

18. Story Time

I'd like, if I may, to clear up a few bits of confusion that have been bothering me along the way. There's a lot I've bore witness to in my time, some of which I feel the need to share. So if you could be patient, I'd like to tell you about the incident with Harley.

Lucid had been training me for some time to take over the streets, knowing as a Ransom, it was my right. As he grew up and settled into having a family, he wanted me to take over, so his daughter could have a shot at being free. As we all know, things never really work out as you intend them to. So I pledged myself to him and his family, hoping that things would work out for the best in the long run.

Angyl knew I existed, just could not explain how. My connection to the Ransom family is inexplicable, but yet, here I am. It was I who confronted her after burning down the Dragon, after killing numerous people. It was I who she mistook for the true legend – Toryn. But all the same, time marched on, and we kept a most precious eye on one another.

Lucid was the closest thing to a father I ever knew. He taught me everything I would ever need to know and then some, careful to keep me far away from his family. He didn't want his daughter exposed to a cavalcade of killers and otherwise unsavory characters. He was attempting to break the cycle with the kind of desperation only a father could understand. I was there to assist him as best as I could.

Now, Harley.

As the owner, and operator of the Drowning Raven, her place was always important in the chain of command. That bar was the safe haven, the pathway for the lost and road to the underground. Everyone knew her as the original Ringleader, so her place in history was secure. She could not just simply

disappear. As such, she embraced her fate long ago, and that of her child. Her daughter would grow up to take over the bar in her parents' stead and carry on the tradition of peace. Or so she hoped.

Until Angyl Hunter saw fit to intervene.

Angyl's background is just as complicated as my own, but she knew my family for generations. She was the one who burned the original Black Dragon down, yet, through conditioning, convinced my dear Lucid that he had committed the crime. I don't know if he was just that far lost from the world, or if chemical influence was to blame, but he was very susceptible to the art of suggestion at the time. With enough convincing he would believe anything. And blame himself for it.

Harley's version of the stories held the truth, and thus, had to be destroyed. But as long as Harley lived, it could be retold and rewritten. Angyl knew from early on she had to get rid of Harley, but at the same time, she needed to destroy the entire family too. She needed to prove a point. She needed the survivors to see the cost of peace and freedom. Angyl's retirement from the world rode on Harley. If the truth got out, all the people she was instrumental in murdering – the hunt for her would never end. So she began to plot out how to end the hunt before it ever began.

Angyl befriended my teacher when I was young. I remember her coming around, her pats on the head. She seemed to treat me as an afterthought, but I knew she was far cleverer than that. She would deal with me when the time was right, when it suited her. And she did. When Lucid's usefulness had been worn through. Then her attention would turn to me.

As much of a demon as Angyl was a sense of morality survived inside that warped head of hers. She would never harm someone who had helped her, or been kind to her. Such people were so few. If you had betrayed her in any way though, you were quick

to the slaughter. Lucid pulled the trigger on Harley, that much is true. I saw it happen. Why? He thought that Harley had killed their daughter, to save her from Angyl and Lucid. This was a lie. Angyl had hidden the girl away, faked her death, to twist Lucid into doing what was necessary. He fired the killing shot.

But Harley didn't die.

Angyl had met Harley years ago as a child. She respected her too much to let her die, especially in such a backhanded way. So why did she make Lucid do it? Because she needed evidence. She needed to have facts, proof positive, that Lucid had gone mad. She needed something to show the community when they voted on his madness. And the apparent murder of his wife would be the killing blow to his reputation. He would fall, and the bar's future would be in her hands, as she would be the savior. But could she let Harley suffer? While she destroyed her family before her very eyes, death seemed like a more appropriate fate, something more fitting of her character.

But it didn't happen. I watched her carry Harley off. I watched her wrench the bullet from her chest. And I watched Harley rediscover oxygen. She survived. And would continue to. As Lucid dealt with the aftermath of his sins he was cast out of the community – as was I. When the issue of Harley's death came up, and my involvement...I found myself unable to rat Angyl out; Why? Well, in my mind, Angyl, for the first time in her life, in her own backwards way, was showing the first inch of compassion I'd ever known her to possess. And I had to respect that. For the first time she had saved a life instead of taking one. And most importantly, she hadn't shot me when she had the chance.

Lucid had the smoking gun in hand. Destroyed, he had simply turned and walked away, leaving the scene behind like some bad dream. I remember picking up the gun he'd dropped at the

scene, leveling it at Angyl. She turned on me faster than I could imagine, knocking me off balance, leveling a gun of her own.

“You have a choice,” she said to me, her words piercing. She cocked the weapon, mere inches from my face. “You can die here, like this, defending a mindless master.” She lowered the weapon slowly, her eyes still fixed on mine. “Or you can help me carry her out of here.”

I handed her my weapon, which she tucked in her waistband slowly. Looking around, we endeavored to keep Harley amongst the land of the living. As Angyl had just spared my life, I had to return the favor when questioned for the truth of Harley’s death. In our own ways, we owed each other everything. My brother was a young street demon early on, so we were never close. My entire fate rested on Miss Angyl Hunter. And I knew never to take it for granted.

As time passed, Harley disappeared. She ran the bar behind the scenes, with her survival known to only a select few. Her daughter, Relic, would grow, thinking she had fired the killing shot that ended Lucid’s life. Angyl had fired it. And I had carried him away. I operated as Angyl’s right hand, until she realized how much easier it could be to cut me out of the bargain.

Relic was mentally destroyed from a young age from the loss of her parents, constantly fighting to discover the difference between reality and fiction. Angyl started filling her head with lies, making her believe that she had committed the crimes that Angyl owned. It was all part of an elaborate plan that would leave Angyl with nothing to answer for in the end. Letting her escape scot-free. But as time went on, and I got older, she realized she would be unable to control me. So she had a meeting with my brother. A very short, but painful meeting with him.

He would spread the rumors, tell the stories, and rat me out. He would betray his blood in order to keep his own warm. And she knew he would. Ransom men were also egocentric maniacs, desperate to save their own skins. He would do what he was born to do from birth. And I would die. Or such was the plan.

But I didn't die. I survived the constant beatings, the murder attempts; I kept coming. My savior had turned on me and I wanted blood. I wanted my chance to exist. I wanted a piece of the freedom she possessed. My reputation destroyed. My family lost. Everyone I'd ever trusted gone. I would continue waging war, spilling blood, until I faced the mistress of evil herself. I would face her, and I would end her. The cycle continues, the damned must die, and the wicked will inherit the earth.

17. To the Last

Ever fall flat on your face? Or just fall? You trip and while you're in midair your mind shuts down. You don't know how to react first. Should you put your hands out? You do it anyway. Anything you think about, or want to think about, gets lost in the blur of movement. It's just a split second of madness and then thunk. There you are. On the ground. And nothing else matters. You're there. It doesn't matter how you got there. You just...are.

That's how I felt after I found the kid. I had done research. I had looked long and hard. And I had found her. With her, I'd be able to get to Angyl. My brother had been keeping me up to date. Which is really funny because he was the one that sold me out. I forgave him. He thought it would end the wars. Bring peace. He was wrong. And he learned from it. As did it. I

trusted him less, but he had his uses. I needed information and he provided it. He just so happened to be in the right place at the right time. He was going out with the girl I was searching for. Isn't that something? Couldn't have been more perfect if I'd tried. Then again, maybe I had. Subconsciously and all. Who knows? Never can tell these days. Everything is something or nothing. Yeah, that clears things up.

Uncertainty is the basis of life. The unknown. Around it all things revolve.

So now what? Where to go from here?

In your entire life, have you ever woken up and taken that big breath of fresh air like they do in the movies? That breath that defines this day as significant? That moment that shows you will live it to the fullest, you will try your hardest, and you'll make it the best damn day in your entire life. And you know what happens?

You stub your toe.

You trip and almost twist your ankle.

Some asshole cuts you off in traffic.

Some jerk knocks you down on the way to work.

You drop everything.

You start cursing.

And the best damn day of your life just went straight to Hell. So you know what? Fuck the good days. Fuck the bad days. They're just time. They're just an assemblage of time, arranged to help it pass more smoothly. That's it. You wake up. And you get started. You go do whatever you were doing yesterday and it doesn't matter because it's what's expected.

Fuck the expected.

You know what my theory is?

Fuck everything I've just told you about. Everything. Into the ground and then some. You know why? Because I'm a hypocrite. A self proclaimed liar. It's tattooed on my body in invisible ink – I dare you to find it.

Here's to the earth shakers and trouble makers.

My kind of people.

The only way through life is simple – head on.

Against oncoming traffic. On the wrong side of the road. Horns blaring.

That's life.

Anything less is just a waste of time. Nobody else's but yours. Because in this life, which is the only one you've got, your time is the only time that matters. That's it. Nothing else. Nobody else. Just you. This' your show ladies and gents. That's it. And the train won't wait on you. There's no way off either. So buckle up kids. You're in for a hell of a ride.

And for the record, there's no emergency stop.

You're stuck.

Welcome to the show.

That's the majority of life. Society, all those little factors. Politics, economy, it's just a show. It's just a picture of how things are, how things should be. They are insignificant. They play no part in the grand scheme of things. And if you play your cards right, you'll never have to deal with them forthright at all. And for the record – I'm one hell of a card shark.

Or as the line truly goes –

I'm the Queen of Aces.

Now and forever, always and never.

Here's to a return to some classical values. To a place we haven't been in awhile. Have you missed me? I'll tell you, it was a trip being gone, and it was a hell of a time coming back, but I'm here to stay. Ladies and gentlemen, if you'll kindly turn your attention to the center ring.

Our ringleader would like to introduce himself as your guide for the remainder of the trip. Excuse me, *herself*.

Take a bow Miss Ransom.

And welcome back.

Pick a name, any name, and it's mine. It's only a title – it's nothing to me what you call me. I don't give a damn either which way. But the only name that matters, the one word that sums everything up, that is the title to which I'll always answer. Guaranteed. That's the term that's burned into my soul. It's the idea that'll stop most people in their tracks.

Say it with me, real slow. Keep it in your head – don't let it go. Don't lose sight of what's real. If you can find it in the first place.

Ransom.

My first name is Dacien. I know no real name, no given title. I took the meaning of my life unto myself. My last name is more powerful than my first. I've always known that. It's the type of word that just sends shocks down your spine. It's unnerving. It just...demands attention. It matches me. I demand attention, at all times. It's how I operate. I will not be ignored or suppressed. This' my life and I'll live it to the extreme. I know no other way.

My brother sold me out. I'll get his number. And I'll get to

Miss Hunter. And we'll straighten this entire mess out. And I'll be free. I was always free, but this is a caged sort of free. This is a freedom that comes in running. And I'm sick of running. I'm sick of hurting and fighting. I'll make it through this. And from this, I'll be stronger. And I'll learn. I'll adapt.

And this will never, ever happen again.

Once everything's said and done, I'll be on top. Always.

Nobody's going to get the jump on me.

Ever again. And the guy who does?

Someone better save him. Because even God's wrath won't be enough to pull that unfortunate fuck from my grasp. Poor soul.

Now I need to plan. Now I need to scheme. And I'll make it work out. I know what I need to do. I just don't know how. I need to work out the kinks. I might need help. Mr. Brogan seems more than willing to become more informed on my affairs. Perhaps I could swing him to my side. Persuade him that my argument is a much better side to be on. Miss Hunter fucked with the wrong girl when she threw the ball in my court. She tried to frame me for deaths I had no hand in. She's screwed my life up from afar. And it's nothing personal. Oh no. She just needed a scapegoat. And I just so happened to be conveniently placed for the job. Ain't that swell? Ain't that just fucking great?

God, I love people.

I think after this, I like dead people a lot more. They're a lot less troublesome.

16. Home

Ever have that dying dream? The one where you wake up covered in sweat and you can't breathe and reality is a twisted realm of uncertainty. The dream where you're absolutely certain that for a moment, you're dead. And you wake up scared. Are you scared that you could be dead? Or that you're still alive? I never understood that. Imagine that feeling though. And you'd know how I felt. Because I actually did wake up from dying.

I wasn't where I was before. The dust and dirt were gone. The foundation, the old building. I had deduced that it was a church before I passed out. I looked around. I wasn't in a hospital; there wasn't the usual blinding shine of white, or the institutional shade of pale green. No, this was different. This was a safe haven – it felt secure. I was on a mattress on the floor in a room devoid of most else. I looked around but there was no hint. I got up, despite pain that shot through everything. I found that I was bandaged all over. I was still coughing.

After awhile without any sort of explanation, I went wandering. The house I was in was broken down in places, salvageable at points. It was empty. I moved to the doorway, eager to get out, to get away. To find out what had happened, what I'd missed. Could this be Hell? Was I truly dead? Or was this a delusion that I was having as I lay dying? I looked around one more time before putting my hand out for the doorknob. I heard a cough behind me. I wheeled around.

“Feeling better?”

I narrowed my eyes, searching the shadows, but I could find nothing. I wouldn't answer a disembodied voice – I wasn't that insane yet. I looked around, waiting. They stepped out eventually, a young man, perhaps my own age. I was in my early 20s, not quite the kid that I wish I was. Children usually

still possess some semblance of innocence. I do not. He took a few quiet steps over to me, his hand outstretched.

“My name is Colt Brogan.”

I shook his hand halfheartedly. I had no idea who this was, but I nodded upon hearing his name, as if it were familiar or special. But it was just another name. Another time and place. Another thing that I'd have to try to remember.

I moved to keep going, to walk away from this. I turned away from him, my hand again on the door. He called to me and I turned around for half a second.

“What do they call you?”

I smiled at him. “Traitor.”

And walked out.

He followed me, as I knew he would. I don't know if it was the look, the smile, the step. Or he was just bored. Or desperate. I don't know. Everything hurt, I imagined that a small collection of bruises and scars covered my body. It was how I was. They were me. This was my life. I didn't try to hide them or deny what I was. I kept moving anyway, with him behind me. I moved for blocks, trying to get rid of him. He wouldn't go. I couldn't keep going for much further. My body was going to quit. I could feel the dizzy spell already. I had to stop. I looked around and decided to go to the bar. Try and lose him there. Try.

I got to the bar, all the regulars hanging around. I didn't stay long. The place was called the Drowning Raven. Or to the regulars – the Drown. Or, if you thought you were really clever, you could tell people that you were going to Drown. One way or another, any way you say it, it's all the same place. I don't know who runs it now. The owners were killed. Long story, short saga. I looked around, trying to avoid

glances. I must have been a sight – then again stranger things have come through the place. When the coast was clear, I found the right door and disappeared behind it.

The hall I stood in was dark, but I knew my way. Most of the local demons knew the way to the Serkis. The Serkis was an underground show, more of a community, a safe haven for the freaks to come to. I moved forward, counting the right number of steps. Anyone who didn't seem fit was turned back. It didn't happen all that often, but it did happen. I kept going until I got to the end. There was a heavy curtain at the end, the parting of which led to the outskirts. I had been brought here when I was younger. And from time to time, I came here to hide from the world. From my enemies. From those that plotted against me. Those that would rather see me dead. I would rather fight. To the last.

I looked around, traveling through the parts. The Serkis was part of a sewer line, but it was never really a sewer. It was built by the city with the intent of using it, but the project was terminated and the stretch of pipe was taken over by gangsters and criminals. Over the years, it was left behind and a new kind of bad crowd found it. Us.

I kept moving, searching for the furthest corner, the darkest spot where I could curl up. With a little effort, I found a leaky little nook. How water was leaking, I wasn't sure, but I didn't care. I looked at myself in the water's reflection with the little light I had, trying to see. I was a mess. The blood had been cleaned out for the most part, but I was still a mass of bruises and cuts. I pulled at bandages all over, checking the wounds under them. There was a fresh cut across my right eye, diagonal, a slashing sort of cut. I could see out of that eye though, but the water showed the pupil was a distorted color. I blinked a few times to be sure. Everything worked. When I was through, I curled up, my back against a cool wall. I didn't realize I was so hot. The overexertion got to me. I had lost a lot of blood. I let my eyes roll back in

my head, my mind shutting down.

I heard the steps before I saw him. And I knew I was caught. I knew I couldn't escape the truth. I needed to know what happened. And he was determined that I know. He wanted me to hear it. And there was a part of me deep down that wanted to know.

"Mr. Brogan," I muttered. He made a low, gracious bow as he crept out.

"Miss. You forgot something before you made your hasty departure."

"Like what?"

"The truth."

"So what happened, being you're so determined to inform me?"

He crept over and sat down near me. I edged away. He smiled softly, in a grin that spelled disaster. I looked over at him, and back to the water; it was comforting. The soft drip every so often, no pattern, no solid noise to stay with. You just had to keep up.

"Well you're not in the best shape. I wouldn't recommend anything strenuous. I would suggest a lot of rest. When I found you, you were unconscious. But still alive. I carried you back to where you woke up. Bandaged you up. And that's when you woke up."

I nodded along with him. "So what do you want? A reward? I didn't ask you to save me. I would have been perfectly content with dying."

"Would you now?"

I got up and started to pace around slowly. "What do you want?"

He smiled. "I don't want anything."

"So why are you here?"

"You're curious."

"Excuse me?" I coughed. He shrugged, looking around.

"You live down here?"

"No."

He nodded again. "Good."

"Why?"

He looked around, raising a brow. "It's a freak show out there."

"What the hell are you doing here? Really?"

"Not everyday we pick up a body that's still breathing. Especially one that gets right up from nearly dying and walks away. That takes something."

"Yeah. Effort."

"No. Something else."

"So you came all the way down here to tell me that I have...as you say...something?"

"Why are you alone?"

I almost fell over. I stopped pacing and stared at him. He wasn't smiling or laughing or joking around. He simply was. I didn't understand the question. I lived and worked alone. I modeled my lifestyle and ideals after the street bosses, but I decided to not go for the job. No girl had ever successfully run the streets. She was always at the right hand of her owner. And I couldn't tolerate the prospect of being owned. I was on my own, always. It was what I did. I was an orphan

early on, and I decided I didn't need anyone to keep watch over me. Every here and there, people would take me in and look after me for a spell. I learned a lot from them. My best teacher was Lucidius.

I was Lucid's pupil for a while. He died not too far back. He was killed. I heard about it. His daughter shot him. They made it look like suicide. I did a lot of investigating but found the truth. He taught me all the tricks of the trade, took me in, raised me right as a real demon. But he went off the deep end. And I got caught up in things that I didn't belong involved in. Some people think that I was responsible for killing Lucid. That's why it's ironic that Colt should find me. And not kill me. I was the enemy. It was the street demons who have been after me. I've been armed for the most part. I've been trying to find Lucid's daughter. I want to see the brat who killed the great man himself. I have all kinds of people after me. For going after the kid. But I'm not really looking for the kid. I'm looking for the kid's keeper. The girl that influenced Lucid so much at the end.

I'm looking for Angyl Hunter.

I didn't run around and kill random people like he did. I refused to be manipulated either. So I lived alone, searching for information. I had to steer clear from the gangs. But they caught up with me anyway, hence why I was in the alley in pieces. I was a damn good shot though. He taught me that. He was a great teacher of many talents. The greatest lesson he ever taught me was this:

Never. Love.

Love is the ultimate weakness. It is suicide. Always. Slow. Painful. Suicide.

And I've adhered to his advice to this very day. Love kills. It was his downfall. All the greats are broken by it, or by madness. Usually the latter. But love's a big flaw as well. He

wanted to know why I was alone. I wanted to know why he hadn't shot me in the head. He had no answer for me and I knew it without asking. And I had no answer for him. He shrugged and got up.

"Why do you bother sticking around?"

I wheeled around to face him. "I don't run away."

"So you're going to just wait for them to come for you?"

I smiled at him. "You're the enemy. I don't expect you to understand."

He shrugged. "Maybe not. But I still saved your life."

"Nobody asked you to."

He shrugged again. "I can't win with you, can I?"

And I smiled real big. "Hell no."

And that was that.

15. To Be Gone

This is another one of those washed out, all important, crucial moments in your life. Or in my life. But then again, you're reading about it. This is another beginning that you're going to have to remember because I *might* just relate back to it later. This is one of those important moments where something is ending while something else is beginning. This is important. Say it with me. Louder. This is important. This could be the most important moment of your life. This could be the most important moment of my life. Either which way, would it matter? It's simply...important.

This is the end of something. This is the beginning of something.

Both of those statements are a lie. This is the middle. This is the one place where nothing else starts because we're so set in our ways that we can't start halfway through. Things have to be all the way over or there has to be a clean slate. You can't start halfway. You can't do anything halfway or you're not doing it at all. Right? There's no middle. There's no in between. There's no gray. No misty zone of uncertainty.

That too, is a lie.

That misty zone of uncertainty, that maybe, that somehow, the idea of – that's life.

With me so far?

Or did I lose you at the start?

Or the end?

Keeping score? Keeping up? Staying awake? Good.

You won't want to sleep through this. Why? Because this is the rest of my life. Why is this important to you? Because it could be the rest of yours.

You are here, in the now, in the always, in the ongoing which will eventually develop into something. You were here without being here. Because I am here. I am living this. You're merely watching. You're part of this as a spectator, on the sidelines, to shout ideas and opinions. To contribute your piece to the cause. What cause? I don't know, but there's always some cause floating around. There's got to be a reason for the madness. Right?

Yeah. You just keep telling yourself that.

Get up, dust off. Look around. Where is this? Where am I? I am

here, in the now, in the always and ongoing. I am part of the cycle, the system, the chain. Life. Death. Rebirth. Action and reaction, inaction, there's all different types and classifications. But here I am. Now.

Stand. Look around. I'm still breathing. Cough up more blood. But it's only further proof of being alive. Cough up more, doubled over, straighten up. Look around. Where is this? Why am I here? Does it matter? No. This is the now. This is now. Now is this. Now. Now.

Like a broken record my mind repeats the obvious. Like a worn out lullaby, I hear the facts in my mind, reminding me why I'm here, where I'm going. The melody is timeless now, it doesn't die, it merely improves with age. I can't shake the tune – it's been there longer than I have. I'm not always there, in my mind that is. Every so often, I step outside myself, out of my skin, and walk away. I'm not sure where I go, or why, but I do it.

Now.

I can't get off of that one thought. I can't get away from the present, the ongoing, the ticking clock reminding me that I'm wasting eternity. It's ticking. Can't you hear it? Tick. Tick. Tick. There's no other sound in my mind except that ongoing tick. It keeps time. It keeps me alive. It matches with the beat of my heart. If you can hear one, you can't hear the other. One is always stronger than the other. You can't have both. Heart and mind. Tick.

I keep trying to think of how I got here but I can find no answer. No. There's just this. The ticking. And the pain and the blood. There's nobody else here. Nobody to blame but myself. I'm here alone. Bleeding and broken. And nothing to define what I am. Nothing to show for it. Pain. Nothing more. Just pain and ticking. The ticking to remind me that I'm alive. If the ticking reminds me that I'm alive, what's the

point in pain? The pain is the alarm, the more striking reminder. You can tune out sound – you can choose not to listen. Even when it's in your mind, every so often, it's possible to hit a button, make it fade away, drown it in something else.

Pain doesn't drown.

Any attempt at such distraction only results in more pain. That's the bottom line. There's a bottom line to everything. There's always a point, a moral idea, a restriction that plays the part of the villain but is really the true hero. It's required.

I think about where I am. I can't really remember how I got here. Why I'm here. But I am, in fact, here. Coughing up blood, bleeding all over. In pain. This is my life. This is where I am. This is the middle. This is where I come back to. No beginning. No end. Just this. The bleeding without explanation. Could you tell me what I missed? Fill me in on the missing pieces of the puzzle. I'm not sure what I'm doing here. I'm not sure if I should walk away. Or maybe I should run. Maybe. But it just hurts that much. I don't know what hurts more. The actual motion of the body or of the act of leaving this. Even though this makes no sense; there is no logic to this place, it is stable. It is unchanging and simplistic. And it is here that I am. Torn by indecision. As always.

When enough time was wasted, I took the step. Every muscle in my body ached and screamed out as I did so, but I took it anyway. I took the steps and walked away from there. Away from the middle. Away from any sort of beginning or end. I moved out of the vacant space that I was in and walked back out into the open air, the free world. And I took my first breath, which could have just as easily been my last. I took a breath and kept moving, the mess that I was. It didn't matter how I'd gotten where I was. It didn't matter at all. All that mattered

was that I was there. That I had come from something at one point and I was headed somewhere. The rest of the particulars didn't matter to me. It shouldn't matter at all. The only thing of significance at this point, or any point, is that I'm moving.

Does one necessarily need to know where they're going in order to get there? Does it matter? I mean – if you wander around idly for long enough, you'll get somewhere, right? That's what most of us seem to do with our lives, wander. You get up, leave any sense of stability that you might have, and you go out into the world and do. It doesn't really matter where you go or why. You just go. The illusion is created that if you go a certain way, follow a certain path, a new outcome will be achieved. There is no new outcome. There's merely a change of scenery.

Scenery is highly significant to any story. It sets the mood, tone...all that kind of analytical nonsense that the educated live by. You can spend your entire life behind books, behind bars...they're the same thing if you think about it. Or you could spend your life living it. Scenery establishes who and what you are, where you come from directly influences where you're going. Where you're going is what you want to be, which is the first, theoretically independent decision that the average human being makes worth substance.

Maybe taking that first step is the end. Or the beginning. That initial movement that starts something new. That moves away from the past, or the present. The now. The steps that carry you through to something new. Somehow, I might be stronger in the end. If there is an end. If the end matters at all. I might not ever get there. Nobody might ever reach the end. We just keep walking. Keep taking that decisive step off the ground. And from there then what?

Anything.

You can go anywhere. That's the glory of living in a three-dimensional world. In a realm where anything is in the grasp of the real. Anything can be labeled surreal but how much of it actually is? Surreal is just another abused word for kids who are too distracted to use a dictionary and learn its proper course. But that's just me. Who am I to talk?

Just another distracted kid.

Beaten. Broken. Bleeding. Battered.

Look at that. Off the top of my head, completely without the aid of a thesaurus. I might have you at a disadvantage. Then again, I might have myself at a disadvantage. The cute, clever little idea that everyone's supposed to believe in is to know oneself. With someone like me, what is there to know? I don't care all that much either way. All I know is that I'm here. And I'm moving. I don't care where. I don't care how fast I get there. I don't care how I look. I just know that I'll find my way, I'll get wherever I'm going. At some point. When I'm ready for it. Or when the world's ready to have me. And that could be a long time from now. If ever.

Are you ready for this? The middle. There's no beginning, no end. Only this. Keep with me. You have to keep up; I won't recap the rules for you later. You have to keep up. Just like I have to keep moving. I cough up more blood, double over, straighten up. And keep going.

There's no better time to live than now. That statement is debatable. It's not that there's no better time. It's just the simple truth that there is no other time. All you get is this. And either you appreciate it and make the best of it, or you forfeit your chances, lie down and die. And me? Well, I know too many quitters. Joining the ranks doesn't appeal to me all that much. Sorry.

I am myself. I'm my own person. My own leader and commander. I control my life. Nobody else. Not parents, not friends or

teachers. The only person I can depend on is myself. And even that is debatable. A body fails. A mind is corrupted. How much can people truly depend on themselves anyway? I depend on myself, faults, flaws and everything, because I don't have any other choice. Because I am lacking of actual people to depend on, to pull me through this. I have to depend on myself. What am I supposed to do otherwise? There's no alternative. There's life. Or death. And I'm much too young for the grave. Or so I keep telling myself. But that doesn't mean that anybody agrees with me. They can find the time to beat me up, so maybe they think I don't belong here. I keep walking, despite the pain. Despite how much it hurts to move or breathe. I look at no one. There is nothing worth looking at anyway. My eyes are following the drops of blood in front of me. In a pattern. I can't figure it out. Yes, I can figure it out. It's my blood.

I follow the path for as long as I need to until I collapse. I look around and here I am. In nothing. In rubble, in ash and dirt. This was a place. A building once stood here, stately and proud. And this feeble structure is all that remains. This is what's left of years of work, blood, sweat, and tears put to literal use. Just this – the cracked foundation, bits of a roof that can't hold back the rain. I look around and collapse. There's no use going on without a plan. And I don't have a plan. I don't think I ever did. I look around and collapse. That's the simple truth. No sugar coating. I was bleeding from all over. I could feel the broken bones every time I took a breath. I tried to ignore it, take my mind away from it, but there was no avoiding it. This building was myself. I was as broken down and battered as it was. But there was a hell of a difference between it and I. This was beyond any hope of repair while I, on the other hand, was still in considerable working order. Working enough to keep breathing anyway.

I just lie there, taking in the dirty air. The dust and ash left an empty, filthy taste to it. I coughed a few more times,

still hacking up blood. It wouldn't stop. I wanted to laugh but didn't want to risk the pain. It would hurt too much to laugh. I needed to hold onto my strength to breathe. I needed everything I could get. I was on my back, looking up through holes in the roof. Rain was seeping in, dripping down. I wanted to laugh. I held back and just dealt with it. This wasn't particularly funny. I was dying. I could feel it. But I couldn't get up. I couldn't care. I needed a doctor, a hospital, any sort of medical attention would do. But I had nothing but this. I was stuck here, in this solitary moment, counting out my breaths, taking them in shallow swallows, one at a time, trying to preserve every last one. There was no point in trying. There was no point in living either, this would continue until it was over. Not this. Until *I* was over.

People can end. Things can't.

They still teach all the wars in history books. Nothing completely dies out. Nothing of substance that is. Me? I'm insignificant. Just another statistic.

Breathe. Cough.

Can't you hear it? The slow ticking. The coming end. Can you feel it? The shift in the spectrum, the loss of one as another is brought in. My passing marks no major event. It won't be recorded in the history books. It won't be passed on, remembered, or preserved. It simply is.

Cough more.

It's slowing down. I can feel it. I walked all this way just to die. That's the irony of life. But I did it. I got up and kept going. I didn't just do it to say I did. They wanted me dead, there. But I wasn't. They left me there to die and I got up and walked away. I was refusing their damnation. I would be at peace in my own separate part of the world. I was here because I wanted to see something more than the familiar Hell that I was in. So I got up, out of the dirt. And I pushed

myself until I could go no further. And where did I end up?
Here.

An abandoned, crumbling church. Out of all places. It figures.

Breathe. They're turning into gasping breaths. It's hurting more. It takes more effort to pull oxygen in. I smile, despite all else. In awhile, none of this will have mattered. I fought until the last. I wouldn't quit. I wouldn't give up. I wouldn't lose to them. I stayed and fought like hell and even lying in the dirt, broken and battered, I got back up. The pain was unimaginable. But I was still here. For a few moments more, I was part of this now. This moment. This one.

Cough.

Countdown to oblivion. Not that I could count at this point. Such things don't require a grand finale or a big deal. There's no counting needed. No big fuss. Nothing to make a big deal of. This is merely the changing of the guard. I closed my eyes and lied in the dirt, feeling the cool rain drip down. It was relaxing in a way, the constant sound, the unwavering effect. It would be my last conscious sound or thought. The rain.

I had slipped off. But even in the state I was in, I could feel myself being lifted. And carried. I was no longer in the dirt. I no longer hurt. And as far as anything was concerned, I wasn't here. If you asked me just then, I'd tell you that I never was. One way or another. I was gone. And that was the point, the whole idea, my purpose.

To be gone.

14. Realm of Fiction

What do you do when you have a killer after you?

Run. Fast.

Though I wasn't entirely sure if she was after me. I mean, it is highly likely, but it seems all the more likely that she'd be looking for her brother. He's the one that sold her out, right? Not me. I had nothing to do with it.

I was merely the only bit of evidence that could liberate her from her attackers.

I stumbled out of the bar as fast as I could, running up the stairs two at a time. I needed Angyl. I needed logic. I needed a plan. And right now I was out of all of the above. I would have to fly solo for the time being and hope that something worked itself out.

Mom had lived above the bar for some time, so naturally, with the business – I inherited the apartment as well. It was mostly untouched throughout the years, one of the many things Angyl had tried to fight me on. I was insistent that the place remain in the condition it was left in, despite the inhabitants. The only exceptions to be made were the food in the fridge, but otherwise – home sweet home. I closed the door with a quiet click, being sure to slide the deadbolt into place behind myself. Taking a few steps inside, the very first breath of fresh air seemed familiar and inviting.

Until a set of steps echoed my own. A set that seemed to come to a comfortable rest a few feet from me, before continuing to move closer. I froze in the doorway, unsure of where to move from here. Forward would bring me closer to the demon, but backwards, out the door...to what end? From there, how far would I need to run to escape this? How far would I have to go to achieve anything? I might as well stand here and fight for

what I believe in than run for the rest of my life. Right? Or was I wrong? Maybe I was built to run. Perhaps I was a coward in denial.

“Leaving won’t make me go away,” the voice rasped, slow and even. I looked up, trying to feign my most honest look of indifference. She was a few short feet from me, smiling this haphazard grin. I tried to figure out what to say, where to go, but she had me. I was trapped in this solitary moment and would have to take the consequences as they came. But of what? What did I do wrong? What sin was I to be held accountable for? She took another step closer.

“You need to tell them the truth, Relic. You need to tell them I had nothing to do with this.”

“But you did. You were his favorite.”

“Don’t be petty with me!” Her voice faltered for a second, an ounce of desperation in her tone. I tried not to let my victory go to my head. She straightened herself out and took hold of my throat, slamming me back against the door.

“You were never built for this. And that’s fine. So give me my life back, call off the dogs and let everyone see the truth for what it is. I didn’t touch either of your parents, you have no quarrel with me. I loved your parents as they loved me, despite my past. And I will avenge them if you’re too scared to. But you need to allow me that chance. You have the power to put the wrong things right. I don’t want to hurt you. Trust me.”

I burst out laughing despite myself. Trust? And to trust her? This lunatic who had burst into my apartment and started making demands? She was the only lead to the truth I sought. She needed to stay where she was or the entire scheme might fall apart. People would start asking questions. And I wasn’t sure how much more misdirection was in me. She let me go and stepped back a few times, looking around the place.

“Come on Dacien, aren’t you being a bit rough on the kid?” I heard from my bedroom, a more familiar voice coming closer. Angyl crept out slowly, keeping a steady count on her distance to Dacien. The smiles on both faces got wider as Dacien sidestepped to greet Angyl.

“Well now, if it isn’t the great Angyl Hunter, the legend of legends, the Queen of Aces and my very own judge and jury? Was it not you who orchestrated everything? You – who destroyed the stories, my family’s legacy? You – who pushed Lucid to his end and convinced my brother to blame me? Was it not you who destroyed all that was to be held dear? And for whose end, besides your own? You and I are the same Angyl – dinosaurs. Soon to be extinct, but living reminders of what kind of people own these streets.” Her voice was filled with irony and sarcasm, eyes locked on her target. Angyl took it all in stride, performing a mock bow when her name was first announced.

“Anything else, tiger?” Angyl’s tone was entirely unafraid. She was at home here, despite the awkwardness, despite the madness. This was her kingdom.

Dacien laughed a bit, nodded slowly. “Yeah actually.”

And I remember that split second thought, that solitary, “Oh fuck,” that crept from my lips before the shot rang out. I remember hitting the floor momentarily. But all else from there was black.

Intermission?

13. In Matters of Devotion

Her real name was Dacien. Though there was no enemy that I could consider that she belonged to, she was still an enemy nonetheless. I needed to get in touch with Angyl and figure this out. She knew who and what I was. I needed to get out, away. I needed a safe haven because mine had just been tainted. Like my stolen innocence.

When making life or death decisions, always double and triple check the information. Misinformation can kill you. And a side note: the Solaces were the top rung of the drug ladder. They had been for years. I don't know how old they are now. But they were in charge. They had the final say in most anything. Always. They were powerful and wise and everyone respected them. Sure, there was an element of fear, but it was respect that commanded the legions.

And they knew it. They knew everything. They'd been around for ages.

If you really think about, what was there to know? Most of the survivors had been wiped out. Those still standing were beyond the touch of death, or at least, for now. They would die eventually though. Their reign would end and nothing would remain. The story that I got wasn't the same as the one everyone else lived by. I knew that. But I had to deal with it. There was no other choice.

The idea was to fight. To the last.

There's a "to the" for everything. Fight to the death. Or a "for the". Stay for the duration. An end for the beginning. A time for the madness. But there's a great difference in the two ideas. The idea of staying for something means during. You're staying for whatever you're told to stay for. And after that happens, you're done. But to stay "to the" means that you're in it until the very end. You have to wait until that

pivotal moment. Sure, they both sound the same and emphasize similar points, and it could be argued either way, but they do bring about different ideas in the mind. Just like certain sounds, places, images evoke a certain sense of something more. That's the point in having so many words. They evoke certain emotions.

Emotions are supposed to be the basis for all human activity. You do what you do because of how it makes you feel. You act like a child when you hurt. You cry when you suffer. You break things and throw things – you become completely irrational. The loss of rationality is blamed on emotions. Emotions, which are summed up as a chemical balance, or unbalance in some cases. So basically, your wiring is fucked up and you're reduced to a toddler for a moment. Then the system comes back online and you're just fine. And what's more? You're sorry for it. Our minds and bodies are engineered like computers. Hold on, the system's crashed. It should be back momentarily. Hold on, just another minute more.

I keep waiting for my mind to reboot, for logic to sink in, sanity to return. It never happens. I blink my eyes and shake my head and I'm still here. As much as I want to throw things and carry on, I don't do that either. It's just...pointless. Why destroy what you have? You'll have to clean it up when you come back down. And then the dilemma arises – what if you don't come back down? What if you find a way to live in that world of toddler hatred? Would you be restricted by someone else or have you built your own theoretical crib? It's all a theoretical. The entire world.

Haven't you heard?

If you ask the right people, this is not real. None of it. It's all a creation of my overactive imagination. The only thing that's real...is me.

I believe the inverse.

Everything else here is real.

Except me.

What I am, well, what am I?

Creation of an overactive imagination? And if so, whose?

Maybe I am really dead. Maybe I've been dead for ages now. Maybe. Maybe. Who fucking cares? Fuck the maybes into the ground and then some. Everything is uncertainty. Why? Because we're too lazy to think things through? Maybe. Fuck that. We are. There is no room for debate. Humanity does nothing for itself but make things worse. Pass more unnecessary laws. Enforce, rewrite and alter the rules. Nothing is definite except our own lack of definition. More people are depressed than ever. More people are suicidal than ever. Why? Emotions. Why? Chemicals.

Are we scientists or psychologists?

I mean, come on. Guys, get together, put everything out on the table, trade notes. Come up with one unified theory that makes any sort of sense. Okay? Is that too hard? I'll make it simpler for you then, just a few short words.

Grow. The. Fuck. Up.

That's the problem in this world. We're all suffering some long dormant childhood trauma locked away in the deepest depths of our memories. We're suffering from something we can't remember. Am I the only one who thinks that's the most crackpot theory in the world?

Hopefully somebody supports me.

Hope. Ha. That's a joke.

A sick, twisted, joke.

Most things in life that we take so seriously are just sick,

twisted, jokes. That's just how it goes. You learn to deal or you don't. Either way, you keep breathing. And you keep moving. Whether you realize it or not. It's not a conscious effort most of the time. But you do it. Unless you kill yourself, and that's another story. And that's just a waste.

If all of the world is suffering, then why stay in it?

Because one person doesn't comprise all of the world. One person can be happy without disrupting the entire order of things. Life's not a game show. But it's a hell of a gamble. There's no consolation prize in this. You live it or you don't. But if you give up now, you'll never find out what's behind door number three. And it could be a shiny new car. Or a cruise. Come on, hang in there, stay in the game. Hold on just a little bit longer. The audience is waiting for your decision. Come on. Take it. Hold on. You can do it. It's not much more. It's not that bad. And when all else fails, there's always sleep. I mean, come on. There's always worse, right?

And if it gets worse?

It can still get worse than that. Don't be foolish. Come on. Please? Take the chance. Hold on a little bit longer. How much longer you ask?

You'll know when it's too long.

Don't ask how. Just do it. Please?

Trust. Me.

And there's a lot I can't explain. Like about what I just said. You'll just have to take my word for it. Please? There's only so much I can handle.

And in terms of matters of devotion, I'm clueless.

You'll have to ask the master and the mistress of the house.

This is where we started. The Solaces. Lord and Master. The ruling party to everything that went on. They were in control. They had command. Forward all questions of uncertainty to them. I'm not positive, but I doubt that they'll have anything of great enlightenment for you either. But like I said, you'll have to forward your concerns to them.

They're the experts on devotion.

12. Feeling Secure

And I was home. After long last. Long drive. Home.

And here I'd stay.

Where things were familiar and I could be at ease. Where Angyl's word was law.

Home was where I could get into any sort of trouble and bail myself out. And if I couldn't, there would be someone bigger and better to help. I wouldn't be stuck in a dead end life here, as part of a dead end routine. This would be ever changing. I had been accustomed to the hustle and bustle of the city. And I would return to it and settle in. And like it. This was where I belonged. Truly belonged. Suburbia wasn't meant for me and I wasn't meant for it. It was too quiet, too calm. There was no amount of surprise or chaos. Nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone got along. Soccer moms and prom kings, Ivy League legacies and neighborhood watches. No. I couldn't take it.

This was my life.

I drove on for a while. Linkon was still behind me, even though I had been trying to lose him. I had been trying for

ages. But he just wouldn't go. I think it was a subconscious thing of mine, pushing him away to see how far I could push him. Then again...who knows.

I drove until I got to the bar. Theoretically, I was dead. So I couldn't take the place over on paper. Angyl had the legality of it transferred to an imaginary person. It was theoretically mine. It was her gift to me. The only remnant of my parents that I was allowed except the memories locked deep in my mind that I couldn't erase. Not that I would want to forget them. They were my parents. Everything I am or was. They made me. I was them – whether I wanted to admit it or not. I had a hand in their downfall as well. I drove to the bar and parked in my spot. Which was really my mother's. I emptied out the car and trudged upstairs. I would drop off my stuff, then go back down and see how things were going.

The current top bartender was a girl named Gin. Her and her guy had fights all the time and seldom ever got along, but they were always together. It made half of no sense, but it was. She was a hell of a good barkeep though. She could do half of anything. She'd been here for a few years now. She'd been around for a lot and I trusted her completely. Angyl handled the financial stuff for the bar when she felt so inclined to do so. Whenever she got around to it kind of thing. She felt I was still a bit young to fully take the reins. And I agreed with her. I'd enjoy my childhood to the very last instant. I had to. After this, what else is there but a life of pain?

I unloaded everything and trudged back downstairs. The usual kids were working. The whole place cried out when I stepped through the door, like a celebration or an announcement of some kind. I had returned. The boss was back. I smiled back at them.

There was such a childish quality to the whole idea of coming back and the warm reception. But it was comforting

nonetheless. I was set at ease by the familiar faces and the general atmosphere. They missed me. They'd remembered me. I don't know, but it did mean a lot to me. It counted for something.

I went behind the bar, saying hello to the workers. Gin was leading the show, as I expected. She was my senior by a few years. I respected her as an adult, as a wiser, older, teacher. The other top girl we had was Irish. She'd drifted in after one of the leadership changes of the gangs. After Rev was killed, she came to us for a job. She said she wanted out. So we employed her. In the employ of the job, the gang couldn't attack her as a deserter. She was safe. There are very few options for those wishing to abandon the gang life. But this bar was one of very few safe havens. But again, it was safe. And that's all that mattered.

Linkon crept in a few hours after I'd gotten reacquainted. He tried not to be too obvious, but I was sure that people recognized him as well. He exchanged laughs and handshakes around the place. He seemed edgy, but I think that was a direct result of being in my field of vision. I laughed to myself, waiting for when he'd come to the bar to sit down. It was about ten minutes' wait. I was still smiling a little about his predictability at the time.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. You're popular."

He shrugged. "Not really. My sister is a major gang target."

"And so why would that make them so friendly toward you?"

He shrugged again. "Because I sold her out."

"What'd she do?"

"She's accused of the death of Lucidius Mason. And possibly aiding in the death of Harley Morrow. My sister was one of

Lucid's more gifted pupils."

I must have dropped the glass I was holding. I didn't hear it crash, but the quick footsteps around the place hinted to me that something had happened. Linkon jumped up from where he was sitting. I backed away from the bar. I couldn't look at him or listen to this. I had killed my father but another girl was taking the blame. And my father killed my mother; there was no two ways about it. I needed to talk to Angyl. I needed to get the story straight.

But would Angyl give me the straight story?

I backed away, apologizing as I went, careful of the broken shards of glass. I edged to the back of the bar, where I could curl up. Where I could be alone. I listened to the door shut quietly behind me. I heard it open and close a few times as people came and went. I looked up at Linkon after the multiple sounds got my attention. I was balled up on the floor, my knees pulled up into my chest, trying desperately to disappear. He dropped down on one knee, to get to my level. I couldn't look at him. And he knew it.

"I'm sorry."

"No. Fuck sorry."

He hung his head low. I didn't care how bad he felt.

"How did you sell her out?"

"The streets were being torn apart, remember? When Rev died. And then Lucid was gone a few years after. Harley was gone in between. The streets cried for blood and got nothing. They demanded Lucid's pupil. It was assumed that she was to blame."

"And why did you give her up?"

He looked at the ground. "She was going to take us all down with her. I told them where they could find her. I thought it

would stop the madness.”

“Have you seen her since?”

He looked down again, away from my piercing eyes. “No.”

“Such a good, upstanding citizen you are. And it’s all lies.”

“How would you know?”

I glared at him. “My *father* killed himself. And my *mother* was murdered. By Lucid.”

He shook his head, shooting a glance up at me. “Excuse me?”

“My name is Relic Fallen Mason.”

And he coughed and choked a few times, desperate for air. I wouldn’t help him. He had sold out an innocent for my crime. My mother’s death was unexplained. There was no funeral either. She was just, gone. I used to sit awake at night and wonder, for hours on end, if maybe her death was a lie as well. Maybe she was sitting up awake somewhere, thinking about me. Thinking at all. But she’d be alive. But as the years went by, I accepted what I knew was true. She was gone.

Angyl knew what happened with my mother. But I needed someone else to tell me what Angyl had done. She had a part in this. I needed a trustworthy part. I looked up at Linkon.

“How do I find this sister of yours?”

He looked up suddenly, sweating a bit, unsure. “I...don’t know. The gangs are after her – anyone with power is searching. The Solace family put out a bounty on her.”

“With no proof?”

“They claim that they have evidence against her.”

“But she’s around.”

He smiled. "She doesn't know what it means to run. Or to hide. She's probably right in the middle of the gangs as we speak. She's a tough girl."

I nodded and got up off the floor, dusting myself off. Linkon got up with me. I tried to think of something to say but couldn't. He looked broken, desperate. I hugged him, holding on tight. And when I let go, I kissed him and scampered back out.

The glass had been cleaned up. I was feeling a little better. Linkon was still standing in the back, trying to get his bearings. I moved down the bar to take the order of the guy waiting at the end. This wasn't a regular, I could tell by looking. He had a hat pulled down over his face, shoulders hunched, the entire body lost in the swell of a great black trench-coat.

"What's it going to be?"

They looked up at me and coughed. "Just looking."

"What for?"

And the guy straightened out, sitting back. The hat was pulled off to allow a girl's long hair to fall around her shoulders. Her face was bruised, with a scar across one eye that glowed red. The eye itself was a bizarre shade of reddish-gray, the rest of her face varied in shades of black and blue, bandages here and there. She got up and stood straight. Just like that, she was very intimidating. I knew without asking that she was Linkon's sister.

"I'm looking for the child of Harley Morrow."

"Are you?"

"Yes. Relic. Fallen. Mason."

"Then find her."

She smiled at me. "I have."

And she winked at me, putting her hat back on her head, straightening the coat out. She turned to walk away; I watched her departing form.

"Who are you?" I yelled after her. She turned halfway around, to give me a look, with the off-color eye, to make sure I was paying attention. And she reached back and pulled her hair away. There was a tattoo there on the back of her neck, just like my father had. She smiled, let go of her hair and walked out the door, into the night and the rain, just as simply as she'd come. Linkon had come out to stand behind me.

"What was that?"

And I smiled quietly to myself.

"A Traitor."

11. To Be Lost

You ever get out of bed and look around, and just by looking around you know that you should have stayed in bed? You know it better than you know your own name. But you can't stop the endless tick of time. You can't stay there, as much as you want to. You have to get up and keep going. The really screwed up part about getting up and making that kind of observation? When you realize that all your days are like that, a series of bad days. They never end and they seldom change. They simply are. A line of bad days. One after another. And that becomes your life. My life. A series of bad days, in a row – one right after the other.

This is just another bad day. This is just a number on the

line. Another sleepless night. Another pointless date. I could look around and try until I'm blue. But it won't change. It won't end or stop or be better. This is just another day. This is my life. This wasn't always my life, but somehow along the way, it's become familiar. And I've become accustomed to it. I've become...stable, or the closest thing to it that I could ever come to manage. People like me aren't supposed to be stable. We're never allowed to be sane and free. Freedom is a really bizarre concept. Those that consider themselves the freest of the bunch are truly the most imprisoned. They have the most, and heaviest, chains.

I am here, in this, in the now. I'm in this moment, which is one in a line of moments that just continues on. Just another bad day. In a line of them. In a line. In a life. In this life. In my life. And no matter how hard I try, it just won't stop. Won't slow down or falter. This is now, this is my life.

I'm here. Now.

Love just...sucks. It's truly very screwy. I should slow down, I should explain. Should. That is such a wacky concept. Should. I should slow down. But why? I'm used to my usual pace, that's what makes it usual. If it's too quick for you to keep up, why should I slow down for you? This is my life and my story – this is my drama. My tragedy. Why should I move at your pace? Would you change your step to keep up, or slow down, to match me? Would you? I highly doubt it. Why should you conform your life to mine? There's no reason, at least, in your eyes. Then again, I wouldn't want you to. I'm having enough trouble with my life, why would I want someone else to share in the madness? It's unique to myself.

Je suis un enfant unique.

It's supposed to mean that I'm an only child. But if you translate it, word for word, it should come out to something like "I am a unique child". Funny how much you lose in the

translation, or how something simple and direct can mean something completely different.

I am myself.

No matter what happens, how many bad days I have, that fact is irrefutable. There's no denying the simple truth of what I am. Who I am is another question entirely. But at least I've managed to get the particulars out of the way as to what I am. No other answer would be satisfactory. The simple truth is enough. Of course, it's not really that simple. But it sounds good. And it's nice to think so. The whole truth, without the fabrications and white lies, is never, ever simple. That's why nobody uses it. It just takes too much. Too much of what? Too much time, patience, effort. It just takes too much.

Love doesn't really suck, that was just a product of the bad days. It's great and wonderful if established properly. See, look at things with Linkon and myself. That wasn't founded on anything except simple chance. And maybe, that's enough. But I was born with the ideas that the only people worth keeping around are the ones worth something. People with power. Anything else is just a waste of space. There's no need for friends. One is independent, self-sufficient – what the hell does one need other people for when they can hack it on their own? They'd only get in the way, sway my opinions. Try to stop me. This is what Angyl taught me. Never be dependent.

Linkon and I got along, all things considered, fairly well. I mean, we didn't know each other all that well when we moved in. Naturally, we drove each other crazy at first. But the fights were usually resolved that day or the next, and nothing occurred that's cause for consideration. We never hit each other; nothing was thrown across the room. The usual domestic issues didn't happen. I mean sure, we had issues, but not the abusive, violent kind. And he was real. That was the main point of staying with him. He was real, absolutely, through and through. There was nothing fake about him. He said it how

it was. He didn't think he was better than anybody else. He was real, and in being around him, I became more real. He reminded me of my father when he was younger, before dear Lucid went insane. Every so often, I just might miss my father. Then again, I did pull the trigger for him. So I guess I don't miss him too much. I made my own bed, so hence, I learned to deal. And deal I did. That part of my life I kept to myself, away from Linkon. He got the rant about Angyl and how I was an orphan. But I skipped the part about how my parents died. It was better for everybody to leave him in the dark.

I was never dependent on Linkon. He offered me a place to stay and I took it. I could have gone anywhere else. It was just a convenience to be there. It was easier, and when something comes up that makes life easier, jump for it. That very seldom happens. Most changes are made to further complicate things. Most. There's always that little area of gray, reserved for chance. For the concept of possibility. Did you ever realize that almost every time someone passes an open door, they look inside? Why is that? Is it a sort of subconscious curiosity? A psychological situation where the viewer wishes to be part of the scene? Are they looking for something, someone? All those questions and possibilities. And then there's the statistical group who don't look, who walk straight by. Hence, the gray. What seldom happens, but does, in fact, happen.

Saying that something is impossible is just stupid. That's just making you look like a fool, ready and waiting to be made a mockery of. Never be that definitive – never be so certain. There's always possibility in this world. I apply this to Linkon and myself. It's kind of hard to explain how or why, but maybe you can figure it out along the way. I'm not sure I really could explain, even if I wanted to. Some things are just beyond words and can't be explained.

I felt like I'd known Linkon for years. I was comfortable with him due to this. And it was this that allowed me to move in

with him. And this all helped me maintain my sanity. As a shift of scenery. We all need a change of mood every so often. There needs to be a shift in order to keep the wheel turning. And the wheel has to turn. If it stops turning, there's nothing.

I got up, went to work, came home, and it all became part of the routine. It was summer hence school wasn't a problem. I was 17 years old. I should have been planning my future. What I would do with my senior year. Where I wanted to go to college. But that would have been put to waste. I'd be lucky to finish my senior year, but I'd never make it to college. And it wasn't a matter of my achievement. It was based on the fact that no street demon goes off to higher learning. I was a street demon. I was raised to survive. My parents were demons. I was born into their classification. It would be stuck with me for life. I didn't care all that much. It wasn't the worst social distinction to be born into. There was a lot worse. And as such, I'd always have a family if I needed them, somewhere. I'd always have Angyl to count on, should I ever find that I need someone. Should. I really hate that word.

A few weeks of the routine passed. We were in the middle of summer. And I was slowly going insane. It's not that I was bored or anything. Linkon was great and entertaining; he could do half of anything artistic. But there was just...the cycle of events. Nothing changed. Nothing drastic ever shifted. Everything was done by rote memory. I could take it. Nothing ever happened that was out of the ordinary. I was in suburbia hell. And I wanted my busy, bustling city back. So I got up and decided I would have it back. I had been up here for weeks and I proved my point. I'd go home. I'd find Angyl. Apologize for any inconvenience I might have caused her. And be a street demon again. There was nothing and nobody to demonize up here. There was nothing but green suburban hell. For miles around. For a city brat, that's damnation.

I told Linkon I'd be going home. He nodded, smiled, took it

all in. He didn't seem concerned.

"So when do we leave?" he questioned. I shook my head.

"Not we, I. I leave. Tomorrow."

He shook his head, mimicking me. "No. We. I'm going with you."

"You can't."

He raised a brow. "Can't I?"

"You have a life here, a job, stability."

"So do you."

"I had a life there first. A life I want to go back to."

He shook his head again, slowly, taking it all in. "What kind of life?"

"The life of the damned."

And I got up to start packing for the trip back home. Like I said, my life can fit easily in the trunk of my car. And it did.

That wasn't the end of the discussion. And by the time I was ready to leave, a compromise had been made. Linkon packed up his car and drove back with me. Every so often, it's just a waste of time to fight. Why bother fighting when you know you're going to lose from the start? Because there's a chance that the expectations were wrong. There's always chance. And I was born and bred to believe in and embrace fully the concept of possibility.

I fought like hell for hours to convince him otherwise. I explained the crime and the madness of the city. That this was where I was raised and there would be happenings that he wouldn't understand. There would be things he wouldn't approve of. But this was my natural habitat. He told me he loved me. I

told him to brace himself.

The drive back was long. I didn't realize how far away from home I truly was. When I left, I wasn't in the sanest state of mind. I lost track of how much driving I'd done. And then I stopped. And now, coming back...I tried to remember what broke, what snapped in my life to make me do this. What broke me to the point of taking off, what made me go that far away? I couldn't remember. Then again, there might not have been a legitimate reason. I might have just been bored. I've done weirder things before. I'm a generally eccentric character.

Linkon was in his own car the whole way down. He didn't have family to bid farewell to. He didn't have that many friends either, just the kids at the theater. We told them we were leaving, left a highly apologetic note for the management to say that we seriously regretted our sudden departure. But it was necessary. If we put it off, it would have taken forever to get away. Some things don't require hours of planning. It was simple – pack and drive. There wasn't much more to consider. We were both largely self-sufficient. There weren't any teary farewells to be worried about. Which made things all the better for us both. Suited me just fine to be free enough to just walk away.

10. Something in the Water

His real name was Linkon.

And he worked in a movie theater. This was the great opportunity that he presented me with. He was in close with the owners and all – he basically ran the place. I'd have a job. I didn't make much there, but it was money, and I had plenty of time to keep up with writing. And I got to spend

lots of time with the theater rejects, but I didn't form too many attachments. I planned on going home still, back to the city, at some point. I just wanted to hack it in suburbia for a while, make sure I could handle it. And I could.

I had been working there for about a month, getting used to the swing of things, when Linkon had a new idea. We were both hanging out in the projection room, bored to tears. There was still an hour and a half left of the movie. This wasn't the most glamorous job in the world, but it paid. He was leaning back in a chair, reading to himself. I was reading in my own corner of the room. I heard his book close suddenly, the chair fall back on all its legs with a flat thud. I glanced up from what I was reading.

"I have a great idea."

I rolled my eyes. Guys always think their ideas are great. "Yeah?"

"You should come live with me."

I started laughing fit to raise the dead. I had to hold a hand over my mouth so the whole place wouldn't hear. It really was hilarious. I stopped laughing after a few minutes when I realized there wasn't the faintest hint of a snicker out of him. He was dead serious. I shot my eyes to the floor.

"I thought you were joking...sorry."

He never wavered in his expression. "Well?"

"What do you mean – live with you?"

He shrugged. "I mean, you pack your stuff and come stay with me."

"Why?"

"It'd be cheaper, nicer, and you'd get to live with me," he

replied, smiling this wide cheesy grin. He knew that he was full of it.

“As appealing as the first two aspects are, the third determines the final decision – thanks, but no thanks. I’ll make it just fine on my own.”

He nudged his chair a little closer. “What is it with you? You won’t let anybody help you. Why is that?”

“Because I don’t need to be saved.” And I went back to my book.

Two weeks later I was living with him.

It wasn’t foreshadowing or anything. But he was right. The place I was staying at was a rattrap, and the cost was ridiculous for such a hole. So I packed the little I had and moved in with him. I had my own room in his place. He was the only one who lived there and I could use the extra cash. And I could use the extra livability value.

It wasn’t really all that bad. Between working with him and living with him, we grew a better tolerance of one another. Why and how he put up with me is uncertain. But he did. Over time, that grew. And that’s what all this is really about. This is about us. This is about what happened when I got home. This isn’t about now. This isn’t about my father’s madness. This is about him and I. Fallen and Lost. This is what it’s truly about.

I developed a sort of “abused puppy” syndrome as I got older. Angyl took care of me, introduced me around, so that I’d always get respect wherever I went, like she did. But there were happenings...drunk people aren’t always reasonable and high people are seldom rational and push came to shove a few times. I was used to being smacked around. My father had problems with being abusive. My mother knew, and she tried to go against him. But she paid for my complaints. And hence, I

resolved to stay silent and trust no man.

It took Linkon awhile, but eventually, the impenetrable wall gave way. And little by little, piece by minuscule piece, he was let in. To my mind, my soul...my heart. And the big bad rebel that I had become wasn't so big and bad in his eyes anymore. I was more...human. I'll get into a rant about him later I imagine. In a constructed sense, in a rational sense. Straight through, beginning to end. I'll explain, in the best terms that I can, what happened and how. Because every so often, I'm not really so sure. There was something very different about him though, something that got under my skin and changed how I was. And no matter how much I gritted my teeth and pushed on, I couldn't make it stop.

Was I in love?

These days...it's difficult to be certain. About anything. But love especially.

9. Uncertain Habitat

The day after Angyl's visit, I took a walk to town. I was in a more suburban development. It suited me better, but I found myself taken aback by the lack of noise. The overwhelming silence disturbed me. The lack of police officers and running strangers and black clad teenagers got on my nerves. But here I was. And here I would stay until I was satisfied. Until I had proven to myself what I had set out to prove.

That I could hack it alone.

I went to town in search of a job. I went place to place, applying for anything anywhere. Nobody would snap me up right

away, but they promised a lot of phone calls. Maybe it's the massive amounts of black clothing I wear, the tattoos and piercings...but I kind of knew that this wouldn't be easy.

I was walking out of the seventh rejection that day when I felt a pair of eyes follow me out of the place. I kept walking, trying to shake my mind from it, but I could feel those eyes burning into my back for every step I took. I wheeled around when I just couldn't take it anymore, finding a guy leaning against the building I'd just stormed out of. He was older than me, it was obvious in his appearance. He leaned casually against the building, watching people pass by. He didn't seem bored or fascinated, he simply was. He was just there. There was nothing more to be said about the situation. He hadn't moved. He never left that place. The only thing that shifted about him were his eyes. I shook off the misplaced agitation and went back to my sulking, trying another few places before giving up. I went back to where I was staying.

The lack of progress did get me down, but I wasn't done yet. I had enough to hold me over for a while without work. But I was kind of concerned. This was a small town, the truth was unavoidable – if there was no work there was just no work. That would mean I'd have to go home, prove to Angyl that I couldn't hack it. No. I'd try until there was nothing left in me. I'd make ends meet or die trying. I kept at it for days.

And I seemed to pass that guy everywhere I went.

After about a week without a word, I began to lose hope. At that point, I just walked around town to have something to do. There was nothing else except that and writing to keep me going. And I had to keep going. I didn't have much else to do. This was my choice. My voluntary action. And I would deal with it. I would handle it or die trying. I wouldn't go home. I'd suffer my stupidity.

I was walking around town again, daydreaming, when I walked

right into someone. It was the same guy that I'd been seeing around. I felt silly, walking into him blind, not paying attention. I started to stammer apologies like a fiend. He was holding me by my arms, straightening me out, holding me away from him. I was still rambling. He shook his head a few times and smiled.

"My name is Lost."

It wasn't really. But that's what I heard. His name could have been any number of things. But that's what I heard, and that's all that mattered. I told him that I was Fallen. He smiled and let go.

"Walking blind?"

I nodded, realizing we weren't really talking about the accident anymore. We'd moved straight from the physical to the metaphorical. With some people, if you don't keep up, you'll drown before you ever realize you were in the water at all.

"Find a job yet?"

I shook my head, stepping back a bit. He was a little taller than I was, definitely older. I wouldn't put him over 20 though. He had this confidence to him – I couldn't explain it. It wasn't like the typical male cockiness. It was something else. I turned to walk away.

"Hey, not so fast." He reached out and grabbed my shoulder. I wheeled around, throwing him off of me. He pulled his hand back fast as his face shifted a tad. He looked ironically afraid, scared that I might bite him.

"Sorry...I'm bad with contact."

He nodded. "I could get you work."

I narrowed my eyes at him, thinking him false, up to no good.

"What kind of work?"

And he glared back at me, matching my expression in every detail. "What kind do you think? I know all kinds of people."

I glared at him until he laughed. I was even more offended by this and began to walk away again. Again he called out to me, but this time I just kept walking. I wouldn't be his ongoing practical joke. He called after me.

"Go to Hell!" I screamed back at him.

"Babe, I'm the Prince." I looked back and he made a ceremonial bow of sorts, making his way back over to me. I stopped walking, waiting. I don't know why I waited. But I did.

"What kind of work?" I repeated when he was close enough. He just smiled.

"My kind," he replied with a shrug, draping an arm around me. "Stick with me kid, and you'll go far," he continued, in an almost sarcastically simple tone. I didn't have much choice. I needed a job. And it wouldn't hurt to find out exactly what he had in mind. I was a big girl. I could take care of myself. And I would.