

15. The Saint of Sinners

“So where do we go from here?”

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

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

“And the child? What of her?”

“She has three years, does she not? “

I nodded again, watching his eyes dance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“Don’t I always?”

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

14. The Final Consensus

So Colt was dead.

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

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

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

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

Especially herself.

And I?

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

Ironically, where as their favorite place to play?

The Drowning Raven.

Call it karma.

13. Fate of a Murderer

“He’s dead.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So how am I responsible?”

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

“How do you know?”

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

“Trust me.”

“So now what happens?”

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

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

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

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

And she left.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I thought I’d never see you again!”

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

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

And somehow, it helped me relax.

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

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

“I think I need a dr...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Abandon all Hope.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What a class act.

12. Another Turn of the Wheel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Colt...I'm sorry."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

head hit with a solid thud.

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

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

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

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

He smiled a little. “To survive.”

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

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

“You were saying?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dusk.

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

“Survival of the fittest.”

Click. Bang.

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

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

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

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

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

Curtain. Scene.

11. Help Wanted

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

And perhaps, I should have.

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

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

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

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

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

had my vengeance.”

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

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

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

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

Rest in peace you son of a bitch.

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

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

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

"How long have I been out?"

"Enough to scare me."

"How did you know where to find me?"

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

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

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

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

"I don't understand."

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

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

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

The streets serve their own brand of justice.

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

Until the wheel turned yet again.

If the wheel turned.

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

As long as it took.

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

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

10. Identity Fraud

For the record –

My name is Deacon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My only real option was lack of failure.

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

Past this one last man.

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

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

See also – my innocence.

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

Aren't you tired of being weak?

Yeah. I am.

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

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

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

"A few hours, tops."

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

"One round would be sufficient."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Going? To Hell – wanna join me?”

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

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

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

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

"You fucking..."

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

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

"Good boy."

And we were on our way.

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

This was my revenge for pride damaged.

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

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

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

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

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

“How can I help you?”

“Help? Me? Smile, lover.”

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

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Linkon Ransom.

Rest in peace, you son of a bitch.

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

“Packed?”

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

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

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

"'Atta girl."

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

"Thanks."

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

"How many rounds?"

"I owe you for an extra four."

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

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

"Who's the refugee?"

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

And we were both gone.

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

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

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

Ironic.