

The Blood Duel (S5, E24)

Kim: The Critshow contains elements of horror, fantasy violence, and adult language. Content warnings can be found in the episode description.

SFX: INTRO MUSIC

Rev: Hey, everybody. Rev here. Before we get into this week's episode, just a reminder that if you are interested in getting in on our t-shirt or our digital swag tier, this is the month to join in. Also, as we mentioned on the commercial that kind of went out before all the episodes this month, we have set ourselves some goals that are specifically aligned to just the number of patrons that we have. And once we hit those goals, we have some content that we want to release. So our first goal is 420. So if you are interested in getting involved in the Patreon in any way, you can head over to Patreon.com/TheCritshow. It does not matter what tier you join at, you will count towards our goal of 420. So if you would like to support us, you can head over there to find out all that information. And with that, it's time to get into the episode.

SFX: CRITSHOW STINGER

Rev: As Maddie falls to the ground, the blood coming from her mouth and ears and eyes pooling in the sand, Strohm leaps out of her box and runs down to her side. Half a dozen people from the crowd do the same thing, and they start checking over her. You can hear Maddie coughing, and they roll her over onto her side and the portal behind her closes. Strohm lets out a sharp whistle, and a dozen fingers rise out of the sand — made from the sand — and start to usher everyone out.

Rev: STROHM: We'll be back with you in just a moment. We want to take care of our friend Maddie here, see what is going on. No one leave. You don't need to leave. But please clear the room. Clear the room.

Tass: Yeah. I mean, I was on her heels as she ran down, and I want to be checking Maddie over.

Kim: Yeah, I would have left with Strohm.

Megan: Yeah. I'm also heading down, but I want to kind of look around to see, like, is this an attack?

Rev: As you look around, everybody seems worried. Some people seemed panicked. But no one is ... Like, sounds silly, but no one's like looking on with delight. And there is no other threats that you can see. The group of you make it down to where Strohm is next to Maddie. The guards made out of sand almost stop you but then step aside. You can see that the blood coming out of Maddie is starting to steam, and her breathing is very shallow.

Megan: I don't want her to have to try and talk through this. Can I try and open up a mental chat room between all of us?

Rev: When you reach out to Maddie's mind, there's a block there. Like you can't get into her head.

Jake: I want to, like, kneel down and hold my hands out over her and try to magically heal her.

Rev: Yeah, roll Use Magic.

Jake: Six.

Kim: Oh ...

Tass: Can I help him out? Because I'm, like, looking her over and, like, getting out my med kit and stuff just to try to, like, stabilize her while he works?

Rev: How does that help him do magic?

Tass: Takes away any of her pain flailing and stuff, so he can focus more.

Rev: Okay. Yes.

Tass: Nice.

Rev: You lost me, then you got me again.

Tass: All right. Ten. [Sighs in relief]

Rev: All right, Jake, that bumps you up to a seven.

Jake: Okay. So for my effect, I want to choose heal 1-harm from an injury or cure a disease or neutralize a poison. As I am reaching out to do this healing, can I determine if there is a disease or a poison involved?

Rev: You can. There is a poison.

Jake: Then I'm fully gonna neutralize a poison.

Rev: And what is your glitch?

Jake: I think I take 1-harm, ignore armor.

Rev: Yeah, I think that makes sense. This is like the first time you've done something like this. So I imagine you drawing some of it into your own body.

Jake: Yeah. Like I'm basing this off of when I could do this with divinity, and that involved taking it upon myself sometimes, so.

Rev: Yeah. you notice that as Jake has his hands out over Maddie, this green, sickly glow comes off of her and into Jake. And as it does, the blood coming out of her stops steaming, and her breathing becomes a little less ragged.

Tass: "What the hell is this?"

Jake: [Groans] "She was poisoned."

Kim: Is Maddie conscious?

Rev: Kind of?

Kim: May I touch her and see if I can get a vision of what happened, using Psychometry?

Rev: Yeah. Roll Investigate a Mystery.

Kim: Ten.

Rev: All right. You get a hold 2.

Kim: My free one. What happened here?

Rev: You get a vision of Maddie walking into her office and heading over to her desk and sitting down. The chair creaks, and she reaches into a drawer on the desk and pulls out a flask, unscrews it, and takes a sip. And then she starts to choke and convulse. And that is when the magical portal opens for her entrance, and she staggers across the room trying to get to it so that someone can see what is happening to her.

Kim: What is being concealed here?

Rev: Maddie is not entirely human. You get quick glimpses of her family and her lineage. She comes from a family of partial giants. It's a secret that is very well kept. Someone would have to know that to be able to use the proper poison on her.

Kim: What was it going to do?

Rev: This poison enhances the body's production of bile and forces the blood out of the body at an extreme temperature that evaporates it, leaving the body just filled with bile and no blood.

Kim: Oh, my god.

Rev: And again, this is something very specific to giant-kind.

Kim: "Maddie was poisoned. Her flask was poisoned with something. She's ... Has some giant ancestry and whatever poisoned her, it was something that was specifically designed to kill half giants. Like, boiling their blood."

Megan: I look at Strohm. "Is there a reason I shouldn't be able to communicate with her telepathically right now?"

Rev: STROHM: Oh, the same reason you wouldn't be able to do it with me. Defenses, training.

Megan: "You could let me in, though, right?"

Rev: STROHM: Yes.

Megan: I look at Maddie and make eye contact with her. And if she can hear me, just say to her, "If you can understand what I'm saying, please let me inside your head. It'll be much easier for us to help you."

Rev: She opens her mouth and vomits and passes out.

Megan: "Okay. Yep. That makes sense. Okay."

Rev: Strohm and the soldiers made of sand start to lift Maddie and move her towards the exit, taking her towards her office.

Jake: On our way there, I want to ask Strohm, "Do you know anybody who had beef with her, or I guess with giants in general?"

Rev: STROHM: It is not largely known that she has giant heritage.

Kim: "Oh, sorry."

Rev: STROHM: Just one moment.

Rev: And she gets to the door and opens it. The sand soldiers lay her down on a bed in the corner of the room and then depart. As they leave, Strohm closes the door.

Rev: STROHM: As for the other part of your question, she has had a fair share of winners. Lives have been lost over the things wagered and lost and won here. Everyone has a reason to have a beef with her. I don't know a single person that doesn't love her.

Rev: And I think at this point, if you have got a beginning of mystery move, it's time to roll it.

Kim: Vision Twins!

Tass: Activate!

Kim: [Laughs] That's a nine for me.

Tass: Uh, four.

Rev: So Tass and Kim get their visions. Tass, what you see is disorienting. It's like you're looking through many panes of warped glass. There are dozens of faces shifting and screaming and laughing, and it's hard to tell who any one of them belongs to. But for a brief moment you see a silhouette of a man kneeling down, and the hilt of a blade sticking out of his back. And the silhouette becomes less hazy, and it's you. Kim, you see the ring for the Monster Mash. There are half a dozen portals open, leading to various locations where the fights are going to take place. There's a smell of burn and char coming out of these portals. The sand is drenched in blood and gore. The seats of the stadium are filled with bodies. A torch drops from the ceiling, landing in the center. And the black gore ignites, setting this entire facility — all of the bodies and all of the connected spaces through the portals — ablaze. And you both snap back.

Tass: I think I double over a little, just holding my head.

Rev: As you bend over, Jake lunges forward with a dagger.

All: [Laugh]

Tass: "Oww. Ow, ow, ow."

Megan: "You okay?"

Tass: "Yeah, I think I am now. But I don't think I'm gonna be."

Kim: "What'd you see?"

Tass: "Me, with ... Well, I get Et tu, Brute-d, here. I saw a blade sticking out of my back."

Kim: "Oh. Well, I mean, I've had visions of us dying before, and it didn't happen."

Megan: "What kind of blade?"

Tass: "I don't know. A dagger of some kind."

Kim: "I had a vision of this whole arena just covered in gore, and everyone in the stands dead, and all of the portals to all of the other arenas were open and the smell of death was overwhelming. And then something or someone dropped a torch into the center of this arena. And everything — like this space, the bodies, all of the portals and the arenas within those portals — went up in flames."

Megan: "So it's not just the competitors. It's everyone."

Kim: "It's everyone. It's the entire Monster Mash."

Jake: "I liked this job better when you guys didn't have visions. I liked this job better when we just kind of stumbled half-assed into whatever was gonna happen and figured it out along the way. Now I've gotta live with the dread of what's coming, instead of just the ignorance of what might be."

Tass: "Hey man, I'll take it. If I could have watched myself explode beforehand, I might have gotten ahead of that one."

Kim: "Listen, I've seen some really terrible stuff in visions, but I'd rather be informed than ignorant."

Jake: Ugh, pass. [Laughs]

Megan: [Laughs] Yeah.

Rev: Ignorance is bliss, baby. [Laughs]

Jake: I want to go grab the aforementioned flask and give it a look and like a sniff. And ... Oh, I'm going to Use Magic to view another time and see when somebody's fucked with it.

Rev: Roll Use Magic.

Kim: Yes, yes, yes!

Jake: Eleven.

Megan: Nice.

Kim: Nice.

Rev: This magical hologram pops up around all of you as you are standing in the room. Maddie, sleeping in the corner on her bed. The door opens and the lights are very dim. And this figure walks over, sits down in the chair, and turns on the lamp to start looking around for the flask. The person sitting in the chair is Strohm. Strohm looks shocked at seeing herself sitting in that chair.

Tass: I whirl around, checking out her response to this. Like, does she seem genuine?

Rev: She does.

Tass: "Mind control or shapeshifter?"

Rev: STROHM: What?

Tass: "Which thing would you be susceptible to? Did somebody mind control you? Is there a shapeshifter?"

Kim: "I don't think it's possible to mind control Strohm."

Rev: STROHM: No.

Megan: "I mean, you're really strong, but maybe with the right artifact."

Rev: STROHM: That's true. I did ... I mean, I knew Maddie's secret, but I'm not missing any time.

Kim: "Yeah. Why are we entertaining the thought that someone compromised Strohm when we know that doppelgangers are a thing?"

Megan: "Well, it could be either. We're just laying out our options."

Rev: STROHM: To be fair to them, I had a long history with them before you arrived on the scene, dear. And I did try to kill a number of them a number of times.

Tass: "And to be clear from my point of view, I am literally asking. If you don't think you are mind controlled, I'm gonna take your word."

Kim: "Sorry. I'm sorry. I get very touchy about this. I apologize."

Tass: "It's understandable. We're just information gathering, here."

Rev: DAMIEN O'DOYLE: She tried to kill me on at least six different occasions. In case you forgot I was here.

All: [Laugh]

Rev: He's just standing quietly, holding Megan's hand, very confused.

Kim: I mouth, "Aww!" to Megan. [Laughs]

Megan: She's like, "How dare you accuse my mother — aww!"

Kim: Aww!

Megan: "What's this?"

Rev: [Laughs]

Megan: I say to Strohm, "Looking at this replica of you, is there anything in particular that looks off? Or based on what they're wearing, when would they have copied you, if it's a shapeshifter?"

Rev: Yeah. Megan, why don't you roll Investigate a Mystery?

Megan: Okay.

Kim: Nice.

Megan: Eleven.

Rev: You get a hold 2.

Megan: What sort of creature is it?

Rev: I think at this point, that doesn't cost you a hold. You know, you're looking at a hologram of someone, so it's kind of hard to tell what kind of creature it is. But I think that you can get that it does not have the gold ring around the eyes that Strohm has gotten in the last two and a half weeks. And this poisoning clearly happened today. So it's not Strohm.

Megan: What is being concealed here?

Rev: The entrance and sitting at the desk, turning on the light? It's all a little theatrical. Whatever this is wanted you to see Strohm's face. Whatever this is, is aware that people are going to try and track it and see it. And it's presenting a false face intentionally.

Megan: Okay. Knowing this thing can make itself look like Strohm, I'm gonna go with what can it do? Was there anything else that kind of is shown as it's trying to make us think that it is Strohm. And now that I'm aware of that, I'm looking a little deeper?

Rev: Yes. As Strohm gets up and leaves the room in this vision, she turns back once more to the room and grins. And it's very subtle. But because you're looking for something to be off, you notice it. There is a second mouth behind her mouth when she smiles.

Megan: I think I just yell. I just go, "Ah! No, no, no!"

Tass: "What?"

Megan: "Oh! Two mouths. There's two mouths!" And I'm just like shaking my hands and, like, spinning around.

Tass: "Oh, yeah. Look at it. Look right there. Oh, yeah. Good catch. Ew. Ew, ew, ew."

Rev: Yeah, and it's very subtle. It is just Strohm opens her mouth just a bit when she smiles, and you can see that the mouth behind it has its teeth clenched in a smile. So you can see those teeth behind.

Jake: So, okay. Me the player, trying to understand this.

Rev: Uh-huh.

Jake: Like a mascot costume, almost? Like ... Or like a Halloween mask?

Rev: Kind of. But it's a tight fit, if so.

Kim: Is it like, um ... In the early movies of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, where sometimes the turtles would open their mouths wide, you'd see the performer's mouths?

Tass: [Laughs]

Jake: That's what I'm picturing.

Rev: Kind of. But again ...

Kim: I've sent you all that picture.

Rev: Tight. It's a tight fit.

Tass: I'm picturing where, like, the Xenomorph has opened its mouth and just not spit its weird tongue mouth out. It's just grinning back there.

Rev: But a normal sized mouth, not like tiny mouth.

Tass: Got it.

Rev: Yeah.

Tass: Got it. It's in my brain now, very firmly.

Rev: I can't get rid of it.

Megan: "It's definitely not Strohm. Or our Strohm, obviously. The gold circle, the eyes, it's not there."

Kim: "Okay. Okay. So what kind of thing is this? I don't know if this is a doppelganger. Like I thought that they usually just look completely like the person that they're imitating."

Megan: "I mean, I don't know much about them. I don't know if they can go off of, like, memory of what a person looks like or like a photograph or if they have to, like, look like what the person looks like now. But whatever it was, took an image of Strohm at some point before she got her future memories back. But I mean, look at — look at how purposeful this was. Whatever it is, it wants us to either think Strohm did this, or knows that we were gonna probably be able to see the scene and just used a disguise that it knew would throw us off."

Jake: "So a doppelganger like, fully adopts the physiology. Like it wouldn't have a second mouth. It's not that. This is either something basically wearing a Strohm suit but like that is the same proportions. Or, there could be some kind of, like, I don't know, like time dilation. Where like one part of her is moving, but, you know, the part of her from the past isn't like she opened her mouth, but like, we've got an after image or something like that?"

Rev: That is correct. Both from your experience in the future and in Dungeon World, doppelgangers fully take on the physiology of whatever they have become.

Kim: "It seems like kind of personal business I'm about to bring up in mixed company. But do you keep a second skin suit anywhere that someone may have gotten their hands on?"

Rev: She looks slightly indignant.

Kim: "Sorry!"

Rev: And turns to you.

Kim: "It's important!"

Rev: STROHM: I do keep additional, after what happened the first time I met these two gentlemen. But no, no one would be able to get to them.

Tass: "Yo, I was in a rock, okay?"

Jake: [Laughs]

Rev: STROHM: Yes. And the whole issue was because of you. And you.

Rev: She looks at Damian.

Tass: "Concede."

Rev: STROHM: Whoever did this is still here. If they did it right as the portal opened, that was minutes ago. We need to make sure no one leaves.

Kim: "Where is everyone? Because I also saw everybody dead."

Rev: STROHM: The guards would have escorted them out of the tunnels just into the open air while we got everything situated. So they should all be outside. We can bring

them back in. We can take them to a different location through the portals. But we definitely don't want anybody absconding.

Megan: "Well this is by invitation only, right?"

Rev: STROHM: And plus-ones.

Jake: Damien ...

Kim: Damien?

Rev: STROHM: So should I have everyone brought back in, or taken to another location?

Tass: "I don't know what we're looking for. So, I mean, yes, I think we do need to do this, but I feel like we should split up to a capacity. Like if we start bringing people in slowly, have a couple of us like checking people, right? And then have the others outside with the group, to see how people are responding to the others being checked. Like this could be a way we double up and keep an eye on someone that might try to get away or hide something."

Megan: I have an idea. I don't know if my abilities would work this way, though.

Rev: Mmhmm.

Megan: What if we brought everyone in and split them up evenly between all the different like portals?

Rev: Hmm.

Megan: And then if I could try and, like, Tune In to narrow down which of the portals that's coming from?

Jake: Oh!

Megan: We could at least cut down our suspect pool by as many separations as possible. But could I Tune In through a portal?

Rev: I think you would have to go through the portal and try it, so you'd have to go from portal to portal.

Megan: Then never mind. [Laughs]

Rev: That's a lot of walking. Someone carry me.

Megan: Damien, this is why I invited you.

Rev: He's already bent over.

Megan: You said you want to — [Laughs]

Rev: Climb on.

Megan: Yeah, I'll pitch that to the group. "If we separated everyone, we could maybe narrow down a smaller section. I would still be a lot of people to try and sift through, but we could at least keep it from being an arena full of people."

Kim: "But also a crowd full of supernatural people. Would you be able to filter through all of that to find the one person that we're looking for?"

Megan: "That's a good question. It might be kind of overpowering what this much magic in one place, but maybe if I'm really focusing in and casting this net with the intention of finding a creature that has this ... That has this specific ability that I now know more about, I might be able to narrow it down."

Tass: "Yeah. I mean, that's awesome. If you can even get a vague idea of what it's hoping to do, then that gives us a better idea of what to look for."

Kim: "Yeah, being able to filter through to see if anyone intends to do all of these people harm."

Tass: "Okay, so how do we want to split them up?"

Rev: STROHM: I could just split them up by seating. It seems like it would be the easiest way and would cause the least amount of suspicion.

Jake: "Kim, was Maddie in your vision? Was she among the dead?"

Kim: "Yeah, she was in it. She was dead like everybody else."

Jake: "Okay. I wondered if it was like, uh ... Why did they poison her before they're about to do whatever they're gonna do? I didn't know if, like, they needed her out of the way. And if anything in your vision would, like, inform that, you know? Like, she wasn't there because she was already handled or anything like that. I'm wondering if ... If they were trying to kill her genuinely before whatever else is about to happen, do we think that putting out the word that she didn't make it would help us, because they'd want to start moving on to the next phase of the plan and we'd be able to look out for that?"

Megan: "Good idea."

Kim: "Yeah, that's not a bad idea. There has to be some reason why she was the first target. And do we also ..." [Sighs] "Do we also want to put out the information that we think it might be Strohm? The minute I'm saying this out loud, I'm becoming less and less comfortable with this idea. But there has to be a reason why they wanted us to see that."

Megan: "I think that's a really good idea, Kim. We could even have you kind of step in as, like, temporarily taking command. And Strohm has been put under observation until we can figure out what's going on and we're gonna be questioning everyone."

Tass: "Yeah, this is a plan. Like this could just look to them 100% like they did it. That Maddie's dead, that we saw Strohm, that we pinned her down. You know, got her whatever, hidden away in shackles, something. And now we're just trying to get everybody in order and calm down, and that's all it's gonna look like we're doing. It looks like we're going right with their plan, right?"

Rev: STROHM: Really quick, who of you is going to stay behind to protect me? Because if word gets out that I killed Maddie, it's going to take more than a few of you to defend this room from them tearing me apart.

Tass: "I don't think necessarily actually that we do have to get word out about that."

Rev: STROHM: That's what they just said they were going to do.

Tass: "I know. I know. I know. But that's a good point that you're bringing up, and a great point that I think can still do exactly what you guys are talking about. Because really all we're trying to trick is the person that did this. And if they think that they succeeded, that's all that's important, right? We're gonna get to see what they are gonna do next. So if we're operating without you, most people are gonna think, fantastic. Like Strohm is looking after Maddie, and her cronies are taking over. But to the person that thinks that they set up a good ass trick, they're gonna read between the lines. They're going to go, oh, those people put Strohm away. I'm on to my next step. Right?"

Jake: "I get what you're saying. That yeah, the person who did this could draw the quote unquote right conclusion — like the false right conclusion that nobody else would draw, and so nobody else would panic. We will need to frame it probably as like Strohm is attending to Maddie's affairs or something if we are going to claim that she has died. As opposed to, like, taking care of her."

Tass: "Sure. Yeah. There we go."

Megan: "Well, what if we just said something like we suspect a high profile person to be involved, and that's why we need to question everyone. Not say who it is, but get people kind of suspicious and curious, cause a lot of buzz."

Jake: "Will that make everyone defensive, though? Is that gonna make this harder if everybody's like ... You know, if you're trying to pick up a vibe and everybody's now mad that they're a suspect, is it gonna be harder?"

Rev: STROHM: I would like you all to take a moment to just ... To remember the crowd you're dealing with. You're trying to add blood into the water of people who hunt regularly anyway. So if you even insinuate that Maddie is dead and that a high profile person did it, you're going to have a number of murders on your hand very quickly.

Megan: "That's a good point."

Kim: "Maybe this isn't a good road to go down."

Tass: "I don't know. I still think we're on to something. We just don't have to give up as much as what we initially thought. I don't think we have to approach it like we're questioning people."

Megan: "Do we say she's dying? Something happened, we don't know what's going on, we're just trying to find out? Like, I think we still should give a little bit to whoever did this. Make them think that they succeeded, or their plan is still in action. Because if they think that she might have survived, that throws a wrench in their plan and they may zag really hard or even try to escape."

Rev: STROHM: That is if they aren't escaping right now as we debate the merits of all of this.

Megan: "Yeah, can you have your sand guards go out and just get everyone back in here? I mean, I don't know how we're gonna split them up yet, or if so, but at least they won't be outside."

Rev: STROHM: Just back into their seats?

Megan: "Sure. Or just right into the arena. Whatever is gonna be the easiest way to address them all.

Rev: STROHM: Yes. I think that getting them in their seats and then if you want to talk to them, stepping into the arena is a perfectly good way to talk to them.

Jake: I'll go just try to get a vibe off anybody as they walk in. Just see if anybody seems like they're acting weird or anything. I'll work with the sand guards.

Rev: Yeah. So Jake heads out of the room and up through the tunnel that leads out into this series of stones that looks remarkably like Stonehenge. But maybe is, maybe isn't.

Jake: Who's to say?

Rev: Kind of innocuous, yeah. And there are some commotion up here. The sand guards are holding down two werewolves, and two others are holding back a very muscular vampire. And they are trying to get at each other.

Jake: "Whoa! Whoa, whoa, whoa. What's going on here?"

Rev: The vampire is spitting and cursing in a language you don't recognize. And the werewolves are like ...

Rev: WEREWOLF: This guy just attacked us out of nowhere. He's losing his mind. He just came at us. I don't know what's going on with him.

Jake: Do I by any chance recall, like, seeing these three prior?

Rev: Sure.

Jake: Okay.

Rev: But I think with that memory, this vampire was not alone before.

Jake: Okay. I want to look at the vampire then and be like, "Where's the person that was with you?"

Rev: Again, he is speaking in a language that you don't recognize. But when you kind of point at him, he gestures to the ground and at them very forcefully. And on the ground, there is a steak with a pile of ash around it.

Kim: Oh, no.

Megan: Oh, shit.

Jake: I turn to the werewolves. "Did you do that?"

Rev: WEREWOLF: Do what?

Jake: "Stake his friend!"

Rev: WEREWOLF: Are you out of your mind?

Jake: "I don't think so. Are you?"

Rev: WEREWOLF: No! You come to an event of the House of Strohm, and —

Jake: "I know! That's what — but there is a pile of ash and a stake right there. Nobody saw this happen?"

Rev: The vampire is still talking in a language that you're unfamiliar with, and pointing at them and pointing at the ground. And he stops. And you can see that he's working his mouth.

Rev: VAMPIRE: Blood duel.

Rev: And he points at one of them. And as soon as he says that, the sand person holding the one that he did not point at lets go and grabs the one he did point at and starts ushering him inside. And then the two sand people holding him back start ushering him inside, as if this was ...

Jake: Binding?

Rev: Yes.

Jake: Fuck.

Rev: And you have little problem getting everybody to go inside.

Jake: [Laughs]

Tass: Shit.

Jake: That's messed up. Boy. I mean, okay, true to the plan.=, I want to, like, just keep an eye on the crowd here and see if anybody other than the two who are going to blood

duel now are acting strangely. Ultimately, I do want to hang back and I'm gonna try and observe this again and see who fucking staked this vampire.

Rev: Yeah.

Jake: But first, just anybody being weird?

Rev: There's no roll here. You watch. Everybody here seems to be in good spirits, and they are headed inside to watch a pre-Monster Mash fight, as far as they're concerned.

Jake: Great.

Rev: Roll Use Magic.

Jake: Ten.

Rev: This image pops up around you, and it's very crowded, and lots of people moving and shuffling. You see the vampire who issued the blood duel talking to his friend, and he turns around and you see the werewolves nearby. And they kind of bump into each other, and some heated words are exchanged. But the werewolves move away across the crowd. And as you're watching the other vampire, the one who is not currently going inside for the duel, you see something moving below him. And it takes a moment for your vision to make sense of it. But it's like a chameleon. And it very slowly stands up, and you can see that ripple effect. And a stake appears in its hand and jabs into the back. And then this thing goes flat to the ground again, and this weird wave moves away through the crowd.

Jake: Shame this isn't like security camera footage. It's a shame that I can't just take this in there and show it to them.

Rev: [Laughs]

Jake: Can I learn anything else about this thing, now observing it in a different form?

Rev: You know, it was moving through the grass here. So I don't think in your vision, but like in ... I'm gonna ask you to step out of virtual reality, Jake. And just ...

Jake: I don't understand what you're saying.

Rev: Be in the moment.

Kim: Touch grass.

Jake: That sounds boring.

Rev: Touch grass.

Megan: Touch grass, Jake.

Jake: [Laughs]

Rev: But yes, if you want to like look around now that this area has been cleared, you can Investigate a Mystery.

Jake: Okay. Do we still have mundane comms?

Rev: I assume. I mean, they don't work here, but I assume.

Kim: Yeah.

Jake: Ah, dang it! They'll figure out that a blood duel is about to happen. [Laughs]

Megan: There's a whole arena full of people, chanting ...

Megan and Kim: Blood duel, blood duel!

Megan: [Laughs]

Jake: I want to look around the area for evidence of whatever this chameleon creature was.

Rev: Yeah. Roll Investigate a Mystery.

Jake: Nine.

Rev: You get a hold 1.

Jake: I don't feel like I've got enough to really know what it is still.

Rev: Hmm.

Jake: But I feel like I could have enough to catch up to it. So I want to go with, where did it go?

Rev: You follow the matted grass in the direction that it's going. And then pretty quickly you can see divots where it stands up and rejoins like the shuffling of feet, and then heads inside.

Jake: I'm gonna head inside as well.

Rev: All right. Inside of Maddie's office, a couple of moments pass as Jake is gone. And then you hear everybody coming back inside. It is oddly joyous, the sound that is coming off of this group. There is cheering and chanting, and Strohm turns her head towards the door.

Rev: STROHM: Oh, no.

Kim: "What?"

Rev: STROHM: Someone ... Someone declared a blood duel.

Kim: "Fuck!"

Tass: "What?"

Megan: "What's that?"

Rev: STROHM: Where two houses that have grievances with one another, if they have accurate belief that they were wronged, they can challenge another member to a duel to the death.

Tass: "Great ..." I'm gonna rush out and see what's going on.

Rev: You rush out into a crowd of people. Are you staying in the doorway, or are you joining with the moving crowd?

Tass: I think I'm going with it.

Rev: Okay.

Tass: I want to see, yeah, how this is gonna progress.

Rev: Okay.

Kim: Before I leave, I think I look at Strohm. "For the first time, I can't see the right course of action to undertake here. I am still not sure as to whether you should be seen or what we should say about what happened to Maddie or your supposed involvement. I don't know what to do. I don't want to compromise you, even if it would make investigating this easier."

Rev: STROHM: Yes, I certainly would prefer not to be compromised. It would be devastating for my brand and possibly my existence.

Kim: "Yeah. Yeah, no. I don't ... I don't want to do that."

Rev: STROHM: Well, this is about to be a very public event. Normally, I would be the one to make the announcement of its beginning. I could pass that off to someone else. Or I could join you all out there.

Kim: "I'll do it. I'll do it."

Rev: STROHM: Very well. I will stay here and guard Maddie.

Kim: "Love you. Please be safe."

Rev: And as you all get ready to go out, Damien, you can see him scanning around the room and his eye falls on one of the artifacts. If you remember, Maddie had all of the artifacts stored here. And he looks at Strohm and gives a half smile and elbows the glass shattering it.

Megan: [Laughs]

Rev: And he grabs a golden Zippo that is sitting on a small pedestal.

Rev: DAMIEN O'DOYLE: All right, let's go.

Kim: "Yep." I will open the door.

Rev: As the three of you step out, Jake is running down the hallway.

Megan: "What happened?"

Kim: "What's this about a blood duel?"

Jake: "Whatever we're looking for, it's like a chameleon. It was, like, invisible. And it framed one of these werewolves for killing a vampire's friend. They got heated with each other, they broke apart. This thing came up from the ground, Predator-style, staked this vampire, went back down, and has now re-assimilated with the crowd as someone."

Megan: "Fuck, that's a good distraction. Okay, well, maybe we don't have time to separate everyone, then. I'm gonna try and see if I can track down where they are."

Kim: "Okay. I mean, I'm the acting head of the House of Strohm now, so I have to go oversee the blood duel. Which I wouldn't like to do. But I also, as the acting member of the House of Strohm, I can't stop it."

Megan: "Can you make an announcement of some sort? Maybe ... I don't know. What are we gonna tell people? But while you're talking, maybe that's when I can kind of do my

thing. That maybe people will be distracted and paying attention to your words and won't be as aware of what's going on."

Jake: "I mean, yeah. Can you just stall it?"

Kim: "Oh ... Yeah — yeah, I guess?"

Jake: "It's like an official thing, right? So it's not just two people going at each other's throats. There's, like, rules about this. Can you just bullshit some stuff to make this take too long?"

Kim: [Pained] "Oh my god ..."

Megan: "This whole thing is about theatrics. Like make it a big deal and talk about the what it means to blood duel and why it's important and blah, blah, blah, whatever. Like these people care about that shit."

Rev: Tass, you have made it into the arena first, and the two combatants have been led into the center of the arena and then moved to opposite sides. And they are both stripping down to the waist and pacing back and forth. The crowd fills in and everybody is very excited. Everyone is on the edge of their seats. You can see people taking bets. What exactly are you doing as you get swept in with the crowd?

Tass: Like I'm, you know, initially, as I'm swept up into this, I realize I have messed up. I have made an error. So as everyone is like filing and I'm getting jostled along, I'm trying to, like ... I'm going with the flow, but like walking backwards and I'm trying to get everyone around me chanting. Like, "Blood duel, blood duel! Come on, everybody! Blood duel!" And if anybody is, I'm looking in their mouths as they shout.

Megan: Yes! That's so good!

Kim: Oh my god!

Rev: Yeah. The people around you immediately, you don't see any second mouths that look like the second mouth that you saw. I won't say you don't see any second mouths.

Tass: [Laughs] Uh-huh.

Rev: There are some breed of vampires that have — like sharks, like two or three rows of teeth.

Tass: Ah, yeah.

Rev: But you don't see anything similar to what you saw inside of Maddie's office.

Tass: Okay. Then by the time like they get down to the floor, I'm literally just going back and forth between them, I think. Just talking to the side, like, "All right, let's make sure Strohm comes down or somebody. Like, we'll — we'll do the whole what to do. Just stretch. Get a good stretch there. There you go. You know, make — arm behind your back. There we go. Get your hammies. All right." And then just — I'm just trying to stall until I can see my friends.

Rev: Yeah. And a couple of moments pass, and you see the four of them coming down through the main entrance towards the arena center.

Tass: "Oh, thank god." And I ran over to join them.

Megan: "Kim's gonna try to talk to the crowd and stall everyone, and I'm gonna see if I can pinpoint where the son of a bitch is."

Tass: "Okay, great. Great plan."

Jake: "It's like a chameleon. So keep an eye out for any, like, weird shifts, or something moving that isn't really moving. You know what I mean?"

Tass: "Oh, yeah. Like Predator vision?"

Jake: "Yes."

Tass: "Yeah. Okay. Dope."

Rev: As Kim starts to walk into the arena, you feel this little bit of magic come over you, and you kind of instinctively make a sound and you hear that echo throughout. You can tell that you are being amplified. As you turn around to address the crowd, you can see that there are every sort of monster you can imagine. There are creatures made of rock, there are the fae, there are plant people and werewolves and vampires. They aren't necessarily always clustered together, but you do see clusters of monsters that maybe work or live in packs or have royal courts, things like that. As you turn to speak to the audience at large, there is a soft "whump" sound. At first when this sound goes off, it seems like nothing happens. And then a cluster of the fae start to burn and scream as you see two dozen iron nails fire out of the seating directly in front of them.

Megan: Oh my god. I think I'm running over to the edge of the box where we're at, and I'm just putting my hands on the edge of it and I'm throwing out all of my mental energy and trying to focus in on where this thing is.

Rev: Roll Tune In.

Megan: Nine.

Rev: You get a hold 1.

Megan: Where's the creature right now?

Rev: Megan, as you focus in your powers, trying to get a sense of where this creature is, the room around you erupts into chaos. People start rising from their seats, moving towards the exits. Others stand up and start lashing out at those near them. You see the energy of all of these creatures bubbling up in your vision. But you know what this creature can do. You've seen it shapeshift. You've seen it take on chameleon-like abilities. And as you filter this idea through your mind's eye, lights start to dim all around you until there is only one person in this room that is glowing. And as you turn to look at them, they're one of the few people who are not moving. She sees you looking at her and holds up one of her hands, and in it is a small crystal which she squeezes and it shatters. Six portals pop into existence as the crystal breaks, and everyone starts to rush through them. Your eyes narrow in on her, and she's sitting in the third row smiling at you. It's Anastacia. She gives a small nod and then vanishes from your sight.

SFX:

OUTRO MUSIC

Carolyn: The Critshow is a Critshow Studios production, edited and produced by Brandon Wentz, with music by Jake Pierle. You can find more information about us at thecritshowpodcast.com. To keep up to date with upcoming live shows, contests, and other special events, follow us at The Critshow on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. For even more weekly content, join us at Patreon.com/TheCritshow.