

15. The Saint of Sinners

“So where do we go from here?”

“As far as you need to in order to ensure this madness finally ends.”

I inhaled on the smoke, staring at the distant eyes before me, compassion long lost. I nodded slowly, expressing my understanding.

“And the child? What of her?”

“She has three years, does she not? “

I nodded again, watching his eyes dance.

“Then give her three years to sweat before the story finally comes to a close.”

“I’m to hold back three more years? Haven’t I suffered this long enough? Haven’t you? Why not just end it all, right now, bury the madness, pray for the lost, and call it a day? Enough is enough! We’ve both lost everything we’ve cared about – there is nothing left to lose.”

And he smiled slowly. “And that is why three more years is nothing to us. It’s time well spent to make sure there are no other loose ends we need consider. And perhaps the sinners will destroy themselves.”

I stubbed the cigarette out abruptly, clearly getting frustrated. He jumped out of the chair to grab me before I could properly storm off.

“Trust me, it’ll be worth it in the end.”

“I’ve trusted you for years, Saint, years. I’ve followed you through every level of Hell there ever was, and some I found by mistake. I’ve risked everything and asked no questions,

raised no objections, serving as your loyal apprentice for years now, well before Rev even.”

His grip tightened on my arm as he jerked me closer to him.

“Saying those two words to me now are almost...offensive.”

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“Don’t I always?”

“That’s what family is for. Sweet dreams, Irish.”

14. The Final Consensus

So Colt was dead.

Dusk disappeared into the bowels of the underground, living the circus with every bit of strength he possessed.

Gin kept working at the bar, though became a mute with time.

Irish ran the bar as honestly as she could manage, tolerating no nonsense and cutting whatever hard deal she had to in order to keep breathing.

With Colt’s death, the resistance gave in to Dacien’s new brand of street justice, and her absolute rule. Unlike her predecessors, she had no second in command, no right hand man, or woman, to settle her scores. All blood debts were paid personally, she sent nobody to do her dirty work. The rumors were that she began to actually enjoy hurting people.

Especially herself.

And I?

Turns out Lucius and Jekt were part of a band. I started traveling around with them, and over time, taking pictures. That whole concept of sex, drugs, and rock & roll? That was the story of my life. I would spend my nights completely strung out, following the boys with a camera until I decided on which one to take home that night. My days were spent sleeping while recovering from a drug-induced nightmare.

Ironically, where as their favorite place to play?

The Drowning Raven.

Call it karma.

13. Fate of a Murderer

“He’s dead.”

I woke up in a hospital bed with a start, Irish sitting calmly next to me. The words rolled off her tongue so casually, almost painlessly.

“Why are you helping her? After all that they’ve done, everything that family has destroyed, why would you allow yourself to aid in the madness?”

She paused, considering her response carefully. “Only through madness can it end. Open your eyes child; you of all people understand the importance of appearances. Through betrayal and treachery, the cycle shall end as it began. Colt’s death will end the war.”

“And is that how it was supposed to work out from the start?”

She shook her head slowly. “No. You interfered.”

“Are you trying to blame me for Colt’s death?”

She shrugged slightly. “Yes and no. He was damned from the very moment he got himself involved with street demons. And somewhere in his soul, he knew it. Very few get to live this life beyond the age of twenty or so. Very few. He had faced his fate long ago, and it didn’t bother him in the slightest. His goal was to change things, to bring peace after generations of conflict, no matter the cost. He was prepared to die for such peace all along.”

“So how am I responsible?”

She smiled slowly. “He had seduced the enemy. With Dacien on his side, he was safe. Linkon’s death triggered the demon deep in her soul that we all saw her to be. Except Colt. He was so convinced that even horrible people could be decent. He loved her despite her name, despite her fate. And he loved her until the moment his last breath left him. No matter what she put him through, and even after the ultimate betrayal, he loved her still.”

“How do you know?”

And she locked her eyes to mine with a ferociousness I’d never seen before.

“Trust me.”

“So now what happens?”

“You disappear. You are hereby banished from the underground. You are never to make contact with Dacien or Dusk unless they approach you. You are however still permitted at the bar, since all decisions regarding such still fall on me. The life you once knew has ended. We will not be saving you again. Most people think you’re dead as is. You will heal, and you will move on from this moment.”

I nodded my consent, since I had little other choice. She got

up from her chair to leave, turning back for a moment.

“And remember that you are alive right now only because Dacien Ransom wishes it so. Long live the Queen.”

And she left.

I let the words swim in my mind until I passed out again, waking up to a doctor leaning over me staring at my chart. He seemed almost too young to be a doctor, barely older than myself. He noticed my movement casually, still pouring over the paperwork.

“Miss...Burton? How are you feeling today?”

I nodded, smiling slightly. “Could be worse.”

He kept the chart high, masking most of his face; eyes as sweet as sin shone down on me. “Think you can walk?”

And I pulled myself out of bed as quickly as I could manage. “Willing to try.”

With that, he replaced the chart quietly, wrapped his coat around me, and quickly helped me escape the hospital. Once we'd reached street level, he held out his hand.

“Name's Jekt. And I am here on behalf of the Save a Deacon organization to help you. Brie sent me. We should get out of here before the wrong people get suspicious though.”

And it was as simple as that. I followed a stranger down backstreets and alleys, trying to avoid public scrutiny. He had ditched the white coat along the way, digging through his pockets for a smoke. He leaned the pack out to me, which I declined politely, and we kept going.

I think from the moment I locked eyes with his, I loved him.

And somehow, I knew, he would never love me.

We walked in silence, neither really comfortable with one another enough to start a casual conversation. Once we reached the building, he held the door open for me, smiling sheepishly. I was led up two stories when he stopped abruptly and knocked. The door craned open slowly, the viewer staring nervously between the pair of us, before a vague blur attacked me. Arms clasped around my throat, Jekt helped steady me from toppling over.

“I thought I’d never see you again!”

Brie’s voice was soothing for some reason, her entire presence helped steady my already shaky composure. I was glad to see her, and pleased to see she was all right. She ushered me inside, where Jekt followed after nervously glancing up and down the hallway.

I was seated and had all manner of luxuries thrown at me – food, drink, clean clothes, the works. Her excitement couldn’t be contained in mere mortal bounds. I appeased her where I could, laughing despite myself at her eagerness to please. I felt like a doomed pound puppy, recently granted redemption from the big sleep.

And somehow, it helped me relax.

She started talking a mile a minute, more words than I thought her capable of. She tried to explain everything at once, but her words started to blur and fade in my mind. The more she spoke, the less I heard. I understood that the apartment belonged to a gentleman named Lucius, and that he was in a band with Jekt. Everything after that was blurry.

I shook my head slowly, trying to absorb everything at once.

“I think I need a dr...”

And before the sentence was finished, an open bottle was placed at the center of the table before me. I took a few

straight swigs without hesitation before putting it back on the surface.

“Thanks,” I muttered as the liquid burned down my throat. I shuddered slightly as warmth crept over my body with the familiar twinge of disassociation. I took another few swigs, feeling my stomach start to spin, then leaned back on the couch to unwind. My mind was spinning a mile a minute, as I tried vaguely to make sense of my current situation.

After a fresh shower, and enough whiskey to drown a small child, I made the brilliant decision to go for a walk. Brie thought it would be a fun idea, and was more than happy to tag along. Realizing that the two smallest people in the crew were about to go staggering around the streets unattended, Jekt and Lucius decided to tag along as well.

We wandered a few blocks, laughing and disoriented, trying to decide where to go. The bar seemed like a logical solution at the time, but given the recent events, I didn't want to cause any more trouble. Brie felt much the opposite however, and we ended up turning towards that direction. We were about a block away when we saw the crowd standing around in a semicircle. Once we got closer, we realized that it was the demons, from both sides of the war. Only once we were standing immediately behind them did we understand their actions.

Hanging from the storefront of the bar in a mock crucifixion was Colt, his body still leaking blood from endless wounds. Around his neck, a simple sign, crafted in his blood.

“Abandon all Hope.”

I felt the effects of the drunkenness wear off at a remarkable pace as I stood there, staring up at the body of my protector. Reduced merely to an object, a marker of insult and humor.

With this simple act, the war had been ended. The martyr, the fool, all stereotypes in one, demolished. Broken and bleeding, our once great saint, our flawless, fearless leader – gone. I

pushed my way through the crowd, slowly at first, then more frantically until I could finally reach him. I just wanted to touch him – to be sure the warmth was gone. But then I needed to have him lowered, to end the mockery. I tried in vain to pull him down, despite the futility of it, his weight against my strength. I kept trying even as countless hands reached in to pry me off. I fought and clawed my way back to him, even as the steel grip slipped around me, an arm locked around my throat and I was hefted back.

“Bare witness to the cost. You can not deny it now. You can’t hide from the truth. He is dead...because of you.” Irish leaned her face close into my ear as the last few words slipped off her tongue. I tried to pull myself from her grasp, but her hold was impenetrable. The more I fought, the harder the hold, until I had nearly exhausted myself. I heard calls for the crowd to clear, a voice so familiar a chill ran up my spine hearing it. And Irish kept me in that lock from behind as Dacien parted and dispersed the vulgar mob. After a lengthy look at me, she exhaled her smoke slowly in my face, at which point Irish finally let go.

“Couldn’t stay away could you? Trouble seems to find you, doesn’t it kid? Wouldn’t want to break my promise early.” She inhaled slowly, turning her head lazily to stare up at Colt then back at me. “Run along home. Now.”

I took a few steps back, slowly considering my options. I couldn’t win here. Irish would not save me anymore. She only kept watch over me because Colt did. I was on my own from now on. Now and forever. Irish would do what she did best. Survive. No matter the cost.

I turned my back on the bar that day, on Irish and Dacien. I walked away with my head held as high as I could amidst all the confusion. And I regrouped with Brie immediately.

No matter what I ever said or did, I would never be forgiven.

I would never find myself in their good graces again. I had fallen so far from the gates of Heaven there would be no saving me now. I had single-handedly destroyed our only hope. And all he had ever done was take care of me. Keep me safe. And this was the thanks he got. This was how I repaid him.

What a class act.

12. Another Turn of the Wheel

I stayed with Irish for an undetermined amount of time. Until my eyes were able to focus and most of the swelling calmed down. Until I could stand on my own two feet without cringing. And despite her arguments to the contrary, she allowed me to go home. There were wheels turning, most of which I had set into motion with Linkon's untimely passing. And I was fully prepared to reap the cost of my...insubordination.

Irish assured me that she would relay my absence to the right people, but she would not be responsible for how they decided to handle it. I understood and was grateful that she was willing to play the part of unfortunate messenger as it was. Coming from her, Colt was bound to keep his cool and attempt to make the best of things. Lately he was wound up pretty tight, putting a huge emphasis on his orders being followed. I had gone and murdered the opposition's lead enforcer, the king demon himself, without anyone's permission or instruction. And in doing so, I had managed to make an already complicated situation even more so.

Either the war would end, the madness would stop, and Colt would take control, as he was meant to.

Or Dacien would cry havoc and let the madness boil over,

throwing the streets and circus into pandemonium. The city would pay the cost of my harshness, and she would not rest until her point was made.

I was hoping for the former, but my chances of the latter seemed much more likely. Dacien didn't have a very peaceful, forgiving reputation. But I was prepared for the worst.

I had taken to hiding out in the circus in the darkest corner I could find, after trying some time at home and finding myself a bit apprehensive after the attack. It hadn't been the first time Dacien Ransom had dropped in on me, and I was sure it wouldn't be the last as long as she could find me. Then again, no matter where I went, she would be sure to locate me. I was hoping to rest and heal up some before dealing with Colt and Dusk. Which, for the most part, happened.

Until I woke up to Colt's severe gaze fixed on me. I had tried my damndest to prepare myself for this moment, but nothing I could say would be good enough.

"So you thought you'd take matters into your own hands eh?"

I coughed a little, sitting up abruptly. I wasn't sure if I was about to get a lecture or another beating. I was halfheartedly hoping I still looked horrible and he wouldn't be able to retaliate. But I had defied the master's orders, taken the war into my own hands and risked the lives of countless innocents. My actions could not go without punishment.

"I couldn't let him get away with it again."

"And so you decided to murder the other team's leader without warning anybody? Without considering what might happen? Did you even think for a moment that somehow your actions might affect someone other than yourself? Did you?"

"Colt...I'm sorry."

He shook his head slowly. "So am I."

And with that he pulled me up from the nape of my neck and dragged me out of the circus. I was led all the way to the front gate, though his grasp relaxed some once I'd reached my feet. This place was one of safety and salvation, whatever his plans were, they could not be carried out within the circus.

We moved down the sewers until we were a safe distance away from the entrance, and still a decent amount away from the bar. He turned then to face me.

"Dacien's loyalty has always been questionable, at least to her faction. Now, with Linkon gone, they look to her for strength. They need someone to take charge. And she's doing just that. Anyone who opposes her is beaten to within inches of their lives and abandoned to the streets. Any compassion she once felt towards us has been lost."

I kept my eyes locked to his, as this carefully prepared speech played out. I figured it was now or never.

"You love her, don't you?" My voice was soft but sincere, pulling at his heartstrings. He glanced away from me for a moment before turning to lock eyes on me, cold as sin.

"That's irrelevant, the point here is how your mess has damned us all."

"It's entirely relevant though. She's now playing for the other team full time. She won't play with you anymore. You're heartbroken, aren't you?"

And he reached out with such force that I would have hit the ground had his hand not been clamped around my throat. For about thirty seconds, Colt Brogan was gone. Everything that made him the responsible leader that he once was had been replaced with the cold shell of a man now desperately demolished. I was slammed backwards into the wall, which my

head hit with a solid thud.

“I am *not* heartbroken. Understand me? I am Colt Brogan, and my primary mission in life right now is to keep this operation secure. Any deviation from the plan can result in severe loss of life. And I’m not prepared to take that risk.”

He reached behind his back and pulled a handgun I’d never seen before from his waistband. He used it so sparingly I had never seen it up close. He held it pressed tight to my forehead. I just stared at the piece, beautifully crafted, recognizing it upon closer inspection as the same weapon I’d used on Linkon. It clicked softly.

“Control is the only way I’m going to keep my family alive. The only way we’re going to survive. We must maintain order, there can’t be any deviation from the plan.”

I took a breath slowly, locked onto his eyes. “And what is the plan?”

He smiled a little. “To survive.”

I played through everything I could say in my mind to try and convince him to stop. But his actions were warranted, my fate accepted, and despite my own heart tearing in two, I knew this had to be. I could not be permitted to walk away. This betrayal needed to be answered for. An example had to be made.

And just as his finger began to squeeze down on the trigger, another soft click rang out next to his head. I shifted my glance slightly to the left, following the outstretched arm, and the same confident smile I’d seen only weeks before.

“You were saying?”

Colt stood frozen, the gears in his head attempting to sort out his few limited options. He could attempt to pull the trigger before she did, taking me down with him. Or he could let go and hope that his own death would wipe the slate clean.

One way or another, he was going to die, and he knew it. There was no escaping that. But whether or not I would was the issue at stake currently. His grip on my throat tightened as the weapon shook in his hand.

“Easy now, lover. Just put the child down, she’s still of use to me.” Dacien’s words were even and short, to the point and direct. Colt turned to face her, his eyes hard.

“You could betray me so simply for *him*, knowing the monster that he was? Knowing that his time was running out, knowing his fate was richly deserved?”

She shook her head slowly. “You don’t understand Colt. Family is family, despite its monstrosity. He was all I had left in the world. And she stole him from me. Her life is mine and mine alone. Blood for blood, remember?”

And for a moment, for the first time in my life, I can say he looked defeated. The gun dropped to his side. He leaned in slowly to kiss me on the forehead, before stepping back finally, his eyes locked to mine. Dacien’s arm followed his every move, positioned perfectly over his ear. At such close range, there was zero chance of survival. And they both knew it.

As we all stood locked on one another, I watched an arm slip around Colt’s body from behind as a syringe was jabbed violently into his throat. The harder he fought, the more his body gave in to the drug, until he was finally on the ground. And behind him, holding the syringe?

Dusk.

“What the hell are you doing?” I heard my voice without realizing it had escaped my lips. Dacien and Dusk both seemed almost surprised to hear it as a sinister smile snuck across her face. She crept closer to me, pulling me into her, pushing the gun into my stomach.

“Survival of the fittest.”

Click. Bang.

I coughed as I grasped onto her, laughing a little. “What happened to three years?”

She tucked the weapon in her waistband, lowering me to the ground as blood began to pour out again. Dusk stood by, wide-eyed and lost. This hadn't been part of the deal. He had been commissioned to deliver his brother, nothing more. And as she put her hand on top of mine, applying pressure to the wound, I realize that this too was a matter of appearances.

“I said I wouldn't come for you for three years. But I never said you wouldn't have to fight for it. How bad to you want to survive Deacon? And not for nothing, you of all people should know that nothing is as it seems.”

I nodded my agreement, my breathing becoming more erratic as time slipped away. I heard slow, shuffling steps as Dusk dragged Colt away. And another set of calm even steps, stopping right over Dacien's shoulder. Staring up, I found Irish standing there, cold and distant.

“They're easier to fix when you don't shoot them you know,” she muttered, leaning down to pick me up. The more I tried to figure out her role in this, as well as Dusk's, the less sense it made. Her and Dacien spoke for a second about matters I no longer cared about as I started to slip out again. And then it was over.

Curtain. Scene.

11. Help Wanted

To say that I knew what I was doing entirely when I did it might've been a stretch. But I had carried out my plan nonetheless. Linkon Ransom was dead, and that's all that mattered to me. What I hadn't considered was how this might affect the war. Who would suffer in this deal.

And perhaps, I should have.

I was able to have three days of peace after my little scene. Three days and nights was I free from the world, sleeping soundly on a conscience heavy with guilt but somehow free enough to function.

And then there was a knock on the door that I would never forget.

The knock was calm and even, nothing suspicious. Very similar to how Colt would knock, or Irish, so I imagined they wanted to discuss the final outcome of things. Brie had gone off that day to look around and get her bearings, which I warned her could be dangerous. She stayed close to the bar and they kept close watch on her. I moved to open the door, relaxed and without hesitation.

The first blow caught me off guard and I staggered back slightly, still gripping the doorknob. The second laid me flat out on the ground. And that's where I stayed for the entirety of the beating. Nothing more was used than fists. Nothing else was necessary. This continued until I was just about to black out, when the pain had reached an intolerable level that I simply couldn't ignore. It was right then that my attacker leaned in, inches from my face, her hands resting on either side of my head, covered in my blood.

"Justice has been served. You murdered a sinner who deserved his fate. But in doing so, you've condemned yourself. I have

had my vengeance.”

I coughed, trying to arrange a sentence in my mind, but it would not happen. She got off of me, carrying me deeper into my apartment, where I could sit up a little and look around. I locked my eyes on her form, blurry and dark, towering over me.

“So finish it,” I muttered, spitting blood with every word. She had a right to my life. I knew this as I stared into her cold, dead eyes as Linkon lay dying. And I had slept peacefully for three whole days with this in mind.

“I have. The only person with the right to avenge Linkon’s death is his family. None have that priority over me. If I declare the issue resolved, then none may question me. However, if I let you get away scot-free, they would come for me, whispering of my weakness. You’re a showman. You know the importance of appearances.” Dacien seemed satisfied with herself, staring at her handiwork. “However, my dear, you will die. Not today, but you will pay the price of your sins. Blood for blood. Three years you have to consider your options, to make yourself useful. Until your 21st year will you be safe from my grasp. But after that, dear Deacon...all bets are off.”

I nodded slowly, breathing in shallow gasps through my battered ribs. She smiled slowly at me, the corners creeping sinisterly across her lips. And the last thing I remember was a gunshot, tearing through my chest. A river of blood snaking down my front as I sat there, dying slowly. The last conscious thought I had before blacking out, before the pain overtook me?

Rest in peace you son of a bitch.

I woke up in bed, bandaged but still tender. The place was empty, and mostly blurry at the moment. It wasn’t my bed, so I began to wonder where I’d been taken and by whom.

“Scared me for awhile there kid, when you wouldn’t wake up.”

Irish's voice came through the darkness, concerned and severe. I judged from the sound she had to be within two feet of me. I gave up on trying to lock eyes with her, finding it pointless in the long run. From the scraping of legs on the floor, I heard her take a seat at my side.

"How long have I been out?"

"Enough to scare me."

"How did you know where to find me?"

She paused slightly. "Let's just say whenever Dacien Ransom drops by the bar, it's never a good sign."

I nodded solemnly, still unable to focus and completely content with my pain all the same. I knew there was no way I would be able to get away with it, but I was fully prepared to take my chances. I didn't honestly expect that I'd ever make it back out of that building once I'd entered. But as soon as my foot hit the concrete outside, I knew I was damned. That vengeance would be stalking me and I could never consider myself safe again.

"I'm going to keep you here. They're less likely to come looking for you here."

I coughed a small laugh. "They're not going to come looking for me, Irish. She proved her point, now it's all about killing time."

"I don't understand."

"And you're not supposed to. Let's just say...Miss Ransom and I have an accord. For the time being."

Irish just sat there quietly, taking it all in, considering what to do next. Her options were limited and her time was running out. She was growing old fast, and with age came a sort of impatience for childish games. She had seen much in

her life, things I couldn't even begin to fathom. And I knew better than to question her methods. She was tending to me out of necessity, because she was the only one who could vouch for my safety without being personally attached. The Brogans had their hearts and souls at stake. Irish liked me, but would not have been destroyed if I somehow caught a stray bullet. She knew better than that.

The streets serve their own brand of justice.

And since the death of the Endless, there were no neutral parties to clean up the blood, to watch over the lost. Us mortals would have to fight our own battles and lay out our own dead.

Until the wheel turned yet again.

If the wheel turned.

The family behind the Endless, as well as the Endless themselves, had been murdered. Or so the legends say. We would have to suffer this all out in the long run, riding on the wings of chaos until peace reigned free. For how long would we bleed? How long would the streets run red with blood as the sky cried with pain?

As long as it took.

She stayed there, the sound of her breathing somehow reassuring as I drifted away from the real again. Just as I started to pass out, I remember her voice, answering back that of another. A female voice that I had recalled recently. And only one thing passed through my mind before I gave in to the warmth of darkness.

Exactly how long had Dacien and Irish been such close friends?

10. Identity Fraud

For the record –

My name is Deacon.

Yes. I'm aware that it's a boy's name. What can I say? My family was insane.

This is me running away from my old life. This is me starting over. You see how well it's going? Maybe one day, I'll tell you what I was running away from, why I got up and left. Until then, here we are. This is my new life. This is starting over.

I ran away from gang troubles and Linkon and all else. And here I am. Back in the same city I started in. Hopefully this time, the mess will clear itself out.

Saying I have no family is a lie. I have one, somewhere, but they're not important. I'm not getting into that right now. Right now, I'm here, in this.

I knew I had to get away but I had no way out at the moment. I would have to suffer this until the end. I'd run the course and try to survive. This was a game of survival now. I had nothing left to lose. And dangerous is the person with nothing to lose.

My body was wrecked. My soul was sold. My heart was bleeding. All I had left was the absolute, indestructible drive to keep moving. I'd come this far and the road wasn't getting any shorter. I'd get up and keep going. Running away didn't seem to be doing anything for me. So I'd fight this war, one way or another. I just needed to heal up first. Not even fully, but enough to stand. I couldn't let them think I was running

scared. I couldn't let them think I was afraid of them. Linkon would get off on that. I couldn't give him the satisfaction.

My only real option was lack of failure.

I stayed in bed for about a week then went home. I gave my thanks to Irish and Colt, and walked there myself. I didn't want help or protection anymore. It would only get in the way, cause more trouble. I just needed to figure things out on my own for a change. I needed to stand my own ground. And from there, I could do anything. I got home and laid down on my own bed for a while to think. My eyes stared into the surface of the ceiling, then past it for miles. My mind wandered to the possibilities, to the infinite. I just needed to make it past this.

Past this one last man.

Linkon Ransom was my downfall. Because I didn't deal with him when I was supposed to, now he'd come for me. He'd always be there unless I finished this. But I couldn't exactly walk up to him and blow his brains out, no matter how much I wanted to – it would be a suicide mission. But I decided then and there, that I would have to. Despite all else. It was my only escape. I had to end this. The gangs were already at war. Fuck this. The waiting and wondering. This was a new day. This was the rest of my life. This was my taking the reins and pulling this fucker back into control. My control.

I got up, took a shower, and changed. I grabbed my coat on my way out the door, taking a quick glance around the place to see if I'd forgotten anything. I'd done a lot of writing since...the incident. I couldn't say the word, I could barely think it; I was still fairly scarred. And I closed the door behind me. There was no point in locking it – I had nothing worth stealing. It'd all been stolen already.

See also – my innocence.

I walked to the bar. I didn't have anything with me but ambition. I walked fast, not wanting to waste a moment. I got there to find it busy, as usual. Irish was behind the bar, talking to Colt who was seated close to her, in a distant corner. They both turned to see me as I walked in. Dusk was standing next to his brother, in his circus attire; ready to turn and leave when I stepped in. I felt like the whole place stopped because I walked in.

Aren't you tired of being weak?

Yeah. I am.

Straight up to the bar. Step. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Hand on the counter. Make eye contact. Look and sound convincing.

"Hey Irish, got a firearm I could borrow for awhile?"

She raised a brow, shooting a look at the boys. "Awhile?"

"A few hours, tops."

She nodded, again shooting looks at the boys. "Ammo?"

"One round would be sufficient."

She frowned, folding her arms and standing back. "Going on a trip, kid?"

And it took me a minute to grasp, but I got it eventually. I laughed, even though it hurt to do so. I looked at the boys, flashing them each different smiles. Dusk nodded devilishly and took his leave to go back to the show. They were always waiting for him there. Always. And Colt just sipped his drink idly. Irish shrugged and reached under the counter, producing her own sidearm. She pulled the clip out, inspected it, and slammed it back in. She put it on the bar, sliding it over to me, her hand resting on it.

“Take care of her for me, huh? Gotten me through a few tough spots. You’ve got enough in there to take down a hell of a demon.”

I smiled at her. “Just need one, Irish, just one. I’m going for the King.”

She shook her head. “Always fear the worst.”

And I took the gun from her, checked the safety, and held it loosely in hand. “Irish, I *am* the worst.” I smiled wide, nodded to both of them, and walked out. I could feel their eyes watching me, the dumbstruck looks. And I didn’t have to be standing there to hear the stool scrape across the floor as Colt got up to follow me. I kept walking.

I walked clear across town. To Linkon’s territory. I saw his thugs give me dirty looks as I came through. I recognize a few from the incident, and the incidents before it. They leered at me, smirking and smiling. I kept going. I was a good halfway to Linkon’s place before one of them stepped up.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” He had a cocky attitude to him, a good few inches on me, and easily a lot heavier. I couldn’t take him, even in my best condition. He smiled ear to ear as he waited for a reply. He had his hands on his waist, within easy reach of his own weapon. I smiled widely, looking him in the eye.

“Going? To Hell – wanna join me?”

He smiled wider, and before he could word his reply, I had my gun out, aimed right between the eyes. He was frozen in place.

“Hey babe, I was just kidding around, come on.”

“Babe?” I muttered, clicking the safety off. I lowered it from between the eyes and shot him in the arm. He howled and stumbled around the street. I kept the gun fixed on him until he straightened up, the cockiness lost from his eyes. “Now,

we're going to see your boss. Now. Without any more silly names. Got me?"

"You fucking..."

I took a step closer, pushing the gun to his head. "What? Come on, tell me."

He swallowed hard. And he thought about his life. And he stepped away. "Let's go."

"Good boy."

And we were on our way.

Every so often, it's great being a bitch. And even more fun getting even.

This was my revenge for pride damaged.

Due to my escort, there were no other problems all the way to Linkon's place. He held his arm as he kept at my side. I could see and hear the blood dripping from between his fingers. I considered offering him help but thought better of it. Fuck it, he's a guy, let him suffer.

I walked into the building and right up the stairs. He'd be on the top floor. The top dog always has to be. It makes sense somehow. I could see the lackeys all the way up, watching me. They were thinking about calling the boss. I left my tour guide on the ground floor. No doubt Linkon knew I was en route. I marched up anyway. I would march into my death. Die amidst blazing guns. I'd go down with a fight.

I got to Linkon's door, the gun still loosely in hand. I'd walked from the bar with it there the entire time. And nobody stopped me. God, I love this city. I knocked with my free hand. A girl I didn't know answered.

"Can Linkon come out and play?" I asked. She looked startled.

I gestured with my hand holding the gun, stepping inside and forcing her back. She was scantily clad, not that I was surprised. Another day, another girl. She stepped back as Linkon stepped into view. I saw his eyes lock on me, the gun. He turned to her, whispered a few words in her ear, and she was gone. He smiled at me.

“How can I help you?”

“Help? Me? Smile, lover.”

And I shot him in the chest. Point. Blank. Just like that. The smile was frozen on his lips as the force hit him and he dropped. I took a few steps, coming to his side. He was still breathing shallowly. I aimed and shot him another two times in the chest. His body jerked with each blow. He blinked a few times. And I shot him in the head.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Linkon Ransom.

Rest in peace, you son of a bitch.

I looked up from his body to find Dacien standing in a doorway, smoking casually. She was indifferent to the situation. Unarmed. She said and did nothing. She'd seen it all. I looked to another doorway, finding the girl that had opened the door. They'd both watched. I took a few steps over to her.

“Packed?”

She shook her head. “I didn't have anything to come with.” She was dressed by now, my age or so, looking distant and scared. I put a hand behind her back and pushed her out in front of me. I shot a last look back over my shoulder, at Dacien. She was smoking, watching the blood seep out of her brother. Then again, with the indifference in her eyes, she could have been looking at a spot on the floor or something right next to him. I closed the door quietly, knowing that Dacien wouldn't even

think of moving until she'd finished the cigarette. I knew I'd make it home before the news broke out. Because Dacien cared about her brother about as much as everyone else did. Everyone knew he was a jerk. And he had it coming. I just gave it to him.

I closed the door behind me softly, listening to the little click. I could still hear Dacien's whisper, carried through the air like a song, floating with a smile.

"'Atta girl."

And we walked home, my new friend at my side. I had blood on me. I needed another shower. I stopped by the bar on the way home, putting Irish's gun on the counter, sliding it back across.

"Thanks."

She didn't look surprised, just pulled the cartridge out.

"How many rounds?"

"I owe you for an extra four."

She shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Put the dog down?"

I smiled at her. "Yeah, for good."

"Who's the refugee?"

I had turned away to go home, my new friend in tow. I turned and shot another over the shoulder smile. "Just another casualty of society."

And we were both gone.

On the way home, I found out her name was Brie. And her situation was complicated, like mine once was. But she was free now. Just like I was. Sort of. I offered her a place to stay for a while, which she accepted. And when she was feeling

better, she'd take off. Or she'd stay. She was working on reinventing herself. I told her I always had room for another lost soul such as myself. Always.

And that was the end of Linkon's reign, thanks to yours truly. And the beginning of a beautiful friendship. At the end of a long day, we both decided that sleep was the best option. And that's what we did – after hot showers and burning of some key evidence. But after all the minor details, we both curled up and slept. Literally, curled up. Funny, the abused always tend to sleep like that. Not really funny. More like...

Ironic.

9. Recovery

Colt's apartment had the best security that there was. He pulled Irish from whatever she was on to stay with me at all times on the inside. And there was a small army on the outside. I didn't see Colt for a while, but I imagine that he was conspiring. He had sent Irish to try and make me feel better, hoping that, as a girl, I could bond with her better. She crept in slowly, trying to make the least amount of noise possible. And she was good at it. But I couldn't go back to sleep once I was up. After falling asleep on Colt, I couldn't sleep that peacefully again. It didn't make sense, that I was abused by a guy but needed one to sleep better. I watched her creep in though.

"Hey," I whispered.

She jumped, almost falling over. Her eyes locked on mine as she staggers to sit down at the bedside. She looked alert for a moment then sat back, calming down.

“Hey, feeling better?”

I shake my head. I feel filthy, still covered in dirt and blood. Colt didn't want to embarrass me. I could understand how he felt. This was a situation he was unfamiliar with. He didn't know how to deal with it. Even Irish seemed a bit distant.

“I think you just need a hot shower.” She looked at the bed, thinking about it. “Scratch that, a warm bath wouldn't kill you.”

And she got up and started the water. I heard it distantly. Everything was still blurry, the colors were a little off; the lines weren't as crisp as they should have been. She came back and gave me a hand, leading me shakily to the bathroom. She asked if I would be all right. I told her I would. I was looking the place over, the bright light hurting my eyes. Seeing the problem, she reached up and removed a few of the bulbs.

“Better?”

I nodded and she smiled back.

“I'll be outside if you need anything. Try not to drown, huh?”

I laughed a little, the most I could muster up, changed, and sank into the water. Everything hurt more, the cuts, everything, I had sharp pains everywhere. I washed out all the cuts, the bruises, got out the blood and dirt. Tears were running down my eyes in rivers while I did this. I sat and soaked for what felt like half an eternity, my head resting back, eyes closed. My throat was tender all around. I had bruises on top of bruises. I never fully healed from the last adventure. And Linkon knew it. He knew how and where to hurt me. My body tensed up just thinking about him. The memories repeated, no matter how hard I tried to shut them out. Over. And over. The tears just wouldn't stop. After awhile, when I

was thoroughly numb but also thoroughly refreshed, I crept out of the tub. Looking over, I found a clean set of clothes waiting. They weren't mine; my first thought went to Irish. She was all types of wonderful in more ways than one. I changed painfully, opening the door slowly, my torn and stained clothes balled up in my hands.

"I'll take those," Irish said insistently, jumping up from where she was sitting. I dropped them into her waiting hands and she rushed off to dispose of them. I assumed she was trying to remove all reminders of the event. She came back after a few minutes, smiling tiredly.

"Feeling better?"

I thought about it. Mentally, I'd be a little weird for a while. But physically I was better. My hair was soaked, dripping down my back. I moved slowly over to the bed, sitting down, a towel wrapped around my shoulders. I thought some more before whispering:

"A bit."

My voice was small and raspy. Irish kind of winced hearing it, then decided that it might be better for me to write things down for a while until it was back to normal. If normalcy could ever be resumed. Irish smiled a little bit of a grin as she handed me paper and pencil, then moved to sit next to me.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

I shook my head slowly. Any quick movement sent such sharp pains that the room would spin. She nodded her acknowledgment, getting up slowly. She told me she would go see if she could find any sort of food. I nodded at her.

"Colt's a guy, I doubt we'll find anything edible, but I'll try," she said, smiling wide. I wanted to laugh, but just smiled back at her. I felt like a mute, lost in the realm of

sound. Everything was new and different. And every so often...spinning. She moved off to ransack the place while I sat.

I tried to just clear my mind. I needed to get out of this place. Not Colt's apartment. This town. This city. I needed to get far away, run until I couldn't run anymore. But I couldn't. I couldn't get anywhere.

While I was sleeping, I had a dream.

I was dreaming that I was walking. And this guy, young, possibly a street demon, was running. I was watching him get nearer and nearer. And the closer he got, the more I started to think. When he got close enough, I stepped in front of him. He wasn't running in a frantic kind of way. It was a casual, slow pace. He came to an easy stop when I moved out, his shirt drenched in sweat. He stood doubled over, panting loudly, his hands on his knees, looking up at me.

"What are you running from?" I asked him. My voice was perfectly clear, there wasn't a bruise on my whole body. I was as I was before all this. He raised his head, but didn't answer. I looked around, making gestures with my hands to emphasize my point as I ranted.

"What are you running from? For that matter, where are you going? Do you know where and when you started? Do you have a plan for what happens when you stop? Can you tell me any of those things?"

And he straightened up, wiping sweat from his forehead. And he shook his head. I knelt down and cried, staring up at him. I wanted any sort of answer, any idea at all. The more I cried, the more attention he paid. Eventually, he dropped down to a knee, taking a hand to raise my chin up, so my eyes met his.

"There are no answers because there aren't any real questions."

I still didn't understand. He smiled and pulled me up with him then he ran off again. And that was that. I didn't get it. I woke up and raked my mind. Until it hurt. Which wasn't that hard, considering. But it didn't make sense, as most dreams tend not to. Either which way, I tried to disregard what happened – on both the real and surreal levels.

I came back to reality. I had to deal with it one way or another. This was the real. This was the now. I had to deal with it in one form or another. I wasn't really hungry; I was just shaky. I sat on the bed for a while trying to think of what to do now. And when that failed, I curled up and tried to go back to sleep. It didn't take long before I was back to dreaming.

For the next few days, all I did was slip in and out of the waking. I slept for hours on end, woke up for awhile, and slept more. I was feeling better, slowly making progress. Colt would come and go, check in, then disappear. Irish looked like a train wreck. She would stay up for days on end, always watchful. It took me awhile, but she finally consented to sleep. I don't think it was consent...she just kind of passed out in a chair one day. It was kind of funny. Irish's a stubborn girl – she's up there with the top dogs. When she says that she won't do something, it'll be a cold day in Hell before it happens. She wouldn't sleep, and yet, she was out. It was kind of funny. Maybe you'd have to be there to understand.

I wasn't briefed on what was going on. Colt didn't want me to worry about things. And when Irish was just too exhausted to keep up with things, they had Dusk take shifts here and there. It kept him out of trouble. Another issue off of Colt's shoulders. I didn't know the latest. All I knew was that nobody important was dead or dying. I knew that the war was still going on. I knew that neither side had established a major foothold. The bar and circus were still operational, despite major and minor setbacks alike. And here we stood. And

from here, it was just a matter of edging forward. Inch by inch, but the end would come one way or another.

That transitory state exists until the next big collapse, the next major emergency. Until the calm was again interrupted – because nothing could remain so tranquil for such an extended period of time. After all this is said and done, do me a favor?

Define: Impossible.

Because I'm just *dying* to find out what "impossible" means these days.

I want to know who bought the rights to reason.

8. Battle Fronts Collide

I got up. I packed. And I started walking again. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know why. And at the moment, I didn't care. I just wanted to get as far away as I could. As quickly as humanly possible. I wanted to be worlds away. I wanted the pain to stop. I wanted the world to stop spinning. Time to slow down. Anything. But it wouldn't happen. And I'd still be here, no matter how hard I tried to make it stop. I got up and walked because I needed to move. I took the guitar and the suitcase and for a little while there, I was gone. Completely, entirely.

Gone.

But you can only get so far. I'd walk a few yards and look back. Think about it. Keep going. Keep going. Stop. Look back. Why? I had nothing there. I had nothing anywhere. Nothing at all. I just had this. I had my life in my hand, over my

shoulder. This was it. This was always and never. This was ending. This was beginning. And the further I walked, the more I held the scream choking in my throat. I had something here. I had the Brogan boys. I had hope. I had chance. I had just a tiny bit more than I might have anywhere else. The further I walked, the more I thought. I couldn't go back, but I couldn't leave. I was stuck here, just like we all were. In the end, we're all stuck somewhere. In the end, whether it be in a box, six feet shallow, we're still stuck somewhere. Always.

I kept walking until I got to a bus stop. I sat down on the case, as I was accustomed. I had the guitar case next to me. I don't know how it all worked out, but it did. I sat there, scheming, trying to think. It was raining. It always rains when you're leaving. That's the whole thing. When you're running away, it's got to be raining. People run when it rains. It's because you're hoping to disappear in the mist and madness of the sky's fall. You're hoping that you can just hit the street and fragment, never being whole again. That things were that simple. Or just disappear in a puddle and be uniform to the masses. Anything. That's why all the runners run when it rains. It's just that much less...complicated.

It makes sense to me. Then again, a lot of things make sense to me that don't make sense to anybody else. I'm just fucked up. The cycle continues. The clock keeps ticking. Move. On.

Sitting at the bus stop, staring at the sky. I can feel the individual drops of rain hit my face, sliding down at random. I can feel myself smile, because for half a second, I might actually be free. I could get on a bus and go anywhere. But where? And why? I have no security anywhere. But here...at least I have people who kind of care. They take the time and effort to pretend to. It's more than I could have anywhere else. It's something. It's also nothing. And it might be dangerous. There's a war going on here. Which side am I on? Do I care enough to swear allegiance to anyone? I pledge allegiance to...?

I sat on the case, thinking about it. I didn't hear the steps, or see the guy, but I felt the hands slide around my neck; I felt my body being dragged off and slammed into the wall of an alley. He still had a hand on my neck, holding me back. Another one held a cigarette away from familiar lips, returned it. I watched as the smoke crept away, as he turned to face me.

"Where you off to, kid?"

"Hello, Linkon," I coughed.

"Skipping town? That's no fun. Come on, we're just getting to the good parts."

I tried to push him off of me but he held on tight.

"Tell me Linkon, what part of this wasn't supposed to happen this way?"

He smiled an evil grin. "This? No, no. See, you having the shit kicked out of you by someone *else*, that wasn't supposed to happen. Spoils my fun."

I shook my head, closing my eyes for a moment, looking back up when he squeezed my throat. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to spit in his face and take whatever he had for me. I wanted to see him burn in Hell. I wanted to send him there. But I was here, now, stuck.

"What do you want from me?"

And he smiled wider, sneaking closer to me. "Nothing I've not taken before."

And I remember the cold ground coming up at me. I remember being thrown and hit and beaten. I remember kicks. I remember bleeding and coughing. And I remember things that I desperately wish I could forget. But I remember them nonetheless and nothing will ever make them matter. I saw my

guitar case and suitcase carted away. I asked between coughs where they were going.

"We'll drop them off at Colt's, so he'll know to expect you."

"When?"

And Linkon bent down real low to smile in my face. "When we're done with you."

And the abuse continued for a while longer. I blacked out. And when they were done, I didn't care. I felt myself picked up. I felt myself dragged. And I felt myself dropped on the doorstep. Not in the building. Outside on the stoop. In the street. Soaked and stained from the rain and the blood. And I couldn't come up with a reason to care. There was no feeling. Nothing left. I remembered everything, even though I couldn't come up with words to admit it.

And I got up. I got up and crept up the stairs, doubled over, into the building. I could only see from one eye. But I kept going. The elevator was conveniently broken. I looked at the stairs. And started up. I walked and crawled up a few flights. I made it part of the way. And then I looked up. And I looked down. And I quit. There was no point. No purpose. I just curled up on a landing. And I went to sleep. I was hoping that I'd die there. I was hoping that I was bleeding internally. I was just praying for any sort of release. Anything at all. But all I had was this. The pain. And the memories that wouldn't die. I heard steps as I dozed off. And I was slipping into a state of unconscious delirium when I was picked up. And carried the rest of the way.

I woke up bundled up in Colt's bed. I had covers up to my chin, which I pushed away immediately. I tried to sit up in a solid motion but found I couldn't. Everything hurt, everything was blurry. The bed moved next to me and I looked over to find Colt sitting there, watching me.

“Are you alright?” he whispered.

I shook my head.

“What happened?”

I tried to talk but my voice was stuck in my throat. He shook his head and got up to walk away. He was muttering to himself, searching his pockets for a cigarette.

“Rape.”

He spun around. “What?”

I tried to repeat the word, but found that I couldn't. It crept out in a sort of involuntary cough. I closed my eyes and saw the visions in my head playing through yet again. I couldn't shake them off – I couldn't make it stop. It had happened, as much as I tried to get away from it. I couldn't deny the truth. I couldn't make it just fade to black. It had happened. It was real.

The really screwed up part? It had happened before.

Colt came back over to where I lay, creeping onto the bed. He took me as close as he could, pulling me softly into his arms. I curled up, trying not to put too much strain on my already battered body. He just laid there, my head resting on his chest. I could feel his hand running through my hair. I could feel the blood and dirt still on my skin. But it didn't matter. I was here and now. This was real. He had carried me here and would watch over me. He would help me back up. He'd make sure it never happened again.

I don't remember ever having a father, but if I had, I sure as hell hoped it was something like this. He was like a protective older brother. I could feel his body shaking with mine, unable to discern from fear and rage. He just stayed there, holding me close, my body curled up in him, lost in his depths. And I fell asleep. Not an exhausted, passed out kind

of sleep. But a kind, peaceful sleep – the kind of sleep that a child falls into. A quiet slumber, dreams devoid of dark demons and nighttime monsters. Just black, simple and pure. Nothing making noise. Nothing moving. Nothing at all. Just calm. And that's all I wanted all along. That's what I'd been craving so desperately in my travels. That perfect, peaceful, pensive...calm.

And I finally had it.

In the arms of a street boss in the middle of a war.

I pledge allegiance...to the Brogans.

7. Art of War

The war was on, the sides were rivaled, but what could happen? What would result from this? Either we'd have a change of power, or we wouldn't. I wanted things to stay how they were. I didn't want more madness. Staying with Colt seemed to be the wiser solution. The ongoing cycle would continue. Linkon was up to no good, whoever he worked for as well. I didn't want to know more, I didn't care. The only point that mattered was survival. Everything else faded to black. I could always start over. Always wipe the slate clean. Always. There's no such time as "too late" in life.

This started as a battle of politics. The fighting was mostly fair, the people jumped should have known better...it wasn't as ruthless as it seemed. Nobody was killed. And then...people started dying. Bodies started to turn up. The fighting got serious and the weight came down on Colt's shoulders. He spent more time on the streets, running things himself, keeping things in order. He did everything in his power to keep Dusk

and myself off the sidelines. We were told to stay on the benches. As far away from the action as possible. For the most part, we did as we were told. When bodies started turning up, people we knew, people we might've cared about...we trusted Colt's word.

I tried to stay on the sidelines the whole time, watching from afar. I didn't want to get too close to anybody, just in case. I had nothing to risk. Nothing to gain. Nothing to lose. That's just the way things worked. As comforting as Dusk was, this was the wrong time to be close to him. He was the boss' baby brother. He was in the crosshair of every enemy's gun at all times. Staying next to him was just asking for trouble. It was just...less complicated...to be close. Things were that much simpler without someone else's consent needed at every turn. I liked my freedom. I liked being able to pick up my cases and walk out the door. I had been running for so long, I'd gotten used to it. Run long enough and it becomes a lifestyle. As such, it adopts a different name. This was simply...mine.

I stayed at home a lot, writing more. I tried other hobbies, trying to branch out. I didn't play out in the rain anymore, kids were being shot in broad daylight. I spent days in my apartment, playing until I had nothing else to play. When I ran out of anything old, I'd write something new. I had nothing better to do with my days. Colt would drop by when his schedule would allow it; it was the same with Dusk. I learned to deal.

I had just gotten up one morning when things took another one of their infamous turns. I walked out of my room, yawning and stretching, looking around absentmindedly. My eyes swept across the apartment, without thinking. But then they settled on a shape in the shadows. A girl, standing, leaning against the wall, smoking nonchalantly. I knew without knowing.

"Miss Ransom. A pleasure. How might I be of service?"

She took a few steps out, looking around carefully. She held the pack out to me, from which I took a smoke, sneaking the lighter out with it. I returned both to her neatly. She nodded and found her way over to a chair to sit down. I followed her lead.

“So, who are you betting on?”

“Excuse me?” I muttered.

“Which side do you think will win?” She smiled at me. “Yours. Mine. Or Linkon’s?”

“You’re not on Linkon’s side?”

She laughed again. “Who said I was?”

“Being his sister, I’d assume you would be.”

She took a few casual pulls from the smoke, looking around, exhaling the smoke away from my face. She shifted in her seat and focused her eyes back on me. “Assumptions are always dangerous, kid. Always.”

I took a few more pulls myself then decided it was too early for this dramatic nonsense. I looked her dead in the eye. “What do you want?”

She laughed again. “To find out who’s leading in the polls.”

“What does it matter?”

“Doesn’t it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t get it.”

She shrugged as well, leaning back against the chair. “You’re not supposed to. After all, you’re a foreigner.”

“I’m still here for the duration.”

She raised a brow. “That’s a curious pledge...what keeps you

here?"

And I didn't know. I wasn't sure. I didn't have a smart comeback or anything. And she knew it. She had me figured out. I'd been caught. She knew I didn't belong. She knew I had no right to be here. I had stumbled and staggered and found myself in no man's land. And even once I'd gotten back on my feet, I wouldn't run. I was so tired of running anymore. I just wanted it to stop, to end. I was here not because I cared about their cause. Not because I cared about any of them at all.

I was here to catch a bullet.

And for no other reason than that.

It is more honorable to die in the service of something worth fighting for than to kill oneself aimlessly and pointlessly. Suicide is a crime of conscience.

"Kid, pack up and go. It's not the hardest idea in the world to grasp."

"Why?"

She looked around. "Do you really want to be stuck cooped up here for the rest of your life? Hiding from the demons that will come to you if you aren't careful?"

She had a point. But I wouldn't let her win. I wouldn't run. I couldn't explain it to her. All that her brother had done to me. Maybe she already knew. Maybe she was just that damn good. Or maybe I just wanted to believe that she was. So I wouldn't have to explain. So I could get the compassion. Someone would care. I didn't really care all that much anyway. It wasn't important. Or so it seemed. I don't know. I could just be slightly insane. Only slightly. Only.

I got up to pace around, trying desperately to make sense of the situation. There was no sense to be made, no logic to be

found. I didn't know these people as well as I'd like to think. I was replaceable. They didn't care about me as much as I hoped. It was just a feeling of security, something I hadn't had in the longest time.

I didn't belong anywhere in particular. I might as well belong here. Even if it was just for now. Just for the sake of being. It was the best I had. I wanted to explain all of this to her. I wanted her to see it. Maybe she could. Maybe she saw right through me. For the moment, I wished she could. Just to save me the effort. Of trying.

She smiled a wicked little grin and got up from her chair. I stopped pacing, taking a few steps back without realizing. She smiled wider.

"I'll give you awhile to let that sit on your shoulders."

And she turned and left.

I felt myself let out such a breath as I'd never held in before. Of tension, fear, confusion. I collapsed back into my chair. And passed out.

6. Forever Twenty-One

Her name was Dacien.

She was Linkon's baby sister.

And one of the toughest girls on the street at the time.

What Linkon didn't know...was that she was Colt's girl also. She didn't "get caught" by our side. She was always on our side. The really funny thing about this way was that none of the

lines were clear; everything was blurry, slightly out of context. Just barely out of focus. That's what made this war so dangerous. There were no clear-cut sides. No definite rules. The opposition's ruler hid in the shadows. We were left to wonder. If there was anyone above Linkon, that is. It could've been a lie.

Anything could've been a lie. Nothing clear. Nothing real.

The only thing that I know to be true is this – I knew Linkon once, from another time, another place, another life. From the person that I used to be – a person that I no longer was. I had escaped from it a long time ago. I had escaped his piercing eyes, fingers that felt so soft but could hold on like a vice. I had walked out. Away. And I had come here. And every time I thought about him, I could feel a tear sneak down my cheek. No matter how hard I tried, how far I ran away...he would always be there. And I would always be his. There was no escaping it. I was his from the time I was orphaned onto the street. He was my master. My owner, my creator. I owed my existence to him.

And I was the pup that bit the hand that fed her.

And instead of taking the punches, I ran away. And I've been running ever since. Headlong...right back to the start.

Linkon Ransom and his sister, Dacien. He was older than me. I had never met her before the day they dragged her in. I heard about her. The free tiger. But I'd never seen her until just then. At that very moment. Linkon made me what I am. While his sister roamed free, I bore her chains. He needed control, and I was born into his waiting bonds. And it was from his caged realm of life that I broke out, that I learned what it is to run. And I came to define freedom. I lived where I could, how I had to. And nothing else mattered.

It's tattooed on my body somewhere. It's up to you to figure out where. It says simply:

“Courtesy of Linkon Ransom. Upon death, send my compliments.”

He was the most handsome thing you'd ever see. The kind of badass guy that the young girls fall in love with. And he knew it. That's how he got away with murder. He was like a father figure to me until I got older. When he decided I was better suited to serve him in other ways.

Mr. Linkon Ransom was my first kiss. The first guy I ever slept with. The first guy to leave bruises too dark and deep to cover. The first one to break bones or crack ribs. The first guy to scar me forever. But he couldn't keep me. In the end, he lost. Just like we all do.

I had good reason to hate him. I had a million good reasons. And the fact that even his sister was against him only drove my point home. It was just there. For all to see. He was a jerk. As compassionate as he tried to be, as sweet and innocent as he tries to portray himself, he's acting for an invisible audience. Sure, maybe he cleaned up. But I'll never erase the images from my mind. No. More than images – memories. Actual events. Things that happened. Things that he said. To me. About me. It's all real. Very real. And I can't escape it; no matter how many times I pack up my life, or how many places I take it. It'll still be there, haunting me.

To be damned.

Either which way.

Every which way.

That's just how the game was running these days. No rules. Everything that might've been real...wasn't. That's life. The lines are blurry. Nothing clear-cut. I don't know. I was getting used to a world where nothing was clearly defined. That's just how it was. I might've been raised in a realm where the rules were always changing. Maybe. I'm not entirely sure. I'm never entirely sure about anything. What's the point

in being positive? Humans are creatures of indecision, ideas created from thin air...and we survive. That's life. The world keeps spinning. That's just the way it goes.

I healed up over time. And I went back to work. I stayed outside the bar, playing in all sorts of weather. Colt had security tightened. The girls that ran the bar had already been hit, but they were back to work. Time had ceased to function. We were gone and then we were back. Days were months, hours were weeks...logic became non-existent. It was like falling asleep and living in a dream world. The ups were downs. And you couldn't be sure if you were asleep or awake. I stayed outside, usually with a small group of people nearby. Nobody screwed with me. Nobody started anything. And I felt at ease, or at least slightly better than before.

I still sat on my suitcase, always ready to run away. I still sang from my soul, tearing the wounds open from the inside out. I still played with my heart, praying the gods could understand. This was life. This was moving and running. This was avoidance. This was escape. Mine. Always. Always. Forever. Always. Say it with me. Maybe you can understand. Maybe. Not.

I played. I was in pain still, but the pain I was in wouldn't heal. It was internal. It was deep down, buried in my heart's depths. It wouldn't die. Even after I was long gone, I was convinced that it would strive. And I played. Night and day. I quit sleeping for a while. The guys tried to talk me out of it, to get me to work less. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't run from this. I would stay and wait for them to come back for me, to finish the job. To end the cycle. I was playing Russian roulette...backwards. Instead of one bullet, there were five. I just kept landing on the empty chamber.

I was out one night, near the end of the week, playing in the rain. I saw Colt coming from miles away, from far down the street. He just had that presence – you could feel him in the wind. I played louder, stronger. I was beyond exhausted, but I

persisted anyway. I couldn't sleep. I wouldn't rest. I would wait. I would wait. Time would run out eventually. It would end. I would die. And it would all be over. I watched him come, weaving through the people, hands in his pockets. He stopped at the case and dropped a few coins in, winking down at me. I stopped playing and looked up.

"You look like you need a drink," he whispered as he bent down, closer to me. I nodded a bit and he helped me up. We went into the bar. We sat at a table in the furthest corner, keeping away from any sort of excitement. I heard shuffling steps, looking up I found Irish standing by the table. Colt was talking to her calmly about minor topics of interest.

"The latest?" he questioned. She heaved a sigh.

"Slowing down, they're giving us a good once over. Suspiciously quiet lately."

Colt nodded, ordered drinks, and Irish was on her way. She was very forceful in the fight; she took up the reins where others had faltered. She came back shortly, tending to us personally. These were tense times right now. There was a war going on and the sides were dwindling and swelling in turn. The injured refused to stay on the bench for long. I still had bruises and bandages over my body. There was no end in sight, no peace to be made. I was thinking about all of this when she entered.

The infamous, Dacien. Also known as – the enemy.

This was our territory, our home. Everyone knew it. And all eyes turned to watch her come through. Everyone waited, holding their collective breath. They were all dying to see what she had up her sleeve. She wasn't safe here. She knew it. You could feel the tension. You could hear the sudden hush of conversations stopped mid-sentences. Drinks hung in midair, inches from waiting lips. And the bar was patient.

She sat right at the bar. And waited.

And I sat watching her, shaking my head slowly to myself. All I could think was – This is not my life. This is not *my* life.

Colt was standing in place. I didn't notice him get up – I didn't hear the sound. I don't think he consciously realized he was standing. But he was. His arms were at his sides, the one hand shaking involuntarily. His eyes were closed for a while as he tried to think of what to do. I was looking at both of them. Irish was still moving. I watched her slide a drink over to Dacien. Talk was exchanged, money too. When the world didn't end, Colt moved over to the bar, taking a seat next to her.

I watched the two of them go back and forth, talking here and there, drinking mostly. Irish had poured Colt a fresh one. The two sat talking for a while. When they started laughing together, the place's atmosphere calmed down. I sipped at my own drink, watching them from afar. Another few minutes passed and the two got up and left together. They went to the circus. The bar resumed business as usual as they walked out.

Irish and Gin had worked at the bar for years, so I was told. They were close friends with Colt. I liked Irish better, she just had more to her, she was tougher, more admirable. I trusted her more than the rest. She had been through a lot, had seen it all. And she was still here. I had to respect that. Who and what she was, what she stood for. She came over to me after I had been abandoned to see how I was.

“Do you trust her?” I asked. She shrugged.

“He's the boss, he knows what he's doing. But she *is* the enemy. I wouldn't put it past her to be playing him as the fool to serve her own ends. Linkon's not the sweetest guy in the world, no matter how hard he tries.”

I coughed at the words. I knew it from experience. I knew it from memories. I tried to take a sip to cover the cough. I tried to think of a response to end the silence. I didn't have

one. Irish sat down for a minute.

“Are you alright?” she whispered. Her voice was calmer, more...maternal. I looked up and nodded a bit. I was soaked from the rain, my guitar leaning against the table next to me. She nodded quietly to herself then slammed her hands on the table. I jumped out of the chair, finding myself standing, searching the place. She got up and stepped over to me, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

She smiled a silly little grin. “And you’re doing just fine, right?”

I hung my head down. I had a job to do. I had sleep to get. No. Work came first. I picked up the guitar and started to move away. Irish reached out and grabbed my shoulder again. I wheeled around to face her.

“Anything else?” I muttered.

She pressed a key into my empty hand. I looked her in the eye. She looked around the bar, waving at one of the guys by the door. He came over.

“Take her to my place. Make sure she sleeps. Bring Dusk with you.”

And with that, I was sent to sleep. I was sent away from the battlefield, in case something blew up. I was too tired to fight anyway. And I was led away. We found Dusk along the trip, and we were led back to Irish’s place. I hadn’t been to my own apartment in ages. It felt like years. Irish’s place was in good shape, everything neat. It looked like she hadn’t been here in ages either. I didn’t think about it much – I just collapsed. My guitar was left in the bar in Irish’s care. Meaning...I couldn’t go back to work until they saw fit to allow it.

Dusk walked around the place silently. We said nothing to each other the entire way home. But in the apartment alone, the air of uncertainty was overpowering. We'd both been working for days straight with no rest. I was lying on the couch, watching Dusk pace around. He gave up after awhile and dropped down near me. We rearranged ourselves so that we could curl up together. Even though we didn't know one another as well as we should've, his presence was comforting. I could sleep in his arms.

And that's all that mattered.