

Tab 1

Hacksaw spent a majority of his time working now. The pencil pushers in the office called it training, but Hacksaw knew what work was; long hours being lectured, having to read dozens and dozens of textbooks, taking tests and displaying his competency. This was work, and the compensation for said work basically amounted to free housing and free food, with not much else.

Apparently, monetary compensation would come when he was out in the field, fully certified, and past his probationary period, which for EMTs was one hundred and eighty calendar days. Despite the slapdash nature of the training program—an understandable necessity considering most of the agency staff had died recently—Hacksaw felt at home in the boiling stress.

His job, when he finished his training, would be an endless void of stress, where he would have to make decisions that would spell the future of countless people. Their lives would, quite literally, be in his hands, and he would have to save them. Though he held little regard for the minutiae of it all, if there was one thing he could do above all else, it was performing under pressure.

When he was permitted a break, Hacksaw chose to spend it with Ludus, who wanted to be in his company even though he was a meanass. Hacksaw, however, liked to observe Ludus whenever he could. It staved off a gnawing hunger that nestled deep in his guts.

That stupid idiot could never survive out in the world on his own. He had cotton for brains, trusted too easily, and would definitely walk into oncoming traffic if his sycophants convinced him to. He could work a computer just fine, but that didn't make him special. All the newts seemed to trip over themselves, staring at those glass rectangles; utterly incapable of paying attention if there wasn't a special sound to reward them for breathing.

But damn it if Ludus wasn't gorgeous.

He looked like cotton candy, colorful and sweet, with luxurious fur that caught the wind and flowed around him like a delicious cloak. Hacksaw couldn't stand how clean his white hair looked, how good he smelled with his fancy oil and soaps, the delicate points of his golden horns. Every inch of him begged to be devoured by a monster, but he was too stupid to realize how close he was to actually experiencing that reality.

This was what made Idris and Mithras so possessive of him, Hacksaw was convinced of that.

Like clockwork, on the evening before his one day a week off, Hacksaw received a message from Ludus, who was the only one outside of the Emergency Service Professionals Division who had his phone number. The cotton ball texted frequently, usually sending an emoji or two, or sending a random comment about something he found outside, food he was eating, really anything he was doing at any given time.

He sent pictures as well. Countless of them, most of which went ignored, though Hacksaw had figured out how to save some of them after a while, something he was strangely proud of for figuring out on his own even though he hated having the phone with him at all times.

Ludus: are you awake still? :Oc

Hacksaw blinked at the message, the blinding light burning his eyes. He lay reclined in one of the communal bunks, the top bunk of course. Though these were sized for humans, he would never let someone get the jump on him, regardless of what form they took. Only a worn pair of grey sweatpants served as his pajamas.

He peeked over the side of the bunk. His roommate, a small cccat who he didn't think would last through the rest of the program, lay fast asleep under the blankets, their crowns twitching as it broadcast dreams across the invisible airways. Satisfied that they were very and truly asleep, Hacksaw returned back into a more comfortable position, and shot a message back.

Hacksaw: Yes, I am awake still.

Ludus: you coming to hang out tomorrow? :)

Hacksaw: That is the plan. Do not be coy with me, newt. If you are busy, then say so.

Ludus: wanna pic? :))

Not even a moment later, Hacksaw was graced with a perfectly framed picture of Ludus in his human form. He couldn't recall why Ludus seemed to prefer prancing around like a little human prince all the time, but he couldn't complain. His human form was just as beautiful as his crook form, with a full head of white hair that fell down his back in a creamy wave.

It was always cool to the touch, and curled loosely at the ends. Ludus frequently had to brush it out of his eyes whenever he was concentrating on something, or if he intended to beg. In the photo, his eyes were obscured by gentle white bangs, but his deliriously dopey smile was present, creating light dimples in his cheeks.

Beautiful, Hacksaw thought hungrily.

Ludus: me after a hair styling stream. do you like it? :)

Hacksaw: I am coming tomorrow, stupid, I will see it then.

Ludus: okay, see you tomorrow then. :0

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He arrived in the afternoon, shoulders tense. Ludus promised a surprise the other day, and Hacksaw doubted it was the one the cotton ball sprang on him last night. Ludus was quite considerate when planning surprises, and as long as Hacksaw knew something was coming, he could behave himself. Ordinarily, he would punch first and ask questions later.

He knocked on the door and a moment later, Neo answered it, clipboard in hand.

"Hey old timer," Neo said, a sly smile gracing the corners of his lips. He leaned against the door jamb. "You here for the barbeque?"

"What barbeque?"

Neo cleared his throat with a knowing laugh. "I'll take that as a no. Fluff for brains is in the backyard, but you better watch out. We got some new biters running around here."

"Get out of my way, newt," Hacksaw growled. "I do not have time for this."

Though could he really resist free barbeque? Was this the surprise?

He worked his way past the new biters, who all introduced themselves at the same time before scampering off to do whatever it was that biters did. One of Ludus's other roommates came along afterwards, dressed brightly and looking better than usual. Worm Money, if he remembered correctly.

"You lookin' for Ludo?" Worm Money asked. "He's in the backyard. There's food too."

The backyard stretched out for quite a while before ending in a spit of untamed overgrowth. The grill sat just off the wooden porch, already chock full of meats and vegetables, and chugging away as Embly, Idris's resident human stood with a roasting spit in hand. Wrench stood beside her, and both were engrossed in conversation, likely over the best way to grill all this food.

Ludus stood at the edge of a giant field, neon streamers serving as the borders. On one side stood a gaggle of younglings, some Hacksaw recognized and some he didn't. As soon as Ludus saw him, he rushed over.

"You're just in time," Ludus said, the fire of competition in his eyes. "I'm glad you made it."

"Leave them," Hacksaw growled.

"Wait," Ludus pleaded. "I think you should try this. It's really easy."

"No," Hacksaw snapped. "No games."

"I am certain that you'll like this," Ludus added. "They all say you wouldn't be able to catch a throw because you're old."

"I do not care about the approval of your roommates."

Ludus poked his lips out in a pout. "That's not very cash money of you. I'll tell you what, if you catch this, you get first pick of the premium snack pile."

Hacksaw blinked at him.

"You seemed really into those snacks last time," Ludus turned, shrugging his shoulders and hanging his head. "Too bad, I guess, since you don't want to play and all"

Similar to last night's photo, Ludus wore a tank top that hung limply from his shoulders, bogged down by the beaming sun. A thin sheen of sweat coated his bare skin and Hacksaw frowned. Ludus was so delightful to behold. How could he say no?

"Fine," Hacksaw said. "One throw."

Ludus punched the air in excitement and guided Hacksaw over to the first one neon marker. He reached into a big plastic tub and fished out a plastic disc about ten inches in diameter. He twirled it expertly between his long fingers and flashed a bright, toothy smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling in delight. He flared his nostrils as he waved it in front of Hacksaw.

“I’m going to throw this as far as I can,” Ludus explained. “All you gotta do is catch it. If you drop it, it doesn’t count, and you’re not allowed to run once it’s in your hands.”

“Do I have to catch it with my hands?”

Ludus cocked his head. “Yo, Ducks, does it have to be with your hands?”

Ducky, the orange and black one, stretched her calves and twisted in place, limbering up for a sprint. She said, “The guys I played with in the Cosmos allowed you to catch it with your mouth. So I guess that’s fair too.”

“Yeah you can use your mouth too,” Ludus said. “Ready? Because we’re first.”

“Yeah,” Ducky snarked. “Just in case the old man needs a break already.”

She and the other competitive crooks snickered amongst themselves. Hacksaw rolled his neck and swung his arms in wide arcs before dropping down to all fours. His tail relaxed, the red hook just barely hovering above the thick blanket of grass.

This would be easy. Hacksaw was built for speed, and had spent most of his life chasing after things trying to run away from him. A disc flying overhead was no different than fleeing prey in his mind. He’d catch it, and he’d kill it.

Ludus wound his throwing arm up and with all his strength, a flick of his wrist, and a well timed release, the disc sailed across the field. Hacksaw darted after it, surprised by how much he enjoyed the feeling of grass underfoot, the way it sounded as it flattened under him. It smelled delightful, like it had spent a whole season filling out the musty stench of naked earth.

His third eye, which sat directly in the middle of his forehead, tracked the disc. It curved and Hacksaw followed the path, only putting in an extra burst of speed when the target descended. The grass faded in favor of more barren earth, and Hacksaw kicked up dust as he neared the incoming copse of overgrown trees.

His legs burned with the effort, but he leapt into the air and crushed the disc between his teeth, landing with a heavy thud on the dirt. A series of hoots and hollers followed his catch, though he couldn’t hear them that

clearly. He was a mere thirty or so feet from the edge of the overgrowth, wheezing as he caught his breath.

A few moments later, one of the biters ran up with a surveyor's wheel. They scribbled down the measurement and trotted back with the disc Hacksaw had just caught, the old crook following closely behind.

"We'll find out who wins once everyone's done," the biter announced, and they went back to sitting under a shady umbrella.

One by one, each team had one throw, with their partners racing after the disc. The only other one to throw in a somewhat straight line was Ducky, and her partner, a biter named Esther, clomped after it, surprisingly agile despite her otherwise clumsy mannerisms.

Esther also managed to catch the target.

Everybody else failed to catch up, or ended up dropping it during the landing. Though everyone did have a chance to swap, so they could also try to catch the disk.

"I told you I have never thrown one of these before," Hacksaw said when it was his turn to throw, voice heated.

Ludus pressed his hand to his forehead. "Oh yeah, I forgot that you said that a few days. It's easy. It's all in the flick of the wrist. Go ahead and throw it far, I'll be able to catch it."

That particular flying disc was never seen again.