

9. Recovery

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

"Hey," I whispered.

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

"Hey, feeling better?"

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

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

And she got up and started the water. I heard it distantly. Everything was still blurry, the colors were a little off; the lines weren't as crisp as they should have been. She came back and gave me a hand, leading me shakily to the bathroom. She asked if I would be all right. I told her I would. I was

looking the place over, the bright light hurting my eyes. Seeing the problem, she reached up and removed a few of the bulbs.

“Better?”

I nodded and she smiled back.

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

I laughed a little, the most I could muster up, changed, and sank into the water. Everything hurt more, the cuts, everything, I had sharp pains everywhere. I washed out all the cuts, the bruises, got out the blood and dirt. Tears were running down my eyes in rivers while I did this. I sat and soaked for what felt like half an eternity, my head resting back, eyes closed. My throat was tender all around. I had bruises on top of bruises. I never fully healed from the last adventure. And Linkon knew it. He knew how and where to hurt me. My body tensed up just thinking about him. The memories repeated, no matter how hard I tried to shut them out. Over. And over. The tears just wouldn’t stop. After awhile, when I was thoroughly numb but also thoroughly refreshed, I crept out of the tub. Looking over, I found a clean set of clothes waiting. They weren’t mine; my first thought went to Irish. She was all types of wonderful in more ways than one. I changed painfully, opening the door slowly, my torn and stained clothes balled up in my hands.

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

“Feeling better?”

I thought about it. Mentally, I’d be a little weird for a while. But physically I was better. My hair was soaked,

dripping down my back. I moved slowly over to the bed, sitting down, a towel wrapped around my shoulders. I thought some more before whispering:

"A bit."

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

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

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

"Colt's a guy, I doubt we'll find anything edible, but I'll try," she said, smiling wide. I wanted to laugh, but just smiled back at her. I felt like a mute, lost in the realm of sound. Everything was new and different. And every so often...spinning. She moved off to ransack the place while I sat.

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

While I was sleeping, I had a dream.

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

drenched in sweat. He stood doubled over, panting loudly, his hands on his knees, looking up at me.

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

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

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

“There are no answers because there aren’t any real questions.”

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

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

For the next few days, all I did was slip in and out of the

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

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

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

Define: Impossible.

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

I want to know who bought the rights to reason.

8. Battle Fronts Collide

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

Gone.

But you can only get so far. I'd walk a few yards and look back. Think about it. Keep going. Keep going. Stop. Look back. Why? I had nothing there. I had nothing anywhere. Nothing at all. I just had this. I had my life in my hand, over my shoulder. This was it. This was always and never. This was ending. This was beginning. And the further I walked, the more I held the scream choking in my throat. I had something here. I had the Brogan boys. I had hope. I had chance. I had just a tiny bit more than I might have anywhere else. The further I walked, the more I thought. I couldn't go back, but I couldn't leave. I was stuck here, just like we all were. In the end, we're all stuck somewhere. In the end, whether it be in a box, six feet shallow, we're still stuck somewhere. Always.

I kept walking until I got to a bus stop. I sat down on the case, as I was accustomed. I had the guitar case next to me. I don't know how it all worked out, but it did. I sat there, scheming, trying to think. It was raining. It always rains when you're leaving. That's the whole thing. When you're

running away, it's got to be raining. People run when it rains. It's because you're hoping to disappear in the mist and madness of the sky's fall. You're hoping that you can just hit the street and fragment, never being whole again. That things were that simple. Or just disappear in a puddle and be uniform to the masses. Anything. That's why all the runners run when it rains. It's just that much less...complicated.

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

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

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

"Where you off to, kid?"

"Hello, Linkon," I coughed.

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

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

“Tell me Linkon, what part of this wasn’t supposed to happen this way?”

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

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

“What do you want from me?”

And he smiled wider, sneaking closer to me. “Nothing I’ve not taken before.”

And I remember the cold ground coming up at me. I remember being thrown and hit and beaten. I remember kicks. I remember bleeding and coughing. And I remember things that I desperately wish I could forget. But I remember them nonetheless and nothing will ever make them matter. I saw my guitar case and suitcase carted away. I asked between coughs where they were going.

“We’ll drop them off at Colt’s, so he’ll know to expect you.”

“When?”

And Linkon bent down real low to smile in my face. “When we’re done with you.”

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

come up with words to admit it.

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

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

"Are you alright?" he whispered.

I shook my head.

"What happened?"

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

"Rape."

He spun around. "What?"

I tried to repeat the word, but found that I couldn't. It crept out in a sort of involuntary cough. I closed my eyes and saw the visions in my head playing through yet again. I couldn't shake them off – I couldn't make it stop. It had

happened, as much as I tried to get away from it. I couldn't deny the truth. I couldn't make it just fade to black. It had happened. It was real.

The really screwed up part? It had happened before.

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

I don't remember ever having a father, but if I had, I sure as hell hoped it was something like this. He was like a protective older brother. I could feel his body shaking with mine, unable to discern from fear and rage. He just stayed there, holding me close, my body curled up in him, lost in his depths. And I fell asleep. Not an exhausted, passed out kind of sleep. But a kind, peaceful sleep – the kind of sleep that a child falls into. A quiet slumber, dreams devoid of dark demons and nighttime monsters. Just black, simple and pure. Nothing making noise. Nothing moving. Nothing at all. Just calm. And that's all I wanted all along. That's what I'd been craving so desperately in my travels. That perfect, peaceful, pensive...calm.

And I finally had it.

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

I pledge allegiance...to the Brogans.

7. Art of War

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

This started as a battle of politics. The fighting was mostly fair, the people jumped should have known better...it wasn't as ruthless as it seemed. Nobody was killed. And then...people started dying. Bodies started to turn up. The fighting got serious and the weight came down on Colt's shoulders. He spent more time on the streets, running things himself, keeping things in order. He did everything in his power to keep Dusk and myself off the sidelines. We were told to stay on the benches. As far away from the action as possible. For the most part, we did as we were told. When bodies started turning up, people we knew, people we might've cared about...we trusted Colt's word.

I tried to stay on the sidelines the whole time, watching from afar. I didn't want to get too close to anybody, just in case. I had nothing to risk. Nothing to gain. Nothing to lose. That's just the way things worked. As comforting as Dusk was, this was the wrong time to be close to him. He was the boss' baby brother. He was in the crosshair of every enemy's gun at all times. Staying next to him was just asking for trouble. It was just...less complicated...to be close. Things were that much

simpler without someone else's consent needed at every turn. I liked my freedom. I liked being able to pick up my cases and walk out the door. I had been running for so long, I'd gotten used to it. Run long enough and it becomes a lifestyle. As such, it adopts a different name. This was simply...mine.

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

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

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

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

"So, who are you betting on?"

"Excuse me?" I muttered.

"Which side do you think will win?" She smiled at me. "Yours. Mine. Or Linkon's?"

"You're not on Linkon's side?"

She laughed again. "Who said I was?"

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

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

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

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

“What does it matter?”

“Doesn’t it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t get it.”

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

“I’m still here for the duration.”

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

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

I was here to catch a bullet.

And for no other reason than that.

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

“Kid, pack up and go. It’s not the hardest idea in the world to grasp.”

“Why?”

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

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

I got up to pace around, trying desperately to make sense of the situation. There was no sense to be made, no logic to be found. I didn’t know these people as well as I’d like to think. I was replaceable. They didn’t care about me as much as I hoped. It was just a feeling of security, something I hadn’t had in the longest time.

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

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

“I’ll give you awhile to let that sit on your shoulders.”

And she turned and left.

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

6. Forever Twenty-One

Her name was Dacien.

She was Linkon’s baby sister.

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

What Linkon didn’t know...was that she was Colt’s girl also. She didn’t “get caught” by our side. She was always on our side. The really funny thing about this way was that none of the lines were clear; everything was blurry, slightly out of context. Just barely out of focus. That’s what made this war so dangerous. There were no clear-cut sides. No definite rules. The opposition’s ruler hid in the shadows. We were left to wonder. If there was anyone above Linkon, that is. It could’ve been a lie.

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

The only thing that I know to be true is this – I knew Linkon once, from another time, another place, another life. From the person that I used to be – a person that I no longer was. I had escaped from it a long time ago. I had escaped his piercing eyes, fingers that felt so soft but could hold on like a vice. I had walked out. Away. And I had come here. And every time I thought about him, I could feel a tear sneak down

my cheek. No matter how hard I tried, how far I ran away...he would always be there. And I would always be his. There was no escaping it. I was his from the time I was orphaned onto the street. He was my master. My owner, my creator. I owed my existence to him.

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

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

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

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

"Courtesy of Linkon Ransom. Upon death, send my compliments."

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

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

I had good reason to hate him. I had a million good reasons.

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

To be damned.

Either which way.

Every which way.

That's just how the game was running these days. No rules. Everything that might've been real...wasn't. That's life. The lines are blurry. Nothing clear-cut. I don't know. I was getting used to a world where nothing was clearly defined. That's just how it was. I might've been raised in a realm where the rules were always changing. Maybe. I'm not entirely sure. I'm never entirely sure about anything. What's the point in being positive? Humans are creatures of indecision, ideas created from thin air...and we survive. That's life. The world keeps spinning. That's just the way it goes.

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

ease, or at least slightly better than before.

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

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

I was out one night, near the end of the week, playing in the rain. I saw Colt coming from miles away, from far down the street. He just had that presence – you could feel him in the wind. I played louder, stronger. I was beyond exhausted, but I persisted anyway. I couldn't sleep. I wouldn't rest. I would wait. I would wait. Time would run out eventually. It would end. I would die. And it would all be over. I watched him come, weaving through the people, hands in his pockets. He stopped at the case and dropped a few coins in, winking down at me. I stopped playing and looked up.

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

“The latest?” he questioned. She heaved a sigh.

“Slowing down, they’re giving us a good once over. Suspiciously quiet lately.”

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

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

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

She sat right at the bar. And waited.

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

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

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

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

"Do you trust her?" I asked. She shrugged.

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

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

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

"Sorry," I muttered.

She smiled a silly little grin. "And you're doing just fine,

right?"

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

"Anything else?" I muttered.

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

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

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

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

And that's all that mattered.

5. Testing Devotion

I was thinking back to the last thing I had written about. To when they'd beaten Dusk. Since then, more had fallen. We'd taken down some of them, but not nearly enough. It was getting worse, and fast. I thought back to where I was, holding Dusk's hand, his blood staining my fingers. I remembered Colt's downcast expression, the look of hopelessness in his eyes. I remember all that as I coughed up my own blood, looking at hands stained red with blood from my veins. Those memories seemed so distant. I wasn't in danger then. I wasn't dying.

I'm not dying, even though it feels like it. I'm just in so much pain it hurts to breathe. It's been days, maybe weeks since they raided the circus and beat up Dusk. They caught me right off the street outside the bar, a whole troop of them. Linkon came over, dropped a coin in my case and looked up. And I knew as soon as I locked eyes with him that it was done for. That I was his. That there was no way I'd see home tonight. And I was right.

The rules of war shifted. Instead of just beating kids at random, each side has started taking prisoners. To trade. They're hoping that in doing so, one side can force the other into trading the leader – ending the conflict. It might work – then again, the sun might decide to fizzle out tomorrow. I've been here for a while and I don't think it's worth it. Cough up more blood. I wonder how much I've lost. I wonder how much more I can afford to lose. I wonder if anyone's being traded for me. Whose life equals my own?

I heard the steps coming from awhile away. I was in a room, dirt floor, nothing in it, walls, no windows. Just the door. There was nothing really in here. I had been relocated a bunch

of times. The door creaked open. I was curled up in the corner, leaning on the walls. They stepped closer to me, kneeling down to my level.

This was Linkon. He was the leader of the enemy, the driving force of the opposition. But he was compassionate, just as Colt was. He took a flashlight and tipped my head up with two fingers, carefully. He looked at my eyes, had me open my mouth. He turned my face side to side.

“How do you feel?”

I looked into his eyes for a moment, feeling the hatred burning through him. I coughed, holding my stomach, showing him the blood that came up. He got up and stepped back a moment, watching my body lurch and shake from the stress. I stopped coughing and closed my eyes, breathing in slow, deep breaths. He just stood and watched me for a while. He knelt down again, daring to get closer.

“I’m sorry. This wasn’t supposed to work out this way.”

I merely glared at him in response. He looked around, collecting the thoughts for his next statement carefully.

“We...they were just supposed to bring you here. This wasn’t...they had no permission...I never ordered them to do this.”

I glared at him, trying desperately to suppress my coughs. He looked around the room again, reconsidering his options. When he’d reached a decision, he dropped flat on his knees. And picked me up. And carried me out of there. I closed my eyes for the trip, slipping between consciousness and delusion; hope and despair. He brought me to a room, not the best kind of place, but a room with a window and a bed. He set me down on it carefully, not a simple drop.

“Why?” I coughed. He looked around, sitting on the edge of the

bed.

"Mr. Brogan has us all wrong. See, we don't want this war any more than you guys do. But he's losing control. Someone must keep order. Someone must rule with an iron fist. There has to be control somewhere. And he's just not keeping up."

"No. Why...me."

"Because you're important to both Brogan brothers. While one confides in you, the other...well, he loves you."

"Liar."

"Why do you think he acts so big and tough around you?"

"I just want out."

He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. "No such luck in this game. I'd have thought you'd have learned that by now."

"I left the last town to get away from you, Linkon."

He smiled as he got up to leave. "I know."

"How'd you set up shop so quick?"

And he moved towards the door, thinking his answer over carefully. "I'm just a figurehead. You've not yet seen who's pulling the strings." And he left, with that hanging in the air, and the sound of the door locking behind him. I turned over and went to sleep, despite the pain. There was nothing else to be done but wait. And I would do so.

And I did. For days. Until Linkon returned. And I was helped out of bed and led away, out, to a chair. Where I sat. I wasn't coughing up any more blood. Linkon had sent a few girls to come by and clean me up a bit. He figured that they would seem like less of a threat. I still felt like I'd been run over, and probably looked just as bad. I was seated at a table, in the middle on one side. At one end of the table sat

Linkon. Across from me was one of his lackeys. And at the other end of the table was Colt.

I sat slumped over, my hands on the table, holding my body up. Colt looked exhausted. He must have been doing a lot of running around these days. He had Dusk standing next to him.

“We want an exchange,” Colt demanded, his voice even.

Linkon nodded. “Understood, and we’ve met your requirements. Who are you prepared to return to our good graces that is worthy of such an exchange?”

Dusk disappeared into the shadows and came back, pushing a girl in as bad a shape as I was. She was bigger, like an older model of myself, all the finishing touches made. She was pushing the whole way in. They had her hands bound behind her, but she still pushed and tried to slip away from Dusk. He had a good hold on her, even though he didn’t look to be in the best shape either. There were still scars and bruises from when they caught him.

He stopped when he got next to Colt. He stood up and rested a hand on the girl’s shoulder and she stopped fighting. They exchanged looks. Linkon nearly jumped the table when he saw her. He turned away, took a few deep breaths, and turned back.

“Deal.”

And I was pulled out of the chair while Colt led his prize over to Linkon. They shook hands and we all turned to part. Colt had an arm around me, holding me to his side the entire time on the way out the door.

“Why’d he jump at the chance?”

“Because that is his baby sister.”

“I don’t understand...how he could be so careless?”

Colt smiled down at me, kissing me on the cheek. "She was never really on his side in the first place."

"What?"

"It's a set up. She conveys information to us about them. Don't worry about it. Let me handle all the particulars. You just get home and rest." He handed me off to Dusk once we were back on the street. "Take her home, look after her, and don't leave. Understand?"

Dusk's arm replaced Colt's, and we were on our way. We all bid our farewells in the middle of the busy street. I hugged Colt tight before we left, holding onto him like I'd never held onto anyone before.

"Thanks," I whispered. And we all split and departed. I know he'd never cop to it, but there was a tear in his eye during all that. My eyes were dry. From lack of caring, lack of feeling.

Dusk took me home. And when we got there, he made sure the door was locked. I kept walking, moving to my room, dragging my feet, desperate for a shower and a change. I could hear Dusk's footsteps. He was checking windows, any other way into the place. I heard shades come down. We'd risen in respect for one another since this all started. He would make sure the place was safe. And I would clean up. And sleep. And he would watch over me, just as he was told. He would do as his brother instructed. In this case above all.

I got a change of clothes, and moved off to the bathroom to start the water. I went out to the living room, finding Dusk standing in the middle of the room, arms folded. He was watching the door like a hawk. I crept over to him, sliding a hand on his shoulder slowly so he wouldn't jump. He turned his head a little. And I kissed him. We separated. And I went off to shower. And he went back to the night's watch.

Not another word was said. Nothing was questioned. We slept in the same bed, fully clothed, myself locked in his embrace, safe from the world in his arms. I can't explain how or why we ended up that way, why not one word passed about the kiss, or the sleeping conditions...but that's just how it worked out.

It didn't matter anyway. When all things are put into perspective.

But for one moment, nothing mattered not because we were pessimists bent on the world's destruction. No. Nothing mattered because we were at peace.

Just...peace.

4. Chain of Command

I talked with Colt more. I don't know why he was easier to relate to. His brother, Dusk, was more involved in the show. He had his girls, his drinks and drugs – he was a hazard to my health. I knew this when I met him. I kept my distance. If anything went wrong, I went to Colt. He was just more...sedate. Like he was above and beyond all this. He was protective of me for some reason. The fact that I had no home, no family, no past...it was the typical lost puppy syndrome. I don't know why I took comfort in him really. I never needed or wanted comfort before. But it was nice to have. Security. Something to fall back on. And when things with his brother got...complicated, he had me relocated to an apartment in his building. I didn't know what to do with all the empty space, living alone. It was just...different.

Things seemed to be moving fast. Or maybe I seem to be vague. In my mind, there were no important details. I was a girl from

the mist – I had nothing to return to. I was going nowhere fast and I didn't care. I was headed in any direction the wind took me. And I seldom stayed in the same place for too long. Being I was here, being I had security, I decided to start keeping track, to write things down. This' as far as I've gotten. I still play on the street for money, I still help out the circus push comes to shove. But for the most part, Colt takes care of me. But I can't stand the dependency – I need to have my own life. My own income. Hence, I work. I have morals, contrary to popular belief. I had limits, just like everybody else.

I was sitting in the empty apartment one of the many nights I spent at home. I worked during the days for the most part. I tried to keep a constant sleep schedule, but to no avail. When I wasn't writing, I was playing. When I wasn't playing, I was coming up with more to do. I stayed outside the bar mostly, where it was safe. There was a gang war coming, the first in a long time. There hadn't been one in ages. Since the Fallen passed on. Since Cicero Merrick died. There was no competition. There was the ongoing cycle. Here, now, where the gangs have no names and there are only us and them...this is the new world. This is the new war.

For generations, there was peace. For years, ages, there was a calm. I am on the side of the field that I just happened to stumble onto. There is nothing to say that where I am is wrong or right. But I am here. And here I shall stay. Not because I don't know any better. Or because I don't care. No. Because I find comfort here. This side is the side of the constant. The side of the ongoing cycle. We continue the trend where others have faltered. I say "we" as though I belong – I am an outsider. I am not from here. A foreigner. And yet, Colt has made me feel welcome. At home. I belong here. I wrote until I was bored then put the pencil down, looking around aimlessly. After I'd smoked a few, I gave up trying to come up with new ideas. And I trooped upstairs to see what Colt was up to.

I knocked on the door, not too loud, not too soft. I didn't want to be too obvious. I didn't want to alarm him or anything. I heard some scuffling before the knob twisted slowly. He looked behind me before looking me in the eye.

"Hey kid, what's up?"

"Nothing...busy?"

He took a look inside, thought about it, then shrugged. "Not really, come on in." He stepped aside, letting me sneak by him. I counted the seconds in my head, how long he'd wait until closing the door. Checking the halls. He was especially nervous these days. I looked around a little, coming to a canvas standing against a wall, painted in parts and pieces. I wheeled around, realizing just now that Colt was covered in paint. He gave me a sheepish smile.

"They sent me to a therapist once...he said I needed an outlet for my emotions. Anger especially. He said I should get involved in the arts. So...I paint. Usually when I'm trying to clear my mind. I guess it's a hobby."

I laughed and hugged him. "It's okay, you're only human. I write when the mood strikes me."

"Oh, really? I wouldn't know that, being you're only writing every time I drop in to check up on you." He poked me until I let go, smiling back. I looked at the canvas with him. It was easily taller than he was, and Colt wasn't too short.

"What is it?"

He turned his head to one side, then the other, looking at it from different angles. "Well...what do you think it looks like?"

"Right now? A mess."

"Well, there you have it. Entropy."

“That’s chaos?”

He smiled. “If I want it to be.”

I took a few steps closer to the canvas, looking at it from different angles. “It must be nice to have that kind of control.”

I could imagine him nodding behind me. “Sometimes.”

The piece made no sense, then again, very little makes sense these days. That’s just the way it goes. I turned away from it to sit down somewhere. I felt like I’d been standing for an eternity, even though it was minutes only. Colt moved over and sat nearby, not too close, not too far. I looked around the place that was becoming a familiar sanctuary.

“What’s on your mind?” I questioned. He shrugged.

“The usual. The business. The family.”

“What’s the latest?”

He looked down, thinking his words over carefully. “I’d suggest that you keep your head down, don’t swear loyalty out loud, and don’t stray too far from the bar. When outside at night, keep someone with you, okay?”

“That bad, huh?”

He nodded quietly. “A few of my better guys got jumped. I already gave Dusk this talk, but...well, you know Dusk.”

“Yeah, he’s a fairly stubborn bastard.”

“Keep an eye on him for me? I told him to keep one on you as well.”

I turned and glared at Colt. “Make sure that’s all he keeps on me.”

He laughed. "Yeah, he got that talk as well."

"Good, I wouldn't want to have to hit him again."

Colt laughed harder this time. "I have to admit, that was humorous, if for nothing else but to see the wonderful color he turned from shock and embarrassment."

We both laughed about this, looking around aimlessly.

And back to silence.

"What's his name?"

"Who?"

"The leader, of the opposition. The enemy."

"Linkon, why?"

I shrugged. "It's just good to know."

He moved off to find himself something to drink, shooting a look over at me. "Want anything?"

"Not really."

"That's not a real answer. Yes or no?"

"Maybe."

He laughed. "You're a brat."

And I got up from where I was sitting, special, to bow for him. "Naturally."

He fixed me something anyway.

And we sat and talked about a few things here and there. How things were going. He was especially careful to avoid the truth. His operation was falling apart. We all knew it. Since the Dragon was reduced to ashes...let me explain – The Dragon

was the old tattoo parlor, it was one of our centers of command. Since it burned, things were shaky. Colt had come into power at a very rough point in our history. And yet he made it work, climbed to the top on his hands and knees, and commanded order. And what's more, they listened to him. He wasn't a creep or anything. He had a fairly decent reputation. He was a pretty trustworthy and honest guy considering the kind of business he ran. His word was law, and it was enforced justly. He was one of the few in the line that anyone could dare to call "just" and be accurate.

There came a pounding on the door at that moment in time, before either of us could move towards it, a crew of people stormed in. I recognized Irish and Gin from the bar, both of them bloody. Between the two of them was Dusk. His entire body was limp; they had to drag him into the place, blood trailing after him. The rest of the lackeys I didn't know, just the usual faces in and out. Colt jumped up and ran over, holding Dusk's bloody face up to the light.

"What happened?"

Irish spoke more. She was older, had known Colt longer; she'd been involved in this longer, even though it was inadvertently. She tried to quit the game. But this' a lifetime commitment. The girls let go, allowing Colt to bend down and pick Dusk up clear off the ground, bringing him over to a couch to lay him out. He was still breathing, blood running all over his face in rivers.

"They raided the circus."

Colt bit his tongue, holding down anger. This wasn't in the rules. This was a break in procedure. The circus was our sanctuary, our safe haven away from the real, or surreal. It was the holy land. It was the one place that no enemy dared tread. This was a declaration of war. And we all knew it. Dusk's breathing patterns changed. Colt looked around,

pointing at the guys lounging around by the door.

“Get the Doc, now. Girls, what’s the damage?”

Irish hung her head down. “It’s bad...we’re still working on clean up.”

“Then I’ll let you get back to more pressing matters.”

They both nodded at him, turning to leave. He nodded back, his eyes locked on Dusk. I watched the scene in silent horror. Gin went out the door, Irish turned back, lingering behind. She crept over to Colt slowly, putting a hand on his shoulder carefully, so as not to scare him.

“They need a leader now.”

He ducked his head. “We need an army.”

“Don’t start this tonight, you’re not prepared. They will demolish you. Please.”

He turned around to face her, putting his arms on her shoulders, locked onto her. I couldn’t figure out if he did this to keep her from running away, or to keep himself standing. His stance wavered a bit, but Colt remained on his feet.

“I’ll take care of this. Clean up the casualties. Scatter them – bring no more of them here tonight. Compile a list of fallen. I’ll visit the wounded and we’ll bury the lost, but for right now...this has to be handled. We can’t let them see us running scared.”

She nodded her consent. He bent down and kissed her softly, more of a promise lost in the action than for any other reason. She squeezed his arm, he let go of her, and she was gone. I sat at Dusk’s side, squeezing one of his hands in my own. As long as he held onto me, I would hold onto him. I looked up at Colt from there.

“You need to get out of here, this...please. Go home. I’ll send word when the coast’s clear, when all’s ended.”

I held onto Dusk tighter. “I’ll stick this one out.”

Colt’s body shook for a moment. “Please, you’re just a...”

“Child?” I finished. His body heaved at the offense. I had finished his sentence, concluded his insult. And he was wrong on top of it. He shook his head, trying to think, to backpedal, apologize. Nothing would work. He knew, right then, right there, he was stuck with me through this. All we had was each other. Us. And them. The enemy. The war started tonight.

The peace of the streets, a calm that’s survived decades...has ended.

Another turn of the wheel.

3. Of the Vulgar

And I was back to sitting on my suitcase, playing guitar halfheartedly. I was outside the bar. A few weeks had gone by. And he was right – I did decide to join the show. I was elected into the office of public relations. I would sit outside, despite the weather, and play to my heart’s content. I could get whatever I wanted from the bar, and when I was tired, go back to the underground to crash. It was steady. It was secure. I had a nice place to sleep, and that was the most important part. Beggars can’t be choosers. It was a home. It was safe. We had a city under a city. A city of freaks, outcasts, misfits. It really was a circus. There were acts and everything.

Dusk was the ringleader. He told me about it. The first male

since its establishment.

I caught people's attention, being outside, playing in the rain. The lost would ask questions. That's what they were. Lost. The wanderers. The outcasts. Misfits. Freaks. Public relations meant I gave directions to those who could not find their way. I wore a hat that matched Dusk's, just less elaborate; he said it was the symbol of what we were. It would draw more attention – it would be a sign to the wanderer.

I had been part of the show for a while. Every so often, if the mood struck him, Dusk would sit outside with me. Usually the kids from the show would be in and out. The more time I spent, the more I came to know. More or less, I kept myself to myself. If I had a problem, I would speak to Dusk, but besides all that, I was still alone. And it was comforting in itself.

Something had happened, I was out on the streets for hours, playing all over the city, drawing in the crowds as best as I could. It was early morning when I got back to the bar and continued to play. It was nearly three, and the rain only got worse. I had been up for hours, days. I was soaked to the skin, but still I wouldn't stop. I couldn't even begin to tell you what we were fighting for, why we had to pull the whole team together, but it was something. I had been playing for hours. I was exhausted but wouldn't quit. I was in the middle of a song when I stopped. The rain was gone. No, not over. Just, gone. I glanced over to find a slightly older, bigger guy holding an umbrella over my head. He smiled over at me. I finished my song, smiling back. He stayed.

“You take requests?”

I nodded a bit. “Maybe, depends on if I know it or not.”

He smiled. “Come inside, dry off.”

“I don't believe I know that one. I have a job to do.”

He nodded. "I understand; I have a job to do as well. And I can't just allow you to die of pneumonia out here. Come on, just for a while. I promise, it's all right."

"You do huh? And who are you to make such a promise?"

He held out the hand not holding the umbrella, which I shook slowly.

"My name is Colt Brogan."

He slipped a hand around my back, ushering me closer to him, out of the downpour and into the bar. The place was mostly cleaned up. It wasn't theoretically open, but there was always someone there. He led me in, closing the umbrella, shaking it off at the door. I wandered in awhile, sitting down at the closest table. I put the guitar back in its case. My suitcase still had my life in it. I never got too settled in one place at one time. Colt shook himself off and sat down.

I knew who Colt Brogan was. Everyone knew. Colt was the street leader, the head demon, the latest in a long line of them. He controlled the streets. He knew everybody and everything. All in all, he was a very powerful guy. I'd say he was in his early twenties. He wasn't as active on the street, but he was considerably involved. Dusk was his brother. Together, they ran the streets and the circus. Colt was bigger, older, faster, wiser. He was more respected. His younger brother was more troublesome, cunning, a terrible liar. But they both had a lot of power. And that was important to keep in mind at all times.

There was a girl behind the bar, wiping things down here and there. Colt went over to her, said a few quiet words, and she gave him a bottle. With it, he got two glasses, some ice, and came back over. She nodded, looked around one more time, and walked out the door. I could hear it lock behind her. In the time it had taken to watch her lock the door, Colt had poured himself a drink. When I looked back at him, he was working on

pouring me one.

“You must be new.”

I nodded quietly, sipping from the drink he'd poured, watching as he held his own but took not a sip from it. I wasn't all that new, but if he thought so, I'd let him think whatever he wanted. If it suited him, fine.

He took a sip, thinking a bit. I could feel the shivers all over my body from the rain. I was drenched to the bone. He cocked his head a bit, sliding his jacket off and handing it across to me. I tried to refuse but he was persistent.

“Take it. You're shaking the table.” He smiled a bit and I took it and slid it over my shoulders, careful not to become too attached.

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“So what exactly do you do for the organization?”

I laughed. “Organization?”

He shrugged. “What would you like me to call it? Asylum? Freak show? The gangs? The drug trade? Pick something.”

“I work in public relations.”

“Really? What kind?”

“The lost.”

Colt smiled. “So you're not all that deep into it yet.”

“No, I suppose I'm not.”

He gazed around the empty bar, nothing here but us two. When he was able to focus again, he looked me dead in the eye. “Good. You're a lot better off.”

I tried to play ignorant; I tried to pretend I had no idea

what he was talking about. I smiled back at him over the glass.

“What exactly do you do?”

And he grinned. “Everything.”

I took another sip, thinking about the circumstances. I belonged outside, rallying more troops. But this was the boss. He made the rules and he could bend or break them as he saw fit. It would be considered unwise and impolite for me to refuse his offer of rest.

“When was the last time you slept?”

“Huh?”

“You know, sleep? That thing where you close your eyes and everything fades to black? Sometimes you wake up feeling better. It’s really something, you should try it sometime.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

Colt laughed. “Maybe? As in, maybe you’ll try it sometime? And if so, when? Sometime...next year?”

I shrugged again. “Hey, you never said when, you just said ‘sometime’. Nowhere in there did you suggest a time.”

He laughed again, more of a chuckle. “You’ve got me there.”

“What do you really want?”

He was glancing around a bit, pouring more alcohol into each glass. “Figured me out, huh? You’re quite the sharp one.”

“You’re stalling.”

Colt smiled again. “You really are on top of this. Let’s just say...my brother can be...pushy and reckless. I wanted to make sure that things were...suitable. I usually meet most of the

lost that acquire positions of trade, yet he didn't formally introduce you to me. I was most curious to learn why."

"So here I am. What have you learned?"

He thought about his answer for a moment. "That you're very talented."

I quirked a brow. "How so?"

"Because we've been sitting here talking all this time...and I don't know a damn thing about you."

And all I could do was laugh. As hard as he tried, as obvious as it was, all the lies fell apart and every facade shattered. And in the end? I was figured out.

"I should get back out there."

He checked the time. "You should get to sleep. You're not the only one trying, kid."

"Kid?"

"Yeah. How old are you?"

I smiled at him. "How old do I look?"

And Colt laughed. "Oh no, I know better than to answer that one. Either way, if I'm too high or too low, you'll be mad."

"Try me."

And he raised a brow, smiling this sideways little grin. "Really?"

I coughed while taking a sip from my glass. Just the way he said it, and the look on his face, his mind was on other ideas. I watched his eyes wander while I coughed.

"18," I muttered.

He nodded. "I'm 23."

I nodded and the silence returned.

"Come on, go on home, change, rest."

I shook my head. "Not tired."

"That's bull, you look exhausted."

"How I look and how I am are two completely different things."

He looked around for a minute, considering his options. With a start, he got up, shaking the table. I watched him take my guitar, as well as the case I'd been sitting on, and he locked them in a closet somewhere. Then he turned his gaze back to me.

"Now what are you going to do?"

"I can sing without music."

He smiled again. "I'm sure. Let's go." He had a hand out to me. I finished my drink and took it, slipping out of the chair. I wasn't really trashed or anything, but some of the lines were a little fuzzy here and there.

He put an arm around me and led me out of the place, and I went. I don't know why. I don't know why I trusted him, why I didn't walk away or quit. And it wasn't even a matter of trust. I was just...there. I was in the now and this was it. He was the boss. He literally was the top of the chain. I was working for him, when you got down to it.

And here's to getting down to it.

2. From Dawn Till...

I had been outside playing for most of the day. I still hadn't found a place to crash. I desperately needed one. It was still raining, I tried to stay under the building overhangs. Keep the guitar dry. The case sat open, inviting the merciful to contribute. Every little bit helped. This had been my lifestyle for a while now. It was what I did. I played my own music, made my own limits, sang what I felt like. It was just how things worked. And the coins came in. Dollars too if I was real lucky. Today I got one of the more important bits of information instead.

I had been playing for hours when I saw the kid drop a piece of paper in my case. I was about to go after them, lecturing about how my case isn't a garbage can, but instead I reconsidered. The kid turned and looked back at me, shooting me a look and a slight wink then kept going. I picked up the paper shard, unfolding it. It said:

"Shelter for the lost. Welcome to the Gothik-Serkis. Find a door of no point and purpose, and it will bring you warmth."

I looked around. What the hell did that mean? I continued playing, wracking my mind for where a door might be. I couldn't figure it out. I played until the early hours of the morning, retreating back to the bar for another drink. I was very sparing with my alcohol consumption. With such limited funds, I had to be careful. The place had mostly emptied out. The same girl that had been here when I first came in was around. I had lost track of days and such, I assume this was a different shift. She was wiping down tables. The place was mostly run by girls. I could feel myself dozing off where I sat.

"Wake up."

I shook my head, trying to wipe sleep from my eyes; it

wouldn't work. I looked over to find the waitress wiping down the table I sat at. I had slipped off. I got up, muttered some sort of apology, took my stuff and edged toward the door.

"Hold on. You'll need a place to stay, won't you?"

I nodded halfheartedly, more of a subconscious effort than anything else. She pointed next to the bar, to a little doorway in the back, hidden away.

"Go. It's for the lost."

And she edged away to finish up. I went to the doorway she pointed to; finding it unlocked, I passed through. The hall beyond was dark. I trudged on anyway, desperate for anything, just somewhere to rest. I didn't care the cost at this rate.

I walked on for a while, setting my bags down when I hit light. There was another doorway, the words shining overhead. Sure enough, it said Gothik-Serkis. There were candles lit everywhere, illuminating the doorway. I had walked down a bit; it looked like I was in a sewer. I looked around for another person, someone, something. Just the sound of water dripping somewhere; the wax running in rivers from the candles. I sat down on the ground next to my bags, leaning my head against the wall. It was damp, slightly cool. My eyes rolled up in my head, far from this. I let my mind wander. I hadn't bothered to knock on the door. This would do just fine. This was...perfect.

I woke up elsewhere. I woke up to the dripping water and the damp atmosphere, but this was different. This wasn't the empty doorway that I had curled up in. This was soft, a mattress – it wasn't water soaked or disgusting. There was a blanket; the more I looked, the more I learned. This was a home in itself. This was a place beyond other terms. This was a haven beneath the streets, beneath the realm of reality. I got up, looking around shakily. There was a dim bit of light here, enough to see around. Someone lived here. I got up and walked out, or

left; it wasn't really a room. Some sort of curtain cut it off from the rest of the pipes. Outside I found the wonders of the underground.

There was an entire community here. A whole world of misfits – lost and alone in a world that had no place for them. No point or purpose. For a moment, I felt like I belonged. But they were young and free. I was...I don't know. What separated us from each other? I felt like a foreigner, lost in a strange land. I was still staring out at the crowd of milling teenagers, running around, getting things done, when a stranger appeared out of nowhere.

“Hello stranger, have a peaceful rest?”

I blinked, looking him up and down. I couldn't figure out who this guy was, or what he was playing at. He was about my age, decked in the most bizarre fashion. He had a top hat on, black, a little dusty from the underground. There was an Ace of Spades attached to it. He smiled at me, this bizarre show business kind of grin. He had a smoke hanging out of his mouth as he spoke, which he took out for certain dramatic emphasis at times. I smiled back at him.

“How'd I get here?”

He smiled more. “Well see, we found you outside the gates and decided to adopt.” He pulled the smoke out from his lips, exhaled a bit, then returned it, looking me up and down. “Girls like you don't drop into our laps every day you know.”

I raised a brow. “Girls like me?”

He laughed a bit, coughing up smoke. “Please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Dusk Brogan,” he replied simply, taking the hat off and performing a low, courteous bow. I put a hand out to him when he straightened out again.

“Pleasure to meet you.”

“Don’t I get a name out of you?” he frowned.

I merely laughed. “Girls like me don’t have names.”

He smiled back. “I think we could find a place for you down here.”

And I grinned wider. “What makes you think I’d want a place down here with you misfits and lunatics?”

He laughed a bit. “Now that’s a bit harsh. Come on now, you going to stand there and honestly tell me that you’ve got somewhere better to be? If you did, you wouldn’t have been curled up at our doorway. Stay awhile, if you get to be part of the show, you’d have a good bit of security.”

“What show?”

And he turned around, waving his arm in the air, demonstrating the crowd, the people, everything. “Welcome to the circus, Babe.”

I took the smoke straight from him, took a long pull, and blew it in his face. He smiled forcibly, teeth bared.

“Don’t *ever* call me Babe. Got it?”

He nodded and I finished his smoke, grinding it out under a heel. He slipped a hand around my shoulders, leading me away from where we’d been standing in the depths of darkness. I tried to shake him off, but his fingers curled and dug into my shoulder.

“Allow me to welcome you to our home. To your new labyrinth.”

“I didn’t know I’d made a concrete decision yet,” I muttered.

He just kept smiling. “Oh, I trust you’ll make the right decision.”

I looked back at him, the foolish grinning face, the confident

manner. "I'm supposed to trust you?"

He pulled out another smoke from somewhere, lighting up thoughtfully. He shot me a thousand dollar smile. "If you dare."

1. Abandonment

I was sitting on the suitcase – one of those old fashioned hard cases. It was on its side, vertical, so I could sit straighter. I had the guitar case next to me, sitting on the ground. I couldn't remember if I was coming or going. I couldn't think if I'd gotten off a bus or I was waiting for one. I think I was waiting. I felt like I was always waiting for something. For this life to end. For the next to begin. One way or another, I was always waiting. I looked up and down the street, the usual business. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing but me. And even I wasn't all that extraordinary. I simply was. A girl sitting on a suitcase with a guitar. Nothing more. Just a girl sitting alone at night, waiting on nothing, smoking just for the smell of it. I wanted to destroy something. So I started with myself. I've been working my way up ever since. Or maybe it was down the whole time. Then again, either which way, it's somewhere.

The bus came, the last one. I'm always waiting for the last stop. Always waiting. And always for the end. Always for the final show. I couldn't remember how long I'd been waiting, I simply...was. This' the middle of nothing, the beginning of nowhere, the end of anything. Pick it and it is. I am. That's life. That's how I'm going into this. The bus comes and I board. I'm alone. Naturally. But it doesn't matter because I'm here in this. In the now. And fuck everyone else. I'm better

off alone. It's more...secure. I saw myself off. I watched myself leave. I saw my own shadow get smaller against the horizon. And I smiled to myself as I waved myself goodbye. In my mind it made sense. Feel free to turn your back anytime the scene bothers you.

I was a girl with a suitcase and a guitar. I had my life in my head, on my back, wherever it needed to be. And I'd hack it out there. I wasn't sure how. I had enough cash for a bit. No security. Nothing sure. No contacts. Nothing. I was just here. I had stood on the brink of oblivion for the chance at a gasp of fresh air. And when I tired of waiting, I stepped over for the thrill of the fall. The thrill, the shock, everything. I had walked to the ends of the earth and when I found nothing there, I just pressed on. There's nothing else to be done. Sitting down and crying won't make it stop. Don't lose time to tears. Just soldier on. There's nothing else to be done. Pack up your life, leave with a smile, and make the best of the little left in the ashes.

The ride was for hours. Like I said, last stop. Last bus, last stop, last life. It's all relevant in this seemingly...irrelevant way. I just don't understand it, but I don't think I'm meant to, so I don't pretend to try. I just get up and move when things bother me. When the movie's bad, when the building burns down, when someone dies. Pick up, move, start over. There's only so many times to start over, so many places to go. No. That's a lie. With the world at your feet, there's always somewhere to go. In terms of income, that's the trick. Money really does make the world go round. But hey, swing it right, set it up, it's not that big a deal. There's all kinds of ways to make money in this world. Tons. Some of them are more accepted than most. But hey, there's a lot of things more accepted than most in this world. I bet you there's more people that accept a religion than don't. Check the numbers. I don't think the atheists are going to take over anytime soon. Then again, I could be wrong. Don't quote me. I

don't know. I seldom do.

The driver doesn't say anything either. I don't care. I can hear music in my head from the last show, the last place I can remember sound. I can hear whatever I chose to, not the continuous loop that most people find themselves stuck in, dancing around absentmindedly to one stupid song. No. I can rewind, fast forward, select track. I can do as I wish. After all, it's my mind. I should be able to. I'll admit, it did take years of experience. A lot of careful training. It's not easy to cage something that has absolutely no desire to be caged. Just like you can't save the damned. I'm not damned, exactly. I'm just...in limbo.

I don't sleep on the bus. I don't believe in it all that much really. Sleep. I mean, you only get so much time to live, why waste it sleeping? Sure, sleep's necessary and all, but I only crash when I really have to. Otherwise, I'm awake. A large majority of the time. Or at least catatonic. There's various states of rest or waking. I was in between right now, allowing my mind to wander like the road the bus stayed on. My mind went beyond the asphalt, beyond the greenery, the trees and bushes. Between the lonely streets and quiet houses. Wandering idly, trying to find something to grasp onto. There was nothing. I was headed nowhere fast, but at least I was headed somewhere. No matter how I got there, it was somewhere.

And hours later, various thoughts and ideas and theories later, all forgotten the moment I stepped out of the bus, I was here. In a new time, a new place. A new city. My new home. This would be the latest in the series. The new and improved model. No. Change that. New. Never improved. As hard as I try and as much looking as I do, there is no improvement to this life. There is no other. Only this.

I was on a crowded street. It was early morning and the

streets were already crowded here. Something told me they would always be this way. There was no calm period. No time for rest. I looked up and down from where I stood. Which way should I go? Where should I try my luck? I could go anywhere from here. And that was the basis of the appeal of starting over. There was literally anywhere to go. I looked around once more and picked a direction to wander in. My method was simple. I would wander until nightfall. Wherever I was by then was where I'd be. I'd stay there, I'd work there, and I'd make ends meet. Everything was a clean slate. Every minute was another chance to turn it all around. I carried the two cases squarely as I walked among the crowds, trying not to bump into anybody.

I found myself outside a bar. The atmosphere was inviting, the crowd had shifted in its context. I ducked inside, finding a table kept in the back, away from everyone else. I put my stuff down carefully, trying to clear my head. I felt tired, but it was just exhaustion setting in. I'd need to crash at some point. I'd collapse otherwise. I brushed the hair out of my face, ordered a drink when the waitress came over. The place wasn't exactly dark, but it had a kind of atmosphere that was almost cozy. It set my mind at ease, sitting here, waiting. I was genuinely tired. The girl came back with my drink in record time, she crept through the place stealthily, scaring me when she reemerged. She set it down on a napkin, giving me a kind look. I smiled back at her, nodding my thanks. She moved off to another table.

Just another face in the crowd. Just another nameless identity. Nothing more than a friendly smile. I sat quietly thinking, trying to consider where I could crash. I would stay in the bar until it closed. It was nice in here – warm. Outside the world was shown in shades of gray, the people included. It was also raining out. I was soaked when I came in.

The place was called the Drowning Raven.

And I had come to drown.

34. Aftermath

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I introduce – Miss Deacon Burton. She will be resuming the role as herself for the remainder of the evening; if you'd mind returning to your seat, the show's about to begin.

It's been a scream kids.

And I hope you're as eager as I am to see how this all ends up.

Until we meet again on the cobblestone path of good intentions and lunacy leading to Hell.

Here's to vaguely sauntering downwards.

Most sincerely,

Miss Angyl Hunter.