

31. Respawning in...

A new day. – a new day unlike any other, with a bright sky and a brilliant array of clouds to define the moment. A sky I envisioned in my mind, safe from the slings and arrows of reality at the moment. I almost didn't want to leave, to embrace what was true. But I knew that eventually I would get up, as I had before, and carry on. It was my primary function, the only mission that I truly understood.

But a moment of peace was worth all the bloodshed and pain that had been wrought down around me. I would have my second of silence that I had suffered for. It seemed only fair. So I kept my eyes sealed as tightly as I could, counting the seconds in my mind that I was removed from the world, and thus secure.

"You going to just lay there all day?" Colt's breath was soft against my face as he leaned closer, realizing that he was lying at my side. I scrunched my eyes together for a final few seconds before rolling over to face him.

"Don't you have other people to terrorize?"

He smiled, kissing me on the cheek. "Not today. Today I'm yours. And only yours."

I was going to ask him what happened, how we ended up here, why we were both alive, but I thought better of it. There was no need to upset the delicate balance when there was already so much going on as is. I would enjoy the limited moments I could steal away with him and be satisfied. Everything else could wait, and so it would for the time being.

I spent a day free of beatings and pain. Free of stories and lies. I didn't need to worry about who was watching or why. I didn't need to be constantly waiting for the horizon to settle safely. I had survived the gauntlet and that's all that

mattered. For now. Until Lucid fired the first shot, took the first life. Then everything would change.

And it did. The day Relic joined her mother.

We had buried Harley quietly, with a sort of relief that her death was an internal defect. Her loss disheartened us all, but we were glad that it hadn't been the official onset of the war. I had some time to relax, while I helped Colt pick his officers. Jekt and Dusk were naturally at the height of the chain. I was unofficially the second in command. Everyone had their dark purpose, but one we would come to bear nonetheless.

Relic had been out on one of her signature walks with Edward. He had become her entire world with the loss of her mother. Angyl hadn't returned to as someone to guide the girl to salvation, so she was left to ponder how best to go on with life. As Irish ran the bar, Relic's importance in the community began to dwindle. She existed merely as an attraction, a fragment of a much larger and more impressive tale. And she knew it. Her legacy was her parents' and always would be. She would merely become a topic of gossip and gawking, the last survivor of the Mason clan.

Until Linkon found her. Linkon and his crew.

They caught them both on a walk. Dragging them down into the abyss of Linkon's most devious haunts, they were held down and beaten senseless.

Relic was given a choice – a deal that Linkon would be willing to negotiate. As he held both of their lives in the balance, he wished to see the value of life versus morality. What would they be willing to give up in exchange for their lives? The trick was...you couldn't save your own life. What would Edward give to keep Relic breathing? And what would she give in return for his life?

Each would be granted one chance. Linkon would be the

“impartial” judge.

Edward gave Linkon forgiveness. For his current and future sins. Edward swore that he would commit no personal ill will against Linkon or his men.

Relic however would need to offer more than simple words. She offered the only thing she had left of substance – herself. He had tried to tempt her in the past, but she had been the stronger person. The better person. She was willing to put it all on the line for Edward, though she couldn't quite figure out why.

So Relic slept with the demon, as Edward pondered whether his loyalty had bought her life. By the end of the day, they'd both have their salvation in some way. The pair was brought to face each other one last time, and Relic's head was blown clean open. Edward would have to live with that guilt for the rest of his life, and ravage him it did. He'd remembered the calm expression on Relic's face, the resolve in her eyes. She was sure that they'd both walk out of this. Instead, Edward carried her back to the underground. She was the example, the sacrificial lamb, and now we all knew it. The obvious choice, hidden in plain sight, and we'd let her slip past.

No matter what she'd said or done for Linkon, she would have died that day. It took Edward awhile to arrive at that conclusion, but once he did, a wave of rage overtook his life. He was no longer the soft-spoken executioner we had come to expect. His temper was constantly on a hair trigger, his moods wild and manic. When his outbursts were getting harder to control, his place as cleaner at risk, he was removed from the underground by the uppers. They found him a nice set of foster parents who deal with troublesome teenagers. They were kind and patient people, eager to handle any of his issues as they came up. Therapists. But they were better for him than any of us. Luke and Carol Dorrance.

He spoke to us when he returned, recounting the details of the story. His pledge to Linkon, which has been refused, left him on a path wrought on revenge. The only thing that kept him breathing was avenging that child's murder. His sister, but he didn't know it. Somewhere she had to exist on paper – it had to be recorded. Should he know the truth?

Or would the lies continue as we hid more and more of each other's souls?

There are some things better left unsaid, and with Edward's current downward spiral we didn't want to push him any further than we had to. The hate in his soul was eating him alive, this much we all knew. And without proper measures in place, his rage would know no bounds in the long run. It was our mission to keep him stable – to keep that rage at bay. It might come in handy later.

Or so I hoped. That kind of blind hatred is a terrible thing to waste.

We held our own, ready for the assault. As the first stone had been cast, we had to make preparations of our own. Colt and I had long discussions on strategy, arriving only at one solid conclusion. I would have to play both sides against the middle. My leverage against both leaders would swing the war in the manner I supported. But Linkon wouldn't know that. If he thought I was serving him, then he might leave himself more open to attack. He didn't think I was bold enough to lie to his face; his overconfidence was his flaw. And I would do everything in my power to exploit it.

So I would abandon my safe haven, leaving behind my only sense of security. The boys would keep their eyes on me much as possible, but there was only so far they could go. Holed up deep behind enemy lines, I'd be more than simply unattainable. These last days would be the few where I could comfortably stay with my newfound family, safe and warm. I would have to

degrade them, attack them, confront them – all manner of psychological warfare to ensure the authenticity of my performance. But it was all part of the plan.

I was the plan.

In Harley's passing, Irish inherited the bar. She would be its keeper and general. She was a commanding officer on the front lines. Her life's value has increased tenfold lately, but for all the wrong reasons. She had worked so long and hard to escape her gang roots and stay out of the line of fire. But no matter how hard she tried, how far she ran, she still ended up returning to the center that she started at. The Drowning Raven was her ward now, and she would guard it diligently.

Before I left the underground though, as my first sign of loyalty to Linkon, I beat Irish within inches of her life. Bare knuckle, into the ground, I let out every ounce of frustration I had pent up on her. The great truth I held in my soul that would have damned her for life. I let it all rage, and she allowed it for the most part. Everyone thought it was just part of the act, but we both knew it was more than that. And that was enough for me. The blood dripping off her chin was just a bonus.

The remains of the tattoo shop that Linkon obsessed about passed curiously enough to Angyl. How, or why, I'll never entirely know, but such was the state of things. She would hold it ransom for as long as nobody wanted it. Being the last remaining survivor of the events surrounding the place, nobody seemed to mind her taking over. The stories were rampant, the memories shaky – but we all knew the amount of pain that had occurred there. She had lived it. Despite the suspicions, the allegations and rumors, Angyl's innocence was never so certain.

What happened in the past was simply put past. We needed to move ahead together, a single direction as a single family.

Saint would stand by quietly, ever vigilant, keeping the strings moving silently overhead. Without a child to babysit, his attention would remain squarely on Irish at all times. He assisted in all matters of business, constantly at the bar to help with tasks high and low.

And the boys got to ransacking. They attacked every individual who dared utter Linkon's name in earnest. They torched any buildings with connections to the opposition. They busted drug dealers and pimps trying desperately to make a buck to stay in Linkon's good graces. And every dozen they beat down or scared off, another two dozen would replace them. Where these blind young soldiers rose from, and why they would gladly march to their deaths, was beyond me. But just like clockwork, the pattern continued.

Once I crossed the proverbial line into enemy territory, I was interrogated and tortured for a week, to see if my story stuck. Of course, it did. Linkon welcomed my return with open arms, eager to let me loose and see what damage I had wrought. I brought him to Irish's bedside, where she lay battered and broken, feeling seconds of her life slip by. Confident in my loyalty, he had left me in charge of incalculable forces. However, she healed as she was meant to.

But what of dear old Angyl? Was she part of the plan all along, did she know I was playing both sides against the middle? I assumed that someone of her stature would know all things, but with a growing boy to focus on, I wondered how active she would be in the revolution. I had to disown all things I had known before, all the past pain and madness. I would carry on as if it had never been. Angyl's loyalty lied on the other side of the fence, and I had to remember that.

As if she'd ever let me forget it.

It was one of those days you wish hadn't come, one of those long rains that isn't too heavy, but heavy enough to make you

wish you could stay indoors. I had errands to run, so I was hustling place to place when she came looking. I remember being dragged right off the street and back into an alley. The alley. Where the legends were bled dry, where naïve children would sit in wonder of all that had come to pass. By this time, Harley's stories had been released, so everyone was up to speed on her side of things. And Angyl's streak of madness. The stories proved that Angyl murdered a number of people. Suddenly, she took my place at the gallows – hunted at every turn.

Her arms kept me locked tight, pressed against her chest. She was waiting to see if I was followed, though I'm sure she had scoped out this meeting a lot more clearly. After roughly two minutes, I was released and able to wheel around and face her.

“Long time no talk Dacien.” Her voice was even, unfamiliar. She would be giving nothing up, allowing no secrets to see the light of day. I nodded slowly.

“You couldn't just say hello like a normal person, could you?”

She shook her head, stepping closer to me. The shine of the weapon in her hand caught my attention immediately, as I sidestepped further into the alley. Dueling sharks, we would carry on this dance to its end. She shook her head again, reaching out to hand the weapon to me.

“I need a favor of you. I need you to make this end.”

I took the weapon, knowing I might not get another chance to keep the odds in my favor. I pulled the clip out on impulse to make sure the rounds were live. They were. She stood there, forlorn and weary. More tired than I'd ever known her, the fire and spirit lost in her eyes. She'd been running for weeks now, trying to conceal both herself and the child. It would catch up to her; they would discover her secret all along...unless she did something.

“Angyl, what will Corvis do without you?”

And she smiled – that same slow and weary grin that I had become accustomed to. That sly shifty smirk that told you there was more in every action than met the eye.

“He’s not going to do anything without me. Someone like me doesn’t just drop dead, don’t you know that?”

Her words were enigmatic and her voice barely a whisper, but I let them continue nonetheless. I raised my hand slowly, pulling the gun to aim squarely at her chest. A centimeter either way could ruin this. A centimeter either way would have a radically different result. But from the angle of the audience, it was a kill.

I clicked the safety off slowly and started counting backwards from three. The body in front of me lurched then dropped slowly. I stared past her, at the ominous pair of eyes that seemed to search for me in the darkness. The demon monitoring my every move.

Saint.

He would go back and report that the great Angyl Hunter was murdered. The bounty on my head would triple as Angyl’s charges faded into black. Her record was clear – there was no longer a murderer to contend with. She was free, or as free as such a person could be.

Assuming I fulfilled the rest of my dark purpose. I had to get her to the best doctor I knew. I had to stop the bleeding. For every great secret, great treacherous purpose, there must be a partner to share it with. I pondered who I could share this with, who I could trust to bear the chore of keeping Angyl alive without incident.

After a few seconds deliberation, I carried the limp form that had been Angyl Hunter to the Dorrance household. She was

breathing in gasps, barely holding onto air, but alive nonetheless. That would have to be enough. I pounded on the door until I got a response, sputtering and coughing some insane story about how I had found her like that on the street. The weapon was left at the scene to prove my "guilt" to Colt's side. It would all fall into place, bit by bit.

As planned, the Dorrance family knew a collection of talented doctors who made house calls. An experienced surgeon was on the scene almost instantly performing miracles. While he concentrated on Angyl, I took the time to have a heart to heart with Edward.

I explained to Edward that Angyl had to survive this. And that her role in the great design was larger than all of us and for that alone she needed to continue on. I explained that her endurance and violence would inspire us to push ourselves harder and further. She needed to carry on because her child could not carry on without her. I betrayed her most sacred secret...but out of desperation and fear. Should the system intervene, that child would never have the proper upbringing and morality that he would find with Angyl. Though she was not a typical mother by PTA standards, she was a warrior nonetheless with power to be passed on. I couldn't allow it to go to waste.

Edward understood my purpose, and the grand design. That Corvis, with proper guidance, would carry on to do great things, things that some of us could only dream of. He just needed the proper footing. Inspiration from people such as the Dorrances, Edward, and of course Angyl...Corvis' potential was limitless. And that was the bigger picture right now – an innocent child's future.

Hours wore on, and Angyl continued to breathe. After a period of deep sleep and rest, she would come around to talking again. I had recovered Corvis from where she had hidden him – Lucid's abandoned church. She knew that she would have to

choose a place that we had in common of equal importance. She had to believe that I would understand her decisions and actions without a novel to back them up. And so far, I had followed through perfectly. With the exception of Edward's involvement. However, upon further consideration, I think she took fondly to the idea of a stable support system to depend on. The hounds could no longer hunt a target that had been declared legally dead, so she was free for the most part.

The Dorrance family stayed uptown, being a more proper establishment. Keeping Angyl from the old haunts was one of the many steps we had to go through to keep her alive. She changed hair colors as often as shirts, changing lengths every few weeks. Her style in clothing changed every other day, anything to keep a pattern from forming.

I wondered briefly what it must feel like to constantly reinvent yourself. Most of us do so out of boredom – Angyl did so to survive.

30. Bang, Bang, You're Dead.

Or so it seems.

Blanks used to seem like such a waste to me until I found myself still breathing after five separate pulls of the trigger. I realized Colt's screams had become silent, that I was still warm and comforted by my madness.

So what happened? And why? The door swung open slowly, and Edward lumbered in. He closed the door slowly behind himself, sitting in the center of the room, ominous and peaceful. I was still on my knees with the weapon clutched in one hand, the barrel in the other. He laid his weapon on the floor, staring

intently into my eyes.

“You have been tried. And you have been sentenced. But as no law of man may supersede that of love, you are being granted pardon at this time. Until said time when/if Colt passes, you will be retried should the Family command it. Do you accept this agreement?”

And I realized why his weapon was in my grasp. I could refuse his offer, blow him away, and run screaming into the night. I could claim my innocence, admit nothing, and keep running. By taking his deal, I would be agreeing, forever, that I had murdered Harley. I would keep that burden deep in my soul for all time, a blade consistently hanging over my shoulder at every turn. Would I be willing to keep that tag despite the truth? I picked up his weapon slowly, turning it over in my hand.

“Yes Edward.” I pushed it slowly back into his hands, where he spun it carefully, admiring the artwork. He rolled it over, sliding a finger loosely over the trigger.

“Alright then. We have an accord.”

And two shots rang out. I remember feeling the impact, shaking momentarily, staring beyond Edward to where the second shot was aimed. Out in the hallway was Colt, held in place by Relic, blood pouring from his arm. I looked down to see blood pouring from my opposite arm, collecting in my open palm. I started to get up, but remember dropping back onto the ground. I stared up at the ceiling as the shock and adrenaline started to wear off slowly, breaking way into relentless pain and fatigue. I didn't care anymore about why things had ended this way, or why I was bleeding.

I just wanted to sleep for a while.

And I did. I let go of my concerns, of the past week of madness and pain. I didn't care what happened from here or

why. Everything would fall into place soon enough. Or so I kept telling myself. I kept hoping.

29. Return to Arms

If you're good at something, you don't usually forget how to do it. And that's perfectly logical. I was good at surviving. As was Harley it would seem. She was also adept at storytelling, and the art of deception. Better than I could have imagined.

Another seemingly routine day, closing the bar. Relic and Edward were off chatting about things of minimal importance, as usual. Harley was approving of their relationship, as long as it didn't cross into romantic lines. She knew the truth, and had to keep reminding herself of it every time she watched Edward saunter out with her daughter under his arm. It was getting dangerously close to the breaking point and she'd need to intervene soon.

I was there alone with her one night wiping tables, trying to avoid her glare. She waited until I had just put a few glasses on the bar and turned around to get more, jumping the counter on me. She threw a towel around my neck and pulled abruptly, slamming me back against the counter. I stared up at her, confused and bewildered, as she kept a hand pressing my throat against the cool countertop.

"Who are you working for?" Her voice was almost a growl, her eyes narrow and accusatory. I coughed and tried to pull up from the bar, but she kept a vice grip on me.

"You come around trying to be everyone's friend when you're related to the enemy. Your entire family line is full of

murderous lunatics and you claim to be far from it. You could be daughter to Toryn Ransom herself with how similar you look to her, and you wouldn't even know it. Saint shared a lot of important information with you, and I know you already had a head full of blackmail material as is. So again, who are you working for?"

I coughed a few more times, pushing her hand up enough to answer.

"Myself. Working to survive."

She let go and I tried to straighten out, coughing and gasping. As I turned around, she had a gun leveled at my face. Point blank, there was no escaping it.

"So how are you going to survive this?" Her voice was sarcastic, but still rational. I tried to slow the facts and figures down in my mind, calculate all possible outcomes.

"By working with you."

She clicked the safety back on quietly. "Clever girl. In case you're feeling eager, killing me will not make anything easier. You are still breathing because Angyl Hunter, and now I, Harley Morrow, allows it. You will help me keep my children safe. You will not break Colt's heart, despite the cost. We will not bleed for you. But you will bleed for us."

I nodded my consent quietly, understanding her objective. She needed to feel me out, to gauge my place in the plan. She knew that I held a dangerous amount of knowledge, but I served a more important purpose right now. So keeping me alive would be top priority.

If only she'd felt that way about herself.

I remember the bang, but the shot froze every fiber of my being. I wasn't sure if I was dead or alive for a good ten seconds, as Harley's frame slipped from view. I don't remember

breathing or thinking further than the sound. I just stared wide-eyed into the darkness of the bar, devoid of visitors, realizing only after a solid two minutes that I had just witnessed the murder of Harley Morrow. A legend. A martyr.

And behind her, red handed, holding the smoking gun?

Irish.

I looked down to find myself splattered with blood, blinking and confused. Irish put the gun on the bar quietly, her eyes locked to mine. This was her white flag. She had completed her mission; there was no more reason to fight.

“Why?” I muttered.

“I wanted something to call my own. I couldn’t let her just come back from the dead and take back everything I’d worked so hard for. I suffered for this, nearly died for this. For you. And I will enjoy peace before the Reaper sees fit to steal me.”

I nodded quietly, understanding her need, but amazed that she could murder Harley so carelessly. I wondered how she’d explain this to Relic, or more importantly, the Solace family. How would Irish be able to escape the dagger this time? She probably saw this playing out in my mind.

“Sit down, let me get you a drink. You’re going to need it.”

So she went to work behind the bar, digging out another whiskey bottle similar to the one Saint and I had conversed over. She worked casually – entirely ignorant of the body on the floor still warm and bleeding. I stared at the weapon on the bar, considering my options.

Irish had just murdered a pillar of our community, both new and old. It was like assassinating the governor. I could turn her into the authorities, or at least to our brand of justice. She would die, slowly and painfully, for her crime. If she

dared call anyone friend, they would suffer with her, as she had no family to be stolen from.

Or I could strike her down myself, stop her from all that pain, from facing facts. But who would believe that I didn't shoot Harley too? The gun would match...no, it was too much of a risk.

Or I could listen to whatever half-baked plan Irish had cooking in her mind. She sat down across from me, sliding a glass my way. I filled it halfway, downed the drink then poured another to sip on. She smiled and poured one to start with.

"By killing Harley, I have inherited the bar immediately. Any and all decisions concerning it now lead back to me. My father, Saint, will be claiming he witnessed it all, saw someone else pull the trigger in a violent scuffle."

"Someone else?"

She downed the rest of her glass, looking almost past me momentarily then resting her eyes on mine. "Yes. You."

I jumped up from the chair only to find myself shoved back down and held in place by a set of hands more powerful than a vice. I twisted around, finding Saint's familiar grin staring down at me. Irish kept taking pulls from her drink.

"This is fucking insane, and you know it! I had nothing to do with it, and you expect me to die for you?"

Irish got up slowly, leaning over the table until her lips were inches from my face. She smiled slowly, whiskey creeping from her breath. "Did you expect me to die for you? I gave you back your life once, today you'll help me do the same."

"So after all this fighting, all this time, you just expect me to sit down and die?"

She started to settle back in her seat, as Saint kept a firm lock on me in mine. Another sip of the alcohol, another uneasy silence.

“No. It was self-defense. She pulled a gun on you, there was a scuffle, you both reached for the gun, but you reached it first.” She seemed satisfied with the response.

“That’s a nice concept, but neither one of us look like we’ve been in a fight, and what makes you think I still won’t die for my apparent carelessness?”

Saint chimed in here, letting go and settling into a chair next to me. “Because Colt loves you. The Solaces may be brutal leaders, cold and unfeeling, but they know better than to tamper with love. Killing you could lose them their white knight and ruin Colt’s eager and hopeful sensibilities. As long as you have him, your life is guaranteed. The details will fall into place, and my word is stronger than most anyone’s around.”

“I don’t like this,” I muttered, realizing the futility of it. He merely smiled.

“You don’t have to like it. You merely have to survive it. Consider us even.”

And with that he pulled me from the chair and tossed me to the ground like a rag doll, setting in to make the struggle look real. Harley had always been rough around the edges, an overly clumsy person when she had other things in mind, so her body would be ravaged with bruises naturally. I had to look like I had taken a decent lashing before the final bout for the gun. A gun that would have been wiped clean of prints by now, a gun that curiously enough belonged to Harley in the first place. How would this affect Relic, and her newfound friendship with Edward? Would it keep her sane, or blow them both away?

A bit too early to tell of course, but it was something to

consider.

I just stayed on the floor, taking the swings, spitting out blood as ribs cracked and blood vessels ruptured. Saint had to make it look legitimate – I understood that. But somewhere in my mind, the constant flashes of knuckle were getting worn out. I was tired of forgetting who and what I was, where I'd come from and why. For a split second, I hoped Saint would get carried away and I would lose consciousness, never to wake back up. Only for a second. He had his knees dug into my sides while he wailed on my face, until I reached up to grab a blood-drenched fist.

“Saint...enough.” My voice was a hoarse cough, spitting out blood as I pushed him back and rolled over on my side. He sat on the floor, watching curiously to figure out my reaction. I hadn't really had time to deal with anything, so he just held out for the final response. He reached out to help me up when the door flew open. We all looked up from where we stood.

Edward stared wide-eyed around at each of us slowly in turn, assessing the situation. Immediately in front of him were Saint and I, both covered in blood. The bar itself had a small pool of blood that would lead him to Harley's body, which he found as he passed around us. And Irish was nowhere to be found. Here comes the all-important moment, the test of skill, to see if we could convince him that our story held water. It all seemed logically sound...

Until Relic stepped in behind him.

We hadn't counted on having to face them; we hadn't considered the first faces we had to lie to being theirs. Saint got up slowly, blood dripping from his fingertips. He tried to lead Relic away, but she wouldn't have it. She didn't speak, she didn't cry, she just stood there, staring into space. After an eternity's silence, she looked at us both slowly.

“Which one of you did this?” Her voice was clear and stern, a

remnant of Harley's resolve. I started to pull myself up off the floor when Saint's voice echoed in the quiet room.

"She did. It was self-defense, Relic."

Relic tilted her head slowly, locking eyes on mine. "Self-defense? That so? Did my mother attack you for some reason?"

I nodded slowly, trying to rehearse my story in my head when she pushed me back down abruptly. She took the spot previously occupied by Saint, knees dug into my sides. But she held a box cutter to my throat, pushing slowly until blood started to slip down to my shoulder. I kept my eyes on hers, cool and calm, convinced of my innocence. Harley had attacked me. I was fine. Harley had attacked me. I hadn't provoked her. Saint saw everything. When he tried to interfere, he and I got into a fight. That's where they came in. That's how it was supposed to work.

But Relic didn't seem to be buying it. She kept a steady hand on me, weighing her options. She could avenge her mother's life here and now, skip the links in the chain of command and end the madness as it was. But it just didn't seem to make sense. What did I stand to gain from Harley's death? Why would I throw my life away in such a fashion? Was I just mad like her father? Was I following in his footsteps? I could see the internal war in her eyes as she struggled with the second loss of her mother, and the possible betrayal in her grasp. I had been as responsible as possible around her as a child and she remembered that.

"This goes above all of our heads. Harley was the mother of us all. Her death must be avenged. A price must be paid." Edward's words were hollow as he directed his glance in our direction. The blood reflected in his eyes, making him all the more sinister. He came over slowly and pulled Relic off of me, keeping a careful eye on Saint's whereabouts. I stayed frozen on the floor for a good few seconds, assessing my future. A

vote would be had. Blood for blood; if the gods were feeling charitable today I might survive this. Key words being "if" and "might". But it was better than nothing, so I'd take my chances.

And I was led away. Locked in the coldest, darkest corner in the depths of solitary chambers, I had nothing but time to consider my options. The Solaces would convene with their generals, with the witnesses, to discuss my fate. Whether Harley's life was worth mine. They sent Jekt to me once when I first arrived to tend to my wounds, make sure I lived on to learn my ultimate outcome. He was as sincere as he could allow, though the conviction in his eyes said much more. He, like everyone else, held me accountable for the loss of one of the great symbols of hope. The shining light that they thought could help them build an unstoppable battle plan.

Their martyr who had died for nothing. She wasn't killed serving some better purpose; she wasn't sacrificed to save the lives of millions. No. She was murdered in cold blood, a single bullet to the side of the head, without a second thought to decency or family. An impatient and angry young girl shot her for minimal reason and completely without warning. It was a frustrating truth, but one all had to bear. Someone as impressively real as Harley had been wiped out for such a pointless, cowardly reason it almost made my head spin. But Irish had done it, and I couldn't begrudge her that. I could, however, begrudge her setting me up for this, gambling with my life, as it were. I hoped she knew what she was doing, or I wouldn't live to see the end of it.

Three days I waited, as was customary, while my fate was determined. Three days I sat in that room, waiting for the unfortunate executioner who had been chosen that day. And when the door opened, I was prepared to face the reaper. Except it was Colt.

Empty and cold, he stood in the doorway like a lost soul, the

pistol loosely gripped in his hand. I recognized it as the weapon that killed Harley. He said nothing, just stood there, allowing me enough room to pass. I was led to the chambers where Edward would lay wait outside. As I reached the door, I found Edward on one side...and Relic on the other. Both armed, both waiting. If Colt failed, there would be no walking away from this one. There would be no fighting his way out. They had him squared in and he knew better than to disregard the policies he had suffered so long to protect. I went into the room and assumed the position that I had remembered from an eternity before, when a younger Irish had stood apprehensively behind me.

"Miss Dacien Ransom," he paused, the name almost stuck in his throat. "You are charged with the murder of Mrs. Hadley "Harley" Morrow-Mason. Do you have anything to say in your own defense?"

I shook my head slowly. He drew his tear stained eyes up to meet mine.

"Do you have any last words?"

And this time I didn't. No clever remarks, no witty comebacks. I was perfectly fine with the idea of leaving this world without a second care, without a concern for what happened next. My soul had been sold to the highest bidder long ago. Even so, I just couldn't let things pass as they were.

"I love you."

Time stopped.

And with that, I turned around and dropped to my knees, as I had before. His arm would swing up slowly, more apprehensively, as he pressed the barrel to the back of my neck. Another hand was locked securely on my shoulder, more to steady him than me. I counted seconds in my mind, trying to focus on the numbers as I waited for the familiar sound of the

safety to click off. It never happened. Ten seconds became thirty, became a minute, then two. Colt never fired. His fingers were wrapped into my shoulder, almost drawing blood, but he couldn't take the shot. He knew that his life would end immediately outside if he failed this test. We both did. After three minutes of silence, he gave up. The gun dropped with a clack on the floor abruptly, I wheeled around to face him.

"Colt, you have about two minutes to do this before they come in here and do it for you. You know the cost of treason, and I will not allow you to pay it on my behalf."

He shook his head slowly, trying to keep my words out, his arms locked on both of my shoulders. I tried to reason with him, but I could hear the seconds slowly ticking away in my mind. A shot hadn't been fired still. The guards would be getting nervous. I picked up the weapon from the ground and pulled away from him. He began to pay closer attention as the safety clicked off.

"No!" His voice was this almost childish cry of desperation and anger as he lunged for me. I kept the weapon pressed to the side of my head, not unlike Harley's wound, trying to keep arm's length away.

"They're going to kill you if you don't come out with a body. If you're not going to follow through, I'll do it for you. I'm not letting you go down with me Colt, I'm sorry. They need you too much right now."

"But I need you right now," he muttered, his hand patiently reaching out, hoping I would surrender the weapon. I refused. I started counting down in my mind, when the door would fly open. It should be in about ten seconds...

Colt started muttering to himself, to me, to anyone who would listen. That this was insane and murder should never be a test of devotion. How could he be expected to kill the one thing he ever truly loved? How was this justice? What was he fighting

for? Just as his voice was beginning to rise into true fury, the door flew open, as I'd been expecting. I waited for it to open, pushing Colt out abruptly, toppling his balance. I pulled the door back closed, trying to keep it shut tight while they figured out what was going on. The lock clicked softly back into place, meaning I would be granted my moment of peace. Colt's fists assaulted the door immediately, pounding and screaming of my innocence. I could hear him fighting and brawling outside the door, trying to pry it open again. I took to my knees in the center of the room, as I had before.

There's this divine moment of clarity one finds when they're facing death that forces you to assess every aspect of your life. I was forced in brutal fashion to confront mine. A complete lack of family, an upbringing I couldn't remember, enemies too numerous to count, friends too few to consider. A hard and vicious existence, leading to a cold and violent person – yet, I was remorseful for a crime I did not commit. I was going to die so that someone as morally bankrupt as myself could live. Not entirely a fair trade, but whom I am to judge?

As my mind started to deteriorate, I made the final decision to let the moment occur as it was meant to. Barrel pressed snugly against my head I closed my eyes and let my emotions take hold. All the pain I had endured, all the lies and treachery I had crawled back from, yet here I stood, again a victim, but taking the bullet meant for someone else. All to serve some greater purpose, to prove a point, make an example. Of what? The madness of politics and justice, the inequality of human lives? What was I proving here? What was I dying for? What was I lying for?

And as much as I wanted to just scream out the truth, I couldn't see myself struggling so futilely against what had already been decided. I remembered that a shot was already chambered, ready to go. Squeezing slowly on the trigger, my last thoughts would go down in history as some of the most

cliché...but that doesn't make it any less true.

I love you Colt.

Click.

Bang.

28. Untitled

What you hold dear and what you hold ransom...should never be one and the same.

I was so accustomed to running, dodging, fighting...that the concept of something I didn't entirely have to bleed for was somewhat unsettling. I ran minor errands, trying to keep myself out of trouble and the line of fire. I had enemies still; people whose loved ones had met bad ends at my hand in the struggle. And of course, Linkon's faction. But I was comfortable on my side of the line, and intended to remain as such.

It was another pointless night at the bar until Colt was carried in. Covered in blood, rivers forming with each step he was dragged. It was becoming a familiar scene, with soldiers on each side taking the cost. Why Colt was out there on the front lines I don't know, but it was too late to wonder now. Irish jumped the bar in a swift leap and helped pull him underground while I ran down ahead for the medical junkies.

The med kids were street smart, nothing fancy. They could sew, they understood the meaning of "sterile" and were pretty proficient with their fingers when it came to finding things like bullets. The best we had were always the last kids you wanted to speak to, but when lives were on the line, you made

exception.

The best young apprentice we had was a kid named Jekt. Don't know where his training came from, or the boy himself, but he had a talent with injuries. Kept to himself, smoking and playing guitar, speaking as seldom as possible. He ran jobs for the gangs when they needed a neutral face. Nothing too fancy. I ran as deep into the underground as I could until I found his corner, the familiar cloud of smoke hanging overhead. I grasped him up off the ground and took off with him – offering as much explaining as I could manage.

Colt had been laid out on a bed while Irish mopped up as much as she could. I cleared a space for Jekt to work and helped her stop the bleeding. She looked up at me defensively, but went back to work. Whether there was an underlying reason to her protectiveness, or she just wanted me to watch my place, I don't know. But something about her apprehension around me made a small grin slip across my face.

A few hours later, our fearless Leader was sleeping soundly, minus a few pints of blood. Irish was passed out in the chair at his side, leaving me standing by awkwardly. Jekt had left some time ago to clean up, retreating to his corner again. I took a few steps backwards to the door to try and slip out...and then Colt coughed. His eyes fluttered open momentarily as he searched the darkness for any sort of release. Irish was out cold; I stepped up to speak to him. He smiled weakly.

“I do believe this is how we first met,” he whispered, coughing up more. I got him some water, finding the comparison humorous.

“I suppose you could say that, things were a bit reversed though.”

He nodded slowly. “So they were.”

“You went to speak to him?”

He nodded again. "Sneaky bastard."

"He doesn't play fair. I could have told you that. There's no talking to him now. His mind's made up, none of us can stop him now."

"So why aren't I dead?" Colt's eyes turned to lock onto mine with a ferocity I hadn't seen. The enemy had more than ample opportunity to put a bullet in Colt's head. The body ripped apart in front of me was here by Linkon's graces alone.

"Because as is family tradition, it's no fun to kill a man when he's down. Killing you would be far too easy, too fast. He wants you to hurt, to remember, what it means to fuck with a Ransom. He wants you to be unable to protect those you love not in death, but in life. Laid out in bed for a few weeks leaves everyone vulnerable. At the same time, according to your history, you were a vital officer to Rev Ransom, our ancestor. Your service to him has earned you another chance to surrender peacefully."

He smiled weakly again, reaching to pull me closer to him. I knelt down at the side of the bed, startled at my own knowledge. I had operated so long outside of my family's code of honor; the fact that I remembered it was amazing. He seemed content with the answer, holding my arm tight.

"So how do we stop him?"

"We?" I smiled slyly at him, raising a brow.

"You're not going to make me go beat him up by myself looking like this are you?"

"We need to wait."

His eyes widened in a silent outburst of fury. Considering the cost, the blood spilt and lives lost, waiting wasn't the option he wanted to hear. But somehow he knew that it was the only one I would offer him. I knew Linkon, I knew my legacy,

better than anyone else. And I knew that there was no force at our disposal that would sway his decision. His most loyal officers would have already been recruited.

I explained to Colt that Linkon needed to prove his brutality to the community. I needed the true evil inside to be revealed before we could attack. We couldn't risk the loss of communal support, as the people represented a vast and dangerous power beyond our control. We had to stress the importance of our mission, our justification. Otherwise, the consequences of our position could be severe. Our safe havens compromised. We had to retain a steady moral stance.

Long story short, there would be blood, and we had to make sure of that. As long as it wasn't on our hands, we'd be fine for the long haul. Colt didn't like the idea of allowing victims to be made, but some examples were required. You've got to break some eggs, right?

So that would be the plan. We would do everything in our power to stay alive, taking the beatings and threats, with minimal retaliation. We'd do our damndest not to be the first to take a life. We needed to leave the true animalistic actions to Linkon. And with enough time, he would succumb to his temper. His anger and arrogance would breed hatred and bloodlust. And God help whoever got in his way at the time.

Or such was the plan.

After Colt's recovery, there was an eerie peace in the streets, while both sides recruited their armies. Linkon had put a new price on my head, as predicted. Colt took a new interest in my safety and security, considering my life at constant risk. The war wouldn't officially have started until someone died – those were the rules. A life lost, a sacrifice made to the gods of war; such was the start of a new age of demons. With my importance to both sides, my death would not only be the catalyst, it would be monumental. Lowering the

ranks of the Ransom family to a solo heir, Linkon's place in history would be secure as his monstrosity was instituted. However, such a move would require a massive set of balls that I knew Linkon lacked. He was hoping that with time, I might see reason and take my place at his side. He was praying he would never have to face me and do the dirty work himself. But we both knew otherwise.

What I didn't count on was Colt's true feelings. Or mine.

What started as a sort of hostility between enemies eventually cooled into a friendship. A casual friendship soon became a partnership as we took lead against a new mutual enemy. That partnership would grow into a relationship with time. Shaky and unsure, but the best we could manage with what we had. Colt respected my opinion as an officer but loved my heart as a warrior. I had no problem getting into the trenches after outlining the battle plan. He loved me because of my internal fire, whereas I loved him for his composure. If such persons are even capable of such a thing as "love"...perhaps it was more something of convenience than actual affection.

Either way, it was how things were.

Tell me something true.

I made a habit to pace through the underground at night, when things were cooling down. Make mental notes of who had come home to us, who had left. Try to keep count of those injured or threatened in some way. I wanted to be familiar with my new home and its inhabitants; the people we would live or die protecting. Each had their role, whether it was something as simple as "exist" or not varied person to person. But they were our ward and we would guard them as such. I moved down the winding paths, past casual rooms to the more important chambers.

Interrogation and torture cells, established long ago by the founders. Usually vacant and quiet at these hours, both rooms

were home to echoing thuds. I slowed down – trying to listen to the voices of the officers, establish what importance this exercise was. Outside of the main interrogation room was the cleaner, pistol loosely grasped in his hand. He would be waiting outside that door for anyone who had failed their task. His job depended entirely on loyalty and obedience; only he could ensure that our soldiers were all without cowardice. For weeks I had merely noticed the black outline as a dormant figure in an ancient machine, but with time I came to learn who really held such a prestigious and heartless position.

Edward.

Relic's unofficial boyfriend, and Harley's new bar hand; the supposed clean slate we all prayed for. He was a levelheaded lad, obedient and pure, his morals incorruptible. He had stood for years, the ever-vigilant watcher, taking life when his position commanded it. The one person we thought had no ties to any of the treachery of our circle was one of the most depraved souls of all. His job made him cavalier and detached when dealing with mortality, a topic very dangerous to Relic's young mind. She had fought long and hard to deal with the constant death and pain surrounding her, and had an even longer battle yet to contend.

What worried me more about Edward's place in the underground was Harley's apparent approval of his position. With her return came her insistence on involvement; she wanted to be familiar with every major player in the cycle. She had known exactly what the boy did with his spare time when she returned to us. She was almost expectant of him, familiar but unsure of his person when she laid eyes on him. There was this brief moment of recognition, followed by an insecurity that set us all on edge. Did she know something we didn't? Was there more in her mind than we cared to consider? All valuable questions, all impossible to answer.

Depending on whom you know.

I decided to go to someone equally suspicious and mysterious in the area – Saint. If there was anyone who seemed to hold all the pieces, it was him; not to mention he was usually a lot more social after a few drinks. So to the bar I went one night, a good deal of cash on hand to keep the booze flowing, and hopefully some explanations.

He sat in the most reclusive corner he could find, distant from the vulgar mob. He was leaning back casually – drink in hand as he analyzed me, down to the smallest detail. I was being weighed and measured right now, my worth determined. Was I devoted enough to deserve his honesty? Should he pass such sacred and controversial knowledge to a punk like me? I kept my cool, my back to the bar as I downed half of my own drink. A bottle of whiskey sat between us that we were both pulling from straight.

“You want to know what’s what, don’t you kid?”

I smiled warmly, staring over the glass. “Anything you think I should know?”

He smiled slowly back, his eyes locked on my own. “Everything.”

I had already read *The Timeless Martyrs Cycle*, the first collection of stories following the ancestors of all clans. It was Harley’s story that was still curiously absent. Some explanations of origin yet to be fulfilled. Saint reached into the depths of his coat and pulled out a manuscript of sorts, tattered and weathered. But it was whole, and he slipped it to me across the table.

“There’s your missing section. Volumes VI and VII. The only request I have to its publication is that it is held until after the deaths of the Mason family. You have some questions for me?”

“Only if you’ll answer them.”

He nodded slowly. "Listen closely, I know exactly what you are. Your family lineage of madness does not make me any more trusting of you. I'm telling you this because every great streak of madness is prone to an exception. I'm hoping with your position in this whole sordid affair, granting you this knowledge may keep the train on the tracks a bit longer."

I nodded slowly, allowing his words and tone to seep in. He had no debt to pay me but would step over the line on this occasion.

"What I just gave you should help you evaluate the background of the major players, understand what they'll do next. With that, I grant you three simple truths, information you are better served to keep to yourself lest you wish to face more treason charges. First off, Irish is my daughter, and as such, I would appreciate highly if you kept a good eye on her in this upcoming hostility. She's survived without my involvement for many years now- I won't break that pattern now. Second, Relic is one of a set of fraternal twins. Her surviving sibling is closer than you think, his origins hidden, like Irish's, to protect him from himself. And third, no matter how hard you dig, how many stories you collect, you will never know the Ransoms from which you were sired. Your true identity is long gone, lost to the general mystique of the Ransom family name."

"Why are you telling me all this? What do you need in return?"

He emptied his glass and poured another. "I've been playing this game for a long time. I've buried friends and family both, wondering how I keep evading the blow. You've been to Hell and back already, yet retain your morality. I respect that, and find solace in your resolve. However, being young and fiery, I wonder if you can maintain that attitude. I'm willing to risk it. Like I mentioned, Irish will need looking after, and I shall do everything I can to enforce that. If certain parties were to learn of her true origin, her

existence could be in jeopardy. I want someone with an undying spirit who will keep by her side.”

“So this is all about protecting a daughter you abandoned at birth?”

He grimaced a bit, unhappy with the truth of the matter. He knew I was right, but facing facts wouldn't keep her any safer. Anyone who knew that Saint collected the stories would realize his value as a hostage. His background put everyone close to him at risk. Loved ones were a favorite of those trying to make a point. He didn't want Irish getting special treatment all around, or endangering her with a connection to himself openly. I'm sure she knew the truth, but facing her would just push the point that much closer home.

“I did what was best for her,” he paused. “And she forgives me for it. I don't need you to. I just need you to make sure she keeps on track and keeps breathing.”

“Only if you grant me one all important answer.”

He paused, considering his options. “Shoot.”

“Who is Relic's brother? The son of Lucid Mason, the madman, the martyr, my master?”

He smiled slowly to himself, considering the weight of the truth. Was it worth sharing? Would it play a part in things down the line?

“As Irish was hidden from me to save her reputation, the son of Lucid had his background stolen as well. Who in your world of freaks and outcasts comes bearing the most ironic family story? Any ideas?”

I started piecing through the tales of each kid, their histories and issues. Running through all the males, one at a time...my mind slammed abruptly into the solution.

“Edward, the cleaner.”

He nodded slowly. “They call him Hyde you know, like Edward Hyde, in the story. But yes, Edward. That’s why he’s taken to Relic so, they’re twins. He connects with her without understanding why. He ended up in a role just as sinister, but with more morality behind it now. The son of Lucid Mason could not be let loose to avenge his father and lay waste the current order.”

“Do you guys get some sort of sick fun from hiding people, changing life stories and entirely removing someone’s identity?”

His eyes narrowed momentarily, slightly insulted at my stab. But they softened as he pulled a long sip from his glass, considering his options.

“So you understand the importance of doing all that is necessary to ensure the safety and survival of innocent lives? Do you accept the cost of freedom? Sometimes what is right is not the same as what is real. Remember that.”

The line ended with such an abrupt emphasis, I knew that I would receive no more answers. He had told me all that he was prepared to share, hoping I would put my newfound knowledge to good use. His information had made me reconsider a few details more carefully; making mental note of things that might be important later.

Who raised Edward, if he was cast out from his normal family? A foster family, or some gang family? His loyalty to us suggested the latter, but he was amazingly morally sound for not having a proper mother and father. How did he fall into the position of murdering “disloyal” soldiers? With all the stories running rampant, how has he been able to hide from himself?

I’d need to keep a closer eye on Irish. As long as everyone

penned her as a mostly neutral third party, she was in no danger. But any favors performed for our side of things would upset the balance.

And Harley's accounts of the last decade or so might prove useful in understanding not only the current cast but the previous one. Who had built the establishments we held dear, and why? Why was there an underground subculture of kids running a circus under a bar? How was such an establishment profitable as a drug front as well as shelter to the city's endless runaways?

Saint's background might be hidden in the depths as well.

And what was with the new trend of missing children and secondary lives? Families you never imagined, relatives you couldn't dream up, all running rampant to complicate matters. You couldn't write a script for daytime television this complex.

One of the few moral lessons I had come to live by was this: Don't waste time questioning why providence has granted you redemption. Just take the chance, while you have it, and run like hell. The longer you stand around and ponder the obvious, the sooner someone will come steal your knowledge from you. And with details this precious, I wouldn't want to lose hold of them.

I needed a safe haven, far away from all connection to the family. I wasn't sure if what I had was something that could be shared at this time, so I opted to just keep Colt out of the loop until the coast was clear. Assuming such a time would ever exist. But where to go? The list of places we didn't have eyes on was dwindling ever faster by the day. I decided to return to my old home – Lucid's safe house. The church. Abandoned for decades, it withstood the test of time because it, like us, would not collapse. Some paperwork loopholes kept the legal wolves from tearing it to shreds, so it remained as

desolate as it started. I crept there as quietly as I could, trying to steal away from Harley's ever-watchful eye. She knew I was there, speaking to Saint, uncovering the truth, and she allowed me to walk out the front door without a second thought. Or so it seemed. She was keeping track of everything as it occurred, and I would do very well to remember that.

I was able to curl up in the darkest corner of my old master's den and find a candle to read by. The place hasn't changed much, despite the bloodstain where Lucid's life ended. It took a few minutes to step past it, to remember that dark day when my memories would count for nothing. But I had to move past it now, grasping the collection of stories in my fist with desperation I'd never known before. What truth was I hoping to find? Was I going to be able to better predict my enemies? Would it grant me a better appreciation of my friends?

A good 200 or so pages later, I was back where I started. The stories had granted me only a marginal edge over everyone else in terms of knowledge. There was nothing of severe substance and worth in there. Except for Angyl's confessions. Yes, hidden in the pages of Harley's memories were a small series of events penned by Angyl herself. It was probably the only proof of her accepting her fate, taking responsibility for her actions. She had murdered a number of people in her lifetime, brutally and violently. She had little to no conviction about the morality of her actions. But her words on paper made that shockingly clear. No matter what she ever said or did, she would always maintain the ability to eliminate anyone that threatened her. No matter how much she swore she'd never hurt you, she'd be quick to the blade if you ever crossed her.

There's this theory about sleeping with someone who sleeps with a gun under the pillow...you're just asking to have your head blown off. Being anywhere near Angyl Hunter was like sleeping with someone who kept a loaded shotgun pointed at your head while going through night terrors. As much as I could respect her for what she was doing now, it was hard to

forget all the bodies that lay in her wake.

She would be an important player in the upcoming chain of events, depending where her loyalties lied. Assuming she survived long enough to lay loyalties. The fact that she continued to breathe this long was perplexing, considering the murders. She has killed some very important people in the chain of command and lived to tell about it. Such treachery usually does not go unpunished. Was there a greater plan in store for Miss Hunter, was her life serving some greater purpose that none of us had considered? She had burned down the tattoo shop, killed the owners, killed the children of legends in an effort to stop the great families. Yet, the Ransom line, my line, prevailed. And she allowed us to.

There were inconsistencies. Minor...but they were there. What purpose could Angyl serve, besides that of a murderer? It seemed to be the one thing she excelled at. And maybe that was the goal they had in mind. Murder is a dark business, corrupting both body and soul internally. The Solace family wouldn't want to corrupt an entire family if they could just send one hell-bent warrior to clean up the mess. But would she work for them? Would she yield to some higher master now that she was free? She murdered the man who gave her targets to kill in a bid to enjoy a life without chains, without restrictions. A life where she could raise a son without issue.

And Saint's reasoning in giving me these stories started to come together – Angyl's dark past would be the warning shot. He was trying to tell me not to get too close. The trail of bodies was his evidence, the charge of treason that was no doubt leveled against her. But my knowledge of her actions now, knowledge that somehow Saint must also possess, about the child, could not be used to weaken what was overwhelmingly true – she was a murderer. But why would Saint be protecting me in this upcoming pissing contest of wits?

Because I had Colt. I held the interest of the side he was rooting for, had the attention of all the major players. And he knew that I held the secret of Angyl's son. He knew that I had intentionally kept that secret against all odds, and that gave me a few notches of character.

But how did he know? And how did Harley's troubled childhood help me understand the collected but equally troubled woman before me? The stories did give me a glimpse of a younger Lucid, a more playful lad than the man I served. It also chronicled some of Relic's upbringing, conveniently, and predictably, leaving out the details about her brother. Harley wanted the truth hidden away in memories and minds, far away from the definitive nature of words. Can't say that I blamed her.

A lot of vague answers laid in Saint's contribution, but nothing I could concretely put to use at the moment. I kept the stories safely stored away in the underground, in a corner where only I would find them. I'd go back over them from time to time to try and pull out any important clues to help me sort out how things would play out from here, if more martyrs would be made to the cause. And how many more lost children would crawl out from the fray.

I guess it would just be a test of patience for the time being.

27. Imagine.

Back sooner than I thought I'd be.

I ran minor errands in the underground to keep myself busy, and keep all the major players fresh in my mind. I wanted to

know whom I could trust and whom I couldn't at all times. The Brogan boys were the key players, and they seemed pretty reliable for the time being. Colt seemed fascinated with me, and I let him creep closer so I could assess his own strengths and weaknesses. He was rational, which was an immediate change from the typical around here. I was glad for it. He was doing everything in his power to achieve a peaceful solution with minimal bloodshed, a strategy nearly unheard of. His brother, Dusk, was the sideshow ringleader, keeping the entertainment going and thus, the distraction. He wasn't as patient as his elder, but he had a way of quietly taking notes about his surroundings. He was the eyes and ears as Colt was the voice of the operation.

The bartenders were our eyes above ground, and worth their weight in gold. The enemy doesn't usually wander into your home base and lay out his plans. But every so often, you'd get an overeager street demon saunter into the bar. After a few rounds, he'd sell you his soul for a song. And we counted on those rare occasions to learn how close Linkon was to making a move. Sometimes they were plants, sent there to intentionally mess with the works. Sometimes they were very lost and very helpful. Somehow, we never saw the helpful ones again.

Everyone knew who I was so my place in the underground was sketchy at best. They were sure I would turn traitor at the drop of a hat and run back to Linkon's side. He was family, true enough, but he was entirely out of his mind. I knew better than to assist in his madness, blood or not. It was curious to watch his actions from the outside, marveling at his ego. I knew how his mind worked; we were siblings after all. But I was the more patient of the pair, the more calculating. I would wait for his plan to crash and burn – as I knew it would. And I would be there to help pick up the pieces and laugh at his misery. Assuming he survived. Ransom men don't have the longest life expectancy you know.

Harley however, was always suspicious. As she had every right

to be. She had seen and heard so much in her time, she knew that nothing was as it seemed. Not to mention my being a Ransom by birth. I allowed her to suspect everything – I would have done the same. I tried to be as friendly as possible, but still kept my distance, which I'm sure she respected. I passed through the bar quickly and quietly, eager to keep her pleased. If my presence began to hinder her financially or personally, I'm sure she had the kind of power to have my throat slit while I slept. I respected her space – she respected my right to oxygen, so all was well.

Relic I kept my distance from entirely. A really easy way to piss off a Mama Bear is to fuck with its cub, and I wasn't touching that with a ten-foot pole. She was flirting with one of the new bartenders, as is typical of young love, but we all kept watch nonetheless. She was the child of us all – her death would bring the fire of hell down from above.

I never did explain the Solaces, did I?

They are the grand masters of all we survey. They, Layne and Serkis, make all the rules and govern everything we enforce. The peace, the war, is theirs as well as ours. They raised a few of the demons personally, demons who barely survived into their late teen years. The devastation of the loss kept them as disconnected from things as possible. They pulled the strings and made any decisions that left us at odds but we mostly ran things ourselves. When the war broke, they declared what side we would fight on. And in such an emergency, were the only people who could supersede the rules and decide who lived or died.

How would I know all of this?

Because a long time ago they ruled against me. And I was charged with treason. I was condemned to die. And as I sat awaiting the shot to the back of the head, I was granted a reprieve. The vote had been cast after Harley's apparent

death. I sat in a room as black and empty as my soul at the time counting the minutes as they passed.

We didn't believe in wasting too much time on things. Three days a prisoner would be given to find forgiveness in their soul. Or for their case to be reheard. 72 hours, no more, before the final shot was delivered. Nobody pled my case in my stead; nobody saw reason why I shouldn't be blown away. So I waited my three days in silence, finding my own inner peace. I made no plans for revenge, gave no thought to a future beyond the darkness. So I waited until a specter came from the depths to collect me. To bring me to the final scene that would sum up my career.

Who would my executioner be?

I waited to see who had been selected for the task, whose loyalty was on the line today.

It was Irish.

She opened the door as calmly as one can for this sort of thing, motioning that I should walk past her on my way to the theoretical gallows. It was more of a solitary room where rulings were carried out. I walked towards the wall, awaiting my next instruction.

So why the cloak and dagger, the theatricality of it all? Why were the damned brought to a room by themselves with their executioner? A number of reasons; let me explain:

The Solaces believed in punishment, but they did not want to inspire fear. Despite the dark and dank atmosphere of the underground, they didn't want the condemned to be confronted by a hoard of people as they faced their fate. The executioner was always different until every Officer had proven their worth. Then it went to lesser soldiers. If the criminal was notorious for one reason or another, a specific person might be called in.

Such was my case. Irish had been serving the bar and the underground for years, but had never been called upon to prove her loyalty through cold-blooded murder. She was a force to be reckoned with, but never pulled the trigger in anything less than self-defense. The Solaces felt that it was time to put her dedication to the test and find out if she was prepared to go all the way.

Now here's where the situation gets curious. What if the executioner breaks down, can't handle it? What if they can't pull the trigger? Do I go free? Of course not. There's a failsafe; the guard outside the door with a pistol ready to murder anyone who cannot accept their duty. He is always the same, always at the ready to make the deciding vote. His true identity was a mystery to us all, hidden under layers of black, but he was always faithfully perched outside the door, awaiting the verdict.

Had anyone ever failed in their test of devotion? Yes. And they were promptly removed from the realm of the living. If you cannot face your fear before picking up the pistol, you have no right to carry a weapon in the first place. Such was the mindset attached to these policies.

So I was led into a dark room, reeking of bleach where blood had been washed out recently. It was a time of traitors. I faced Irish as calmly as I could bear, the pistol hanging loosely in her hand.

"Miss Dacien Ransom, you are charged with treason against the Family proper, associating with a known fugitive, and accessory to murder. Do you have anything to say in your own defense?"

I shook my head slowly. She nodded her consent.

"Do you have any last words?"

I smiled a tiny smile I remembered growing up with, this sort

of shifty grin when you've got something up your sleeve. Even when you don't.

"Kill me faster."

And with that, I turned around and dropped to my knees, listening as her shoes scraped forward to set up the shot. Her arm would swing up and lock straight, barrel pressed to the back of my head. I remember the safety clicking off, the shot being chambered. The last things I remember hearing in that room, as the shot rang out and my body was clutched and dragged off before ever hitting the ground, was this:

"Trust me."

I would wake up some time later in a hospital upstate without any idea how I got there or how I had escaped a bullet leveled at the base of my neck. I remember a doctor explaining repeatedly that I was alive – there was no real bullet wound, just a graze at the neck. I'd be stabbed in the chest at a curious angle. That nothing I remembered was true.

I struggled with the facts for weeks, until I could finally convince them to release me. My ID showed up at random one day and they allowed me to carry on from there. I didn't question the curious events that kept me breathing until much later.

Irish had the gun leveled at the nape of my neck. With no gunshot, the cleaner outside would know there was a problem. She moved the weapon enough to just graze the skin, but still fire the shot. How to cover up my lack of physical injury? At the precise moment of the shot, she had stabbed clear through my chest, at enough of an angle to miss anything fatal. Her chances were slim, but had paid off. When the door opened, she handed the firearm to the guard and carried my body out, praying her cut hadn't been too close to anything vital. How I made it so far upstate without more of an investigation, I'll never know. But after months of intense remembering, putting the pieces back where they began, I realized that Irish wasn't

the mindless pawn I had envisioned.

Her true origins and motives were both as aimless as the girl herself, but I couldn't begrudge her any sort of eccentricity. She had saved my life at the risk of her own. I'm sure the Solace family let the boys take turns beating her senseless when I came back to town. What's curious though...is how she escaped the gallows herself after such a reckless act. One can only wonder. Perhaps she was of more importance than any of us cared to think, but who knows. She played her part backstage so well it's hard to think of her anywhere else.

I went back for answers and found headhunters instead, which led me to where we first met. Dodging beatings when and where I could, I found myself amazed at my survival skills day by day. To think, someone can put a price on your very existence, it's almost sickening. But it happened, and I ran and dodged until the truth finally came through. With Harley.

But her return meant more than just the old boss. It meant the stories, the origins of all, were up for grabs. Harley's written account of the Solaces' rise to power would be priceless, if anyone should find a way to possess it. The other stories were being mass produced as we speak, hundreds of copies being made and distributed all over the underground. The Timeless Martyrs Cycle would live again, through a new generation and with an entirely new following. And the stories that came after, that chronicled the aftermath? They would be worth their weight in gold...if we could get hold of them. Harley's exploits, the accounts of my ancestor Rev Ransom – ex Street Boss, the memories of Maven Merrick – last of her kind and of course, the rise of Angyl Hunter; all hidden in these streets on scraps of paper and fading notebooks. Desperate to be shared, told, revisited and remembered. Most of it was in Harley's custody, never to see the light of day.

Or so we thought.

They say the enemy you know is always better than the one you don't. But when you don't know whom your enemies are in the first place, it's pretty tough to gauge which is worse, wouldn't you say? Blood is thicker than water, and for good reason.

26. Not Part of the Plan

The boys would have their war, as they were destined to. Boys will be boys. Saint continued to hang around, having nowhere else to truly belong. Time and tragedy had aged him, but he tried to appear upbeat around me. Having a godfather was a new sort of feeling that I'd never considered, discovering this long lost part of my legacy.

Despite the conception that things would be a bit tense, there was an inexplicable calm that overcame the bar and community. People felt at ease, despite the mutiny between leaders. I just tried to assume a normal life as best as a person with my background physically could. Or maybe it was more of a mental issue. It's hard to be certain nowadays. Mom went back to her post at the bar, where she always belonged. I couldn't imagine her kicking back and enjoying some sort of retirement. We just weren't that sort of people. Could you imagine if we just hung up our legacies eons ago and let the chips fall where they may? Well what kind of situation would we be in then? Would it be better or worse? Hard to be sure, but I guess there's no use focusing on possibility when you've got actuality staring you in the face.

Edward was a welcome addition to the staff at the bar. He seemed less tainted than the others, more bright and hopeful. I know that now was possibly the worst time to get involved in

such issues, but I couldn't help myself. With a war brewing and everything I knew fading into a blur of possibilities, I had to look beyond what I had seen in Linkon Ransom. His place was far away from me now, defiantly holding the opposition line. For my safety, and that of my family, I had to respect his position from a distance. His journey for revenge would undoubtedly end poorly for him, and I didn't want to get caught up in the downfall.

So back to Edward. He was more upbeat with kinder eyes, making me wonder what led him down our way in the first place. Perhaps fate has a way of taking care of the misfortunate if they suffer long enough. I tried to consider myself compared to him. Damaged and indecisive, I seemed all the more childish the more thought I put into it. Maybe he was better left on the sidelines for simple observation purposes. I barely knew what was real as it was. How would I even begin to explain my background, my complicated family structure? There was a lot to hold, a lot to hide, and a lot left unheard. I let my thoughts drop for some time until he took some interest in me.

"Need any help?"

Another late night, another arm full of glasses to be washed, I shrugged absentmindedly. I tried very hard to be useful, something my mother could be proud of. Since her return she spoke seldom, constantly appearing deep in thought. I wondered what plagued her memories, but knew better than to ask. She was trying to remember what existing in the light felt like. I could relate to a point, but I didn't want to add any stress with my childish rants. She watched with an almost genuine curiosity as Edward instigated conversation.

He kept trying to start casual conversation for about a week, eagerly waiting for me to turn around and face him. He was always patient and calm, offering help at every turn. By Friday, my mother had enough of our antics and took my tray of glasses from me herself.

“You should take a walk and enjoy the good weather,” she paused, staring past me. “Hey Edward, you mind keeping her safe for me?”

He nodded, striding over to help her with the tray even as she rolled it away from him. He smiled anyway, slowly mouthing “thank you” to her, before turning to lead me out of the bar. I looked back to find my mother thoroughly proud of herself, content that she’d gotten me to act like a normal teenage girl for a change.

We walked the familiar blocks in silence at first, unsure of what to talk about. I knew all the stories, all the legends. I had become one of them in my own quiet way. I wondered how much he knew about me, my family, my father. I wondered if he’d truly care. There was just something reassuring in his tone that convinced me I could admit to a dozen murders and he wouldn’t run off screaming. Perhaps I was young and hopeful. But I wanted to believe that I had a chance at something real for a change. Who, or what, defines what is real anyway?

We stopped suddenly where the tattoo parlor had burned down some time ago, the plot desolate and black. The bloodstains hadn’t washed out of the alley walls, the patterns lingering and sinister. I shuddered when I thought of the stories I had heard from others about the place. He seemed to sense my apprehension, considering how to go about things.

“Nobody’s bought it still huh?”

I looked at him wide-eyed. “You know what happened here?”

He looked over solemnly. “Who doesn’t?”

I shook my head slowly, trying to play naïve. “I guess nobody wants to recoup the cost of taking out the wreckage and rebuilding on the plot. With real estate so important, I’m honestly surprised though. It’s a really good location.”

He laughed softly. "Depends who you ask. I'm sure someone owns the land, they just can't bear the thought of rebuilding."

I took a few more steps, trying to shake out the memories of times long gone. I had heard the legends; I lost count of the lives lost. I wondered exactly how much he thought he knew, how much he truly remembered. I decided to play it off like anyone else, innocent and confused, just wandering down the block oblivious enough. He took the cue after a few seconds and fell into step behind me.

We spoke about everything and anything, most of it unimportant. It passed time and kept me free from my mother's scrutinizing gaze. She seemed so intent to see through everything, to figure out the greater meaning of it all. I didn't believe that there was a greater meaning anymore. Most of the great truths had been revealed, leaving me amidst the rubble of what once was and what would come. Angyl had her own ends to tie up I was sure, since she needed to find a side of the line to stand on.

Since I was trying to gauge my new friend's awareness of his surroundings, I decided to throw some bait out on the line.

"Have you ever heard of the Timeless Martyrs Cycle?"

He shrugged a bit, smiling at me. "Just a bunch of fairy tales. I've never physically laid eyes on it though, so it's anybody's guess if it truly exists. Hard to believe a set of stories chronicling the deaths of dozens of people where nobody gets caught. But I guess you never know."

I nodded to myself, trying to weigh his words. Was he playing dumb, or did he truly believe that there was no way such an item could exist? I had seen it – I knew it was real. And I knew it would be distributed again. I gave up after a fashion trying to make sense of things and we continued on in silence.

That would be the first walk in a long series of walks. At

first it would be once a week, then twice, until we would go for such strolls every night after the bar closed. My mother approved, so I didn't have to hide anything from her, which made life easier. We could wander around for hours on end; as long as I came home before the sun, I was clear.

Over time, we covered every safe topic available before wading into the vaguely familiar waters of legendary storytellers. The old tales my mother not only grew up with but survived. She was a part of that mighty chain of tales. The first ringleader of the Serkis. Owner of the safe haven – the bar. She held her own place on the mantle of memorable names. She was someone you ought to know, and I was proud of her for that.

Turns out he knew more than he let on, but entirely from an outsider's perspective. It was peaceful hearing things through filters and possibilities, quickly dissecting fact from fiction. I knew all the stories, as my mother passed them to me through my infancy. As a witness, she had locked away too much to lie to me about, so she pushed me to embrace the past. As Edward had heard the tales of my parents, I could feel him begin to wonder why I hadn't mentioned it before; that I was an heir to a community safe haven. It's not something that typically comes up in conversation. But he didn't ask loads of questions when he finally put two and two together; he respected my casual manner about things. I was grateful for his lack of curiosity as I was still unable to fully accept my father's madness, let alone explain it.

Suffice to say, a relationship was eventually born from our late night strolls. My mother and I both agreed that Edward's lack of background in the area made him a safe choice as someone to latch on to. He was pretty well mannered and decent as well, all the more reason for her to approve. He had no ambitions of power or knowledge; he was perfectly content in the corner of the universe he occupied, which was fine with me. I just wanted to survive as best as I could with all the

demons and ghosts following behind me.

Would I ever explain to him my true origins, my family history of madness and pain? Perhaps. But I didn't want to send him running either. Trust is supposed to be one of the foundations of a worthwhile relationship, but there had been so much that was negotiable in my own life that the concept was foreign to me. Everything I thought I knew had changed drastically lately, leading me to question every minute detail. Who can you trust when those closest to you are the ones pulling the strings, leading the façade? I decided it was better to just play it by ear and hope for the best along the way.

Saint was pretty scrupulous about the company I kept however, keeping an ever-watchful eye on my surroundings. He was playing the role of godfather as best as he could, considering we had just met a few weeks ago. There was something cold and distant in his demeanor, a sort of overwhelming grief that he held in his eyes. But he smiled on rare occasions, an almost weary effort to keep himself in motion. I never pushed his buttons, unsure of the entirety of his past, thus how he would react.

He kept himself busy at the bar, mostly as an excuse to follow Edward's and my every move. He was vigilant, I give him that, and I wasn't upset for his attention. Too much was changing, too much was at risk at the moment for me to be running free on the streets. There was a war brewing, and blood would be spilt along the way. I was doing everything in my power to make sure it wasn't mine, and so was Saint.

Business at the bar resumed the constant roar I was familiar with as a child. The return of the infamous Harley Morrow, the bar's rightful owner, made everyone take on a mentality long lost in the years.

Irish was glad to have the help, but there seemed to be this sort of darkness in her eyes that I couldn't follow. She had a

relationship with Saint that I couldn't figure out, this sort of love/hate cycle that seemed deeper than just casual quips. I wasn't sure what side of the war she was supporting, if she was supporting it at all. Getting involved in matters that do not affect you is a dangerous place to be, especially after working so hard to get out of the cycle. She had gotten free of the gangs long ago, getting a full pardon from anyone who mattered. She worked at the bar open to close most of the time, keeping herself occupied to pass time. What went on in her mind, how she operated, was a mystery to us all, but she continued along nonetheless.

For the moment, things were stable, which is a frightening concept. I was happy with Edward, he wasn't suspicious of my origins and all the players on the field kept their roles under rug swept. Linkon's campaign for power was in full swing, but as long as we seemed nonchalant about things, the storm might continue overhead without us. Doubtful, but we tried our damndest.

I would spend hours staring at my mother, amazed that she had survived all this time and barely aged. Her eyes were colder and deeper, the warmth long gone. There was a period of time that I found myself angry and spiteful of her for hiding for so long, for allowing my mind to be tampered with. She had allowed me to become the unbalanced creature I'd grown into. And that didn't bother her in the slightest. Furthermore, she thought it was for the best to just abandon me into the arms of a rebel. Angyl's past was even more shady and confused than my own. There were stories that she had killed a number of people, but the warmth with which she cared for me kept those stories out of my mind. I trusted her entirely, despite the warnings. She hadn't abandoned me until I asked for space, and even then, I knew she would return to me if I truly needed her.

I decided with peace resuming in my life, I could let the storytelling to the more experienced voices on the scene. They

have more of a right to explain things anyway as I'm just an idle passerby. Thanks for hanging around with me though.

25. And Yet Another Turn

And now we reach the ever ominous "now what?" part of the story.

It always occurs, that point in the middle where that which does not matter finally fades to black and all the major and minor players are on the field. Some have been shifted off without you ever properly meeting them, but that's under the assumption that you're fully aware who they are without more reinforcement. So that's assuming you're a fan of our madness and have prescribed to this ongoing episodic series of obituaries.

Theoretically, we all live happily ever after now, right?

Wrong.

Nothing that simple could ever possibly be real, and if you haven't come to terms with that by now you're in the wrong story now aren't you? Peace would reign, for a few days, as it was meant to, but there were a lot of players on the field now. A lot of old secrets would be unveiled, a lot of old grudges remembered, and somehow, we'd have to forge a new existence from here.

I, personally, didn't know what to do with myself. It had been so long since I was able to roam free; I was so accustomed to running and fighting for my survival that the lack of which made me uneasy. I considered shooting random people in the underground, turning myself true traitor once more, but to

what end? There was no use in ending a life unless it satisfied some greater purpose, some ulterior motive. And right now, ending any of the lives I had access to would merely complicate things. Or would it?

Harley's return was welcomed by all; her existence would help cement a sense of morality in the area. She would help us rebuild the hierarchy. Or so we assumed. We were counting on her wisdom to lead the charge against youth anarchy.

Assuming she was up to the task, of course. Maybe she just wanted to enjoy her retirement. Maybe she just wanted to legitimately get old and die peacefully. Babysitting does get old after awhile you know. I couldn't blame her for wanting a crack at freedom.

But then there was Relic. She had to help her forge her place in this new hostile world, to find where she could roam free and clear. She would need to make herself necessary, as that was the true secret to survival in this world. You needed to be irreplaceable.

Linkon. He had always desired power, since he felt robbed of it when Lucid Mason took over after Rev's death. But nonetheless, he would get his chance now. He would destroy all that the Brogans inherited in his hunt for control. And innocent blood would be spilt by the gallon. He had hoped that I would be at his side, the colonel of his masses, but instead I was on the opposing fence, standing at Colt's side. Linkon was always an egomaniac, mere inches from oblivion, and I didn't want to be too close when he finally snapped. Why did I not pull the trigger now, when he was just starting out, and save us all the trouble? I could have sweet-talked my way into his stronghold and pulled the trigger before he ever consciously thought of the potential danger he was in.

Because his legacy had to be concrete. He needed to prove himself as the bastard I knew he truly was deep down. I needed

to allow time for that cruelty to fester and surface. I did feel bad for the innocents that would get caught up in his path and suffer under his fist, but no great accomplishment is ever made without sacrifice. They would be tortured for his pleasure, but their pain would be proof enough to execute him without a shred of conviction. And that's what I needed.

I needed the truth to be told, all secrets revealed – cards on the table. Too much had snuck by undetected for us to continue with this business of smoke and daggers. And Angyl's son? What of him? The secret that slept upstairs – desperate to be free. He could be our savior or sinner, depending on his life and opportunities. Was it wise to allow him to exist, knowing his family, knowing what he could become? Perhaps it was a more frightening world without him? It was a gamble to be sure, but one we would need to take, as Angyl would sooner die and take us all with her than lose that child.

Angyl Hunter never had anything of her own in the world that she could value. She didn't have morals or a purpose beyond the mission she was sent for. This child gave her a reason to continue to survive and fight. It gave her a loyalty to pledge herself to. And with that, it gave us a much more tame demon on the loose. His existence needed to remain hidden though, lest those who knew more than myself, my elders, seek to take things into their own hands.

As she had saved my life, I would do all that I could to save hers.

There's a code of respect among traitors and liars that even we dare not break.

As a free woman, I had nothing to avenge. My greatest enemy was also my most crucial ally. Killing Angyl now would damn me just as much as save me. And who would tend to her child? Harley had her own life to take control of, the cat was out of the bag; it was only a matter of time before people started

getting suspicious.

I kept to myself, as I'd been accustomed to, for the few days of peace that reigned. A few new bartenders were hired, and Angyl, as she is infamous for, slipped out the back door. I assumed she took the child with her as Harley and Relic resumed their proper place above the bar. Order slowly returned, despite the screams of treachery in the streets. Linkon needed time to build his army, just as I needed time to plan out how best to destroy it.

If there was something I knew about my brother, it was his charm. I didn't need to know Relic particularly well to know that she was the type he would prey on. Young and innocent, something pure that he could corrupt. And with her legacy, she could provide him the proper footing to build his own legend. But things didn't go according to plan. I showed up. And Angyl Hunter returned to run the show. Harley Morrow came back from the dead. And he snuck away, like the snake that he was, searching for other innocent souls to steal.

But then there was Edward, Harley's latest hire. Young with a bit of spunk to him but not too shabby otherwise. He got the job done efficiently and kept to himself as best as he could. He wasn't connected to anyone or anything, which made him safe. We were trying to keep away from people with long standing histories of violence.

And while I'm off topic, I know there's a lot of players on the field right now; but you must understand, we're setting up for one hell of a dance in hell's winter and need to be fully prepared.

New bartender. Relic took a liking to him right off, much to Harley's dismay. She was very protective of her child, considering all the chaos that was ongoing all the time. But yet, in terms of available young men, he was a good choice. Stable, collected, he had character and charm. He didn't have

a trail of bodies in his wake. From what we understood, his parents lived upstate and he had come to the city for school initially. After a few months though, school had gotten old and he turned to bartending to keep paying the rent. Over time it became his ambition, aiming to own his own establishment some day.

A dreamer, but weren't we all nowadays? He fit in fine, and as long as we kept control of the situation, everything should proceed according to plan, assuming we had one. Maybe half the fun was not having a plan and simply figuring things out as we went along. Hard to say.

I don't know about you, but I'm long overdue for some rest, and I intend to get it. It's been a long trip down an ever-changing rabbit hole, so I'm going to take a breather for a bit if you don't mind. I'll check in from time to time of course with any important updates, but I guess I should return you to the woman of the hour.

24. An Old Friend

I woke up alone, comfortable and safe, down in the sewers still. Why we hadn't moved back upstairs I don't know, but I was content where I was. I stretched slowly, feeling a bit groggy but otherwise alive and glad for it. I decided to make sure the bar was intact.

I found my mother in her familiar post behind the bar, wiping it down as if she'd never left. The place was closed at the moment, apparently preparing for her triumphant return. I had heard a brawl here earlier, but all signs of it were gone by now. She'd bid Gin to take her leave while she kept tidying up, checking the stock of liquor behind her.

“So just like old times?”

She nodded. “Sort of. Relic, I...”

And the door burst open, a disheveled gentleman staggering past, Irish holding him up. She looked up at my mother with an expression of both fear and desperation. “He needs your help.”

She shook her head. “How did you know...”

“No time Harley. Just fix him.”

She helped the stranger to a chair, trying to sort out what sort of medical attention he might require. She sent Irish down to find the most able medical expert in the underground as she pushed pressure to a series of random injuries.

“What has he done to you?”

The stranger coughed up blood, resting his head back to stare at the ceiling. His eyes rolled over to lock on me. “What have I done to him?”

Harley stopped what she was doing to meet his eyes, and he pulled her hand up to lay something in the palm. And in it, he laid down a policeman’s shield, old and weathered, apparently forgotten with time. She wrapped her fingers around it, coming to some sort of realization beyond my understanding.

“I have the Cycle. The stories, all of them. He never gave the children the original. We kept them. I have everything. His reign of terror has ended.”

I tried to make heads or tails of things, but was quickly shushed and brushed off as the new player was brought down to the underground. I stood in the bar grasping a handful of blood-drenched rags, amazed how far and fast everything I knew had changed. Or had it? Was it always like this when I was young, strange people entering and leaving my life so suddenly? Maybe I’d merely forgotten the long days and even

longer nights. Maybe I was mistaken. Or was I? It's hard to tell anymore, no matter how much time I put into considering the issue.

I gave up and trudged back downstairs, waiting patiently for the moment my mother would inform me of this latest development. There was no word of Angyl's return, nothing to explain what had recently transpired. I returned to sleep, hoping for some sort of release in the morning.

"Morning sunshine."

I awoke to a considerably more battered Angyl at my side, smoking a cigarette despite being covered in ash as it were. She looked weary and beat, but yet, still standing as always. As I had no reason not to trust her at this time, I welcomed her return as something familiar. She was something steadfast and true, who would not lie or betray me. She would help make sense of this madness so that I could live to be the epic storyteller my family expected of me.

"I'm sure you're pretty confused...I guess I should lay out a few things. A long time ago, there was a man. A man in love. And that man's great love ended her life out of sorrow. Our blind hero, torn with guilt, never recovered. He spent his life destroying other lives in a desperate effort to quell the guilt and pain deep in his soul. Eventually, he stopped being a man, and became a legend."

I nodded, showing I was keeping up with her.

"Despite his pain, he was entrusted with a solitary purpose, which he fulfilled when the mood struck him. To defend the innocent. Throughout his life, he found himself entrusted with a child that he was sworn to train to perform in his stead. That child would continue to punish the evil and end the madness that had plagued the community for generations. That child would live above the law, without rules or boundaries, and define truth as closely as one could."

“You’re that child?”

She nodded solemnly. “I just killed that man. To him, all I was...was a tool. A toy to play with. A soldier to follow orders. And once I had outlived my usefulness he would have destroyed me like he destroyed all else in his life. So I beat him to the punch. I killed my mentor and burned his house to the ground.”

As outlandish as it seemed, I went with it. Stranger things had happened, and even if she were exaggerating things at the moment as a way to vent, I’d leave her to it.

“So what about the stranger that Irish just brought in?”

And she blinked. “A...stranger? What’d he look like? Have you ever seen him before?”

“Didn’t she drive you up? I’d have thought you’d have known about all this?”

She looked around frantically, suddenly paranoid of her surroundings. “No. She left before I did, I was busy destroying evidence. I had to make sure all loose ends were tied.”

“Well, you failed junior.” The voice was male and even, calm but dominant. He stepped forward slowly, a box under his arm. “You forgot about me, and you forgot about this.” He held it up to show her, smiling slowly as he did so.

“How...” Angyl’s tone staggered slightly, realizing that she was caught, seeing that her plan had been missing elements. She’d been slipping along the way and had failed somehow. I don’t know how or what, but it had happened.

“You think I didn’t know you’d come back for him? To report your success? Or to destroy him? And he knew it too. He would lay in wait for you for hours, hoping you’d come. But you didn’t. Once I caught wind of all the trouble down here, I

knew it'd be soon, and there you were. Gun in hand. You didn't want to talk anymore; you didn't want any little jobs or missions. You wanted your freedom, so you took it, as you were meant to. You see tiger, we both had a common enemy. Damien "Klyde" Thompson – your caretaker, my partner in exile. We both wanted to be free. You just helped me get there."

"But the stories..."

"Yeah, about those. My brother's entire life was spent playing storyteller. And I can't let his legacy die because of your arrogance. Your family was insane from the start, there's no hiding it. And I won't let you destroy the evidence to save yourself. The stories will be redistributed, as they were meant to be. And I will keep the original, thank you very much."

The box was dropped on the floor, a bit dusty but sturdy. On the top had been carved the following: The Timeless Martyrs Cycle. I recognized the title, as everyone had heard of them. It was a collection of stories that chronicled the past 30 years or so. Everyone's ancestors, our great beginnings...and ends.

"Saint...I..." she mumbled.

"Don't tell me you're sorry. I know you're not. You did what you had to do, that's fine. You thought you left me for dead when you hadn't though. Some old demons are just too old and too tired to go down. I've lost everything else in this world, now it's time to make amends and set all the madness and anarchy unleashed through the years to rest."

He looked over me, hand outstretched. "I'm sorry, we haven't met. I'm Saint Crowe, an old friend of your mother's."

"How did you..."

He smiled wearily. "You look just like her. And I might be

your godfather if memory serves me correctly.”

I got up apprehensively, pulling his hand and hugging him close. I was so deprived of family in the world that anything, an uncle twice removed, would make my heart sing. There was something calming in his pain – his presence brought a sort of peace with it. I felt that with him around, and my mother, we would be able to find justice in the dark. Or perhaps I was too hopeful – it’s hard to say. He took his leave of us, letting Angyl fight with her thoughts. She took pride in her efficiency, failing in something she had set out to do was a let down to her. Without another word she marched out, her mind set on something. And despite our long heart to heart conversation, I could feel my trust begin to waver.

23. Hostile Negotiations

Once we were sure the kid wouldn’t bleed out, I went to find my own corner of the sewer to curl up in and close my eyes for a while. I had barely been unconscious for twenty minutes when I heard the familiar chuckle.

“Got a name this time, Traitor?”

I opened an eye and found Mr. Colt Brogan, holding a flask out to me, which I gladly accepted. He crouched down next to where I’d been sitting.

“You know I’m sure I know of somewhere a bit more comfortable if you don’t mind.”

I laughed, taking a few good swigs of the flask and handing it back to him. “I’m sure you do. But I’m not really a candles and starlight kind of girl. If you don’t mind, I’m just fine

where I'm at."

He took a swig himself before tucking it away. "Let me see here. Miss Dacien Ransom, one of two survivors of your clan. Your brother, Linkon, in a backhanded pitch for power is trying to use your wrongful persecution, which he started, to take control of my streets. Previous, you were Lucid Mason's right hand, until he got too unstable to say which was which, and you got lost in a bit of miscommunication and chaos. How am I doing?"

I smiled despite myself. "If you knew who I was, why didn't you leave me for dead?"

"Well how was I supposed to take you out if you were dead?"

I laughed, reaching back into his coat for the flask. "Out huh? A bit presumptuous for just meeting someone."

He got up, shrugging as he went. "What can I say, I know what I want. Coming?"

And that time, I went with him. We were on our way to crash for a few hours when a smaller version of Colt came running up, his brother I'd assume. They had the fierce eyes that flashed with every blink as they tried to make sense of things.

"Colt, now."

He excused himself from me and ran off to inform more important parties, leaving Dusk and I in an awkward silence. Dusk, who ran the entertainment part of things underground – the circus and show aspect. He was the latest version of Harley. And with her still alive and keeping a close eye on him, it was important that he did his very best to impress. I made a mental note of his person; he might become useful later on down the line.

Colt returned suddenly, grasping my arm as he passed. "We're

going to go have a bit of a talk with your brother. Before he burns half the city down.”

And yet another already long day just got longer. Thankfully I kept hold of the flask.

We walked upstairs to the bar, finding an ongoing brawl to meet us. People were being tossed around like rag dolls, leaving Gin curled up behind the bar unable to react. Without Irish, Harley, Angyl or Relic, she was entirely lost in the madness. Colt started ripping people apart by the fistful until he made it to Linkon, seated peacefully at the bar with a drink. I whipped him around by his shoulder as fast as I could.

“Stop this. Now.”

“Ah, dear sister. Wonderful of you to drop in.”

“Linkon, you know how I hate to repeat myself. Stop this, or I’ll stop it for you.”

He continued to smile, taking a large gulp out of his drink. “If you dare.”

I returned his silly grin, moved up to Colt and reached behind him to the weapon I knew any street demon would keep behind their back in their waistband. He tried to pull away but I wrenched myself free and took a step forward into the mob.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Three demons hit the floor howling in pain. I turned my aim to Linkon.

“Either you carry them out, or they carry you out with them. Enough.”

He finished the drink, holding the glass thoughtfully in one hand. “You always were the rebellious one, weren’t you? We

have every right to these streets, don't you see that? You, of all people, should understand the price of blood. You should want the power you suffered for."

"Suffered thanks to you. A family bleeds together Linkon. My time of struggle has ended. Your turn to take a few lashes for our dear aunts and uncles long since dead."

He chuckled a bit then leaned back to toss the glass at me, which I deflected with my gun hand, ducking the shards. He took a few steps back, rallying his troops, and sulked out as proudly as he could. I watched the shards embedded in the back of my hand get stained with blood, shaking my head as I went.

"That didn't go as bad as I thought."

Colt laughed, picking a particularly large chunk of glass out from between my knuckles. "I suppose not. But something tells me this is just the beginning of what's going to be a long winter in Hell. Best prepare for the trip."

I handed him back the weapon, leaned over the bar to see if Gin was okay, and wandered back to the underground. Sure. The lines were being drawn, but we'd persevere. Colt snuck in behind me, leading me further into the abyss and into his own private corner. There I would be safe from all else, which was comforting after fighting and running for so long. There I could close my eyes without wondering if they'd ever open up to greet the new day. And I was grateful for that.

22. Show Me Something Real

I slept for a short lifetime. It was necessary, or so I convinced myself. In my mind, I spoke to my parents and the

dead and damned and everyone else who had been lost over time. When I woke up, I was alone, leaving me time to write endlessly until my hand cramped up, getting all the madness out so that a sense of peace could settle in. But there was no peace, no sense, no logic. Everything ceased to make sense the moment I laid eyes on my mother. The mother I buried, who had died and left me long ago. The master storyteller who left me with nothing to tell of but madness. She had left me the bar as it was my birth rite, but little else in terms of support. Family, sure, but not blood. She had robbed me of a mother, my father, what then? Could he too be alive?

Could all the dead still be wandering around and it's all just been some elaborate game, some clever hide and go seek trend? Or maybe I was just getting ahead of myself, too hopeful, too lost in the sway of things. But anything was possible, right?

"You're getting ahead of yourself."

The voice was a soft purr, right over my shoulder, watching my hand scrawling all over the page. She leaned over and pointed. "Oh, and you spelled that wrong."

I tried to spin around, finding myself slightly dizzy in the effort. She sat down next to me, looking me up and down calmly. "Well I guess they weren't kidding when they said like mother like daughter. I don't think we could have any more in common if I told you explicitly how to live your life...which would be a good time for me to apologize."

I had a million good questions in my mind, but none I could figure out how to word. I wanted to scream and cry and deal with a million emotions at once, but she was so calm and relaxed, like she belonged here all along. I couldn't come up with any sort of logic to it. I had been deprived of her for so long, and here she sat, as calmly and collectively as anyone else. We would converse like any other two people on a Sunday afternoon. And this would be like any other day. Or

would it?

I got up to face her and just started wailing on her, punching as hard as I could like the frustrated child that I was. And she took it, every swing and hit and blow, every scream and rant, until I'd had enough and dropped to my knees. She held on to my wrists, coming down with me, still searching for my eyes. I was bawling uncontrollably, more infuriated with her than happy.

"How could you leave me?"

She clutched me tight to herself. "But I didn't, I was always with you. You needed to learn to handle yourself on your own. I barely survived the ordeal, but you had to. You needed to carry on in my stead, keep the stories in your heart and embrace what you will become. Your fate is much larger than you think. You're a part of something more now Relic, you always will be. I've been watching you every day since then, I've run the bar under the tables, I've never left your side. You just didn't know it."

"And Dad? I don't understand."

"And you're not meant to right now. You'll make sense of it later I'm sure. Angyl kept you safe for me and kept me breathing. Our loyalty to her was important then, and will continue to be. But there will be a time where even that will become dangerous, and I need you to be aware of it. You need to keep yourself on the right side of the line at all times, do you understand?"

I looked up at her, confused and hurt. "No. But I'll try."

And she held me as close as a mother could, her body just as cold as my own. "Well that's the most I can ask of you."

I heard the footsteps come running down the hallway, stopping abruptly at the door with indecision. My mom called out to

them to enter before they ever got the knock off.

“It’s started. The war. Linkon’s heard of his sister’s innocence and is demanding the heads of all those that persecuted her. He wants revenge.”

She laughed, still clutching me. “He wants power. You keep him out of here, you hear me? I hereby banish him and any of his followers from the underground, and you can quote me on that. He wants to wave banners for old sins? You let the word out. Harley Morrow is back, and she will take over what’s rightfully hers.”

He nodded and ran off. I recognized Colt Brogan, our top officer on this side of things. He would be our general. He would lead the charge. Until this was over or he was defeated. The control of the streets had laid with a series of people over time. After Revere Ransom was killed my father took over again and after him Colt stepped into his cursed shoes. And after Colt? Who knows. But apparently Linkon Ransom was determined to take what he felt was his by birth. And we couldn’t allow that. Despite my admiration of his character, the sudden lust for blood plus his love of himself were a dangerous combination for a leader.

“Times are going to change Relic, you know that right?”

I nodded slowly, still trying to keep up with my mother’s game. This had all started generations before me, so the art of keeping track was something I had just barely inherited.

“What will happen to Dacien? She did shoot me, didn’t she?”

My mother nodded. “She did. She also saved you, so for now, her life is safe – from me anyway. That doesn’t mean someone else can’t lay claim to it. Her and Angyl have sorted things out, so she’s clear to keep her head down for the time being, which is what I suggest. She’s going to go help Colt reason with her brother, I’m sure.”

“And Angyl?”

“She had business upstate to deal with. Irish went with her, said she wanted to visit her father.”

“I didn’t know Irish had any family, thought the gangs raised her.”

She laughed. “Me too, but who knows. The way people just come and go, it’s anybody’s guess.” She kissed me on the forehead. “The real business in this town is hats.”

“Hats?”

And she laughed again. “You’ll understand someday.”