silence. Standing there, immobile, Valkyre couldn't even be sure as to whether or not he'd really heard it at all.

"Stop."

The second time the voice spoke, he managed to find where it came from, tracing it to a tangled mass of underbrush and dangling, brittle vines in front of him.

"Leave this place. Strangers are not welcome."

The voice was odd, the accent clipped and uneven, spoken with a foreign tongue.

And then he blinked, and that was when Valkyre finally realized that the owner of the voice wasn't hidden at all, but standing right before him, melting in and out of the foliage.

His skin was a warm, gentle brown shade, not tanned but not the normal fleshy, peach shade of humans or just about any other species, for that matter.

His eyes were dark and liquid, large and framed in almost feminine lashes. His hair was a cropped, tangled mess of dark strands which flowed past his shoulders, wild and uncombed, caught with specks of leaf and vine. His features were sharp and angular, face slightly long, neck thin. From his face, he appeared young with his large eyes, the skin smooth and soft.

The upper half of his torso was bare, his one arm leaning against the trunk of a tiny, emaciated tree thin and sharp. His fingers seemed stained dark brown or black; the crossbreed could not quite tell what from where he stood, and the dark fingers seemed to meld into the rough, knobby wood of the tree trunk on which they rested.

The first thing that Valkyre noticed, though, was his height.

The boy was stood taller than he did, slightly. And although it wasn't as if Valkyre was unaccustomed to this, but the height did not suit the shape of the boy's bones nor his frame. In fact, everything from the torso up seemed elevated.

And around then, Valkyre really began to realize what else was different about him.

He had no human hips. Instead, his torso merged smoothly into the muscled, sleek chest and forelegs of an equine, two long, thin, almost spindly legs touching tiny, cloven hooves into the ground cover, the bones of the fetlocks and ankles large and sharply defined, jutting from the thin, tight skin. Just visible out of the corner of his eye, the sweep of a lithe back ended in sharp, angular hips and spiked down with thin, colt-like hindquarters.

A centaur. And yet, this was like no centaur Valkyre had ever seen before. The thin, narrow legs, the particular coloring, the lithe, almost cheetah-like body, the cloven hooves.

He was in no way a combination of human and horse, but something much more delicate, smaller and daintier.

The other tilted his head slightly to the side, as if almost curious, and Valkyre realized there was even more to the boy than he'd imagined.

He bore a set of horns.

Thin, simple yet elegant horns, spiked in only two short tines, tips whittled sharp, curving in a slight, graceful manner. They protruded from the tangled mess of dark hair like sapling trees, small tines somehow effortlessly sliding through the foliage and undergrowth without catching. They were so out of place, yet appeared so natural on the boy, Valkyre was almost caught as to wondering whether or not all centaurs had them.

The boy was shaking his head, the movement catching the other's attention again, snapping him out of his scrutiny.

"Strangers are not welcome here," he repeated, voice that same fluting, androgynous tone which mingled and melted into the silence of the forest, difficult to separate from the air.

"Outsiders are not meant to die within here. These are sacred grounds."

Valkyre stared at the stunted, twisting trees, clinging to their handfuls of dried, brittle leaves. He almost felt like laughing. Sacred? Here?

The crossbreed shook his head. He took a step forward, then stopped. The boy's dark eyes darted to his wings, gaze roaming over the elegant curve and arch of the webbed, folded demon's wings and the sweep and furl of the black-feathered angel's wings.

"I've come here for Iris," he spoke, voice loud and rough in the silence, shatteringly crude and brash in the majestic silence and the boy's elegant, whispered voice. Valkyre swallowed hard, tasting the dryness in his mouth.

Whatever reaction he might have been expecting from the other, what he got was probably the worst possible. The boy's eyes narrowed, shoulders rising slightly, body tensing. His hand shifted, and for the first time, Valkyre realized that the boy held a staff in his other hand, made of gnarled, dark-grained wood, smoothed through handling. The staff was topped with a spearhead of some dark, gray-black stone, sharpened to a wizened point, the area where the spear was bound to the wood decorated with trailing bits of vine and leaf.

"...I should have known." The eyes were narrowed and cold now, clenched hand tightened around the staff turning the knuckles white, as sharp and bony as the boy's deer-like legs.

Before Valkyre could react or attempt to refute, the boy had taken a step backwards into the foliage daintily on his tiny, cloven feet, and had vanished utterly into the undergrowth.

It wasn't hard to figure out what was happening.

Valkyre whirled to his side, following instinct. Nothing. Dead silence. He turned around, glancing to his right.

...Nothing.

Of course, he knew the boy hadn't left. Although he could not sense a strong aura from him, he knew that the other didn't intend on leaving him here, so simply. Not with a spear-tipped staff in his hand.

Valkyre shifted his gaze slowly now, barely daring to breathe. The silence was stifling. Somewhere, somehow, the boy was traveling, circling around him, stalking him.

The crossbreed shifted a hand down to his waist, fingers brushing against the stiff, calming reassurance of a dagger hilt, but he did not take it out. After a pause, his hand dropped. It was useless, using a blade here. Spears pierced, not slashed.

Valkyre checked behind him. The wooded growth and decay of the forest was much too close for his liking, and he took a step out into the small half-clearing of area, side-stepping a twisted mess of bush. It was too cramped here, and his wings were only becoming a disadvantage. However, he kept them

spread, as they were the only form of protection he could give to his bare, exposed back. Valkyre's eyes roamed the tangled mess of foliage and drooping vines, but he found nothing. It would do him no good to look for the boy, not like this. And yet, without a strong aura, silent, sure-footed, and hidden... He was invisible.

And Valkyre was an eyesore in the muted browns, grays, and weary greens of the forest. The crossbreed took another sidling half-step, leaves crunching brittle and sharp underfoot. Any noise he made wouldn't make a difference, now. He took in a long, slow breath, and closed his eyes. The world was different here, inked with black. The remaining shapes and defining figures slumped into nothingness on the backs of his eyelids, calming his mind. Vision was only one of the tools the boy was wielding against him, and Valkyre knew it would not be able to help him. He'd have to rely on other senses, then.

After all, no one was dead silent.

However, on tuning into certain new senses, Valkyre merely discovered that a forest was never silent, even if it was as marginally close to dead as any would ever come. Leaves crinkled as if of their own designs, and there was a wind, somewhere, if merely the sound of air rising.

In truth though, it was the sound which saved him. The thrown spear snapped out a fast, high-pitched shriek, like a sharp intake of breath. Although Valkyre had not the time to gauge where it had come from, he instinctively dodged back, twisting his body, eyes snapping open.

Silence allowed for the heavy, thick thud of the spear's stone head embedding itself in the packed, dusty ground before swallowing all again in its endless void of muffled nothingness. The spear's hard-grained, whorled length jutted at a sharp, low angle from the ground, inches from Valkyre's feet. Before the crossbreed fully had time to prepare or recover, the boy dashed into the hollowed arena, prancing on his tiny, cloven hooves, entire body on edge, flanks flashing creamy white on bottom. Instinctively, Valkyre dodged back, fearing a second blow, arms raised. The boy darted forward, and in one smooth, liquid motion, he snatched back the spear, cast him a sharp, hard glance, then leapt back into the foliage, vanishing from view.

Valkyre cursed his stupidity.

Of course, he shouldn't have backed down. The spear was the boy's only weapon, at least, the only one in view. And if he'd darted into view merely to retrieve it, exposing himself in the process, then the chances of his having hidden a second weapon were slim. As well... something about the way the boy had moved, about the way his body had tilted and how he'd balked, front and hind legs almost touching at the ankles, shoulders drawn...

As if he was afraid of coming close to him, of touching him.

Valkyre licked dry lips, eyes still darting around, ears alert. Mentally, he weighed the odds. The boy's only weapon was a spear. He was keeping his distance.

He still had the advantage of surprise, and Valkyre had no cover.

The crossbreed scuffed at the leaves as he stepped into the center again, the drooping and twisted edges of twigs beginning to catch at his wings. It wasn't as if he had anywhere to hide.

He closed his eyes again. This time, he ignored the sounds. Instead, he felt the air, felt its stiff sluggishness. Underneath the slow, lethargic currents, he felt the tints, touches, and brushes of auras and presences. The earth, it was a shifting, twisting entity he'd been forced to accept when he'd arrived here. The ground was a set solid, rippling on occasion.

And through the ground beneath his feet, tremors shook, faint, delicate.

The auras, stacked and motionless, faded like infrared. The boy still had centaurian blood in him; he was not of the labs, like Corryn or Eire or Rague. Deep down, there was still an aura he could trace, that he could follow.

The second blow Valkyre was already attuned to, by the time it struck. He dipped nimbly to the side,

half-ducking, exerting little more but the necessary energy. The spear, unfortunately, vanished into the undergrowth, and Valkyre knew it would be futile to plunge into the foliage and attempt to find it before his adversary did.

Instead, he merely held his ground, feet planted apart, wings half-spread.

This time, Valkyre did not close his eyes. He flexed his fingers, letting the tiny, minute threads of magic travel along them, seeking. Silence reigned, wiping clean the memory of sound, but Valkyre knew it was not to last.

The third time the boy struck, Valkyre was already moving. He'd felt the tremor through the ground, felt the tension snapping in the air. His fingers brushed against wood as it whistled past, snapping out at it on instinct. The spear's smooth body slid between his fingertips, but the leather of his glove closed down and gripped the wood just as it was almost past; Valkyre stopped the spear just as the tip met the soil, the edge of his thumb just wrapping around the base end of the wood. He swung the spear around, effortlessly, and slid his grip to hold the weapon just past the spearhead.

The boy materialized at his side, a thin, browned arm shooting out and grasping the spear just underneath Valkyre's own grip, twisting it around. Startled, the crossbreed almost let go, catching dark, hard eyes and streaks of tangled hair. He grabbed at the spear with his other hand, and found the boy opposite him, staring him down. Here, height played a difference, as the boy could lean on his weight and allow his upper body to push down against the other; Valkyre was forced back with stumbling, sliding steps, the crossbreed gritting his teeth as he tried to hold his own, leaves crumbling and scattering underneath his boots.

Abruptly, the boy twisted around the spear in his hands, suddenly releasing the weight and forcing the momentum downwards with a push toward the ground. Valkyre, startled, lost his grip. He felt the wood bite as it slipped through his hands, and the next thing he knew, there was the sound of the spear whirling around in the air, cutting through thick silence, and the stone spearhead was a centimeter from his throat. It was held poised in the boy's hands, the thin fingers curled around the wooden spear's body browned and black-stained, knuckles gleaming white.

Valkyre froze, body stiffening at the cool lick of the fine, honed edge of the spear tip touching the soft underside of his throat.

The boy's eyes were too human. They were sharp and drawn, cold, but underneath, they were wide, warm, and childish. The eyes held no compassion for him, without a doubt, yet they were not the eyes of a killer.

Valkyre swallowed, dryly, on nothing. The tiny movement was enough to puncture his skin before he'd quite noticed it, drawing a hot, warm bead of blood. Valkyre winced, slightly, expecting pain, but stopped as the boy rapidly moved out of the corner of his eye. Surprisingly enough, those dark eyes had widened, set lips parting just slightly, and the boy had stepped back, daintily, drawing away with him the threatening tip of the spear.

Valkyre sat there stunned for a moment, wondering what was going on. As he watched, the boy turned around gracefully, swinging around the spear again to rest the butt end in the crinkled, shriveled undergrowth.

The boy looked back at the crossbreed over his shoulder, expression downright distasteful.

Hardly conscious of what he was doing, Valkyre stood up straight, smearing away the blood at his neck, which was beginning to cool. He paused, then raised a hand to his face. Caught in the oiled folds of his glove, the blood showed black against the tanned leather, glistening. Valkyre could feel the moistness smeared over his neck, cooling in the still, stifled air, yet... he felt no pain. The blood was no longer some burning, raging thing inside of him, scalding his skin.

A movement drew his attention back. The boy had tipped the spear down, angling it until his small, brown-black fingertips could reach the spearhead tied to the top. A charcoal-darkened, thin finger

brushed against the honed edge, the smudge of red invisible on his dark skin. A pause, then the boy glanced back. His eyes were dark, wide and blank. They showed no warmth towards Valkyre, but a guarded interest.

"...You're... like him."

Valkyre slowly, carefully shifted his footing. The boy ignored it, blinking, then looking away again. His fingertips tightened their grasp on the rough, worn wood of the spear, fingers tangling themselves in dried twists of vine.

The words had been soft, almost whispered. More self-contemplative than an outward declaration.

"...Please."

Valkyre kept his voice down, tone soft and flat. His throat was dry, a half-formed bead of blood starting to well up at his neck again.

"Let me see Iris. I will not harm him."

The boy closed his eyes instead of replying. Without his large, dark eyes, the boy's face still held its childish features, but there were suggestions of a tiredness in the way his brows were drawn, and in the set of his lips. He seemed somehow older, wearier.

A sudden flash of movement, and Valkyre suddenly found that the boy had spun around again and leveled the spear's sharp, glinting tip to him, inches from the bridge of his nose. On the flattened, smooth surface of the dark stone edge, Valkyre's own deep red blood glistened back at him, glowing dully through the dark rock.

When the boy spoke, his voice was suddenly clear and sharp, piercing through the thick, heavy silence.

"You are bound by the blood on my spear. Break your oath, and I shall not hesitate to kill you."

With that, he turned around, and began to step away. Valkyre stared after him, numbly for a moment, startled. What had made the boy suddenly change his mind? Had he passed some silent test? Or was it simply his blood which had saved him...?

Valkyre shook his head, letting out a slow, long breath.

"Come."

The boy glanced over his shoulder, aloft and distant, dark eyes large and cool, calm. "If you want to see Iris."

Valkyre took a faltering step forward, then another.

Iris.

Yes, this boy knew where Iris was. They would finally find each other again. It did not matter what had happened, or what was to come; as long as they were together, everything would be all right again.

+--

AN: Jezuz jesuum I'm so sorry. XD; It's been so freakin' long, I know!! I-I-I got preoccupied with stuff, yeah, and... I had to do things... and projects... >>; I swear, I did. ;A;

Anyway, here's more Iris for y'all! Sorry, but I have jsut really been struggling to find some time to really work on Iris. I've got a ton of schoolwork, honest, and if not, I've still got things to draw and all that snaz~ SO! things are happening. ...I feel a writer's block coming on though, auugh~

Thanks a lot for reading! Hope to have the next chapter out sometime decently soon~ X

60 - Touch

?Iris

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The grove was silent.

The air was thick, heavy, and dry. The day's light was beginning to fade, bleaching the world monotone and gray. The straggling leaves hung still from the twisted tree branches, as if frozen.

Valkyre surveyed the small clearing. In the dying light, it took him a minute to realize that what had appeared to be thick mounds of undergrowth were actually crumbled piles of stone, some still holding to shape, forming disfigured corners and walls. Rotted lengths of wood lay in heaps where they had fallen, untouched. Over the soft, pale stone vines and creepers had taken back the land, slowly closing in. To the crossbreed's side, a pale shadow resolved itself into a channeled pillar, tilted threateningly at a sharp angle.

The ruins weren't recent, nor was the architecture. The buildings here had been walled with stone, yet roofed by wood. The design was crude, simplistic.

It had been a long time.

"Here."

The other had stepped forward, small cloven feet nimble and sure. The boy glanced back over his shoulder, large eyes blinking, emotionless.

Valkyre followed him wordlessly, but found the boy's slow, rhythmic movement unnecessary. He could feel Iris, could sense the other's presence. He was guided by premonition alone, footsteps steady and sure.

Iris was tucked into one of the crumbling corners of a ruined building, sitting calmly on the ground, leaning back against the chalky stone. His hair was slightly rougher and unkempt, shoulders slumped, small hands half-curved. His eyes were closed, legs folded.

Valkyre took a shaky, slow half-step forward, suddenly losing his sure-footedness. The other boy yielded, stepping to the side silently, and with a quick glance to the crossbreed, vanished into the undergrowth, leaving the two alone.

Iris's breathing was so shallow, he might have been sleeping. Valkyre stared at the boy, eyes running over the soft, familiar features, the pale skin, the fraying seams of the battered, shapeless white shirt. The crossbreed took another step closer, and Iris opened his eyes.

His gaze was the same as ever; the eyes were wide, empty, and distant, mirroring nothing, reflecting nothing. They stared at him, past him, into nothingness.

"...Iris?"

Valkyre went up to the boy, stood there stiffly staring down, lips drawn. At his feet, the boy did not move. What was he supposed to do? Why was Iris not even... acknowledging his existence?

The gray eyes moved, slowly, head tilting up. The tangled hair fell back from the boy's face, a strand catching at the edge of his mouth, stuck to his lips. Before he could realize what he was doing, Valkyre was leaning down, rough fingers brushing away the stray hair, fingernails grazing lightly over the cool, smooth skin.

Iris's mouth opened, the boy catching a sharp, sudden exhalation and intake of breath.

And then, he was crumpling, curling up, thin arms reaching upwards, scrabbling to grasp Valkyre's arm,

shaking violently.

The crossbreed dropped down onto his knees, catching the boy as he fell forward. Iris's body was trembling, shoulders drawn, small mouth rasping out one unsteady breath after another.

"Iris? What is it??"

Valkyre folded the boy into his arms, feeling the frailness of the body, the thin torso, the gaunt ribcage. Iris was shaking, badly. In his arms, Valkyre could feel the boy's body jerking with dry, heaving sobs.

"...Iris?"

And yet, when the boy looked up...

He was smiling.

The small mouth was upturned, colorless lips chapped, dirt smudged under his eye and along his cheeks, hair a tangled, unruly mess. And yet he seemed so happy.

"Valkyre..."

Iris let out a small sigh, then curled himself up in the other's arms, knees tucked, small hands clutching the stiff, battered clothing. The boy's body relaxed, breathing slowing down. The thin form ceased to shake, but still trembled faintly, on occasion.

Valkyre opened his mouth as if to speak, but then closed it again. What had he been expecting, after all? Formalities were meaningless. In the end, all he needed to know that everything would be all right was this touch, this solidarity and heaviness in his arms.

And yet, lying there in his embrace, it felt like Iris weighed no more than a feather.

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AN: My god, it's been forever. I'm so sorry!! ::bows::

And also, I'm sorry it's such of a crappy chapter. X< Absolutely nothing happened!! Augh!

Well, I'm hoping things will start to get back together soon. I'm still floundering about looking for my plotline (has anyone seen it??) and I want to get in some action, but we're really drawing up to a conclusion here, so I need to finish things off, and I need to know what to do in order to finish it off right!!

XC

(Somewhat on this subject, I'm afraid the ending to Iris could, majorly, suck. I realize I've had my ending since about the same time I had my start to Iris, and I don't want to change it. However, with the way the story has evolved, it'll probably just seem like a cheap, crappo ending. So, just in advance, I'm sorry. ;o;
)

Anyway, thanks to all of my faithful readers!! I can't believe you guys would stick through for such an un-updater like me. ;A;

I promise! I promise! I promise to finish Iris!! XC

THANK YOU~

61 - Ending

?Iris

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“It’s the end of the world.”

Caerwyn glanced to his side, sharply. His large tipped ears caught at the low, smooth voice, which had spoken as if laughing, then lost it again. The boy’s hand tightened into a fist around the staff he gripped, the dark-edged fingers thin and bony.

A rustle to his side, a flash of movement. He whirled around, but saw nothing. The looming shape of a pillar faded in and out of shadow, the crumbling ruins of the ancient citadel he guarded blending back into forest.

He heard laughter, a low, sweet chuckling. Caerwyn whirled around again, spear point arcing through the air. The stone blade’s tip pointed itself at a hunched-over figure dim in the fading light, dark tanned skin blending into the rich, deep shadows of earth.

Corryn grinned, baring his teeth.

“Well?” he asked.

Caerwyn bit his lip. With a quick, fluid motion, the boy leapt from where he had stood, four thin legs instantly taking him to where the other had sat.

But Corryn was gone, darting to the side, stirring up dried brush and snapping twigs. He shook his head once, sharply.

“Give it up, fool. You know it’s too late.”

Caerwyn gritted his teeth, fingers tightening their grip on his staff. He lowered his head, shaking his antlers out of instinct, prancing in place. Corryn ignored him, leaning back on the balls of his feet.

“What are you, dumb?”

He looked annoyed, glancing back over at the boy. Caerwyn took a half-step back, then stood still. A pause, and in an instant, he had vanished into the undergrowth, still as stone, invisible.

“Don’t bother.”

His fingers clenched around the gnarled wood. Corryn’s back was still turned to him, the scars on his skin glowing faintly, pale and twisted, over his back.

“You know the truth.”

Caerwyn’s fingers loosened, then tightened again. He saw the vulnerable, exposed neck; the curved line of the spine. Just one flick of the wrist, and...

And yet, he did not move. He remained still, hidden, silent.

Corryn paid him no heed, gazing out into the rugged landscape of the ruins and encroaching forest.

“They’re here. And they’re coming. You can’t stop them all. You can’t stop what’s been started.”

The other remained silent.

“It was started by him. Iris.” Corryn leaned back slightly, relaxing. “You know,” he continued, speaking to the silent woods, “This might not be happening, if you’d killed the boy.”

Corryn paused, then absent-mindedly scratched behind his ear. In the fading light, he couldn’t see much. But beneath his bare feet, felt through his smudged, rough hands, was... nothing. No tremors, no distant vibrations. Simply silence.

This was a place of rest; a silent, wordless, motionless plane. Different than the moving, shifting,

up-heaving world that the cities, the labs, and even the wasteland was a part of. Out here, it was simply... quiet. Peaceful.

"...This is hallowed ground."

Caerwyn had materialized out of the brush to Corryn's side, less than a spear's length away. But the boy's eyes were distant, looking over the browning forest swathed in gray shadow.

Corryn snorted.

"Was," he corrected. "Don't fool yourself," he muttered. "This place is good for nothing now but ending."

Caerwyn remained silent. Corryn, after a pause, glanced over, and grinned.

"You know it." He nodded sharply in the other's direction.

"Those two... are here to end it all."

A heavy pause, Corryn's pale eyes flickering to Caerwyn's face. "Will you allow that to happen?"

The boy's lips drew tight. His fingers twisted the staff in his hand, over and over. In the silence, Caerwyn found himself the only source of sound, fingers like rasping branches. He stilled his hand. Slowly, he boy nodded.

"Yes." He spoke quietly, almost inaudibly, as if afraid of his words taking to form, solidifying into something he couldn't take back. "I... I knew it would happen. Eventually."

Caerwyn glanced to the other, a nameless boy with a scarred back and dirty fingernails. In the end, he was not so different.

Caerwyn tilted his head, gazing to where a few stars were beginning to show as the sun sank away. Here, clouds scudded past, wiping out small clean spaces of sky.

He was not so different. Caerwyn had entered this world alone, a foreign child without a mother, a fawn dappled by gray shadows in a secluded grove. He knew little about himself, knew less of what it was like, out beyond the crags of the mountains fringing this forest. He had lived here alone, a solitary, silent guardian, watching as the forest wilted and shrank.

Caerwyn had experienced very little. His life had been flat and bland, and somehow, he knew it.

And above all, he was tired. He was tired of his existence, of the gray world around him which he knew, perhaps from the very start, that he could never truly protect.

"Yes," he murmured, half to himself. Caerwyn caught the other's golden, black-flecked eye. He smiled, though he could smell the dried blood on Corryn's fingertips.

"Yes, it is time to end it all. Because then... only when we are done... can we begin again."

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AN: I'm so sorry. ;A; I have been doing so little for so long... Really, just lazing about... I'm such of a terrible person. I'm sorry. :bows repeatedly:

Anyway, yeah. Um, sorry. Caerwyn (the deer-kid) seems like a bit of a last-minute thought shoved in. Initially, he was supposed to play a bigger role, but... ..I forgot what. >>; And I had no time to put him in. (I've got too many characters, come to think of it... Augh, what a bother. X<)

Anyway. So, sorry if Caer-baby seems a bit flat. I hope he's still cute. :3 (

62 - Alive

?Iris

+--

“Valkyre.”

He blinked, eyes re-focusing in the darkening light, staring down at the boy curled against his body, knees drawn up under the chin, one arm wrapped around his legs, the other resting on Valkyre’s thigh, loose and light. The crossbreed ran a finger through Iris’s tangled, neglected hair.

“What is it?”

Iris’s face was hidden behind his gray hair, eyes downcast, the boy’s lips almost at his kneecaps. When he spoke, his voice was hollow, words distant and dry.

“...Why... are you here?”

Valkyre blinked, taken slightly aback. Iris opened his eyes halfway, gazing sleepily at nothing, face expressionless.

“Why... Why I’m here? For-For you, of course. What else would I...?”

Iris closed his eyes.

“No,” he whispered.

Valkyre’s fingers stopped moving.

“...No...? No what? What are you talking about?”

Iris shook his head, almost imperceptibly.

“No,” he murmured. He turned his face to Valkyre now, resting his cheek on his knee, eyes idle, yet seeking, searching.

“Not for me,” he breathed. The boy’s hand moved from Valkyre’s leg, up until it pressed to the crossbreed’s chest, small hand pressing gently against the other’s stained, stiff shirt.

“Look.” Iris paused, then smiled softly, just the slightest bit, as if to himself.

“You’re warm...” he’d closed his eyes, small hands clenching at the fabric, slipping. “You’re alive,” Iris murmured.

Valkyre felt himself shifting, felt his own rough, callused hands take the boy’s, wrapping around Iris’s cool, soft fingers. He felt himself pull the boy close, felt the soft curve of the spine and roll of shoulder against his body.

“What... do you mean?”

Iris buried his face in the other’s shirt, shaking his head again.

“Don’t ...live for me. You’ll only...”

The boy pulled his face away, looking up into the other’s eyes. Valkyre’s hair was drifting down into the boy’s face; it’d grown longer, and more unkempt, oily and sticky. It reminded Valkyre of his other life, so far away, before any of this had happened. Back when he’d had stability in the form of the singular pair of wings on his back, the gloves on his hands and the familiar touch of cold metal in his hands. Back before things had begun. Back before he’d realized... no, become- this creature, this thing he couldn’t understand, this thing that was not himself.

This being with cold red eyes and an apathy masking a deep-down sensation for something more... something dark, something harsh and rasping he couldn’t comprehend. Black as shadow, smooth as silk. Something burning, smoldering slowly deep down.

“Valkyre.”

He blinked his eyes, once more finding himself, feeling the hard earthen ground beneath his body, the brittle stone against which they were leaning.

Iris was smiling.

“You can’t live for me,” he whispered.

Valkyre’s eyes sharpened. He took in Iris’s soft, pale face as if for the first time, staring at each clean, crisp strand of hair framing the colorless skin, at the individual eyelashes around the heavily-lidded eyes, at the gently-parted lips, sighing.

“Then... for who?”

Valkyre already knew the answer.

But that didn’t mean he understood why.

“Yourself.”

Iris was smiling, gray eyes warm.

...Himself? Valkyre stared back numbly.

Why...? He was nothing. A misconception. Something slowly deteriorating, breaking down. What did he have to live for, after all, but for Iris? Iris, he... he had been the only thing keeping Valkyre going. Without him... Valkyre had no purpose. No meaning. No existence.

...How could he possibly survive, only for himself? It wasn’t...

He had nothing. He had two sets of wings, neither of which he had ever truly wanted. He had cold apathy as his companion in the dark, he had silence as his shield. He had sharp razor steel, his only comfort in his earlier life which was no longer any form of life, but merely an illusion.

Even then, back then, he hadn’t been living for himself. He’d been... waiting. Anticipating.

Living in the past, in an uncertain future yet to come. Nostalgia for something he’d never felt.

Live.

To live, for... himself?

Valkyre was startled by the press of a cool finger to his lips, tasting of dust and dew.

“Promise me.” Valkyre’s explication was silent.

...To live?

Iris leaned closer, small body weighing him down, gray hair tangling with jet black, strands caught and sliding off of each other.

“Promise.”

Valkyre felt a tremble run through his body, with Iris’s face so close, eyes so soft and wide, lips moving soundlessly, echoing, shaping that one word again and again. The finger slipped on his lip.

“I-I promise. Promise.”

Iris’s lips curled up shyly into a smile. The finger fell away.

And then he leaned up and he kissed him.

Valkyre’s eyes widened, feeling the boy’s one arm loop around the back of his neck, small, thin fingers tangling in the crossbreed’s dark, sticky hair. Iris tasted of flower petals, his lips soft as their skins, small tongue lapping, gasping softly. Valkyre was taken aback by the boy’s fierceness; Iris’s mouth was pressed hard to his own, small lips seeking as if to engulf him whole, the thin hand tugging at the roots of the crossbreed’s hair, forcing them closer together. The boy’s body was curved to fit against Valkyre’s, small frame pressed hard to the crossbreed’s ribs and legs, one knee digging into his thigh. Iris tasted of dusk. He tasted of dried, parched ice, of sharp bitter glass. He tasted like rain, which Valkyre had never felt upon his lips. There was a rushing sensation which the crossbreed could not explain, like stepping out of a fire and breathing again for the first time; like slipping on the sand cool on the beach, finding the deeper grains still warm beneath your heels. Like snapping along nerve endings, flashing brilliant neon colors with no name, ripping apart veins and branches, coaxed along crackling

threads.

Like falling, upwards, into the night sky. Knowing you'll never crash, knowing you'll swim through the sea of stars, dripped with light.

When they broke and gasped for air, it was like a broken rip in the belly of a cloud. Valkyre felt his body trembling, blinking his eyes open to realize that his hand was clenched tightly around the back of the boy's head, his other with the palm pressed hard to the small of the boy's back, sharply pinning Iris to his body. The crossbreed let go, compulsively, startled. He couldn't understand this longing he felt, the stirring in his body.

There were faint bruises on Iris's neck, small red crescent moons marking where his fingernails had almost pierced the tender skin.

Yet at the same time, he felt Iris let go of him as well. He felt the sharp burning sensation in his scalp, knew the small fingers had dug into his flesh all the same.

Iris slipped down, slowly pulling away from the other's body. With a half-suppressed shudder, the boy drew up into himself, arms wrapped around his legs.

"...I...ris?"

Valkyre's voice came out in a hoarse croak. His body was trembling, his skin tingling. "What is-?"

"-Now."

Iris's word was a gasp, sudden and sharp. Valkyre blinked in response, brows drawing close. "...What?"

"The... dragon. Valkyre, finish..."

Iris turned around. His eyes were large, expression forced, possibly painful. Valkyre was shocked by the emotion he was seeing there, by the way the boy was biting at his bottom lip, eyebrows crunched, small hands trembling.

"Please."

The crossbreed took the boy into his arms. He felt Iris breathe in a long, slow shudder, felt the small heart somewhere down inside beating, faint and irregular. He closed his eyes, and he could feel what Iris was; alien, in a sense. Strange, changed, different. A piece of glass, swirled and whorled, but starting to crack, brittle and frail, splinters running through the clear body. An amorphous shape, its innards pushing and heaving, each seeking to escape. And all contained in such of a frail, weak body, a puppet shape unable to sustain the sweeping, thick wings it was forced to bear. Wings with which he could never hope to fly; wings which only bore him down, made him fall, harder and faster, spinning in circles, ground rushing up, wind shrieking past his ears.

"O-Okay. All right."

Valkyre fumbled in his shirt, suddenly feeling a coldness at the pit of his stomach, fearing he'd find nothing, fearing that somewhere along the line, he'd lost this thing that he'd once hated, which he now needed so badly, somehow.

The pen was still there, simple and silent, like a pooling shadow.

Valkyre's fingers moved as if of their own volition. He pushed up the bottom of Iris's shirt, exposing the boy's thin, gaunt back and gentle curve of spine. Running his finger down the center of the other's back, Valkyre realized with a start that Iris had gotten even thinner than before; although his skin color was no different, there was no doubt that his body was weakening, the ribs starting to show through the skin and the torso so narrow it was almost inhuman.

Valkyre pressed the flat of his palm to the boy's back, feeling the coldness through his fingertips, knowing that Iris felt his warmth. High up to the right of his hand, at the top of the shoulder blade, the edges of the wolf's jaws showed, opened as if about to sing, about to howl, to sing to the moon. A corner of the bat's wing tip peeked out through the bunched-up folds of the boy's shirt, up to the left. With all of these tattoos, these seals... the only space remaining was the one Valkyre had dreaded to bring himself upon; the open expanse of the boy's back and shoulders. Although he didn't want to, the

crossbreed could already see the pattern engraved into his own flesh, the twin demon wings rising high, curling elegantly around his shoulder blades, talons tipped and curved, webbed membranes drawn in smooth folds.

“Dragon,” he muttered to himself, under his breath. Dragon, and...

“...Phoenix.”

Valkyre began. Under his left palm, he could feel Iris’s body trembling, shaking. He himself couldn’t quite lose completely the sensation that had just so recently come over him, the burning fire, the ripple like the first gust of a storm over the glassy surface of a lake.

His hands moved on, ignoring his thoughts. The dragon’s head formed, a sharp, angular shape with long, elegant forked horns, the pen effortlessly depicting the fiery, twisting mane, curving around in quick, fast strokes to form the claws, the arched and elegant body, the sleek muscle and smooth scales. Its long, winding tail became a feather, flaring into fire. The phoenix began then; a thin, curved beak, a sharp eye, a crest of feathers crowning and running along its long sleek neck, twisting until it met the huge, spiraling wings, layered in feathers, sweeping down into the flow of the tail, the feathers long and thin, tipped in fire, speckled with ash.

As he worked, Valkyre recalled the legend and reality of what he was creating. Dragons and phoenixes were rare, oftentimes shrouded more in myth and belief than true physical claims. Dragons were ancient beings, wise above all others; phoenixes were immortal, rising again and again from the ash. Indeed, it seemed improbable at all for such creatures of myth to exist. Direct opposites, like fire and earth, light and...

Valkyre’s hands slowed, the pen lifting from its live canvas of skin. The crossbreed stared at his work. The dragon’s one wing was simple, folded and held near its side, talon curved inwards. However, the other wing rose at a sharp angle, flaring out across Iris’s right shoulder blade and even edging onto the boy’s side, the membrane meticulously detailed, edges frayed, the outline of bone clear through the tight fitting of skin, and the taloned tip...

The tip wasn’t right. It wasn’t the hooked tip of a dragon.

It was the straight, sharp tip of a demon’s wing.

Valkyre’s hand moved on. He knew there was no changing what he had done, no erasing and starting over. In a way, this was as it should have been. On the other side of the boy’s shivering back, the full picture was already taking shape. Even as Valkyre’s hand moved in fast, short strokes and painstakingly found the texture and detailing to the feathers, the angel wing was already there, furled from the phoenix’s shoulder, its other wing smaller, more restrained, bent back just out of reach of the dragon’s claws.

The angel wing was light, done with the slightest touch of ink to flesh. The feathers were soft and smooth, long and thick, curling and spinning about the left side of the boy’s back. They were turned to gray by Iris’s skin, as if frozen in stone. Valkyre’s constantly-moving hand soon added quick swiping lines, giving the wing depth and layer after layer of feathers, the inner ones small and fat, the outer long and angular, sweeping in gentle strokes over the expanse of the boy’s back.

Angel and demon.

Dragon and phoenix.

The ageless and the immortal. And yet...

Staring at his own handiwork, Valkyre felt a cold pit of emptiness open in his stomach, felt a hard lump of uneasiness settle in the back of his throat, felt the heavy plunge into fear.

If he had just sealed away the dragon and the phoenix, then... what did that do to Iris? Had the boy ever been immortal in the first place? After all, how old... was Iris?

By sealing everything away... what would happen to Iris’s lifespan? And...

...What had Iris become, now?

Valkyre felt as if his body were frozen. How much did Iris know? Why did he have him do this?? To achieve what purpose, in the end...??

The pen slipped from his fingers, landing on the ground with a hollow clunk, rolling slightly. Valkyre didn't bother to pick it back up. His hands had pulled back from the boy's body, fingers trembling. This sensation, this feeling...

Iris turned to face him, eyes hidden at first, gaze cast down.

"...Iris?"

The boy looked up, and Valkyre felt his hands fall limp to the ground.

Iris was smiling, lips trembling, small hands clenched. A drip splattered on the back of his hand, rolling down to stain the dusty earth a dark brown, almost like black, like blood, like shadows. Another drip followed, landing on the boy's bare knee, rolling and slipping down over the pale gray skin.

Iris was crying.

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AN: Sorry about the last chapter title, guys. :D

Anyway! A nice long chapter, yes?? Yes???

...Because I'm a-gonna be not working on Iris for all of about a week or two, while I cram for AP's. Sorry.

;A; But, I've got Calc BC and APES, so it's... it's hard... ;A;

Please forgive me. Sorry. AP EnviroSci testing is done by May 15, so I PROMISE PROMISE to get back to it after, okay???

Thanks, guys, for everything. Hope you guys are liking Iris!

I recently realized that Iris is rather flat and amateuristic. Along the way, Iris-kun was supposed to start acting a bit more... individual and outspoken, but by the time I'd firmly established Iris's character... well, he goes away. >>; And hence I kinda didn't do too good a job there. Hoo well.

Hope you guys still approve. Thank you. ;D

Promise! Goin' to the end! XC

63 - Sky

?Iris

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It had taken Valkyre a long time to pin down the word. He'd searched through his mind for the simple syllables, dark violet eyes open yet seeing little, lips brushing the boy's hair. Iris lay pressed against his body, curled in his lap. Valkyre kept his one arm wrapped around the boy's lightweight frame, hand resting on the opposite shoulder, feeling the boy's frail chest rise and fall with each slow, faint breath. He felt a shudder run through his body, like hot, muted fire.

Human.

That was the word.

Valkyre squeezed his eyes shut momentarily, doing his best to ignore the flare of boiling blood through his chest and abdomen. It didn't matter what happened to him any more. It was only... distance.

Unrelated, a thing of the past, a thing of the future. A pain he could deal with later, when the time came for it. When Iris... when everything had settled and resolved itself into matters he could understand again, into shades of black and white.

Valkyre knew that things were coming to an end.

He just didn't know how.

"Iris."

He dropped his head, let his cheek press to the boy's crown, feeling the solid bone of the skull through the tangled gray hair. Iris's small hand, resting on the crossbreed's knee, twitched slightly in response. Valkyre found the fingers of his free hand running through the boy's mussed hair, slowly pulling through the knotted ends.

"Tell me. Why are you here? ...What do you want?"

Listening to his words hanging in the silence, Valkyre felt the hints of a rueful smile tug at his lips. All this time, he had never really known. He had never truly found out what it was Iris had wanted. Did he simply wish for silence, for solitude? For meaning, reason, a purpose? For...

Valkyre paused, blinking. He remembered. He remembered a room, long ago, and a young, gray-stained boy sitting slumped on cold stone, back to a shelf empty of books. A night without a breeze, a velvet curtain and broken glass.

It was the second time he'd ever laid eyes on Iris.

And yet, the memory was clear. And Valkyre remembered what Iris had said.

"...Iris?"

The boy shifted, slightly. He made something of a 'hm' sound, more so felt than heard through Valkyre's body. Iris's hand dropped from the crossbreed's knee, running down along his calf, then stopping abruptly.

Valkyre felt his blood run cold.

Iris's hand rested on the guardless hilt of the blade sheathed to the side of his boot. The boy's fingers absent-mindedly rubbed over the worn, smoothed leather of the hilt, a single thin blue vein shifting underneath the skin of the back of his hand, rising and falling, vanishing beneath the surface only to appear again, a gentle pull and tug.

"Iris." Valkyre's voice was sharp and almost harsh, the crossbreed's arm raising, hand out as if to

touch him, or to stop him. Iris glanced back over his shoulder at the other, gray eyes hollow. He smiled, gently, and his hand fell away.

...Death.

Iris had once asked for death, had once risen to the softly breathed word like a soundless moth, face tilted back, eyes closed, expression utterly at peace, lips mouthing the words...

"...Iris? What are you..."-

Valkyre cut off abruptly, head snapping up. A rustle broke the thick silence of the air, a shape shifting in the muted, blending colors. Night was falling, and the clouds were skudding away.

Corryn stood at the edge of the grove, awkward on his two feet, one tanned hand gripping the flaking bark of a nearby tree as if in need of support. When he stepped forward, it was in quick and decisive movements, thought Valkyre noticed the slightest unevenness in his gait. A step before them, he stopped, staring down through the cropped and ragged tangle of oily black hair. Corryn cracked a smile, the whites of his teeth sharp against the black shadows and hair framing his face.

"Hello, archangel."

Rather abruptly, he dropped down into a squat, wrists on his knees, balanced on the balls of his feet. Corryn's gaze ran from up to down and back up again, settling on Valkyre's wary face. He spoke through dry lips, words barely above a whisper.

"Tell me, Valkyre. What are you doing?"

The crossbreed blinked back, but held his tongue. ...After all, what had he to say?

He wasn't doing anything. He was sitting here, waiting. Anticipating. Hesitating.

Corryn made a 'tsk'ing sound, scoffing. He leaned in closer, one hand pressed to the ground, close enough for Valkyre to see the individual hairs on his eyelashes, to count the specks of black scattered around the molten-gold pupils. Corryn blinked, like eclipsing the sun. In the darkness, his eyes glowed with a brightness whose source the crossbreed could not find.

"Let's put it this way. What are you going to do, archangel?"

Valkyre opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words came out. After all, what was he to do?

This entire time, Valkyre had played on the defensive side. He'd sat and he'd waited, he'd fled and he'd hidden himself and Iris, seeking only to escape all those who sought out the boy. He'd played the part of a protective guardian, following wherever Iris led, stumbling along blindly.

Valkyre had not minded. He had not cared. He would follow Iris to the ends of the earth, to whatever final ending awaited them. He would do it all willingly, and yet...

If Iris wished to die... Valkyre was not sure he would-

"Will you?"

Corryn peered closely, words mirroring the crossbreed's thoughts as if he were speaking them aloud.

"Would you let him die? Would you go against his will? ...Would you kill him?"

Valkyre felt a growl begin low in his throat. He made a move as if to push the other away, and Corryn teetered back on his heels, elbows on his thighs, shoulders hunched. He was still grinning.

"Valkyre." His words, however, were serious, and his eyes sharp and narrowed.

"You're not bound to him, you know. You shouldn't be. If you're going to do something, if you're going to save him, doom him, kill him, whatever you want... Just make sure you're doing it for yourself."

Corryn smirked, nodding slightly.

"I realized that, Valkyre. I realized that I don't need him any more. I don't need anything."

He paused, rocking forward again on his heels. Corryn's eyes had softened, somewhat, gaze cast down. This time, when he spoke, his words were almost muffled, nearly inaudible.

"I... I'm not here for you. Or Iris. But... you better not stop him. You better not..."

Corryn looked up, and Valkyre could see it in his eyes. He could see the imploring, the fear. He could see the fragile resolve the other had scrounged up and shaped into a weak, paper-thin frame, as if to

block out old feelings and severed ties.

He saw the plea in those pale amber eyes, saw the fingers curl and relax, tense.

Valkyre said nothing, but he lowered his hand, letting his arm fall limply to the side.

Corryn reached over, slowly, hesitantly. His fingernails were black with dirt, chewed and torn. His hand was smeared with soil and dust and riddled with old, faint scars that stood out light against his dark, dark skin.

Corryn pressed his hand lightly to Iris's forehead, fingers brushing away the long gray hair, thumb running along the edge of scalp. The touch was gentle, soft, and tentative, as he were afraid of breaking skin, bruising flesh. It was an awkward gesture, yet at the same time, it was infinitely delicate, almost affectionate.

Iris's eyes fluttered, then opened. The boy blinked once, slowly, then smiled.

Valkyre did not move. As if he'd lingered too long, Corryn suddenly snatched his hand back, almost roughly, and stepped backwards, hopping to his feet. He stood again, slightly unsteady, one arm out as if to seek support, forgetting that he was, perhaps, originally meant to be a human and not some beast crawling along the ground.

His eyes were hidden by his hair, and before the crossbreed could catch the other's gaze, Corryn had turned away, head tilted back, staring somewhere up into the sky.

Valkyre's eyes followed, and for the first time, he saw how much the world around them had changed as dusk had faded to night.

High up in the sky, shuddering into life, stars burned themselves into the canopy of midnight blue, tiny pinpricks of light scattered over the vast expanse of sky, dense as a field of grass, unmarred by clouds or fog.

Valkyre had seen stars before. He had seen the full moon, high from the rooftops of a city, with thick and sluggish clouds rolling past, a siren wailing below.

But he had never seen a night sky like this. He had never before seen the milky way, a brushstroke of pure white light and emerald greens and dark, soft blues fading to cool violet. He had never realized that the whole sky had remained right where it was, above the smoke and the smog, out of sight, but so closely within reach.

"It's time, Valkyre."

It was all Corryn said. Out on the fringes of the clearing, Caerwyn appeared like a shadow, dark on dappled darkness, spear in hand.

Corryn paused, then looked back. The scars stood out on his back, illuminated by starlight, sharp and jagged, rippling along his back. His lips moved, the single word more like a breath slowly exhaled, silent, hardly stirring air that had come alive at night, air reaching up to a sky soaked with stars.

"Go."

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AN: ...Saying sorry wouldn't cut it, would it?? /. \

Anyway.... ...I'm sorry. :duck: It took me forever to even try to get anything written. And I've been in a slump. And lazing about.

I still can't quite come up with the whole storyline/ending/knocking about of remaining characters and whatnot. I'm trying. (This is why I don't create so many characters!! They all converge when I don't want them to, or else they're left unfinished~ XC)

Anyway. Anyway anyway. Almost done. I'm not stopping now. No way.

I'm sorry if my writing is crap lately. My enthusiasm for Iris... well, it's not so much enthusiasm. It's just... a general feeling. I've got so much behind me, and when I look back and compare or read over, I can't

seem to match the style, and I can't seem to make things sound as well... I dunno, I've lost some of my focus somewhere along the line. There are so many things I want to fix.

Oh yes, and this is my final decision. Despite the cheesiness of that whole star shebang (sorry) I've decided to do the conclusion at night. Yupyup. :> Take that.

...I hope it'll work out okay. It took me a while to decide on this. (Not like you can tell, anyway... ..no one notices these things in a written story... :huddle in corner:)

Anyway. I'M BACK ON IRIS and I SWEAR I'll finish it. A chapter a week, at the very least. I SWEAR. Thank you everybody!!!

64 - Look

?Iris

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Corryn paused, glancing upwards at the sky through the mottled shadows cast by the wizened, bitter-dry leaves of the trees above. Beyond them, the tiny specks of light seemed to shift and shrink and grow before his eyes, some made waxy and thick by passing smears of leftover cloud.

Stars.

Corryn scoffed quietly under his breath, wry grin twitching at his lips. He remembered an old illustration from a time he could no longer recollect, of tipped yellow shapes thick and fat across a dark blue sky. It was false, just as everything else from his past life was false. A lie, an illusion, a fading gray-stained memory in a senile old mind, a story played by lips, distorted beyond reality, beyond recognition or truth. Nothing mattered now. Iris could choose to live, or he could choose to die. The world could groan and sigh and weep and end, and it would not matter.

Corryn no longer wanted to know his real name. He did not wish for company or reason or retribution. Nor, for that matter, for death.

He was fine with solitude, with the singular reason for living: nothing.

And, of course, to see things through.

He'd known, of course. He'd known all along, somewhere inside, that Iris was nothing but a dream, an illusory creature he could touch but never hold. He knew the boy never truly listened to him, never really saw him, always looking over his shoulder, peering through the tangled mess of hair and weak smiles and golden eyes, searching for a reflection.

And that was all right. Corryn had let him go, pulling himself away, closing his eyes and turning his gaze aside, knowing that if he could only see the gray and muddled world again, he'd be able to stand on his own. And he had.

But that didn't stop him from sticking around.

Valkyre... the pure angel with his tainted blood, the archangel staggering up from the fall, with the violet eyes that pierced like jagged, steel-sharp ice, yet that softened to warmth and heat, burning up embers like a newborn fire kindling to life from the ashes and bitter dust of shattered glass and corroded steel and stone...

Valkyre was one to keep his eye on. Corryn had given up his duty and turned it over to the angel, but as to whether or not Valkyre would be able to live up to the task he was presented... Time would tell. Short, fleeting time. All the time in the world, in the next few hours. That was all that was left of the world, after all.

Corryn closed his eyes briefly, turning his head away from the sky above. Regardless, he still had things to accomplish. Corryn darted through the forest quickly, brittle leaves crackling as they were turned to dust beneath his heels and palms. He could taste the faint, dull metallic edge in the air, along with the scent of tepid blood.

Rheis had no aura, but that didn't make him impossible to track. And with the way he moved now, in staggering, blundering steps, it was easy for Corryn to locate the dark-blooded twin.

He found Rheis slumped against the base of a brittle, stiff tree, head down, dark hair falling over his face, strands catching in the corners of his lips. His clothes were torn and uncared for, the pale skin

beneath almost glowing in the darkness, bruised and graying. When the dark-blooded male looked up, his eyes were a flat black that showed no hint of recognition or realization. He was already dead.

Corryn grinned to himself, taking in the sorry sight. The faintest light of the stars glinted off the wires embedded in the skin, sharp and harsh like torn nails or scraped skin.

When he spoke, the words were monotone and bland, yet weak and tremulous, like a frightened child finding its voice.

“...reason.”

Corryn blinked, shifting forward slightly. Rheis turned his blank, black-eyed stare to the other, gazing at him yet seeing nothing.

“...What... reason...? reason...”

Corryn sat back on his haunches, wetting his lips. His fingers scratched at a small nick in his ankle, knuckles brushing against crusty and dry earth.

“None,” he replied, calmly.

Rheis blinked, twice. Slowly, his lips moved, voice dry and devoid of emotion. Yet his eyebrows drew in slightly, the corners of his mouth drawing down.

“...reason,” he repeated. “Reason for...”

Corryn sighed, pushing himself forward.

“There is no reason, you fool. No meaning. No purpose. ...Of course...”

He paused, seeing the other shifting his body slowly, rising, pale hands tensing, mouth setting into a thin line, expression empty.

“Of course... you wouldn't understand.”

For such of a broken being, Rheis moved fast in the dark, blending and pushing forth from the shadows like an extension of it, the visible parts of pale skin becoming a glowing blur. Corryn dodged the first blow, grabbing the other by the wrist and arm and slamming him down to the ground, pulling Rheis off-balance. The dark-blooded male twisted around, feet scrabbling for purchase, finding it in the dry and shriveling roots of a tree, pushing himself forward and against the other.

Corryn hissed in annoyance, jumping clear, ducking to the side of a tree as the other followed, pale hands lashing out, chipped fingernails catching a sliver of light, faint and dull like dusty plastic.

The next blow missed entirely, ripping up the brittle fibers of a tree trunk, leaving surprisingly heavy gashes in the stiff wood, splinters flying. Corryn darted low, aiming for the legs, swipes just barely missing as the other leapt up into the air, Corryn's hands catching only at a frayed piece of clothing, ripping apart easily between his fingers.

He heard the rustle of leaves and small branches snapping, and grinned to himself.

The pain was nothing, pushed to the back of his mind easily, the wet sound somewhat like splitting cloth muffled in the air, stifled by the silence.

Then there was the sudden ‘hmmph,’ and a sound like a blunt blade biting into soft wood.

Corryn straightened himself slightly, though he remained in a half-crouch, one hand pressed flat to the ground in support. He willed the bones and joints to cooperate, withdrawing and pulling back slowly, folding in towards his body again. Rheis was brought down as well, though Corryn's bone-like limb held not the strength to hold him steady, and so the dark-blood's body fell with a heavy thump to the ground, stirring up dust that clung to the dark blood seeping from his split skin.

Corryn took a half-step closer, smiling, breathing in the clouded taste of death and leaking blood. He stared down at the limp body, at the pale bone that had run through Rheis's lower torso, exiting mid-back. The dark-blooded male was gasping for breath, in slow and sudden intakes and exhales, eyes wide and vacant. His blood was slicked black in the darkness, like ink spilling over his pale skin and staining into the torn shreds of clothing.

Corryn cocked his head to one side, studying the other's ragged breathing and twitching limbs, black

hair loosening and falling over the expressionless face. After a while longer, he withdrew the limb, watching the other's back arch as Rheis's body inevitably clung to the bone, then finally succumbed to gravity and fell back with a dull thud to the ground.

Corryn closed his eyes, tilting his head back and letting the hair fall away from his face. He let the limbs around him slowly withdraw, folding over on into themselves until they slid back beneath his skin, vanishing. He didn't... want to have to use them again. He didn't want to be a monster, a something nameless nothing crawling around in the dark. He didn't want the pain, or the broken skin, or the reminder of what his body was doing to itself, how the wounds were so slow to heal now and how the scabs never seemed to go away.

He opened his eyes to a clear night sky and silence, to his own familiar body, frail and yet tough, wiry yet fragile, like empty eggshells.

He heard a broken, quavering breath to his side, almost inaudible. Corryn lowered his gaze, then quickly stepped over to the body lying on the ground, crouching close, rocking on his heels, peering down into unseeing eyes and slightly parted lips through which a thin trickle of blood ran along the side of the dark-blood's face, drawing a black line over the skin, bleeding into the edges of the embedded wires. Corryn reached out a hand like a curious child, hesitant and slow, touching the cool and smooth skin, picking strands of hair away from Rheis's eyes and mouth. His fingers left behind a silvery, quivering line of thread, glimmering in the faint light.

Rheis's staggering breath turned into a weak hacking cough, mouth parting and closing, still forming the shapes to the same words, thoughtless.

"Hmn."

He wasn't sure what whim it was, but Corryn sighed and moved, sitting down behind the dark-blood's head. When he touched the other's head, he was surprised at how thin and light the hair was, at how tender the flesh was beneath the scalp, feeling the round shape of the head and the cool skin devoid of warmth. Slowly, carefully, with a tender touch he didn't know he still had, Corryn pushed the other's head up over his crossed legs, tilting back the face, brushing away the dark and unkempt hair.

"Look." His voice was an unnatural breathy whisper, but he no longer cared.

Upside-down, he saw Rheis blink, black eyes widening then refocusing, emptily reflecting the faint splatter of stars as white dabs of smudged light on his black eyes.

Corryn didn't expect the dark-blooded male to understand. He didn't care. He wondered if Rheis could still feel the warmth emanating up from his ankles and palms and calves, if he could feel the lightness of the air more brushing against his skin than weighing down, if he could understand this one tiny detail to life and let go of his pointless search for meaning in a mental, digital world of fragments and wisps of consciousness.

Corryn tilted his head back as well and stared into the empty abyss of the sky, body relaxing, breaths slowing as he sat back and waited for the end.

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AN: Yeah, and update. ...I promised to do a chapter a week, and then I remembered that I'm going away to Canada soon for a week plus, and after that, I'm juggling between all these summer programs, so, uhh... I kinda actually realized that I have no time for anything soon. D:

Anyway, another chapter. I was bored so, yeah, I did one for Corryn. And because it's not fair to make Valkie-baby deal with everything, ne? ;D

I'm hoping my writing is still okay. It's a little rushed and it's hard for me to find time for all this, but~ hope it's still decent.

I'll try to fit in at least one or two more chapters before I leave on the 27th, 'kay?

Thanks everybody!!

65 - Moment

?Iris

+--

“What... is this place?”

Caerwyn paused, glancing back. His grip on the spear in his hand loosened briefly, then tightened again. He turned and continued to move forward, body rocking to match the silent, delicate steps his lower half took.

“Human.” Caerwyn glanced at the tall statues of stone, the slabs beginning to tilt and crumble under the soil giving beneath their bases and the slow, steady erosion of the earth. In the darkness, they looked like two-dimensional shadows rising from the ground, insubstantial yet insidious, like the closing fangs of a maw rising from the earth.

“Humans made it,” he replied, carefully stepping aside for a toppled, crusted slab of stone roughly hewn into the shape of what could’ve been a cross, or could’ve been a bird in flight, though the body seemed too elongated for that.

Valkyre stared down at the ground, at the green and brown stains where a vine had once crawled over the stone, then withered and died, leaving behind the unyielding rock.

“...A graveyard,” he said. He caught Caerwyn’s eye, but the other’s expression was blank in the dark, wide eyes. Caerwyn probably did not know what a graveyard was.

Valkyre felt the light, gentle tug of a hand in his. He glanced to Iris, who smiled with his eyes and pulled him along. Valkyre hesitated before following. ...He didn’t want to move ahead. He stared at the boy’s small hand in his own, pale fingers smudged and dirty, a small cut showing over the knuckle that Valkyre had never noticed before.

What was Iris doing? What did he want, stumbling towards the end? Was he still searching for a reason, for a purpose? For meaning to his life? For death?

Valkyre didn’t want Iris to die. But he remembered the young boy, curled in on himself, knees under his chin, crying without tears.

He didn’t want Iris to be hurt, to be sad. He wanted to see Iris smile, to know the sound of his laughter. Would dying make Iris happy...?

Valkyre gasped suddenly and yanked hard on the boy’s arm, dragging him back. Up ahead, Caerwyn skidded to an abrupt stop as well, spear raised defensively, body tense and poised.

Crouched atop a stone monument roughly depicting a human figure emerging from a flutter of stone wings and cascading water, Raguel stared down at the three, off-set eyes glinting in the dark, lips pulled back in a smile.

“Valkyre.” His voice was low and sensuous, as if laughing somewhere beneath the surface. “Will you still choose to run the world into ruin?”

Raguel stood up, fluid and smooth in the motion, his black hair and clothes wrapping him like a shadow in the darkness and the still air, only a silhouette against the dark gradient blue of the night sky, peppered with stars.

Raguel laughed, bitterly. “You don’t know what you’re doing, Valkyre. Admit it. You’re clueless.”

In one liquid movement, he dropped to the ground, rising again in an instant, smooth and languid, ignoring Caerwyn as the boy tipped the end of his spear towards him, poised to strike.

“Valkyre. Let me explain.”

The crossbreed backed half a step, boots digging for purchase. Iris stepped back further, hiding himself behind Valkyre’s outstretched arm. The crossbreed shook his head.

“No. I will do what I believe to be right. And I won’t allow you to hurt him.”

They all stood still, Valkyre’s violet eyes locked on Raguel’s unmatched yellow and red, neither moving.

Around them was only the silence, dragging through the void. And then Valkyre smiled.

“And besides... you still have to answer for your actions.”

Raguel’s eyes, for the briefest moment, registered confusion.

Asher, however, did not allow the moment to go to waste. He’d traveled silently, a shadow on a landscape of shadows, from cross to stone to dusty ground, flitting in and out of view. His blow caught Raguel squarely on the back and shoulders, catching the other entirely off-guard. The two vanished into the shadows between the monuments, Asher emerging for just an instant before disappearing into the forest of cold shadow, stone, and silence.

“Come on!”

Valkyre wasted no time, grabbing Iris by the hand and guarding the boy closely, Caerwyn falling into step at his side, eyes constantly alert, glancing behind them often, though there was no trace of any pursuer.

Valkyre’s mind had already moved ahead to other matters. Dodging a slab of stone leaning precariously against another, he tightened his grip on Iris’s hand. Asher’s appearance meant only one thing to Valkyre.

And then, abruptly, they were there. The stone statues cleared and fell back to either side of him, and Valkyre found himself in a wide clearing, no trees blocking his view, the last fading hints of a light blue sky edged sharply by the silhouettes of the mountains far before him, stretching up in undulating waves to the horizon.

And in the center of the small field, a lone figure, his gray-streaked hair distinguishing in the blacks and dark blues of the landscape, though hardly as obtrusive as the folded, clean white wings arching from the figure’s back, glowing in the darkness as if emanating a light pure and clear as bells, as stars drifting from the sky.

Valkyre pushed Iris behind him, motioning. He glanced over long enough only to ensure that the boy was safe under Caerwyn’s care, pulled back until they were stepping into the edges of the graveyard again, stone columns rising to either side.

Valkyre stepped forward, closing the space between himself and the other.

Camael, for the first time, looked up. His face was lined and calm, expression peaceful, almost... happy.

“Valkyre.”

The crossbreed stiffened. His hand fell to his waist, fingers slipping down and slowly lifting at the hilt of a dagger, seeking reassurance from the softened, well-oiled leather bound to the handle.

Camael was smiling.

“What a shame.”

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AN: OH GAWD. D: You guys better be darn thankful for all this. XD; ...Well, guess this isn't so much. But! I'm updating, and TOMORROW. NO DELAYS, NO EXCUSES. I'VE ALREADY GOT THE CHAPTER DONE. D:

This is what my summer is turning into. One chore after another, one homework assignment on top of another.

...Oh, wait. I do this willingly. XD;

Anyway. Things are~ DUMDUMDUM! drawing to a close. Yeah. ...I'm sorry if some of the characters gets left out a little, but I've no choice. I can't squeeze them in anywhere else. (Like Asher...)

It turns out, I have too many 'good guys.' (laugh) Maybe I shouldn't have killed off Rheis like that... but, then again, he was turning senile. XD; (jk, jk)

...Still too many 'dark' and vampiric/demonic characters in my story, ne? Well, get ready for a dose of Angel! next chapter. ...No wait nobody likes those anymore, either. Hmmph.

Okay, I'm done. I'm happy, because I'm getting so much done. Root me on, guys!! Final stretch!! After a year and a half, and then some-!!! Thanks for everything!!

66 - Mortal

?Iris

+--

“What a shame, Valkyre.”

Camael was stepping forward, rapidly closing the distance between the two. Valkyre moved ahead as well, seeking to put more space and time between Camael and Iris, hoping it would make a difference. His hand tightened its grip around the hilt of the dagger, and the metal made a sound like tinkling silver as it was drawn from the sheath.

Camael stopped, abruptly. His face registered something akin to surprise, as if he'd somehow been taken aback by what the crossbreed had done.

“Valkyre.”

The other stood still, poised, arm up, dagger hilt almost touching his chest, blade exposed, dual pairs of wings folded around himself, protectively.

“Will you actually fight me? You know you can't win, Valkyre.”

Winning or losing. Valkyre couldn't help but smile faintly, ruefully, amazed that such of a situation's outcome could be described in such a way, parsed out into such classifications that did not apply. He didn't plan on losing, nor on winning. This wasn't about the stronger prevailing, or about who killed who.

It was for a young boy caught between worlds, a child with powers he'd never asked for, a catalyst for disaster or salvation, it no longer mattered which. It was for a boy with emotionless gray eyes and cold fingers, a boy who'd smiled and mouthed his name. It was for time, for precious time that slid by unobstructed by all the mortals caught in its path and wake, like pebbles thrown into a raging river.

All Valkyre wanted was time, and the chance to hold Iris safe against him, to feel the heart beating out its staccato rhythm, each pulse weaker than the one before... He wanted to see Iris's hair falling around his face, the thin line of ankle and wrist, the fingers cool like water, like stone or polished wood against his own flesh, pale like marble, like moonlight. He wanted to see the flutter of eyelashes, ignoring the gray eyes beneath. He wanted to see the slip of hair along the shoulder, the slightest blush and wetness of the lips. He wanted to see Iris smile, wanted to hear the boy laugh. He wanted to see the tears dripping down the boy's face, like crystal, like rain, purifying, sweet, clear and clean, symbolizing the boy's frailty, mortality... and humanity.

“Valkyre.”

The crossbreed brought his attention back, closing away all other thoughts. He would protect Iris, and that was all that mattered.

Camael spoke as if he had read his mind.

“You think you can save him, Valkyre?” He laughed, hoarse and sharp. Camael took a half-step closer, wings unfurling. The feathers slid over each other like ripples on a pond, flawless.

“You can't even save yourself, Valkyre!”

The crossbreed moved even before the last syllable had been uttered, streaking forward like a shadow, blade's edge flashing in the faint illumination. Camael met him with his feet even and braced, wings sweeping forward. Valkyre slashed at the sudden blinding sheet of white before his eyes, faltering. He felt the dagger's blade connect-

-And then immediately slip through, like penetrating a thin membrane of fabric only to find nothing underneath, like popping a bubble. Startled, he had barely the time to react and throw up an arm in defense before the other angel's wing slammed hard into his gut, sending him flying.

Valkyre thudded to the ground heavily, though his feet were already grasping for purchase, and he flipped over into a half-crouch, one hand pressed palm-down to the ground as he attempted to recover his breath.

"...You're right, Valkyre."

The crossbreed glanced up, pain lacing the action, making him wince. He could feel his demon wings twitching, almost spasmodically. The contact with the angel wing hurt through every inch of his body, and it set his demonic blood to boiling.

Camael kicked at the discarded dagger, the blade skidding in the dust.

"I'm not a real angel, Valkyre. I know that. But..."

Camael paused, and folded his wing over. Valkyre's eyes widened as he noticed the slash through the feathers, the angle at which his blade had cut in surely piercing bone and muscle alike. But there was no blood and no bone visible; the feathers around the wound were shapeless, ephemeral things, bobbing on an unfelt wind, slowly re-shaping themselves into feathers over the wound, which was closing in on itself. It was more like... a hologram correcting itself rather than mending flesh.

Valkyre swallowed dryly on nothing. Of course, Camael wouldn't be like a human, or like an angel.

What he'd done- however he'd done it- made him something completely different.

Valkyre rose slowly to his feet, hands falling to his sides. He still had another blade sheathed at his waist and a third strapped to his boot, but he knew he would not be using them.

"Valkyre. Wait."

The crossbreed blinked, confused. ...Wait? Camael wasn't the kind to show weakness, or to delay.

Of course not. Looking up, Valkyre saw the other was smiling, almost ruefully.

"Valkyre. You need me, and you know it."

The crossbreed felt his breath come out in a sharp exhale, felt the edges of his mouth pulling up in a wry grin. He knew Camael too well for this. He knew how Camael could manipulate words and feelings as well as the body, and he refused to accept.

"Tell me, Valkyre. Did it always take you this long to recover from such a simple blow?"

Valkyre hesitated. His mind ran blank.

"Did you always have such a hard time finding your balance? Did you ever before feel the pain in every nerve, in every fiber or your being?"

Valkyre bit at his bottom lip, squeezing his eyes shut for one brief, painful instant, hoping he could wipe away all the words, all the sensations he felt building up inside. He regretted the action immediately, the open display of weakness.

Camael had taken a step closer, hands outspread as if to welcome him.

"Do you know what's happening to you, Valkyre?"

"...Shut up."

Valkyre wiped at his mouth although there was nothing there, checking his gloved hand although he knew he would find nothing. He glared up at the other, tensing, wings spreading, aching for action, for flight.

"Valkyre"-

"Shut up!"

Valkyre dashed forward, wings spreading, sending him hurtling so fast over the ground his feet barely touched the dusty soil, hair whipping back from his forehead.

Camael, however, hardly moved. And as Valkyre slammed the whole of his body against the other, Camael shifted just slightly to the side, wings sweeping around. Valkyre's bare fist met nothing but a

swarm of feathers, and then, all too suddenly, he felt Camael's grip clamp down on his wrist, heavy as stone. He gasped aloud as he felt Camael effortlessly twist his entire body around, shoving him down towards the ground.

In the instant before he saw the white wing arch from the sky to slam into his body, he heard Camael's voice in his ear, heard the words that made no sense, though he understood them to the core of his being.

"You're dying, Valkyre."

He slammed to the ground heavily, crying out aloud as he heard a rib snap like a twig beneath the crushing weight of a wing that was still, undeniably, astral and artificial. The dust filled his vision and mouth, bitter and acrid on his tongue. He coughed, choking, bile rising up from an empty stomach, the pain excruciating. His demon blood was raging, and he watched as his vision bled into red, his heart thudding in his ears.

Valkyre tried to rise, but only gasped emptily as he felt the sole of a boot slam down into the center of his back, crushing him down against the ground.

"Valkyre."

He squeezed his eyes shut violently, not wanting to hear the words. The voice, the tone, all reminded him of himself, younger, defenseless, confused, hair and face streaked with blood. He didn't want to be chained by these words, by a familiar face he'd thought he'd left behind years ago.

"I can help you."

His hands were clenched in fists, his wings sprawled out in the dust and crumbling earth, like limp body parts he had no control over, that hardly belonged to him at all.

"You're dying, but I know how to save you."

Pain, echoing in every cell of his being, thudding through his head and in his ears, deafening, crushing, grinding him down deeper and deeper into the earth, swallowed up by stone.

"Valkyre."

His name, again and again. A name that had no meaning, that applied to some creature besides himself, someone- something- distant, faraway, a crumpled dream crushed in waking.

Camael was leaning down, boot digging down into the small of his back, wings masking the sky, painting the world above Valkyre white, as if it were day, as if there were clouds.

"I am not your enemy. You misunderstand. Don't you remember? I'm the one that kept you alive. Why would I want you to die?"

Movement, Camael bending over further, the heel now digging sharply into his body, Valkyre's one demon wing jerking in protest. There was the dulled sound of metal scraping over the crumbling earth, of grains of dusty soil falling away and being split aside.

Valkyre stared at the blade dangling from Camael's loose hand, the dulled metal glinting, for an instant showing him his own face- stained with dust, sweat streaking over his forehead, hair falling over his face, over...

Over eyes red like a demon's, rich as blood, hard as glass, deep as an abyssal chasm cut into the sky, centered in obsidian black, jet black, midnight black as no sky had ever before been.

And then the blade was out of sight, and Valkyre winced as he felt Camael's hand, large and warm, pressed to his shoulder, holding him, pinning him down.

"Let me save you, Valkyre. Trust me."

He felt the hand move from his shoulder, felt the strong fingers grab at his black, feathered wing, pulling it up roughly, the limb lifeless and limp, drooping.

Valkyre gasped for breath as he finally realized what the other was doing. He tried to move, but his actions were clumsy and delayed, his body refusing to react.

The blade bit deep into his wing, at the base, hacking through feather and muscle and tendon,

embedding itself into bone. Valkyre heard something snap.

He screamed. The sound burst from his lips painfully, scouring along his throat, his tongue tasting of bitter dust and his own hot, salty blood. He struggled, thrashing out blindly, kicking at nothing, wings fluttering limply. He felt Camael drop his one wing, grabbing for the other angel wing, felt the blade bite almost instantly into the muscle and bone.

The pain washed over him in waves, crippling him. It spread from his back like a fire, eating him up alive, charring his body, his skin, his flesh, his bones- all to cinders, aching and burning.

...Die. He was going to die. He felt the blood rushing through him, the blood that burned and soaked through onto his back, the source of the scalding fire. His own body, his own blood was killing him.

It wasn't Camael. It wasn't broken skin or blistering flesh. It was his own body, every cell and fiber of his being, slowly breaking away. It was himself, Valkyre, the paradox, the antithesis that would burn every drop of blood in his own veins dry, would crumble and decay and fall to pieces like the weathering stone, battered by wind and cold and heat. He wasn't just dying; he was killing himself. He was going to fall to pieces, he was going to shatter like glass, like water spilling onto the parched earth, splattering on stone, and then he would be gone and broken and then Iris-

He didn't know where the strength came from, or how he managed to still fuel his remaining energy into such of a decisive, careful blow. It felt more as if his body had moved of its own whim, the hot blood coursing through his body, reminding him of every nerve and inch of himself he still possessed in his own control. His demon wing, still unharmed, flared up from beside his body, snapping out so suddenly it took Valkyre's breath away, making him gasp aloud at the pain.

The blow caught Camael unawares, knocking him over onto the ground. Valkyre was already forcibly stumbling to his feet, coughing, gasping for breath, eyes squeezed shut against the pain that spiked through his body, threatening at each tiny motion to cripple him for good, bring him crashing back down to the ground.

A sharp, hoarse laugh broke Valkyre's broken, crashing gasps for air.

Camael rose quickly to his feet, wings spread, the dagger flashing in his hand, its metal washed in blood.

"Valkyre."

His smile was harsh, even as he leaned over, preparing to strike, to end it all.

"Give up."

His words were taunting, falling on Valkyre as heavily as physical blows. The crossbreed staggered, legs visibly shaking. Blood dripped and spilled onto the dusty ground, eaten up hungrily by the arid soil.

Valkyre could feel it seeping down his back, down even along his calves and into his boots.

"You poor, pitiful fool."

Valkyre blinked up through red eyes, Camael's face a blur, only his leering smile in focus, his white wings framing his body, forming a silhouette against the backdrop of night and shadow.

Valkyre swallowed hard, trying to hold himself still against a fresh wave of agony spilling over his body, threatening to make his legs crumple beneath him, his chest heaving. Pain, blossoming from his body like the petals of a flower, like spilling water, like... wings.

"You're already dead, Valkyre."

Camael moved, faster than any human should've. His arm flashed, the blade's honed tip pointing to Valkyre's chest, to his heart. The wings flared and folded, enveloping the form slashing towards him, clear like glass, white like clouds in the sky.

Valkyre did not care. He could die- he knew well that he was going to. But...

But he remembered the small face, the delicate curve of the mouth, the gleam of tears along soft, pale cheeks.

...He would not allow Camael to hurt Iris.

Valkyre did not so much move as he simply slumped, one leg half-giving out at the last second, his body dropping down. The knife's blade, carefully aimed for his heart, pierced deep into his body, through clothing and skin and flesh and muscle, grazing against bone. Valkyre hardly felt the pain. And against his shoulder, Camael's impetus petered out, the other slumping over, a startled gasp turning to a wet, racking cough, blood spilling over his lips.

It was not so much Valkyre's movement as Camael's own momentum that had finished the blow. The talon had carved through muscle and bone and organs alike, emerging through Camael's back for a good inch or so, the black spine of bone slicked in blood, the supporting bones near the talon half-crushed as they'd broken through the other's rib cage, ground together and dislocated terribly, though Valkyre hardly felt the pain.

He heard Camael gasp, hand loosening from its white-knuckled grip on the hilt of the dagger. Valkyre, somehow, managed to remain standing as he felt Camael tumble backwards and away, eyes hollow and dead already, body slipping almost gracefully from Valkyre's wing, falling down and losing all elegance as it slumped to the ground, rolling over.

The crossbreed's entire body heaved with each breath. He felt his hair drifting over his face, surprised that despite all the pain and the way his body trembled, his cheeks were still tickled by the passing strands. He was startled when he felt a coolness wash over his face, his hair blowing away suddenly, a few strands sticking to his forehead.

Valkyre lifted his head slowly, painfully.

A wind grazed over his cheeks, chilling the sweat on his brow, gently wiping the coarse dust from his lips and eyelashes. A wind blew over him, bringing with it a scent of something he did not recognize but felt as if he should, looking up into a sky whose stars were suddenly winking out, one by one, smothered in blues and roiling grays.

He felt blood dribbling down his chest, and only then did he recall the dagger Camael had buried into his flesh.

Slowly, as if he could still be intrepid of such a thing, he glanced down at himself. The blade was sunk deep, near up to the hilt in his body. Valkyre's fingers twitched, arm half-rising, almost falling back. He should be dead.

But the dagger was buried in his shoulder, just beneath his collarbone, a slight angling of the blade completely missing his heart, missing even his ribs.

Valkyre, stupidly, felt like laughing. He found control of his hand again, and gripped the blood-soaked handle of the dagger, gasping aloud at the pain it caused.

He wasn't sure then whether or not he'd even pulled the blade out. All he remembered was the sudden realization breaking over him like dawn along a distant horizon he was most likely never to see again, painful and brilliant, shedding away his layers of delicate, silk-thin blankets of reassuring shadow: the fact that it didn't even matter.

Because he was dying, if not already dead.

And then, the black of a night without stars swallowed him, and Valkyre felt himself fall into its soft embrace.

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AN: Hope this chapter was good. :3 Nobody likes Camael, but I hope it was still decent. (He seemed really villainous, didn't he? Yeah?)

Anyway. I'm sleepy now because I only got five hours of sleep last night, followed promptly by five hours of standing and bustling about feeling baby birdies. I need a nap.

One more chapter, and an epilogue to go. Thanks guys!! Love you all. :)

67 - Rain

?Iris

+--

An eternity might have passed, or it could have simply been an instant.

All Valkyre knew was that the fleeting bliss of unconsciousness passed in a haze, and he was jarred awake by the burning pain that ached through every joint of his body, along with the incessant irritation, brinking on painful, of something kicking at him.

Valkyre forced his eyes open, gasping. The motion was accompanied by a renewed burst of pain, mainly from his shoulder, which was covered in slowly browning, still wet blood.

“-Up. Get up.”

He blinked at the voice. For an instant, his unwounded hand reached out in a weak, nudging gesture, searching. The events in his mind were beginning to solidify, though a fading headache denied him clarity.

“I...ris...?”

Something rapped sharply at the side of his head, and Valkyre winced. He groaned faintly under his breath as he tried to orient himself, slowly attempting to push himself up on his one good arm.

Abruptly, a black shape darted over his face, inches away. Dark, ragged hair hung down around Corryn’s face, the golden eyes showing through sharp and glinting, edged in black.

“Get up, Archangel.”

Corryn’s face vanished again. Valkyre slowly sat up, fighting a wave of nausea, then glanced over to where the other squatted next to him, hands curled, wrists resting on his knees.

“What...?”

Valkyre began to raise a hand to his head, his temples throbbing, but stopped with a sharp gasp as pain laced up his arm, fire spiking from the wound in his shoulder. He felt the sickness overwhelm him then. He leaned over, gasping, heaving dryly, though his stomach had nothing to give up. Camael... ..Camael was dead. He’d killed him. He’d...

At his side, Corryn growled and nudged him, leaning over close.

“Get up, Valkyre. It’s not done yet.”

Valkyre took in a shuddering breath, then glanced around the clearing. Nothing but dark shapes over a dark field, the sky above like a void, empty and black, full of roiling grays and blues that resolved themselves into no shapes at all. Valkyre wasn’t even sure if he was seeing them at all, or simply dreaming.

Slowly, Valkyre pulled up his legs underneath himself, hands flat on the ground for support. His back screamed in resistance, every movement painful even though his wings had withdrawn, most likely as soon as he’d lost consciousness, as his body was no longer able to support them. He hesitated, catching his breath.

“Where’s... ..Iris?”

Corryn snarled. “You’re supposed to find him, Archangel. And you’d better hurry up.”

Valkyre, oddly, felt a wry grin pull at his lips. Find Iris... again? He could do that. He could. He’d killed Camael already. But... he was so tired.

The crossbreed tilted his head back, staring up at the hollow absence of sky, devoid of stars to mark

their distance and loneliness in the world, to ensure their valiant, pathetic hopes. Valkyre felt an instant of vertigo, as if he needed only to let go of the ground and he would fall up into that sky, stripping away all final remainders of a bleak and gray world of dust, sand, and ashes, of wilted trees and crinkled, dried leaves and bare rock baking under a scalding, relentless sun.

Out of nowhere, he felt a chuckle shake his frame, fingers clenching and unclenching in the thin film of dust and bloody soil beneath his hands.

What did it matter? Camael was dead. Was there any reason for him to live, now? As long as Iris was safe, couldn't he be allowed to drift away, peacefully, of his own free will? Before his own body turned on him fully, devouring flesh and bone, breaking skin and spilling blood, this blood that would neutralize itself, burrowed deep in his veins, in the roots of his wings? He wanted... to be done. He was tired of it all. He wanted to die with this world, before seeing the end, before he found himself left alone and bereft in a world without meaning, on dry caked earth that split and creased beneath his body. He wanted to...

Corryn struck Valkyre hard to the side of his head, almost sending the crossbreed tumbling back down onto the ground.

"What the-??"

Corryn scowled, leaning close, face inches from the other as Valkyre struggled to right himself, good hand against the side of his head.

"Stop it."

Valkyre blinked, staring blankly into golden eyes ringed in black. Corryn flashed his teeth, almost sneering.

"You're a bigger fool than I ever imagined, Valkyre. I know what you're thinking."

Valkyre dropped his gaze down to the ground, reining back his anger.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, controlling his breaths. What was Corryn doing, anyway? Why was he even here?

"I can tell. It's in your eyes."

Valkyre glanced back up. The black-ringed eyes revealed nothing to him, full of simple emotions, liquid and alive, sharp and cool.

"I know what you'll say. You'll help Iris, even if you're hurt. You'll get up even if I push you down. But, Archangel, why? Tell me why."

Valkyre laughed, weakly. He hadn't meant to, but he did.

"Why?" His voice was quavery, unsteady and barely audible. "I... I don't know why. I-I don't. I just... I want... to protect him. Iris. I want to... help him. Because... he's been hurt. So much. And he..." Valkyre knew he was babbling, and he cut back on his words, teeth gritted, staring down at the gray, colorless ground beneath him, hands blending into the darkness.

"I... I'd give anything for Iris. I don't care if I die, i-if... as long as I knew that he would be"-

"Idiot."

Corryn cuffed him again, this time on the shoulder. Valkyre turned on him suddenly, fed up, snarling.

"Don't touch me!"

Corryn only made a face, standing up suddenly. Valkyre, still sitting on the ground, was forced to lean back to watch him.

"You're a fool, Valkyre. You actually believe that man's words??" He crossed his arms, an odd gesture coming from him, mouth set in a scowl. "Don't ever believe anybody. You think you're going to die? You idiot."

Corryn dropped his arms suddenly, as if unused to the gesture. He dropped back down again to the ground, leaning so close Valkyre could feel the other's warm breath puffing over his voice, smelling of, oddly, nothing.

"Everybody dies, Valkyre. But only when they want to. And nobody wants to die, unless they're stupid."

You think you were born just to die for Iris? They loved you. You're the archangel, Valkyre. You're not dying."

Valkyre stared back emptily. Corryn's logic was broken, too simplistic for reality. He wanted to explain this, and yet, his mouth would not open.

"I realized that, Valkyre. With the light one and the dark one, and with Iris. I realized that."

Corryn paused, then grinned, flashing sharp white teeth.

"I don't need Iris any more, because I'm not going to die, Valkyre. I'm going to live forever."

Valkyre blinked back emptily. He realized that the boy before him now was a different Corryn than the one curled up underground, eyes settled forever on a boy of gray that stared back but never saw him at all. Corryn had changed.

Abruptly, Corryn stood again, and Valkyre noticed for the first time how steadily he'd accomplished the unfamiliar gesture. Corryn's arms hung limply at his sides now, and he was staring up at the sky, head tilted back, eyes nearly hidden behind the thick dark hair. It was a long while before he spoke again.

"And another thing, Valkyre."

After a moment's hesitation, he glanced down again, his golden eyes sharp in the dark, catching light from some source Valkyre could not see.

"You shouldn't live for Iris. That's pathetic."

Valkyre paused, then slowly put his palms to the ground, ignoring the twinge of pain from his shoulder. His body burned, and his back was still ached, but he managed to rise, slowly, shakily, and to stand on his own. He hurt all over, and yet... Corryn was right. At least somewhat.

He still had things to accomplish. He still had reasons for living. He wasn't going to die yet.

Maybe he'd stay and see what happened when the world ended. But.. if Iris lived, he wanted... ..to be there. For him. He wanted...

Valkyre glanced up at a sky in turmoil, feeling the static in the air. A wind was blowing, rustling and coaxing away the last crumpled leaves on the trees, turning them to dust as they spiraled through the air.

"Then what should I live for?" Valkyre asked, half to the other beside him, half to the sky. After a pause, he glanced over.

Corryn's eyes remained fixed on the trembling, undulating clouds above.

"Not for Iris," he muttered. After a moment longer, he glanced over, and grinned.

"Live for yourself, Valkyre. Just... live.

"Because... humans are selfish."

Valkyre blinked, hesitating. He wouldn't call himself a human, but... then again, what was a human? What was a real definition of... human? Perhaps, in the end, everyone, every thing... was human, to an extent.

Valkyre didn't reply. He stared up at the sky, closing his eyes, letting the soft wind pull at his clothing and stir his hair, coaxing, reminding him of feelings buried long ago, of a form of happiness he hadn't seemed able to find.

And he wanted to live.

The other shifted, and Valkyre blinked open his eyes again.

"Corryn."

The crossbreed glanced at the other out of the corner of his eye, letting the wind run fingers through his hair, flicking lightly over his skin.

"...Thank you."

Valkyre only looked over after he'd spoken, searching for a reaction. But Corryn's face was turned away, hair pushed over his eyes. The crossbreed thought he saw a grin in the dark, a brief flash of teeth.

"Valkyre. You"-

A sound cut through the air, sharp and crystalline, and it made the crossbreed's blood run cold. It was a scream, echoing against the sharp stone slopes of the mountains, rebounding off of the cliffsides, and-

Suddenly, abruptly cut short, with the faintest sound of a gargled choke.

Valkyre snapped his head around, looking for the source. He was filled with a mixture of anxiety and relief when he realized who the voice belonged to: Caerwyn.

Without a word, Corryn leapt into the darkness. Valkyre took off as well, begging his feet to remain steady as they pounded over the hard-baked dirt ground, each step a blind leap into darkness, each landing a jolt of pain through his system.

Iris. Who was still... Raguel? It must have been. Of course. Asher couldn't really be expected to take on Raguel, not in the shape he was in. Even with the magic to dull his wounds... of course not.

And Caerwyn... Caerwyn had sworn to protect Iris. If it had really been his voice just then, then... Iris...

The world became a blur, Valkyre's body moving as if of its own will, never fast enough for him, each movement slow and leaden. He hardly noticed when he entered the graveyard again, gloved hands brushing over rough-hewn stone smoothed by age alone, half-stumbling over fallen monuments and crosses and wings, crushing brown and dried underbrush beneath his boots, breaths deafening in his ears.

Valkyre didn't know what route he was taking. He didn't know where Corryn had been. Everything hurt, and the world seemed on fire, only smothered in black tainted red, the shadows pulling him and restraining him, fighting him at every step.

He needed to find Iris. But he didn't know which direction it was, and wherever he looked, there was nothing but shadow to smother the void.

If Iris hadn't cried out, he might've blundered on blindly, missing the boy completely. Valkyre slammed against a heavy black wall of stone at the sharp cry to his left, whirling around. Hands out, he groped around the tilted monument of granite, stumbling for only two steps before he suddenly found himself in a tiny clearing, ringed in shadows and jaws of stone, and -

Iris, in the center, head tilted back, delicate mouth agape in a scream that had fallen silent, small body limp, feet dangling above the ground, Raguel's hands digging into his tender arms-

Valkyre stared in shock as the half-blooded male suddenly sank his teeth into the base of Iris's neck.

The blood broke through the skin instantly, pooling and running down the boy's marble-white neck, soaking the edge of the worn and tattered shirt, staining the white teeth-

"Iris!!"

The boy's mouth fell shut, head falling forward limply, rolling. Raguel's mouth broke away, red and yellow eyes flashing in the dark, finding him, locking on to him. Through the blood running down his pale skin, through his red-stained teeth, Raguel... smiled.

"Valkyre." His voice was low, barely above a breathy whisper. "This is the sacrifice, Valkyre. In blood."

Slowly, the half-blood's tongue ran over his lips, smearing the red. "Will you join it? Your blood"-

Raguel cut off suddenly, attentive. Valkyre wanted to move, to run, but his feet felt frozen, his body wrapped in shadows, held down in place. He stared, watching as Iris's frame shuddered, as the boy weakly raised his head, gray eyes hollow and empty, distant, unfocusing.

And yet, through the dark, through the shadows and the pain and everything... those gray eyes saw him, and Iris smiled.

"Val...kyre."

Something silvery-gray ran down the boy's cheek, dripping from his chin. Iris's mouth was open, saying something else, barely audible. There was a sound then, the sound of ripping wings and fabric, a startled shout from Raguel. What happened then was broken into frames Valkyre couldn't quite place back in order again, his own body stumbling forward half-steps yet stopping again, too slow, too

burdened, unable to catch up, his mind still trying to process those last few words.

Iris's wings snapped from his back, angel's feather's glowing like the sun itself, pure and bright, the demon's webbed joints tipped to the sky, sharp and angular, folding the world in its translucent membrane, smothering it all in soft warm darkness, like velvet tainted blood-red. Raguel was moving, snarling, mouth open.

And Iris, Iris's eyes... they flashed red in the dark, the small face suddenly changing into something Valkyre hardly recognized, small mouth gaping open, teeth glinting pearly white. He saw Iris whirl around in midair, saw a thin pale hand lash out with startling speed, saw red and heard a ripping crunch, a flurry of movement as Raguel's hands turned to claws and lashed out as well, blindly, Iris's wings flaring and snapping, the two both tumbling down onto the ground.

And then the world snapped back into itself. Valkyre's feet broke as if from a sheath of ice, and he stumbled forward, dropping down, hands grabbing for the boy washed in dark grays, skin pale as moonlight, the two wings sagging and folding back into nothingness even as the crossbreed tugged at the small body, prying off Raguel's one hand, which had dug down into the boy's shoulder hard enough to draw blood, fingernails buried in the skin.

Iris turned around, suddenly, and Valkyre stopped abruptly, dropping to one knee as if the wind had been knocked out of him.

Iris stared back at him, eyes wide, hair a tangled mess, tears running down his face. The boy was streaked in blood, drops splattered on his cheek, running down with his tears. His dirty white shirt was crusted with fresh red stains dark like shadows in the dim light, and his pale skin...

His one arm was drenched in blood. His small hand was burrowed in Raguel's chest, animal-like fingers still tense and clenched in the other's body, fragile blue veins strained along the arm and back of the hand, small knuckles sharp and bony.

"...V-Valkyre..."

He was crying, sobbing now, and Valkyre was finally realizing the words Iris had spoke to him earlier, soundless, smiling.

"...I... love you."

Valkyre leaned over. His hand reached out slowly, gently, touching the boy's one bloodied arm, carefully, painstakingly prying the other's fingers loose. He pulled the boy away from Raguel's limp body, and held the frail body to his own, clutching him tightly, breaths coming short and fast. Valkyre felt the fragile, delicate frame in his embrace, the one arm slowly relaxing and going limp, the boy's tangled gray hair pressing to his neck and collar, the soft thighs resting in his lap, weighted down so slightly he thought the boy would float away were he to let go.

Valkyre felt a small hand reach up to his unwounded shoulder, gripping him tightly, almost painfully. And held there in his arms, Iris cried. The young boy's body shook with sobs, each breath sharp and painful, gasping. The tears ran now, like a river, streaking over the pale skin and mixing with the dark stains of blood, dripping over skin and soaking into the torn and tattered clothing.

Valkyre held Iris in his arms and he let the boy cry his heart out. He said not a word, only closed his eyes and felt the small form warm in his arms, let the sobs rock through his body, the blowing wind only making him clutch the boy against himself even harder, afraid of losing him ever again, to anything, anyone, anywhere.

And then the sobs slowed and ceased, the boy's breathing slowly growing regular, falling into the predictable, set rhythmic rise and fall of the small chest. At length, the boy shifted and Valkyre looked down into the tear-stained face, gray eyes edged in red from crying, small smudge of red on a cheek still left over from the blood.

Valkyre merely smiled. He could think of no words to say, no reassurances. The boy's neck was slicked in blood, but it did not seem to be flowing freely. Valkyre gently touched a finger to the punctured skin,

wiping slowly at the dark blood. Underneath his fingertip, something sharp and darker showed. It took the crossbreed a moment to recognize the tip of the tattooed bat's wing, small talon at the end hooked in the crook of the boy's neck.

Iris shifted suddenly, turning to face Valkyre. The boy stood up on his knees, arms slowly, tentatively rising and looping over Valkyre's shoulder, fingers crossing at the nape of his neck. Surprised, the crossbreed stared into Iris's face, at the gray eyes that seemed, almost, to flash the faintest hint of a color besides their normal monotone.

"Val...kyre. Valkyre."

Iris smiled, soft and slow, and... sad.

The boy leaned over then, and pressed their lips together. It was simple, quick and chaste, yet it froze Valkyre's body, sent his heart to racing, his every nerve on end. He felt a sharp sensation run through his body, so fierce it was almost painful, and yet, he didn't know what it was, couldn't understand where it had come from. He remembered Iris's words, remembered the warm eyes and the ceaseless sobbing, like the world was being torn apart. He remembered the night sky drenched in stars, painted in the softest hues of blue and violet and green, waiting beyond those clouds.

Valkyre opened his mouth to speak, Iris's lips pulling back. But the boy was moving, arms dropping from Valkyre's shoulders. The boy pressed a bloody finger to the crossbreed's lips, and Valkyre felt as if he'd been locked in a spell, unable to move. Iris... he'd just seen Iris kill another living being, could even taste the sharp, salty blood on his lips right now. But...

There was the sound of a blade being pulled from its sheath. Valkyre glanced down, sharply. Iris held the dagger in his hands, staring at the cold metal, blood smearing along the blue-silver blade.

"...I...ris?"

The boy looked up, his hand gripping the dagger by the hilt firmly, small pale fingers clenched. He smiled.

"Valkyre."

The boy held the blade level with his eyes, though his soft gaze was on the other's, holding on to the violet eyes tinted red.

"Thank you."

Iris moved smoothly, decisively. He drew the blade over the blood-smeared base of his neck, splitting through the tattoo of the bat, then quickly switched over to the other side of his shoulder, blade just biting along the surface of his skin, drawing fresh blood as it ran through a dark shape over his pale skin- the tattoo of the wolf, jaws opened, body twisted as if in liquid motion.

Iris's hand trembled, the blade's smooth line running jagged just before he lifted it from his skin.

"Iris-!"

The boy was hunched over, shivering, trembling uncontrollably. The blade dripped blood onto a thin, pale calf, splattering black on white. Valkyre reached over, fingers almost touching the fresh cuts, bewildered. What was Iris doing? What was going-

The boy's shoulder moved. Valkyre froze, startled. He stared at the boy's shoulder. A black shadow was seeping out, too dark for blood, liquid yet not, more like warm flowing ink, thin as a knife's edge. And even as Valkyre watched, even as Iris trembled and shook, the black thing took shape. It rose up and fell back, it pulled and twisted at the skin, it sprawled out spiky wings and yawned open an inhuman jaw, tipped in tiny, sharp teeth.

The bat pulled itself free from Iris's body, the tattoo drawn up through the skin, more like a two-dimensional shadow than a living creature, and it rose up into the air. As the crossbreed watched, the elongated shape changed and shifted, wings stretching, jaws agape. The aura of vampires, dark and cool, coursing with heat beneath, filled his senses.

And then it rose up into the air, and it flitted into the shadows of the sky.

Iris gasped, doubling over. Valkyre jerked his attention back, grabbing the boy suddenly before he fell over, staring in shock as he watched the second shape pull at its inked edges and rise through the cut, the wolf's sharp, angular muzzle pointed to the sky, mouth open in a silent howl, fur slicked and ruffled yet silent as water over fingers, slipping out with an impossible ease, vanishing in and out of view, drifting in black, eyes a void. It rose, in silence, and loped up along the stone, a shadow on its surface, hardly hesitating as it broke into the sky.

"Valkyre."

Iris was looking at him, smiling. There was a weariness to his eyes, and a relief. His gray eyes spoke all the words, slowly pushed in the understanding.

Iris picked up the dagger again, and, although Valkyre felt a sharp tug at his heart, felt a burst in his chest as if of pain, felt cold fear running down his spine, he did not stop him.

He only watched, hands supporting the boy, holding him up, as Iris drew the knife's edge along the hawk on his shoulder, over the serpent's coils on his arm, splitting in two the horse dancing just below his collarbone, and the fish whose tail flicked over the boy's other shoulder, riding along the collarbone. Valkyre watched in silence as the ink turned to shadows stained in blood, as the animals, the auras, and the sentient beings slowly rose up and left the boy's body, skimming along the surface, turning to living carvings in the stone, sliding above the dust, carried away by the wind and the smell, again, cool and sweet on the air.

And then Iris put the blade into Valkyre's hands.

The crossbreed stared down at the dagger, edge slick with blood, blackened with the leftover memories of ink.

Iris stared at him, smiling with his eyes alone. And then he turned his back.

His shirt was torn, ripped up by wings that shouldn't have existed, splattered with blood, dusted with dirt.

Valkyre pushed aside the edges of the clothing, and stared at the last of his handiwork. The dragon and the phoenix were still there, feather and tail twined, the demon and the angel wing expanded and flared, taking up all of the boy's back. He could feel the boy's pain, and he knew that this was what had to be done.

The hilt of the blade was wet in Valkyre's hand. His fingers trembled, twitching. He felt like he couldn't control them.

He knew this was what Iris wanted. He knew that, in the end, this was the point to everything. With this, he could release Iris from the unfair duty he'd been set to, the burden placed upon his frail shoulders, crushing the boy beneath, sealing away his heart, his emotions, his tears.

This was what he needed to free Iris, to change him from the gray-eyed boy into someone truly alive, clean and pure and strong enough, perhaps, to stand on his own, to live and breathe and run and sigh and sleep peacefully, curled up like an infant, body no longer so pale, eyes no longer dry, a gray shadow blending into a shadow.

Iris could become... a boy. Nothing more, nothing less. No longer antithesis, no longer the end of the world or the savior or herald to a beginning again, to destruction or salvation or resurrection. He could simply be... himself.

But what, Valkyre thought, did that mean?

When you took away all that made up what Iris was... what would be left? No longer angel and demon, angel or demon, no longer the boy without tears or the child with gray stone eyes in the ruins, with silent sighs and soft cool hands...

...Would Iris die?

Valkyre stared down at the blade in his hands.

He realized that, with this motion, this placement of trust and finality, Iris had given him the choice.

It was his to decide, what the boy's fate should be. It was his hand that would carve out the path, that would set him free or hold him changed, kill him or save him or doom him.

Valkyre felt a shudder run through his body. At first, he didn't know what it was. It made his whole frame tremble, his hand shake.

And then, he realized he was laughing.

Valkyre closed his eyes, breathing in deeply then exhaling, letting the tension flow free, letting his body relax as he searched his mind, his self, and his heart... for something.

The crossbreed opened his eyes again, and he stared down at the blade. His eyes were reflected in it, the delicate violet of his mother's, the sharp angle and shape and draw of his father's. His fingers closed around the hilt, strong and steady.

Valkyre leaned close, kissing Iris on the back of the neck, soft and simple. He mouthed the boy's name against Iris's skin, tasting something clean and pure like river water, like white clouds soft and thin as silk.

And then he pulled back. His hand moved slowly, sure and precise. The blade carved a thin, smooth, arcing line along the dragon's spine, following it up into the flare of the taloned, tipped wing. The blade rose from the boy's pale skin, then kissed it again as it ran along the serpentine neck of the phoenix, tracing the line of the long, curved flight feathers to their delicate tips.

The blade fell to the ground then, and Valkyre's hand formed a fist, the only way he knew to control the trembling that took over. He watched in silence as the boy hunched over, shivering slightly, as the phoenix and the dragon pulled their inky details and intricacies from Iris's skin, rising up into the air, playing shadow over shadow, torn apart at last by the wind.

And with the clouds in the sky dripping down on them, thick and heavy, he watched with Iris as the angel and the demon rose from the frail body, faces all too human, one crowned in feathers and golden light, pale hands reaching out, soft and warm, the other blacker than the sky above, void of color in a sky alight with grays, blues, violets, and greens, frame thin and elegant, fingernails long and tipped, cool and sharp, edged wing sighing on itself.

And then they were gone to the sky, and Valkyre was staring down at the boy in his lap, still and silent, mouth open.

The crossbreed leaned over, and he felt a shudder run through his body. His eyes grew hot all of a sudden, and suddenly, he was watching as his vision blurred and cleared, and as drops fell onto Iris's pale skin, rolling off the smooth, rounded surfaces, so childish, so perfect and unmarred, flawless.

Valkyre was crying.

He held the limp form in his arms, staring at the clear skin and fragile limbs, the small hands cupped like flowers, the hair falling free from the face.

And then Iris opened his eyes, his eyes that were colored like the night sky, and the boy smiled.

Iris raised an arm, slowly, weakly, fingers opening to the clouds above. Valkyre paused, the feelings in him welling over, a flood he couldn't control, an ocean of stars pouring out from a black hole, unstoppable, scattering to every corner of the world, filling every void.

He looked up, staring into the great dark gray underbelly of a cloud. He hesitated, registering what he saw. Valkyre glanced to the east, and saw the faintest hints of green, indigo, and violet over the horizon. Dawn was coming. The night was over.

And then the first drops began to fall.

Valkyre tilted his head back, closing his eyes. His one hand found Iris's, thin and slender, and he clenched it, tightly, in his own.

And the clouds in the sky broke open with a sigh, and Valkyre and Iris held each other's hands as the rain fell down onto the earth.

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AN: THANK YOU EVERYBODY.

68 - Epilogue

?Iris

--Epilogue--

Gray.

It wasn't Iris. It was everything. It was what Valkyre had wanted. The room, faded in shades of gray and dark whites and pale blacks, the curtains pulled over the windows, the door shut. Silence, and the sound of breathing.

Iris stirred, briefly opening up his eyes. The boy smiled, faintly, half-asleep. Valkyre ran a bare hand through the boy's soft hair, grayed by the dim light, dust motes dancing in the sliver slipping in between the two curtains. Iris hunched up slightly, coughing in small exhalations, small curled hand against his mouth. Valkyre bit at his bottom lip, eyes trailing away, staring over the top of the boy's head. Impulsively, he drew Iris close against his body, pressing them together, feeling the warmth, the soft pliable skin, the weak hardness of the fingernails.

The narrow film of sunlight shifted with the curtains, then suddenly vanished, a dark gray shadow taking its place. Valkyre saw Iris's eyes watching it as it traveled over his shoulder and neck, then vanish.

The angels were rising.

Valkyre touched the back of the boy's head, pushing it down, pressing it to his chest. He felt Iris's breaths, quick little puffs against his bare skin.

"Val"-

"Shh."

Valkyre shook his head, though he knew Iris couldn't see the gesture.

The angels were rising, drifting upward into the sky, like birds circling on thermals, higher and higher, until they vanished from sight. No one knew where they were going. But they weren't alone.

Centaurs and weres had vanished into the highlands, seeking the mountains, the coasts, dodging away from human habitation. Merfolk dipped their tails as they slipped under the seas, harpies flying down to unknown islands and cliffsides unmapped, uncharted.

They were all leaving.

And in their wake, the humans seemed to be awakening. They stepped from doorways, alleyways, peeked out through windowsills. They looked down at the ground, stared up into the sky, glanced sideways, behind.

"...Valkyre."

He felt the tug. He saw the sky above him, felt it even with a roof above his head, the vast emptiness of space, of what humans called the 'heavens'. He felt his body, his heart, his wings, all urging him to go, all pulling at him, telling him to cast away this heavy and clumsy body, to soar for that blinding spot of sun so far above, beyond.

Valkyre chuckled, low under his breath. He clutched the boy to him even more tightly, almost enough to hurt.

"I'm not going anywhere," he breathed, speaking into the boy's hair, breathing up the light smell of Iris. Iris... smelled of rain.

"I... can't." He laughed, weakly, the sound loud in the silence.

All the others were leaving. It didn't matter. He'd remain here, with those... left behind. Not to fly in the

sky, or run over the land, or swim through the seas. Humans, those... caught. In between worlds, belonging nowhere.

"I'm... two things. Light and day. I'm staying... in the dusk. In between."

...No, they were not the ones that did not belong. It had been the angels and the weres and the vampires in the first place that had never belonged, that had forced their way into this world of the humans'.

This world belonged to them. To humans, with their simplicity and their disbelief, their stubborn religions and... their perseverance, which overcame all else.

To a world that was dying, and that was being reborn. Reborn to wind and rain and snow and ice and floods, of sadness and loss and yet, in the end, to a world in which those who survived... would live. And live on.

Perhaps Raguel had been right in the end. Perhaps Iris really had revived the world, though in a way, it seemed more like... the world had chosen to right itself. Each and every being was what made up this world in the end, each sentient soul realizing the truth, and each being doing what was right. For the humans, this was to fight on, to continue living. For the angels, it was... ..to rise.

Valkyre wasn't going.

After all, he had nowhere to go.

And he still had Iris to protect. ...He was waiting for the rain to fall again.

"Valkyre."

Iris spoke with his eyes closed, head tilted back, small mouth curling up in a soft smile.

Valkyre pressed a finger to the boy's lips, memorizing each feature, focusing on the sensation of the boy's soft, warm mouth against the flesh of his fingertip.

"Shh. Sleep."

Iris let out a small sigh. Still the same then, in some sense. Still a quiet boy with gentle eyes, with small hands and thin limbs, with light hair that fell over his eyes and framed his face gently, delicately.

They both... belonged. Here.

After all, Iris was human.

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