

## 22. The Story Of You

There was a strong, even knock on the door and I went to it, thinking blind and not caring. Opening it revealed a young boy, young man, a hoodlum, a street demon, whatever you'd choose to call him. He was tall and dark in his features, though the red hair set him out from the world. Dressed entirely in black, his whole demeanor evoked a sense of sex and violence. I raised a brow at his lowered eyes and shadowy character.

"Can I help you?" I asked, nonchalantly. Ignorantly.

Click. Bang.

The. End.

After all the pain and madness, I met my end due to a lost little street demon with a whisper for a voice and fire in his eyes. My downfall? He was a Hunter.

These were the last thoughts that passed through my mind as everything started to fade to black, before my eyes closed.

A few things tried to cross my mind, but nothing would stay. As the last echoes died out, a few chilly words echoed in my mind.

"Trust me. Hurt. Me."

And all else...was black.

Or so it seemed. The shot echoed down the hall, a shot that should have been fatal. It grazed off my shoulder, missing my heart by mere inches. Looking over my shoulder, I caught my daughter's eye, confused and innocent. She was just a child. His eyes had locked onto her first, a mix of confusion and

confidence locked within. Suddenly, he had a plan. Suddenly, I had a purpose. And he would see to it that I realized my potential.

With the same cold glance, he turned on a heel, seeming satisfied with himself. I collapsed on the ground, into my daughter's waiting arms. She stared at the door mystified, unable to explain what had happened.

"Who was that, Mom?" Her words were shaky and unsure, trying to press blood back into my arm. I looked up at her casually.

"A Hunter, Cassandra. A Hunter. Remember to always keep your distance from someone who hunts for sport; they've no conscience left."

And that would be the story of him.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Mister Corvis Hunter.

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## 21. Family Tradition

"So when are you going to let me read it?"

I laughed despite myself, shuffling my papers into an orderly pile and laying my arm across them as I was accustomed when Cassie came around.

"When it's complete, you noisy brat."

She sat down next to me, trying to sneak a few words from the sheets under my spreading fingertips. I had a habit of writing at night, trying to avoid her constant inquiry. She'd grown from a curious and headstrong child into a diligent and determined teenager, much like myself. I cursed the gods,

though I knew I'd have been disappointed with anything less.

There was so much I wanted to tell her, infinite things to explain, but I knew that she needed to learn in her own time. Her own way. I could not interfere. As her mother, I naturally wanted to protect her from every sling and arrow in the world, but I couldn't shelter her that much. She would hurt and she would bleed and I would be there to help her off the ground, but only once she asked for it. And she had to figure that out on her own.

Caine supported my beliefs to a point. He supported her a tiny bit more than I did, his nurturing genes slightly stronger. At the same time, he was fiercely protective, glaring down any young man daring to get within two feet of her. I found myself laughing at his paternal urges, knowing that he just wanted the very best for her. I couldn't disagree, though I knew she would break her fair share of hearts if we let her.

She was constantly curious about everything, asking infinite questions and doing hours of haphazard research. She was becoming the artist I never was, talented in any medium she wished to work in. I was pleased with her ambition.

Miss Cassandra Wolfe would see great promise in the world, I was sure. She would achieve great and numerous things, things her parents had only dreamed of. She would have a life devoid of violence and beatings. She would live a peaceful suburban adolescence and carry on her schooling at a local college before deciding her course of fate. And we would watch with equally eager eyes, to learn what our great endeavor had resulted in.

I tucked the pages away, much to her frustration yet again. There were parts I didn't want her to know, parts I'd sooner forget if I could. I assumed I'd let her know the truth when she settled down herself, if she still felt the need to know. Which I was hoping she'd have outgrown by then. It's not that

I liked hiding the truth from her, but I didn't want her to set impossible expectations for her own life by judging it against mine. I didn't want her to feel she needed to be any stronger than she already was.

Her life needed to be her own, not merely an extension of my failures.

And such was the mindset with which my daughter was raised. She graduated high school with flying colors, all manner of honors connected to her name. She continued to community college, as planned, to make sure she was certain in her career choice.

She wanted to be a photographer.

I was pleased with her choice of arts, and her media of choice was all the more impressive. Photographs had a way of capturing souls, true enough, but there was validity to them that I had to respect. They proved, without a doubt, that someone had existed in the world. It made them more than a memory, more than a story, something real and tangible. I severely respected that, even when caught in the crosshairs of her camera unexpectedly. Her images would record our new life, our pleasant endings, showing that anything truly is possible with enough devotion to a dream.

Or enough blood.

Her great ambitions, her noble works, would cancel out the darker deeds of my youth, and the balance of life would be restored. Perhaps when she was older, I would show her the photography bug she'd inherited from me, introduce her to distant ancestors from a time best left in the dust. Perhaps they were best left where they were – distant memories of a time long since dead. I shook off my indecision, turning to face her.

“Come on, I'll teach you a new song.”

She fell into step behind me, allowing her frustration to fade. She didn't possess the rage that I did, which I was thankful for. Disappointment never bothered her for longer than two minutes, which was a wonderful change from my unrelenting anger that got me into more trouble than it was worth. She sat down across from me, the ever-vigilant pupil, always eager for something more. I made sure my guitar was in tune, plucking the strings carefully, then strumming a few times to let the sound roll out. I reached back into my memories and played something I could barely remember, when I was barely older than she was now.

Caine's steps were even and clear, stopping slowly as the familiar tune crept into his mind. I heard him run off to grab his own guitar, knowing he would before I started playing. He came and sat next to me, tuning up and joining in.

"So are you guys going to teach me or what?" Cass said with a laugh, watching as we both tried to one up each other for a few more minutes.

"I'm sorry, we get carried away from time to time," I laughed with Caine, who was still playing despite my pause. He seemed pleased with himself.

"I didn't think you'd remembered it." He played the rest of the song solo, and I joined back in suddenly, watching as Cassandra started to pluck her way through it, imitating my finger movements. She was a quick learner.

"You think I could forget the song we played when we met?"

He laughed again, changing octaves, but keeping pace nonetheless. I slowed down to help Cass's eye catch on to the pattern, showing her the way, and returned to the regular pace to keep things in unison. By the end of an hour, we had an entirely new piece with three parts, all entirely uniquely dependent on each other.

Such was the state of things then, and how they'd remain from thereafter. All three separate parts of a whole, but entirely dependent.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

If I could go back and change anything in my life, any single moment, any solitary idea, would I? What did I wish I knew then that I know now?

Everything. Anything. Nothing.

Because in the end, it doesn't matter how you get there, as long as you make it still standing. Even crawling counts for something, but only if you don't look back.

And I don't know about you, but the only story I've ever heard about looking back resulted in a pillar of salt, and that doesn't seem like a great way to go to me.

I've always been into the show, into the lights and fanfare, red, blue and yellow. And part of me always will be. But that's beside the point.

Would I change anything?

Perhaps.

But would you trust me if I told you?

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## 20. Intensive Care

Marco Marek didn't survive the crash that night. With his death, the Wicked dissolved, and the balance of power shifted.

Daminao Morrow also didn't survive that night. Her body was

discovered, mangled and battered, in a ditch the next day. Her siblings, themselves city police officers, made it their personal mission to find the one responsible.

In wake of the accident, Angyl Hunter disappeared yet again. Nobody knew her identity, save myself, and I thought it was best forgotten if I wanted to continue breathing. Caine's place on the Wicked was only known to the other three, all of which were now missing or dead. Following the events of that fateful night, Seven also disappeared, never to be heard from again. Did Angyl find a kindred spirit in another outcast, or had she abandoned Seven at the first turn? Only they knew for sure.

I was questioned by the Officers Morrow, twins – Jerome and Janus, repeatedly, about the events of the race and thereafter. There were witnesses that put me at the scene of the crime moments before it occurred. I gave nothing away. I would not be the downfall of those angels of vengeance. Call it selfish, but I couldn't risk the safety of my family. The Morrow twins' anguish knew no bounds, and they pursued the case furiously. They seemed to be more interested in Hyde, despite my questionable past, and I was glad for the distraction.

Caine was returned to his humdrum life of guitar gigs and bartending with me. He seemed content with it now that I was back in town. I let him play around on his bike from time to time, but he did his best to be careful. He blamed himself for my retreat to the city, though there were many factors he had yet to understand. Factors that I was still devising ways of explaining to him.

I was forced into taking a break from work immediately upon my return, by Caine's insistence. He worked his shifts and mine, with an eager smile, desperately trying to make things right. I wanted to tell him I wasn't mad, that it was all a farce and I had no intent to hurt him, but there were bigger cards to

deal with at the moment.

I lost track of how long it took the cuts to heal and most of the bruises to fade away. My ribs never entirely recovered, always holding a sort of tenderness. I was able to return to work before long, which gave me something to keep my mind occupied. I had barely gotten back into the swing of things when a new family moved into the neighborhood, settling not far from where Caine and I decided to reside.

The Lazarus family.

Jekt had picked out a rather nice house, small and quaint. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it, which would serve its inhabitants perfectly. Dacien came by the bar to remind me of her presence and to meet Caine formally. Though he'd played at the bar in the city several times, they'd never truly had the pleasure of face-to-face conversation. He seemed glad to meet her on such polite and civil grounds.

So things began to take on a new tone – calm. A concept previously beyond our reach, we found ourselves secure in the monotony of it. Coming home from a typical day at work to spend a typical night with my boyfriend may have bored some, but it was a life I had longed for and finally received. When things had become routine enough, I told Caine that we were going to have a family.

His reaction was a combination of silence and disbelief. I tried to gauge his initial reaction, since that would be the most important, but it was shielded by incredulousness. Whether he was disappointed or not didn't show, pure amazement and surprise took over his entire being. He hugged me in the tightest bear hug imaginable, realizing after the fact that he might've been putting pressure on the baby. He frowned for a second, the smile returning just as fast as he spun around like a child.

"If you don't act your age, I might need a babysitter for the

pair of you," I joked, leaning forward to kiss him. He seemed pleased with himself.

"A baby, our baby? Like...do you know what it is yet, when you're due, like, wow, Dad's going to be stoked." There was a gleam in his eyes I'd never known, despite all our long days and nights together. I laughed at his excitement, holding him close.

"One thing at a time, tiger."

And I gave him as much information as possible. He'd be coming with me to every doctor's appointment from here on in, and we decided to hit his father with the news after we announced our plans to be married, which was as much a shock to me as it was to Caine as he said it.

For a moment, I was going to accuse him of proposing out of desperation, trying to do what was right by proper Christian law. But when he pulled a ring out, his words calculated and rehearsed, I realized what he'd been spending his nights on in my absence. It was my turn to beam and tear up a little, grasping him harder than anyone I'd ever known in my life.

The concept of marriage was something that people like me seldom got to consider, even in the most remote sense. People bred of pain and madness don't really get the chance to settle down, to find peace and salvation in someone else. The possibility, its near reality, had startled me. Arrangements would be made quietly, with only a small congregation in attendance. What was left of my family, and Caine's father.

I know it seems like I'm skipping around a lot here, but life was less chaotic along the way as my child grew and my marriage to Caine loomed closer. I had invited my siblings, only half expecting them to care. Dacien would be bringing her family, as I expected her to. But I didn't have my hopes too high. Such events were few and far between in the Burton history and I wasn't looking for any sort of special

attention. I was nearing the halfway point of my pregnancy, the marriage a mere week away, when an attack of guilt struck.

I had never explained to Caine about my first child, the child I abandoned in the city to a foreign life. I wanted to be honest with him all the time, hold nothing back, but I was terrified of his reaction. That he might abandon me, realizing his mistake, and leave me at point zero. Despite all my efforts, despite my great strides of improvement, I was still fragile at the seams and I wasn't too proud to admit it. Too much stress, too much abuse, and I'd collapse to the train wreck I'd been at the start. I'd come too far to go back now, and I refused to allow those demons to tear at me any longer. But was it worth the risk?

It's a Catholic tradition before a wedding to confess your sins. I think this arrangement should be mandatory, despite your faith, but that's my belief. I think it's only fair that both parties fully understand what they're getting themselves into. And such was my decision with a mere 48 hours before the big day. I sat Caine down, as simply and plainly as I could, and I recounted the tale. I explained to him every violent detail I could dare stomach, giving him a broad image of Linkon as I knew him, the man I'd once loved, the man who had strangled my soul and sanity. I explained the rape and my revenge. And when all was said and done, I gave him the story of it, written painstaking over the course of events, in case I had selfishly neglected any details.

He sat there in silence for an immeasurable amount of time, taking it all in. After a small eternity, he blinked, setting the bound story on the table next to him and turning to face me. I braced myself for the worst, as I'd already been to Hell and back in my short years.

"Do you feel better now?" His voice was a whisper, severe but human. I nodded slowly, never breaking eye contact. He leaned over and hugged me close to his chest.

“Next time, just tell me. I could tell this’ been bothering you for a while, but trust me, if you can. There’s nothing you can say or do to me that will make me think any less of you. You’ve forgiven me for my deceit, and I forgave you long ago.”

I raised an eyebrow curiously. “Long ago?”

He smiled slightly, nodding. “You’re not the only one with connections you know.”

I laughed despite myself, feeling suddenly foolish for thinking him so naïve. Of course he had connections, he was a traveler and a vagabond like myself, his entire life open to interpretation. We never spoke of the issue after that, aside from a few random times he asked whether I’d consider trying to get my child back. I decided it was best to allow her to enjoy her life uninterrupted. Over time, the topic would mostly fade to black.

On the big day, we all met up to go to the church, knowing it would be largely empty. Every so often, Caine had his religious quirks, and I was fine with whatever sort of wedding he preferred as long as it was done. It was outside, waiting to start the ceremony, that I received my first of many surprises.

“You look a bit lonely, Deacon.”

I whirled around to find Roger standing there, his usual smug grin twisted sideways a bit. Everyone else was waiting inside while I paced the lobby for a few more frantic moments. He stepped forward, reaching for my hand.

“Rog...”

He shook his head. “Not the time or place. What’s done is done, Deacon. I wanted to introduce you to the newest member of my family.” He stood aside slowly, reaching to attract the attention of a child set up to be my flower girl. I recognized

Doryn instantly.

“But how?”

He pushed her slightly towards the doors to the aisle, whispering slightly in her ear. She took off with a skip and a bounce, just as excited as before. I kept my eyes locked to his, despite the tears welling within.

“You honestly think my baby sister could give up a child in my town without my knowing about it? And come on, with a name like Ransom, you had to know it’d raise some red flags. She belongs with her family, you know that.”

“Rog...I want her to have a chance.”

He rested his arm on my shoulder, softly, brotherly, for the first time in our lives. “And she will. Trust me for once.”

The irony of the phrase made me laugh, loud and long. I had heard the words, “Trust me” three times in the past few months, and from some very ironic sources. I didn’t allow it to get me down though, nodding firmly in response to him. Things couldn’t have worked out more ideally, and I was all the better for it.

“Alright. You fuck up though...”

He laughed. “Yeah, I know. She’ll be all right. Deac. Now come on, there’s an aisle I’m aiming to walk you down, if you’ll have me.”

I crooked my arm slightly, which he took, and we started on like the old friends we’d never been.

Dacien had brought her new small town family, sitting neatly in the front row. With them was Caine’s father Gus, himself beaming and proud. Caine’s best man was Hyde, who still remained free despite the police inquiry. My maid of honor was Riley, who kept shooting glances to Dusk. The Officers Morrow

had presented themselves as well, sitting curiously in the back taking a mental log of everyone present. Even Irish had been dragged away from the bar with some old faces in tow. I recognized Saint Crowe in his signature layers of black, applied to a respectable suit for the occasion.

For a split second, my suspicions raged and I worried about some sort of brawl or a wild gunfight in the middle of the ceremony. But once I got to Caine, my fears were assuaged and my mind at peace. This was the happiest day of my life, or at least up to this point, and I couldn't allow myself to ruin it with suspicions and paranoia. I would enjoy every last moment of it, no matter the possibilities.

Such was the fairy tale state of my world from then on. The pain, the madness, the memories, they never stopped, and I would wake up amidst many a restless night plagued by them. Try as I might, couldn't forget the horrible things I'd survived, things I'd said and done to others. Perhaps that is the way it was supposed to work. But I had a family to keep me sane, to keep me stable, and that was most important.

Was it easy? No. Would it be? Never. But I had to keep putting one foot ahead of another. For my daughter. For my husband. For myself. We all must struggle to achieve something worth preserving; we must bleed for our causes. And I would suffer endlessly if I had to in order to keep those two things sacred. My life had a new point and purpose, which was perfectly fine with me.

Such was the end of wars, the calm close to conflict, and the existence we would come to hold near and dear. When asked if I would trade any of my experiences for something better, if there's anything I could change, my answer is simple.

Yes. There is something I would have changed.

I would have poisoned Linkon Ransom to death instead.

You can take the pain out of the girl, but you can't take the girl out of the pain. And despite my fairy tale ending, despite my newfound optimism, there was still that slight part of me that longed to inflict pain, that required carnage to survive, and thirsted for blood. There was that side of me that just wanted to watch the world burn.

And I was okay with that.

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## 19. Would You Kindly?

“Do you want the pain to stop?”

I heard the voice, echoing repeatedly in my mind, bouncing angrily off the inner walls of my skull. I don't know whether I nodded or shook my head, but a hand came around from behind me. I was leaning against someone apparently – they held me slightly upright. My eyes opened, though the focus was shoddy. The arm produced what appeared to be a syringe within reach of my own fingertips.

“You can make the pain stop now. Just like that. Just one hit. Will you?”

I remember taking the syringe, but only to make sure it was real. I wasn't sure if I was awake or dreaming, completely deluded from the pain. It felt real and whole in my hand, full of a liquid I had been very familiar with once upon a time. Or so it seemed. Theoretically, it could have been anything. But I knew better. I twisted it around in my fingers for a few seconds, admiring the shine of the glass.

“Just one tiny prick and you'll be better. Right?”

And I remember smiling slightly despite the pain, despite the

confusion and madness. I remember staring at that tiny vial of salvation, realizing the bigger picture here. I'd been clean for months, but I'd never been tempted in that time, never been tested. This was the perfect opportunity to fail. I had to prove not only to myself, but to Riley, that there was life outside of the addiction. That there was hope. I had to show her that it was possible to carry on without.

I turned the syringe around slowly, the needle facing towards me...and stabbed it as hard as I could into the ground. The sharp metal tip snapped off immediately, ruining it for use. I tossed the remainder aside as far as I could manage with limited strength, satisfied with my cleverness. The form behind me bent down slowly, kissing me on the forehead.

"Congratulations, Deacon Burton, you have discovered the true meaning of sisterhood."

The voice was Dacien's, and she was especially careful as she got up from her kneeling position and helped carry me to a softer corner, assuming a bed. That silly smile plastered on my face, I lied there completely oblivious to the pain. I had proven them wrong. I had shown a dedication to Riley, a dedication even she had never known. And I was proud. No. I was hopeful. I had offered her an example, a positive example, to use as reference. Something that could guide her, a single ray of light when she needed it. And I hoped that it would be enough. I stopped fighting the fatigue shortly thereafter and returned to sleep, knowing I needed it, but when next I awoke, I found my sister wrapped around me. The embrace was almost tight enough to break my already fractured ribs, but I didn't care. All other details were insignificant. I returned to sleep, clutching her just as tightly in return, hoping she could understand the ferocity with which I would defend her if need be.

"Everything is gone."

Dusk's voice roused me from my half-awake stupor a few hours later. Pain kept me between states of consciousness. I looked over to the source of the voice, unable to focus on his shape. He seemed to shift and mutate, coming closer, coming slightly into more focus.

I coughed as I tried to speak, unable to make real words appear.

"The dope. She'll quit as you did – cold. You're not banished either. You're always welcome back, with open arms. Riley intends to stay here though, with me. She is happy here, despite the drugs. You're welcome to visit anytime, and we wish you would."

I smiled slowly, nodding back at him. My throat was battered and much of my jaw didn't seem to be working right, but it was okay. As long as they understand my allegiance to them, that I was sorry for my rage, but frustrated in my powerlessness.

"You managed to prove the most important lesson of all – someone willing to bleed and fight for freedom will always be so inclined. Devotion cannot be weighed or measured in blood spilt or years served. And with enough dedication, any demon may be destroyed. You proved to your sister that you're more than a self-serving jerk, but you also proved to us all that there is possibility of immense goodness even from the most wretched people. Do you understand?"

I nodded again, completely nonplussed about my effect on the world. I didn't care if my getting beaten senseless inspired another three-dozen girls to try the same tactic. I didn't care if it inspired five-dozen girls to fight for freedom. All in all, the only person I cared about affecting with my actions was asleep next to me, and that was fine. I coughed a few times, clearing my throat as softly as I could.

"Dusk...I'm sorry," I muttered in a hoarse whisper.

He smiled slowly, nodding. "We know, and in a way, that's the point." He raised a glass that he seemed to produce out of nowhere, filled with something clear but I couldn't be sure what. "Here's to never walking away and being carried out every time." He downed it in a single gulp, reaching to hand me a similar glass. I shook my head slowly.

"Just water Deac, figure you could use some."

I almost laughed despite the situation and reached to take it from him, emptying it in a desperate gulp. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed that until just then, and I was severely appreciative. I closed my eyes shortly after, and fell back into a peaceful rest.

I'd awake again far away from the underground. Back in Dacien's apartment. I was upset to be deprived of the chance to speak to Riley, but upon further consideration I realized it was probably for the best that we had some time to...heal. Things had been tense and overly violent, a cooling down period was expected.

A plate of warm food was set next to the bed as my eyes fluttered open yet again. I tried to get up but found my limbs didn't want to cooperate just yet. The moment my head rose up, black and white spots were dancing before my eyes, shaking my focus again. A few more confused minutes of fighting with fatigue until an old voice chimed in.

"You were beginning to worry me there, soldier."

Dacien came and sat down on the bed's edge, her own face a collection of bruises and cuts. She was smiling despite the condition of things, satisfied in the progress I had made in the tunnel. She was like my therapist, pushing me toward some sort of personal breakthrough. Her patience knew no bounds, and her methods were far from practical. But it worked, and that's all that mattered.

I started to get up but she put her arm out to keep me down.

"You've been brave enough for one day. Rest, I've had your bus ticket exchanged for one at a later date."

I nodded slowly, appreciative of her kindness, a side of her I was unfamiliar with. Dacien Ransom the hunter, the reckless, the murderer, I was entirely familiar with. Dacien Ransom the mother, the nurturer, the savior...that was something else.

She sat there in silence as the door opened noisily and a small figure came crashing inside. I recognized her too serious eyes from the photograph instantly.

"Morrison," I muttered. The child hadn't heard me; she just carried on with her business, finding happiness in her mother's discovery. The bruises and cuts didn't seem to phase her in the slightest as she hopped into her mother's lap, pleased with her treasure. Dacien seemed slightly uneasy, almost embarrassed, to have to share her with me.

"Deacon, may I introduce you to Miss Morrison Lazarus. Say Hello, sweetheart."

The child said hello in a sort of murmur, her shyness suitable to her age. I smiled warmly, trying to return the gesture as best as I could. Another set of steps were loose in the apartment, a bit too hurried to be Jekt's, but all the same I was hopeful. Another child barreled into the room abruptly, playful and energetic, looking for her playmate. I sat up in bed with a jolt, despite the pain shooting down my spine. Seeing two adults in the room, her playfulness curbed and she came to a screeching halt in the middle of the room, seating herself on the floor curiously.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, her eyes staring up at Morrison, who was already wriggling from her mother's grasp. Dacien smiled at the new stranger, then turned to face me.

“And this would be Morrison’s new school friend, Doryn.”

My mouth dropped, as I’d expected it would. I never thought I’d see her again, never expecting to be confronted with her presence. But there she stood, as innocent and sweet as a spring day, playful and coy. Her eyes too held a sort of inner severity, maturity deep within her three short years. I wanted to reach out and touch her, grasp her close to my chest, but I knew any interference at this point could damage her. Still, seeing her, alive and well, put an equal share of guilt and pride on my heart.

Dacien allowed Morrison to retreat with her friend, and the children went off to play. She stayed where she was on the bed, her expression distant, slightly mournful.

“I’m sorry...I didn’t think they’d escape Jekt. He’s very entertaining to three year olds it would seem.”

I wasn’t upset in the slightest. I almost felt like I had needed to see her in order to carry on with my life. In order to make the most of things from here on in, I could not interfere. I had abandoned her early on; it would have to remain so. Or so it would seem. I hoped that in a few years I could convince myself otherwise, that she would need something and I’d be able to establish communication with her. But the possibilities were too vast to consider. Right now I had work with contend with. I had survival to ensure.

Dacien and I talked about issues of minimal importance, passing time while I worked through the food at my side. She left me to my thoughts a little while after, which only lasted seconds while I passed into exhaustion. Sleep overtook me, as I had intended, and I met a kind of rest more peaceful than ever before.

Here’s to a fresh start and a new day. Resuming a life free of demons and enemies, stalking my every move. An existence that didn’t include looking over my shoulder every few feet – a

life worth fighting for. Despite my suspicions and paranoia, there was a sort of calm that came with the new set of standards, and I was glad for it.

A few hours rest turned into a few days of peaceful, undisturbed sleep. Dacien would come in from time to time to check in, occasionally sending Jekt. We all reminisced as much as we dared about the few good times we had in common then returned to the healing process. By the end of a week, I was escorted to the bus station and sent back north, with Jekt in tow. He was to set up a home for the rest of them while making sure I returned home safely.

The great wheels were starting to turn slowly, and it was a nice change of pace to see good triumph over evil. Caine and I would need to do a lot of talking once I was feeling better, which we both agreed would be another week or so after my return. Apologies streamed from him in excess, but I silenced all his pleas until a better time to speak came about. Seeing my physical condition, he did everything he could to appease me.

And such was the state of things. I returned to my slow and simple country life with my dependable, if someone misleading, boyfriend figure. The shadows of my past would follow me north, but only to find salvation of their own. With the new start would come new pains to heal, but that was all right with me, assuming I was given enough time to heal the old first. And if I wasn't? Well then I'd soldier on, as I was meant to.

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# 18. Under the Big Top

The night wore on and Jekt drank himself to oblivion as expected. There was one person I really wanted to see before I got out of Dodge. Riley had disappeared from my life after the incident, scarred and broken. I was too wrapped up in my own pain to find her or speak to her. I felt like a fool for turning my back on her, but I would have only made things worse, which I had to accept. Before I could ask Irish about it, she answered for me.

“Go find her, you know where she is. If anybody gives you an issue, you send them to me. Understood?”

I nodded, thanking her profusely, and set off at a run for the underground. I hadn't seen her since I skipped town, and I didn't know what people did or didn't tell her. More than anything, I just wanted to apologize. I was going through a responsible shift in my life and I needed to make amends on all points of failure in the past. My family was one of my most significant failures.

I reached Dusk's familiar doorway, knocking as evenly as I could. There was some rustling around, and then finally he came out, looking tired and bleary eyed. It took a moment for his eyes to focus, for the familiarity to take effect. A sort of confusion took over, while he debated what I was doing down here, on whose authority, and what possible trouble I could be unleashing upon him. Surely he was considering how to explain to me what my sister was doing down here as well. I saw through his act, as wisdom had allowed me more foresight than he'd ever understand.

“She awake Dusk?”

He considered lying to me for a moment, before smiling warmly. “Not quite. We had a busy day yesterday. She helps me with the show now.”

“Not trying to retire now are you?”

He seemed to consider his options. “We all have to grow up sometime don’t we? Come on in and sit down, I’m sure we can wake her up.”

I stepped past him, finding the room as conservative as I remembered it. There were some photographs and poems scattered around, nothing too impressive. He had a shelf with a small book collection, the most significant among them the photocopied editions. I sat myself down carefully, looking around.

Riley was curled up in his bed, buried under a mass of blankets, sleeping soundly. I thought back to a time when we’d gotten along, when we could exist together so peacefully. I looked back to Dusk, whose eyes were still slightly confused.

“What brings you back?”

I considered my answer slowly, not wanting to give too much away. “I had some old odds and ends to take care of.”

He nodded. “With Irish? You could only be down here with her permission.”

I smiled again, realizing there was nothing he didn’t know. “With...several people. I don’t think I’ll be coming back after this trip, and I wanted to make sure that everything was well looked after.”

In the back of his mind, I could feel the gears turning. He needed to convince me that he was the right guy for the job. That he would guard my baby sister for all time, and to trust me. He wanted to tell me that he would love her entirely, as he had loved me. And since I had not allowed him to love me, he will replace his affection for me with her to clear the gap. All the things he wanted to tell me, without making it seem like she was a replacement, a second place winner – a

silver medal. He didn't want her to feel like the lesser attraction that we all knew she was. He was with her initially to spite me, but it had turned into something more, as it typically does in overly complicated relationships. I respected his integrity to a degree, but I also couldn't allow him to lie to me.

"Dusk, don't make excuses, or promises. I just want her to be..." and my voice stopped. My eyes shifted to Dusk's familiar desk, the one where he's spend hours on end conspiring his tricks and taunts. Laid out neatly were all the tools of my old trade, instantly recognizable. Syringes and straws, the powdery dope remains barely visible, but just present enough to make out. My eyes narrowed and I rose from the chair in a single lithe motion, grasping him by the shirt and tossing him outside to talk.

"Wait, wait, Deacon..." he muttered, hands locked around my arms, but I didn't care. I was beyond negotiation.

"Explain. Now." I kept my tone level, betraying nothing, though my fury was obvious in my eyes. I released him with a toss, allowing him to slam backward against the wall. He got his balance and stood to face me.

"You weren't the best role model you know," he started, with a malicious sort of glee. I took a stride and leveled one solid punch to his jaw. He staggered, but remained upright.

"Not what I wanted to hear. Don't tell me what's done – tell me what you're doing to make it better. And don't expect me to be sympathetic."

He cleared his throat calmly. "When Brie died...you know...well. Damn it Deacon, you just abandoned her, you abandoned us all. You locked yourself away for months on end, venting it all out on your own, you never considered what you were doing to those around you."

I pulled back my hand and hit him again in the face, the rage shivering through my entire form. "Don't you blame me!"

"She watched a girl die, Deacon. She's not a demon like you or me. She wasn't raised for this, and she couldn't be expected to handle it like any of us. You locked yourself away and your brother washed his hands of it all to save his reputation. She only had the few of us to talk to, most of us too desensitized to understand her grief. She couldn't sleep or function anymore. It's like you both shut down, but in entirely opposite ways."

"What happened when I cleaned up?"

"We tried to explain to her that you needed help, and time, but she couldn't wait that long. If it was good enough for you, it was good enough for her, she reasoned. I don't know who she bought the drugs from or how, I swear to you. But once I found out I've been doing everything in my power to wean her off and keep it contained."

I shivered for another few seconds, contemplating another strike, but there was no use. Her decision was her own, as was mine. There was only so much anybody could do for her now. She would have to want to be better. She would need to fight to be stable.

"Who did she buy from?"

His eyes shifted for that split second, a hesitation. He did know. He was doing everything in his power not to tell me, but he knew. I don't know who he was protecting or why, but I would have answers, one way or another.

"She never told me."

"Dusk, don't waste my time. Who'd she buy from?"

"Deacon, I don't..."

I leaned in and hit him again. He muttered excuses repeatedly, so I kept swinging. I kept swinging until my arms were tired and my body ached from the cycle, but I would not relent. He would give me my answers, or I would...or I would what? Would I truly kill him? The single source of happiness in Riley's life? I stood over his form, curled up on the floor, taking the hits in stride, fists dripping blood. And I found myself more frustrated than when I started. I turned on a heel to clear my mind, and found Riley there. Standing in the doorway, watching it all. She stepped forward slowly, her eyes traveling between Dusk's battered face and my bloody knuckles.

"I thought it was you. I heard your voice, in my mind. Far away and different, but you were always there, weren't you?" Her voice was broken, a sort of child like whisper, confused and destroyed. I stepped away from Dusk, moving closer to her slowly, trying to form a proper approach to this moment. She stepped back slowly, her eyes still following the blood drops on the ground.

"Riley...I'm sorry I left. I had to help myself before I could help you..." my voice was lost in the tunnel, a senseless echo of pointlessness. Her eyes narrowed, suddenly alert and intent.

"Help? No, you never helped. You only hurt, it's what you do Deacon. You locked us all away. You let us bleed and die for you but you were never there to bleed for us, were you? No. No more. And now you want to make it better, tie up the happy endings? It's a bit late, and you know that. You can't beat the answers out of people all the time. You can't answer insecurity with violence. You can't..."

She collapsed to her knees, the tears streaming down her cheeks. I suddenly felt villainous, vile and evil. I had failed her in every way possible, without a shred of conviction or conscience. All I wanted to do was break the arms of whatever monster was giving my sister drugs, a

faceless fiend that neither would name. I couldn't even bring myself to hug her, covered in blood as I was. An utter disgrace to the protector she needed so severely.

"Riley, I..."

"Don't apologize anymore!" She got up with a start and took steps towards me, her back straight, arm outstretched accusingly. "Don't make excuses, you're too late. You were so sure it was always about you, weren't you? Never once considered those around you and the cost they were paying on your behalf. I'm free now, and as happy as I can manage. Leave it alone."

I took a step forward, the anger rising again, my pride on my sleeve. I balled my hands into fists, prepared to make the same bad choice again to get the answers necessary. I felt my body jerked back in one clean motion, my arms pulled and locked behind me. I jerked and squirmed, but got nowhere.

"As the drugs were your first enemy, your rage is your new foe. You cannot let it destroy you. Let go Deacon." I stopped fighting, finding myself locked in Dacien's iron grip. Riley stared on intently, watching the anger seep from my eyes slowly.

"Family never gives up on each other."

"You did that long ago Deacon. It's time to move on and allow new families to arise. And for what it's worth, I gave her the dope."

The struggle started again as I pulled and fought against Dacien's grip, as her fingertips twisted into my arms to grip me against her. I would not allow her to continue her control of this family – I would do whatever was necessary to break the cycle. Riley crept closer as I struggled with my warden, going nowhere fast. She tilted her head slightly, the ever-curious child, and landed a punch to my face not unlike my

assault on Dusk. And as my rage had known no bounds, hers too came to life, wailing on me as I stood helpless in Dacien's grasp. When Riley's arms became weary, like mine, she settled on the ground to her knees, staring up as blood poured from my mouth. I was let free and I dropped with a tired thud against the gravel, looking over to where Dusk had propped himself into a sitting position.

"The vicious cycle perpetuates itself, children," Dacien began evenly. "Violence only begets violence. I allowed Riley a way out, a temporary solution, until she found her feet. Controlled and monitored, she will be free of chemical influence before the year is out. Unlike you, I trust Dusk absolutely. His loyalty to me has been unwavering, and I trust that he will extend the same to Riley. Do you understand Deacon?"

I nodded, the rage slowly subsiding.

"Riley has had her chance to vent in the old Burton family way of violence, now she will recover in a more civilized manner. But her pain should have come before your own, long ago."

I coughed a few times, turning to stare up at Dacien. "More lessons? More morals? Don't you ever stop!" I got up from the ground with a lunge and attacked her, swinging wildly and hoping to hit bone and flesh. I connected a few times, but not before I was ripped back with an urgency and force entirely unexpected. An arm clamped around my throat, another pulling backwards, I felt another familiar voice in my ear.

"Christ, I leave you alone for ten minutes and you're trying to kill everybody. Seriously Deac, is there anything you touch that you don't aspire to destroy?" Irish's grip was firm, her breath in my ear matching my own erratic patterns. I was pulled back another few feet from the scene, locked in place yet again. When Dacien was back on her feet, I was released. She took a few steps to me, considering a counterattack. I saw

her arm lock up and the fist prepare...but it released, calmly, after a few seconds.

“Deacon, you’ve always been the voice of reason in your family. Your brother has been self-serving for some time, but you are capable of so much more; you were lost in your own pain for so long that you allowed great things to pass you by. I have allowed you numerous second chances to prove your worth, and you continually surprise me. But here, in this issue, you still fail. Your sister should have been your priority all along, which you failed to see. Now she has a new family to protect her, a family that will be loyal and true to the end, despite its methods. You must respect that.”

I smiled slowly, her words sinking in. “Are you banishing me again?”

“I am,” Irish joined in – her tone neutral and unfeeling. “Blood is a bitch to wash out and I’m a bit old to be chasing you young hooligans around anymore.”

“And I think it best for you to abandon what’s lost. Family is family, to a degree. She’ll be safe. Trust me.”

The last words echoed in the tunnels like a forgotten hymn, bouncing violently off the walls and assaulting our ears. Trust was such a foreign concept to any of us, especially coming from someone as mysterious as Dacien Ransom. I nodded slowly, realizing the futility in this fight. I could walk out, or be carried out. What would I choose?

The answer seemed simple to me at the time.

I started to turn away, leaving behind the only sister I’d ever have, abandoning the saviors who had kept me safe for so long...but stopped. I wheeled around on a heel and landed a punch to Irish’s jaw, much to her surprise and amazement. She staggered, but did not fall, which would have disappointed me. I locked eyes with Dacien and stepped closer.

“I’ve never trusted you, and that’s something that goes beyond you or me. And if you want to remove my sanctuary from a place where I always belonged, to a place that I gave blood and service for the past few years, you’re going to have to carry me out, because I’m not going to leave like this. Riley and I should at least be granted the chance to talk, to allow our differences to sort themselves out. Our blood laws supersede that of any adopted family of sorts down here, any bonds of friendship, and any loyalty to purpose. Either you allow me time with my true family, or I take it from you.”

Dacien seemed to contemplate the odds. Myself, already battered and injured, against the four of them, assuming they all were up for this fight. Dusk could make due with some rest and I couldn’t envision Riley standing toe to toe with me. That left Dacien and Irish – both very formidable foes. During this entire negotiation, I had my eyes locked on Riley’s, unsure of my decision, but realizing that taking the chance was more important than giving up right now. I had to show her I could try, that I wasn’t afraid to commit to her, and give it everything I had. But Dacien knew something that Irish and Riley did not. We were both carrying children, so this battle could end badly on more than one level. Would she take my bluff, or would she back down? Dacien Ransom never backed down, never gave in, and never admitted defeat. Weakness just wasn’t a word in her vocabulary. She was pleased with herself for one reason or another, as a smile snuck across her lips.

“So be it.”

From there, I took a hard blow to the back of the head immediately, landing on the ground. I rolled over as quickly as I could, hearing the object slam down again mere inches from my head. Irish was swinging what appeared to be a pipe, calculating each attack slowly. The first blow had thrown off my balance, making quick doubles of the participants, but I had to carry on. I rolled up and attacked her full on, attempting to wrench the pipe from her hand. The moment it

came loose though, I heard steps behind me and realized Dacien had joined the fray.

The first few seconds were a series of successful dodges, weaving between the two to grab a few good hits from time to time. The longer I fought though, the harder it became, as they started to land more and more hits on me. I remember Riley's voice ringing out, though what she was saying I didn't know. I took another painful shot to the head and hit the ground, though I remember attempting to get up from there. Seconds dragged on into painful minutes, blurred by blood and pain as I tried uselessly to find my feet. I could see a third figure joining the group, which by voice I knew to be Riley, but what she was doing I couldn't be sure. The last image I could make out before my eyes closed was Riley trying to pull Irish and Dacien away from me, both of them decently bloody but still victorious. I blinked a few times, trying to regain focus and failing miserably.

You can walk out, or you can be carried out. I choose to go down fighting.

And I don't regret it for an instant.

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## **17. The Drowning Raven**

The shower was a blessing and a curse, soothing every ache while lighting them all aflame. I had nearly forgotten that I was covered in blood, as the bus trip had mostly been too dark to notice. Dacien had left me in the bathroom, assuming I'd want to clean up. I changed into a set of clean clothes, grasping onto the sink to look at myself in the mirror.

There were small gashes along my face: my lip was split at the

center. One eye was definitely black and barely open – the other almost pristine. It was a lopsided sort of beating, but I wasn't going to complain. I recalled the last time I'd seriously stared at myself in a mirror, almost another time. I was a different person, living a much different life, constantly on the move. I was serving other masters then. Now I served myself, and my child. Or that's how it would be from here on in. I smiled despite myself, slightly proud of my accomplishment. I had survived, and I had created something better from the ashes of my former self.

When I emerged, clean and more awake, Dacien was in the main room, waiting for me. She got up with a smile as I moved towards her; she was glad to see I was feeling better. She looked over her shoulder slightly, and Jekt stepped out from behind her, a sort of foolish grin on his own face. He stepped past her to where I was frozen, my eyes locked on his.

I had only started to piece together what I'd say to him when we undoubtedly crossed paths again. I had gotten as far as a greeting when all ideas faded to black. I had loved him, in my own haphazard, relentless way. But he had a life beyond mine, a child that I'd never even considered possible. For a split second, I was annoyed with his deceit, until I realized that I never bothered to question him about his family history. I hadn't bothered to ask, and he hasn't bothered to tell me. People didn't belong to Dacien as much as pledged their loyalty; as with Jekt, she allowed him to have his own life as long as she could continue hers. Once the flames of war died down, they could continue what they started long ago, but it would have to wait until then. It was a type of self-sacrifice you seldom see nowadays, with an innocent child at the center. Who had raised her these past three years? My mind was rampant with possibilities as I stood there, realizing that all the details didn't matter past this moment.

"You're looking...well." His voice seemed to choke on itself. He realized how foolish he sounded suddenly, a hand reaching up

to rub the back of his neck awkwardly. I laughed out loud, rushing forward to hug him. Dacien made no comment about the situation, and I took advantage of it.

“You jackass, I’ve missed you,” I muttered, grasping onto him tight. His body shook for a second at the initial impact, and again when I remembered the bruising all over the ribs. The abuse he’d taken...for me. The beating Dacien had put him through, to keep the secret hidden, to make everything appear authentic. I backed away instantly, feeling all the more foolish for causing him so much pain. Pain that he had willingly endured on my behalf.

“It’s alright Deac, I almost forgot myself. It’s mostly healed.”

I laughed despite myself, looking at the both of them. A rough pair, haggard and weary, but they seemed at peace together, their inner intensity calmed in each other’s presence.

“Tell me something, where do you hide a three year old for three years?”

Dacien laughed a little, kissing Jekt on the cheek.

“Anywhere and everywhere. Usually in plain sight. Any child born into this sort of crew becomes everyone’s child, thus everyone helped raise her. She’s been left in the custody of all manner of street demon, every sort of madman and murderer conceivable – and she’ll be better for it in the long run. Soon she’ll be our charge, and ours alone though.”

I nodded slowly, realizing how much sense it made. With so many people running around, willing to run errands for the boss, it was entirely possible. I almost felt like a fool for missing it sooner, but such was the state of things.

“Well what are we waiting for, I think we could all use a drink.”

Jekt's mouth frowned slightly, looking at both of us worriedly.

"I don't know about you two, but I intend to have a drink or three. It might be better if you two kept it to water for a few more months. Don't worry, I can drink enough for the three of us." He smiled wide, proud of his tolerance. Dacien shot him a daring glance.

"We'll see about that."

I was going to fight him on the decision, realizing how entirely positive he was on the issue. I hadn't even thought twice of the abuse my body had been putting itself through, realizing that I was harboring another life that needed to be coddled and nurtured. Dacien seemed to admit the same thing, almost depressing in its truth; we were both in mother bear mode now. Our single purpose right now would be to protect our cubs while they grew inside, taking every precaution. Despite the stark reality check, I found myself just as eager to hit the bar anyway. There was more than just drinking at our old home, and some familiar faces might help the mood.

With a few more casual laughs to lighten things up, we left for the bar, hoping to bury all past debts and start from scratch. The war of the clans had ended, Dacien was the reigning Queen, and we were all at peace with our madness. There were no manic murderers loose on the streets anymore, no more random attacks, things had settled better than we could have ever perceived at the start.

There's this theory about chess that I always respected, and slightly envied. They say that a top player, someone of unparalleled skill, can envision every move on the board before they happen. They can see every possibility, every variant, every outcome of the game after their first motion. Through that single decision, they can learn the outcome of the match. I like to think of Dacien Ransom as a gifted chess

player. Years ago she set into motion a great series of wheels, involving everyone in the community. The war had burned over, her brother was murdered, a series of unspeakable events happened. People lived and died on her watch, but she never blinked, and never faltered. She always maintained control. It was only after this much time had passed, and countless people had died, that we realized that her goal along wasn't power, but peace. She needed to control all the elements in order to bring them together.

The ends justify the means, or so she had convinced herself all these years that innocent blood spilt. Seeing the peace that had finally settled, begrudgingly, it all made sense now. She had set everything up from the start. She had her eye on the Queen from the start and had calculated every possible move to reach her. Now the true question was this:

Who would replace our Queen?

The streets never went without a Leader, there needed to be someone to call the shots and keep everyone in some sort of order. If she left to follow her fairy tale ending, someone would need to take control from there. I was curious, but I decided to just follow along, the oblivious observer, and let everything fall into place.

We reached the bar to find nothing changed. Bands still played, the less enlightened still flocked to them, and Irish still tended bar. She didn't even look up as we entered, almost expectant of our coming. We sat at the bar in a row, as calm and collected as anyone would expect. She rolled her eyes to size me up slowly, recognizing my face, piecing together the memories.

"Didn't I ban you from this place?"

Dacien shot her an accusatory glance. "Come now Irish, we're all here to have a good time, let's not go spoiling it."

She shrugged slightly, setting a bottle down by Jekt and sliding us each a glass. "If you insist, Boss."

The last word seemed to drown in resentment and anger, a sort of respectful nod to Dacien's position and how ill-begotten it was. Dacien didn't let it bother her in the slightest, smiling in return.

"You know you don't have to call me that, I'd actually prefer if you didn't. Come on, take a glass, we're celebrating."

Irish's eyes settled back to me, the black-and-blue bruises all over my face. "Funny way to celebrate, you girls have. Seen better days have you Deacon?" She climbed over the bar in a bound, settling down on the stool next to me. She leaned over the edge for a clean glass. I nodded at her in response, running my fingertip around the top of the glass.

"You win some, you lose some. You seem to be doing alright Irish."

She nodded in agreement, reaching to take the bottle from Jekt. "A lot less trouble without you lot running around, I tell you that. Took a bit to get people back after Dacien here shot up the joint. Which by the way, thanks." She shot Dacien a vicious glance, which lasted only a second as she smiled around her glass. Dacien smiled in response.

"You know me Irish, can't show up without some sort of fanfare. Besides, you know it was good for business. Everyone wanted to see the scene, somehow become part of the story."

Irish shrugged. "True enough. Still wish you hadn't broken so many glasses, it was murder cleaning that up."

Dacien laughed and topped off Irish's glass, glad to find at least a lukewarm reception. Jekt was quiet in his own corner, which was typical for him. It was always best to leave him to his thoughts.

“Aw, I’ll make it up to you somehow,” Dacien paused, the bottle in hand, staring into her empty glass, resting it on the counter. Irish watched her methodically, noticing that neither her nor I were drinking. She stored that fact away in her mind somewhere, resolving to make sense of it later.

“So what’s the occasion, Miss Ransom? You seldom ever grace me with your company anymore, so busy keeping your kingdom at peace.”

“Well, that’s the point of it. I’m leaving my kingdom.”

Irish had been leaning back on her stool until then, crashing back to the ground and swallowing her drink with a cough. “Excuse me?”

Dacien’s eyes gave away nothing. She showed nothing to any of us, staring ahead at the mirror behind the bar. In it, she could see the entire room, all the people carrying on casual conversations. I could envision those people diving under tables, scrambling for the door as shots rang out. I remembered vividly the bodies dropping as blood snaked its way across the floor. The confused look on my brother’s face. The pain and screaming. Dacien had been there too. She had orchestrated the scene. And it had been the final blow in her personal attack on me.

“It’s time someone else took over.”

Irish leaned over me to speak into Dacien, to keep attention to a minimum. “You can’t just leave, you know that. Nobody just retires, least no Ransom does. Your family doesn’t know what it means to quit, they don’t understand...”

Dacien cut in. “They didn’t understand. Past tense. They do now. Peace has been achieved, now I must merely leave it with someone capable of keeping it. Congratulations Irish.”

Irish poured another drink and downed half of it without

thinking twice. She looked around the bar, her home, her haven, realizing what Dacien was offering her. Complete control of the street demons, restoring the balance of power to where it belonged; she tried to analyze Dacien's words in her mind piece by piece.

"Do you realize what you're saying here? What you're leaving behind?"

Dacien nodded slowly. "It's yours if you'll take it. I'd trust it to nobody else."

Irish laughed, long and hard at that. She was amazed at how far things had come, how distorted things had become along the way.

"All the people who have died in this war, between your side and mine. All the bodies we're buried, the innocent lives lost...and once you've won, you want to hand it back to me? It's just sort of funny how things work out."

"It was always supposed to work that way. A lot of good people who weren't supposed to die did, thus complicating things. A lot of people thought dead seem to endlessly return. I'm sorry for the cost Irish, but I'd hoped that you'd understand."

Irish nodded, consenting to Dacien's explanation. Yes, a lot of people had died, but they now had peace to show for it. And Dacien was returning it to the rightful keepers of it. Irish would accept, as she was destined to. After surviving everything else, she was the only one qualified to manage things efficiently and ruthlessly. Which was the way you had to run things.

And so the transition occurred simply – on a typical night at a familiar bar over a few drinks; two old enemies, now long time allies would forge the new order. And I had merely stood by as the witness to the accord. Should any accident befall Dacien or Jekt before their departure, I was the only one who

would know this conversation had occurred. I was their witness to the testimony of both parties. Should any violence erupt, I was their security blanket. I was almost upset for being used in such a way, but realizing all that both players had done for me in their lives, I let go.

We passed a few more hours with Irish, talking about better days and tying up her time, until she left us to tend to customers. We had moved to a table by then to free up some bar space and draw less attention, as there were always watchers in the crowd. There were always third parties interested in your side of things, trying to find information they could sell or souls they could steal. One way or another, there was always more going on than you initially thought. And we liked to keep it that way.

Distraction is the greatest invention of mankind, and without such an amazing tool, we'd have nothing to hide our geniuses with.

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## **16. Reception**

A long trip seems infinitely longer when every inch of your body aches. No matter what position I curled myself into it made sleeping impossible. There were just too many questions, too many unsolved issues along the way. Who the hell was Angyl Hunter and what reason did she have to beat me nearly senseless on the street? How did Seven find herself amidst all this madness and handle it without even the slightest uncertainty? Had Marco survived the accident? Hyde and Damiano? The more names I put into my mind, the less sense any of it made. I decided to just wipe the slate clean and leave all business relating to my new life upstate. Right now I had

to speak to Dacien, I had to put the old life back together one last time.

If you don't learn from the past, you're doomed to repeat it. I was getting really tired of getting beaten senseless for being the slow one at the party. And I wouldn't tolerate it anymore. Or so I kept telling myself. Dacien had allowed me my chance, my peace of mind, and I would have it. I'd left her city – I hadn't bothered with any of the details that could affect her life or her business. But here I was, still entirely dependent on her somehow. She owned me, in her own way, and she knew it. I could almost envision the smile creeping across her lips as the bus slipped through the night, grinding into the station as the sun crept wearily over the horizon.

Home.

Or was it?

Perhaps home was nowhere, and this was merely a distinct memory of another time and place. Another person. Another life. Perhaps.

It was nice to think about. To wonder if perhaps all my greatest sins had been committed by someone else. All my fallen friends weren't really fallen, but on prolonged vacation. But no matter how hard I tried to lie to myself, I never could sing myself to sleep at night with such deceit.

The bus was mostly empty, so I didn't have many people to fight through as I crept off. My bag slung across my back, I returned to solid ground apprehensively. I looked up at the bench, finding a figure sitting there, waiting patiently. They got up off the bench slowly, moving towards me with a sort of sinister step I recognized immediately. She reached over my shoulder to carry my bag for me, a small smile slipping across her lips.

“Welcome home, Deacon.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Dacien,” I responded, a small hint of irony in my voice.

She started down the street, and I fell into step at her side. I was much too tired for questions and simple concerns, so I was prepared to follow her wherever she deemed necessary. We walked in silence until we reached a building from my more dormant memories, an apartment complex hidden in shadows against larger buildings. She led the way, motioning for me to follow. This had been her brother’s safe haven when he was alive, the place where I’d come to murder him. I shook off the memories and carried on, eager only for a soft bed.

After moving up countless stairs, we finally came to rest at the familiar apartment of Linkon Ransom, may he rest in peace; or as much peace as a soulless bastard like that can find in Hell. I shuffled in past her, dropping into the first chair I could find. She moved further in, leaving my bag in a room tucked away from the door.

“Anything to eat? I set up a bed for you, I’m sure you’re beat.” Her tone was neutral, revealing nothing. I tried to figure out what she wanted or needed from me. Dacien Ransom’s kindness never came at a reasonable price. I shook my head slowly. She seemed to think about something suddenly, running off. She returned with a first aid kit she flipped open immediately, reaching out to take hold of my chin.

“Dacien...why...” I muttered. Suddenly the travel and grime caught up to me, leaving pleasantries at the door. She had started to douse cuts with alcohol, her hand locked on my chin despite the constantly grimacing. Her eyes locked with mine, a cold, empty gaze I remembered distinctly, but with a new sort of flame to it.

“What’s done is done, Deacon. Our business is past. You’ve come here for help, which I am offering you. I’m proud of you

actually.”

I laughed a bit, despite myself. “So does that mean you won’t shoot me this time?”

She turned the idea over in her mind a few times, considering it. “I don’t know if I’d go that far just yet.” She smiled slowly, the usual evil grin, but ended it with a chuckle. “Not unless you give me reason to.”

I nodded slowly, slightly relaxed. One survived longer in the world if they remembered to never drop their guard, especially around someone as dangerous as Dacien Ransom. She concluded her alcohol treatment, then moving on to bandages.

“Well, that’s the best I’m able to do tonight, though it might not be a bad idea to see a proper doctor. I’m sure you’d rather rest for awhile before we get down to any serious talking.”

I nodded slowly, picking myself up from the chair. My ribs were on fire, which Dacien could tell by my motions. She helped me to the bedroom, the weariness suddenly overwhelming. I collapsed on the edge of the bed, my fingers wrapping around the edge to keep balanced.

“Dacien...” I started. She turned on her way out. “Thank you, for everything.”

She smiled slightly, nodding her consent. Without another word she left, leaving me to my rest. I don’t know what had brought around her sudden change in attitude, whether she had outgrown the maliciousness I knew she was capable of, or there was some ulterior motive. One way or another, it was too much to consider right now, and I allowed sleep to take over.

I slept until well into the afternoon, waking up with a start. Pain was familiar and suddenly stronger, requiring twice the energy to pull myself up in the bed. I had been conscious for

a mere few minutes when Dacien returned, almost on cue.

“Sleep well?”

I nodded slowly, still struggling to sit upright without wincing. She sat herself on a chair nearby, trying to assess the damage I was recovering from.

“Angyl Hunter sends her regards,” I whispered, finding my center. She nodded knowingly, seemingly expectant of my words.

“So how is old Angyl these days? I lost track of her after her sudden death some time ago. She never could just stay down, could she?”

I replayed the line in my head slowly. “Death, but...”

Dacien laughed a little. “People like us die often. It’s part of surviving. In order to carry on and fight another day we need to disappear and start fresh a few times. Death is the best, and tentatively most permanent, escape of all. I’m glad to hear Angyl’s well.”

“She races motorcycles and beats up younger contenders for fun mostly.”

Dacien smiled wider. “Sounds like her. She the one that roughed you up?”

I nodded slowly. “What did I ever do to her?”

“Nothing. And she intends to keep it that way. Consider it a sort of reminder to keep your mouth shut when you return to town. Angyl wants to remain hidden, and works very hard to remain so. Everyone here is convinced she’s dead and she hopes to remain dead. If you tell anyone else what you told me, it would destroy her new life. Understand?”

“What was she talking about, with the baby? How does she know?”

Dacien took awhile to consider her answer her, equally confused as to Angyl's source of information. "You said she races. Do you have a personal relationship with any of the racers?"

Suddenly it clicked, and Dacien saw it happen in my eyes. Caine. Caine would have reported my illness to Angyl, confused and afraid. Angyl would have recognized all the signs instantly. I felt foolish for not putting those pieces together sooner. Dacien smiled slowly.

"I don't understand what's going on here."

"Let me show you something then."

Dacien got up slowly and rustled in a dresser a few feet away, pulling out a neatly maintained folder. Returning to me, she laid it across her lap slowly. She handed a picture across to me of a child, innocent and free, a slightly sinister grin creeping across her face. Her eyes seemed to pierce my very being though, a familiarity that I couldn't deny. A little girl, about three, she had her arm wrapped around another little girl of equal intensity. It's hard to imagine children being so deep at such a young age, but their ancestry demanded it. I let my fingertips slide over the surface of the image slowly. Dacien leaned over slowly to point.

"That there, is Morrison Lazarus. She's mine."

I racked my brain for the name, trying to figure out whom I had known, if anyone, with such a last name. Dacien seemed to enjoy my confusion, allowing me a few seconds more to contemplate the possibilities. The other child I ignored as best as I could for now, knowing without knowing whom it was. Dacien handed me a piece of paper, folded meticulously. I unfolded a birth certificate, pristine and fresh.

Morrison Lazarus, born October 31, 20\_\_ to Miss Dacien Ransom and Mister Jekt Lazarus. Jekt. My old love, my warm embrace,

my refuge. Dacien's satisfaction nearly oozed from her pores. She had picked up where I left off. After destroying my life, she'd let Riley keep Dusk and moved on to Jekt, making absolutely sure that my life was better without me in it. Nobody died since I left town and everyone seemed happier. I turned the picture around slowly, finding a date and description scrawled on the back in what had to be Dacien's elegant hand.

Morrison Lazarus and Doryn Ransom, age 3.

I flipped it around instantly, staring wide-eyed at the image again. The child, my child – her knowing eyes, her dark smile. She was a perfect replica of myself, housing only slight features of her demon father, long since dead. I stared up at Dacien, lost and confused. I didn't know whether to apologize or explain, though there was so little to say.

"Dacien, I..."

She waved a hand dismissively. "I don't expect an apology. I'd actually like to thank you for allowing her a chance."

"I thought she'd be better off with a fresh start, free of all of us."

Dacien smiled warmly, though a twinge of guilt tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Which was noble of you. However, Ransoms will always find one another, and naturally she's Morrison's best little school friend. For the time being. Perhaps they'll outgrow each other, but I doubt it. I intend to move away from here in the long run anyway, give Morrison a proper chance to grow up without the madness. And she'll have a more important job to do soon enough."

I raised an eyebrow curiously, unsure of her allusion. She cleared her throat abruptly, shaking my mind up.

"How far along are you? A few weeks? Something we both have in

common.”

I coughed slightly, amazed at what I was hearing. The lioness herself, the most dangerous woman I'd ever known, was pregnant? Again? I couldn't figure out how I'd not heard about the first child, but then again I had tried my damndest to keep myself out of Dacien Ransom's clutches for some time. Guilt took as I thought of all the nights I spent with Jekt, while his daughter was hidden away in the world. Maybe that was part of it though? Dacien scripted every step of the dance, nothing was done without purpose; with her position in the world, a child would be a target, and she knew it. Years after Linkon's death, with the war concluded and power established – she could rest easier now. Her children would inherit the business, if she allowed it. Which, from the tone of this conversation, it seemed she didn't want to.

“Boy or girl?” I found myself curious, fighting to deal with the sudden reality of the past 24 hours. She wasn't surprised in the slightest.

“Girl. The women are taking over. I want to take them away from here, with Jekt, and have a proper family, the kind people like us only read about. I want them to have a chance and a future vastly different from the one we had. Your child deserves that chance too, and you know it. There's nothing more for you to run from, Deacon.”

“Where will you go?”

She pondered the question for a moment, debating whether or not it was safe to tell me. “Your part of the woods seems pretty popular for people escaping their big city pasts, might consider heading that way. It's always nice to have some friends in town.”

“My daughter, Doryn...”

Her smile got severe for a moment. “And my niece? She's

settled into a nice foster family with proper values. I cannot force her out of such a peaceful lifestyle. Maybe in later years I can be of some assistance to her, but she needs to experience life as a child, pure and simple first, without people like us to cloud things up.”

I nodded my consent. As much as I felt the villain for abandoning my child, I had to let her live her life. She would never recover if I tried to pull her back now; I had to let go. And as much as I’d turned tail and run three years ago, I missed her everyday despite the lies I told myself to get to sleep at night. I had done what was best for her, as I was entirely unfit to parent anything back then, but it didn’t make my maternal longings any weaker. Yet, I had a new chance, which Dacien was trying to draw my closed-minded attention to, and I had to make the best of it. Another child, a fresh start – one I could settle down and raise with Caine, like a proper family. Assuming we could establish a proper setting when I returned.

“He will accept you back, you know,” Dacien whispered, seeming to read my mind. She’d been following my puzzled expression for some time.

“I know. I just wish he didn’t have to.”

“What we wish and what we have are never one and the same, my dear. You of all people should know that.” She got up with a sort of hop, collecting her paperwork into the folder and replacing it in the dresser. “Rest some more, shower perhaps, and if you’d like we can go down to the bar and catch up with old friends before you head back.”

“Back?”

She moved towards the door, her hand resting on the handle. “I’ve got you a return trip booked for tomorrow night. You wouldn’t want to let things fester with Caine too long, and besides, you have some planning to do I’d hope.”

She clicked the door quietly closed behind her, leaving me on the edge of the bed even more confused than before. Who was that and what happened to the Dacien Ransom of ruthless times I'd known before? Why was everyone having children? What had the world come to? Questions seemed to multiply at a mile a minute, but no matter what came through my mind, only one thing seemed to click.

No matter what, it was all going to be okay, one way or another.

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## **15. As Our Players Reveal Themselves**

I arrived on the scene as simply as anyone else, parking several blocks away and walking the rest of the way as casually as I could. Whether the cops knew about our activities and simply chose to turn a blind eye, or they were involved, I didn't want to know. But the streets were clear of activity, save for the slow roll of the fog as it surrounded the scene. I came up behind the crowd as quietly as I could, the racers lounging on their bikes by the starting line.

At the forefront was Marco, his smile wide, his eyes searching. Damiano, his unofficial girl, would be in the farthest depths of the crowd, hidden well amongst the gypsies. Their differing social classes kept them apart for the time being. Marco would have to exercise his rights as leader, prove his authority, before he could cross borders predetermined. It made sense. You had to convince the people that you were capable of your post before you were permitted to make use of all of your executive powers.

I caught Hyde's eye, perched at the front of the crowd, failing in his attempts to appear nonchalant. His gaze shifted nervously, moving throughout the crowd. Someone needed to teach that lad the art of subtlety; as his eyes locked on Damiano, the tension became clear. The girl had the man she loved out of heart, and the one she loved out of need. Marco kept her safe and alive, in a manner of speaking. Betraying him could end badly. I almost laughed at myself, at the boys, at how obvious everything was in their eyes. But now was not the time or place. Or what it? I knew so little about Hyde that something about his longing made him all the more...human in my mind. It was easier to accept him into my world as a person with real needs and desires. I could respect him all the more as a man, thinking less of him as an axe-wielding madman. His quiet demeanor and constant attention to detail worried me at first, setting off a sort of paranoia when I first met him. But here, seeing the way his eyes melted at the sight of her, the danger faded away and he was as possessed as any love struck teenager.

It almost amazed me that I was able to pick up on that slight niche of Hyde's personality. It was a familiar gleam though, a gleam Brie had carried with her everywhere she went. The sort of hope and optimism that one rarely sees; I was able to relate to the dreamer in his soul. He was hoping against hope for something impossible, no – improbable. Nothing was truly impossible for the man willing to toil for it, willing to suffer and bleed for it. And Hyde was not scared of pain of any kind.

Damiano Sera Morrow. I knew her mostly by reputation, from the stories that Caine had told me about her. I had never been formally introduced, nor did I ever expect to be. She was the love of every man bold enough to lay on eyes on her, but very few were granted the chance to get close enough to know her. She walked in a way that made you wonder if she touched the ground at all, her eyes deep and brilliant. She seemed to have

a deeper soul within that could weigh yours for its worth, assessing the importance of her inner circle of confidants. There was a beauty to her though that was beyond words, hidden in her silent sadness. A purity lost in the suggestion of anything else.

Watching the racers assemble, I tried to resume normal breathing functions. I wished that Caine would appear by my side, but when I realized how he would play into my mental state I changed my mind. Seeing him might only complicate matters, and I was trying to avoid that at all costs. Right now I needed to relax and resume my place in the proper circle of life. Even amidst an eager crowd, hopeful to watch someone careen to a painful end, I found myself empty and uncertain. Why had Seven chosen me as her messenger? Who gave her the information she held deep behind her darkened visor? Nobody knew the truth. Not even Dacien could be sure. I had spoken to nobody from back home, hid my story from Caine, and left no written record of my story minus this. Which, even before her accusation I had never kept a concrete copy of it. I racked my mind for possibilities.

The shopkeeper I'd bought a test from, the only possible clue in the chain. It'd been a young woman, a bit older than myself. She had dark and clever eyes, reminiscent of a huntress, but I paid no mind as I tried to shift myself out of the place as quickly as possible. I had no idea who she was, and I'd never seen her since that day. Could she be of some relation to Seven, and even so, what did I have to do with any of this? My mind continued in vicious circles for hours on end, leaving me finally frustrated.

So one mystery begot another unknown. The cycle perpetuated itself and I was left with no answers. I decided I needed to return to the city. There were connections there, possible sources of wisdom that might be able to turn the world off its head. Or so I hoped. There was only so much help to be had, so much to hope for.

And would Dacien come to my aid yet again?

Three years had passed since I was raped on a dark, cold night I'd sooner forget. Three years since I conceived and birthed a child sired by evil itself. I couldn't destroy a life based on the grounds it was created on; the child was mine no matter how I considered it. I had granted her a name, Doryn Ransom, named for her father's lineage, and let her loose upon the world. With a strong, bold name like Ransom, I prayed that her pack would find her and care for her, that she would return to Dacien. And perhaps she had. Perhaps that's how the truth had slipped out, and it just took a few years for things to relay this far. But how had the information passed to Seven? And what became of the child I had abandoned so long ago; convinced that no upbringing I could offer it would be even remotely responsible?

I shook the confusion off, deciding it was better to deal with such things when I returned to the city. There was more to be considered and I'd have a nice long bus ride to do it in. The race kicked off with an abrupt start and I became one of many cheering fans.

You must love yourself before you can love others, right? And three years ago, young and clueless, I was well beyond the self-loving limits.

Who were we cheering for, and why? Whoever was bold enough to finish the race. Races weren't just about speed or style, they were about survival; a sort of fistfight in motion. Our warriors in the lead, the Wicked, needed to maintain their positions while others took wild swings at them. It was an unofficial team sport of sorts, with the Wicked rotating winners from race to race. If memory served correctly, it was Marco's night to shine.

Except his bike started acting up in the first few turns. We stood at a safe distance, watching the nightmare unfurl. When

riders careen around corners at around 80 mph mere feet from you though, safety becomes an illusion.

Around corner four, things were definitely in the red. He pulled through the corner, barely, relying heavily on his feet to make the bike react. It was pitching and tossing, but old Marco was too stubborn to quit. He didn't understand what it meant to lose. Looking through the crowd, it was then that the grin caught my eye. Damiano's gaze, locked on Marco's faulty bike, she seemed entirely dependent on it. Almost as if a spell were at work, she muttered to herself, her eyes never leaving the machine.

Even as it kicked for the last time, coming around the final corner, colliding with a telephone pole. The machine crumpled instantly, becoming a pretzel of steel and plastic. Tiny shards were tossed everywhere as the explosion stole the attention of the onlookers, now satisfied with their pound of flesh. Marco himself was thrown entirely airborne, landing with a sickening thud a good few yards away, only to bounce and roll a few times more before reaching a final position that resembled what had been his bike.

I felt my jaw drop, cool air rushing down my throat to remind me to breath. The event had all happened in a matter of seconds. Marco's twisted form was soon joined by another – the secondary male running down the road towards him. Seven continued on, battling other racers, trying to find who got the most enjoyment out of the wreck. The secondary continued as well, parallel with Seven, hoping to find a culprit to blame. The crowd formed a semi circle around the scene, all craning for a look but none bold enough to venture forth. The racer in front of me slid down into the grass as quickly as possible, screaming at the top of his lungs to rouse Marco's attention. It took a few more seconds for things to start clicking in my mind, but the voice was undeniable.

Caine.

As if he could sense my presence, the helmet was peeled off his head and tossed aside, his eyes instantly locking on my own. Suddenly, his disappearances made all the more sense. His lack of information on the topic almost felt like a betrayal of trust, but it was nothing compared to the darker secret I held in my soul. I kept my frustration masked, allowing him to think I was upset with his simple deceit. It was actually a perfect cover to go back to the city with. Make him think I was angry with him, he'd ask less questions. Might spend a few days kicking himself too hard in the ass, but it couldn't he helped. I slowly closed my jaw, trying to assess the facts in front of me, finding myself unable to do so.

And like clockwork, Damiano started to depart the track, intently and casually. She had been waiting for this solitary moment, and with it, brought her freedom. Marco's possession of her would end...assuming he didn't survive. Considering his condition, chances were definitely grim, but nonetheless, it was a gamble of sorts. I smiled a bit despite myself, also turning away from the scene and taking a few steps back.

The injury, or possible death, or Marco Marek had nothing to do with me, so I did my best to remove myself from the situation. I had my own issues to resolve, and resolve them I would. The race would be ending early, as the other two females wouldn't want to seem heartless for continuing on without their comrades. I had taken a few steps away when the twin bikes skidded to a halt in front of me. Seven sat back on hers, calm and collected, despite what had been an emotionally trying run. Or so one would assume. The other racer pulled her helmet off slowly, careful of the cracked visor, shards of glass jagged in corners of her face. I had never met her either, and finding my luck hysterical, I thought I'd wait a second to do so.

Her eyes were cold and calculating, which I hadn't entirely expected. Even as warm blood dripped down her cheek, she seemed completely bored with the situation. Pain didn't seem

to phase her, nor the terrible situation of her teammate. I knew better than to question such people, and was going to turn away when something seemed shockingly familiar. The eyes. Cold and clever. Like there was a sort of deviousness hidden within that I couldn't understand. Like a shopkeeper from long ago who had been the only other person who knew my secret. Eyes that radiated ice and sin, stealing your secrets from within; she smiled slowly at me, taking a step off the bike.

"I was curious if you could be of some help," she started, her tone relaxed. "You had a good seat there on the sidelines, and I hear you're a good observer of sorts. I was a bit curious if you saw anything unusual during the race, so we could figure out what happened."

I shrugged as casually as I could. "Accidents happen."

She smiled wider, grinning with sharp teeth in return. "True. And if the bike hadn't exploded so suddenly, I'd almost believe you." She started to step towards me slowly, forcing me to step away from her, away from the crowd, away from witnesses. She kept moving until my back slammed against a wall, leaving me mere inches from her inquiry. I had to give her something, and she knew I would, it was just a matter of time.

"It seemed to be malfunctioning from the start..." I whispered, unsure why this stranger seemed to have a fascination with me. She nodded politely.

"And I'd agree with you. Did you notice anyone watching a bit too closely? Anyone leave the scene a bit too fast?"

I thought about things slowly. What could she do to me, realistically? She didn't know me, I didn't know her...there was no damage that could be done here on a figurative level. On a physical level, she could do whatever she wanted. But was I afraid of pain? Would a little blood really do me much harm?

Then again, why should I suffer for someone I don't even know? Damiano Morrow is not of any relevance to me so suffering for her didn't seem like one of my more brilliant ideas.

To do what is right, or to do what is easy?

My new stranger's patience had apparently worn thin. She nodded with a slight chuckle then slammed her fist into my stomach with a thud. I felt my body vibrate against the wall's surface, gasping in shock momentarily.

"Contrary to what everyone else says, I actually enjoy hurting people, Deacon. Either you can tell me what you saw, or I can keep convincing you. Your call. But I wouldn't want to hurt the baby."

Now my head really started spinning.

I tried to piece together the few key points of her statement. How did she know my name? Who was this madwoman? And baby? I wasn't carrying any...

Or was I?

I started to do math in my mind, count days, figure out the last time I'd been with Caine, the last time...dizziness took over. I'd been sick for a few weeks now, but I hadn't thought twice about it. Settling into a new life with a severe change of pace must have upset my inner balance, or so I had convinced myself. It was entirely possible. It was entirely probable. But how would she know? Who the hell was this person?

As if to answer my mental ranting, she laid another thud into my ribs, then a second hit across the face. I staggered a little then went down. Seven had moved closer to shield the scene from any curious passerby. I tried to stumble up onto my feet, but the assault continued, leaving me battered on the ground in seconds. Each blow was calculated and precise,

energy balled into specific pain targets. She knew what she wanted and would not take no for an answer. When I could no longer breathe comfortably, I coughed Damiano's name.

I'm sorry Miss Morrow, but your life isn't worth mine.

You can fight your own battles.

My attacker stopped, satisfied. She knelt down to where I lay on the ground, curled up and covered in blood. She smiled slightly despite herself, leaning to hand me a mostly clean rag to mop my face off with.

"You do me another favor, will you? You tell Dacien that Miss Angyl Hunter sends her regards. I'm sure she'll be glad to hear it."

I coughed up some blood, nodding slowly, and Angyl walked away. How she figured into the bigger picture, I don't know. I didn't care if I never figured it out. I had survived my encounter with her, and would hope it was the last such encounter I ever had. Seven had remained, despite Angyl's madness, waiting to help me to my feet.

"She wasn't kidding about the baby. You should tell Caine soon, before he gets himself hurt or something."

She wrapped an arm around my shoulders, letting me lean on her, and walked me back to the hotel where I'd found permanent residency at Gus' insistence. I had a mind full of questions, desperate for answers, but a body too weary to handle any of the hard work. She helped me lay down on the bed, and proceeded to pack a bag for me. I leaned up slightly to catch her at work, finding everything with relative ease.

"Am I going somewhere?" I choked. She seemed startled, almost forgetting I was there at all. She turned around abruptly, an apology on her face.

"Ah, well, you were going back to the city weren't you? To

find answers? I figured it'd be best if you got out of town while things are hectic, nobody will notice. And it'd be a good time to get away."

I nodded quietly, agreeing with her logic, but wishing I had time enough for some rest to restore my energy. Bruises were starting to form, and my face felt like a horribly destroyed melon of some kind. When Seven had me packed, she helped me back downstairs and all the way to the bus station. Settling me down onto a bench, I grabbed hold of her arm.

"Why are you doing all of this?"

She blinked, going over her rehearsed answers in her mind, trying to decide on the one to tell me today. I refused to let her leave until I got something substantial, which she seemed to understand by my gesture. She sat next to me slowly, staring into space.

"Because everybody needs a little help. Even the rebel cries, the demons were once angels, and everyone deserves a second or third chance. The outcasts stick together, no matter the climate. And with a history like yours in that city, you think someone didn't tell the big dogs up here what kind of monster was being unleashed in town? We've always known your back story Deacon, but we were advised to observe only. Unless things were severe."

"Severe?"

She seemed to frown slightly, regretting speaking so much. "An innocent life must be preserved at all costs. If you go back and cause trouble, you will be putting it at risk. We needed to prove to you that which you're denying. We needed you to act responsibly. You have a chance for a happy ending, one that very few of us get in our prospective lines of work. We expect you to take it."

I nodded slowly in response, analyzing her words. When I left

the city, Dacien had contacted them with my case history. How did Dacien know anyone this far north? Such a question was wasted, as I knew Dacien had power everywhere. Her legacy knew no bounds, or so it seemed. Seven remained silent for the rest of my wait, staying with me until the bus pulled into the station. It was just as the doors closed behind me that I realized the scene I was leaving behind.

Right behind the bench I sat on was Damiano, clutching Hyde's arm. She seemed to be trying to hide within him, but to no avail. As I boarded the bus and Seven turned around, she locked eyes on the pair. And suddenly, things started to click into place. I could feel the wicked grin slip across her face, almost imagining her starting a friendly conversation with them. All that before the rage took over and everything faded to black. I settled into a seat as best as I could, counting down the hours until I'd be in familiar stomping grounds.

I hope you kids can fight, because running isn't any sort of an option.

Sweet dreams.

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## **14. Against Your Faith**

I ended up spending a lot of time with Caine. After a fashion, I came to move in with him. A kid I knew from back in the city lived next door. We'd both come to escape. He'd been here for a while. Seems he was a friend of Caine's. We all just called him Hyde – he kept pretty much himself to himself, but he had a schizophrenic tendency to him. It's hard to explain, but it was there. In terms of living together, he didn't bother me much and I didn't bother him. If I remembered correctly, he had lived in the same building as I had and was a regular at

the bar. Then again, I could have been confusing him with someone else. My memories are kind of shady anymore. Just like everything else in my mind.

I'm not going to go into detail about the months between my arrival and now because nothing of import happened. I settled, got a job at the local bar here, and made my new life. I played guitar with Caine whenever he could book us a gig. I was a chain smoker, but for the most part clean. I'd take a drink here and there, but nothing out of control. For the most part, things were stable. When I moved in with Caine, I was formally introduced to Hyde, whose real name was Edward. Isn't that ironic? And we all got along fine, a big happy family. I slept with Caine over the course of my stay, and once I moved in we were officially going out. Hyde didn't comment. It was a good start. A fresh point from which to start over. It all seemed perfect. So on that note, let's fast-forward a good bit.

Caine would have his moments of mystery, nights where he would disappear for hours on end. I didn't push the issue. He didn't poke and prod me about my past, so I opted out of poking and prodding him about the present. Whatever made him happy made me happy. I don't know why he felt the need for the cloak and dagger, but I wouldn't go pushing him at the moment. One of the most important elements in a relationship is trust, and I wouldn't be quick to forfeit his.

His father approached me cautious and unsure, which I expected. I was a stranger in a strange land, and he was quick to remind me of it. There was a sort of wisdom deep in Gus' soul that I couldn't entirely explain, some sort of inner turmoil buried in his eyes. I decided early on that we're all waging some sort of internal war one way or another, and we're best left to our battlements. I hoped he'd find peace with time, but he never did. Caine was his only child, and he

seemed to have tireless faith in his goodness. Caine was moral and kind, warm and patient, the kind of child that less fortunate parents would kill over.

All in all, it was a pretty surprisingly stable lifestyle. I had traded in my endless taxicabs for the quiet hum of cars cruising by, transplanted the stifling atmosphere with the pure shine of sunlight unhindered by buildings. And I was glad for it. The peace brought a sense of calm to my otherwise unbridled mind, constantly flitting from idea to idea. I was able to breath without pressure, walk without fear and survive without necessity. It was all I ever wanted without realizing it.

I missed some of my memories though. On long, lonely nights, I'd find myself longing for Jekt's warm embrace, or missing my sister's naivety on certain issues. On a very rare occasion, I could find myself remembering the cold, calculating smile of Dacien Ransom, thankful for her mercy. She had allowed me to run, and I wouldn't take it for granted for a moment. I lived right now because she made it so, and I would not easily forget it.

Almost seemed like a soothing sort of peace, the kind you read about in children's stories, the sort of calm that accompanies "happily ever after". I was content, or as close to content as a person like myself could get. Fractured and broken, I could feel the inner scars begin to slowly close as life began anew. A fresh start that most are forever deprived of.

A start that I had to lose almost everything to receive. Was the price worth it? Did the end truly justify the means? I wondered constantly if the lives ended were worth my clarity, finding myself coming up empty every time. Three good people had died so that I could live, so that I could continue to suffer and burn. Their families were emptier, their dreams dashed, so that I could carry on. And for what purpose? What greater deed would I accomplish in my years? Would I cure

cancer? Would I create something beautiful?

I tried to restrict my running mind to the simple present, to surviving each day as it came. To making new friends and finding a familiar common ground with mankind. I would find something of value to attribute to the race, one way or another. What it was, or how, I would determine along the way.

To pass the time, the local street demons, since even the forests must have their rulers of sorts, had races. Motorcycles built with sweat and blood raged and pulled, dragging fearless riders to possible glory. It was the initiation into adulthood, the final pass into the real. The bold took up their metal steeds and found a glory for themselves. The less adventurous would stand by and observe, telling great tales of their modern day marvels. Heroes in their own age, their legacy would carry on in the memories of the bystanders, eager to witness some feat of greatness. Everyone wanted to be part of something more, by act of association. Such was the state of things, and I learned to be a passive part of the cycle.

As comes with young daredevils, the motorcyclists dealt in all things I had sworn off. I tried to keep myself as distant from the physical racers as possible, swearing off any sort of trouble I couldn't tame. With every collection of people, you get a set of leaders. With the bikers, there were the Wicked.

Wicked they were in appearance and deed, speaking few and destroying any who dared oppose them. They never lost, or those bold enough to defeat them never saw the light of day. The house always won, that was the rule anywhere you went, and they went to great lengths to preserve their legacy. Epic stories had included epic battles, and they often did. The Wicked never stood down from a challenge, on bike or otherwise, and commonly found themselves the victor even in bare-knuckle brawls. I respected their pride and their power, but knew better than to get closer than a respectable

distance. With such a position no doubt came addictions, which were still too fresh for me to entirely turn away.

I kept my post at the bar, serving them quietly as they crept in after their races. The leaders were divided into two sets, the Alpha and Secondary sets. Marco Marek was the Alpha male, a brutish sort with a love of all things female, and a taste for the forbidden. His heart had been stolen by one of the gypsies – a sort of camp of outcasts on the outskirts of town that civilized folk ignored as much as possible. His Alpha female however was simply named Seven – nothing fancy or more intricate than that. No last name or true background. She kept her helmet on at all times, her identity as much a secret as the girl, letting no words pass her lips. Whether her and the boys had anything on the side, nobody knew, but nobody risked their lives whispering such blasphemy aloud.

The other two were entirely mysterious, appearing only on weekends, keeping the identities even more closely guarded. I never saw their faces or heard rumors of their true careers, figuring it was better to leave it alone. Some truths are best left covered, and I was through with my time of knowledge and power. I wanted to exist in the background, an idle passerby without a concern beyond my position. I worked the bar, played some gigs, and kept myself to myself.

Yet, such peace could not last forever.

Sometimes, misfortune sees fit to come up and tap you on the shoulder. And in true fashion, that old piano lid came slamming down when I least expected.

Another late night, another cold night without Caine's presence, I found myself cleaning up the bar alone. Everyone else had gone home and I had been trusted with keys long ago. Most of the regulars had shifted off, a few stragglers waiting for me to kick them out. There was a young girl on the far end of the bar, a collection of men at the tables in the far

corner, and myself. As the minutes ticked away, I decided to clear the tables first to get the chairs raised. The girl at the bar kept her eyes locked ahead of her, taking cool sips of a straight drink while her mind worried over something. I kept to myself, keeping the small talk to a minimum, a strange trait for my line of work. When I returned to the bar, her eyes shifted, following my actions. I felt the lock instantly, aware of her scrutiny, but I kept pace.

Another few minutes and I'd ask her to leave, or so I told myself. Another few minutes. But there was an overwhelming eeriness to her, a sort of power that I couldn't put a finger on. I kept my eyes from hers, darting as I moved down the length of the bar's gleaming surface. She seemed to smile quietly to herself, downing the rest of her drink silently. I looked up slowly, reaching forward to grasp the glass. She reached out instantly, locking her hand around my wrist, staring with ice-cold eyes deep into my own. I locked my other arm to the bar's edge closest to me, not so much frightened as unsure. Her other hand moved over the back of my hand, tracing where the nerves ran to my fingertips.

"Can I help you?" I muttered, still frozen in place. Fear was not something I had been familiar with in some time, and her sudden seizure of me brought back dark memories of the past. She seemed to smile quietly to herself, a sort of self-satisfied grin. Looking down at her arm, locked on mine, I found a series of lines, scars, scratched deep into her wrist's surface.

VII.

Seven.

The infamous. The phantom Herself, known by none, sitting here before me, locked around my wrist, as if we shared some darker purpose I was unaware of. As curious as I was, the fear suddenly faded away, as I found myself relating to her

humanity. This was a person without a name or background, without anything to chase her or hold her back. Something I desired desperately. She was everything I strove to be, and somehow, deep down, I felt like she understood that. She turned my hand over curiously, tracing over the surfaces of my palm, deep in thought in her own way. After enough time had passed, her meditation broke and she released me, leaving me exactly as she'd found me. I could feel my breath resume again, erratic and surprised despite my apparent calm.

"He loves you, you know." Her voice was soft, like a child's, but with the severity of a preacher. She seemed so sure of herself, so positive about her words that there was nothing to second guess. Her word was law, and I would be mad to attempt to argue otherwise. I nodded slowly, matching her steps as she moved down the bar.

"Who?" My voice was a whisper, almost a hiccup, but it seemed the most natural reaction I could handle.

She smiled softly, her voice lowering to a growl almost. "Caine. And it's time to tell him, before he allows his ambition to get the better of him."

I had come around the bar to meet her, my confusion obvious. "Tell him? I don't know what you're getting at, or why..."

"The baby, Deacon. You need to tell him about the child."

And an icy twinge crept up my spine. The cruel hand of fate had swept in yet again, blind and cold, robbing me of my peace. The child. The demon. The bastard. The child that I hadn't even admitted to myself existed. The demon that had grown inside of me that I couldn't bring myself to destroy, no matter my hate. Linkon's final vengeful blow. I had told no one. I barely even worded the truth out loud in the dead of night. My mind rolled over all the variables in my mind, searching for answers, trying desperately to figure out what gave this stranger any power in my world. What connections did

she possess? What did it matter to her at all? My mind was racing so fast that I almost missed the tear slipping down my cheek, shaking as she reached out to catch it.

“Don’t waste time with questions. Forge your future with answers.” She smiled slightly, leaning in to kiss on me on the cheek, and left. Her helmet clutched under her arm, she left as simply as she’d come, looking back slightly before slipping it back over her head.

I collapsed on the floor, my head in my arms, and started crying from a part of my soul long thought dead. I wept for what felt like an eternity, finding myself completely unable to piece together the bizarre events that just transpired. Questions raged a mile a minute, all of them defeated by my already battered soul, too weary and ruined to attempt any answer. As hard as I tried to focus on the truth, I realized that my denial of things wouldn’t make the truth less startling. And one way or another, I needed to face my demons. I needed to make a decision.

By the time Seven’s confrontation had paralyzed me, I thought I had moved away from that part of my life. I had guarded my secret especially well, but how long could I continue the act? When would it become too much to overcome? And how would I explain the child in the long run? I had to make decisions. I had to come up with a better option than this. And Caine. Would I follow through, would I heed her advice and tell him? Could I risk it? Would he continue to stand by my side, knowing the creature I once was? He had never bothered to ask, so I thought it safer never to tell.

Suddenly, everything I once knew came crashing down and I found myself in a stream of consciousness foreign and painful. Somehow I had come full circle. Because I had avoided the truth, I had done the single most important thing I had promised myself not to – lie. My dishonesty with myself was pushing me against the clock, skewing the odds against me. I

was granted this second chance, but the reminders from the first were still so vivid. Why couldn't I abort the child, wrought from rape and pain? Why couldn't I destroy that which belonged to he who'd destroyed my spirit? For the same reason that Dacien Ransom had let me go. There was innocence involved here. And then suddenly...things started to fall into place.

Had Dacien known? All along? Was that why she spared my life? Not because of my chance at salvation, but to harbor her unborn niece or nephew? Was there more going on then I was prepared to understand? My mind starting running in circles desperately searching for answers. Despite Seven's advice, I couldn't contain the wonder. I needed answers. I needed more than uncertainty. But I needed to plan as well. I couldn't just take off without a word, without raising suspicion. I needed to book these things, set things up, construct a plausible back-story. Visiting family perhaps. Riley was there, it was almost true, wasn't it?

But not tonight. No. Not after all this. There was a race tonight, and I had to find my way to the track with the rest of the wandering spirits. I had to disappear in the mob, as part of the grand design. Everything would continue as usual, until tomorrow. A fresh day with a new chance to make plans with a clear mind. I couldn't be left to make major decisions like this. As distraught as I was, I knew better. And I would choose better.

I gathered myself off the floor that night, wretched and cold as I was, finding my limbs suddenly worn and weary. I finished wiping down the bar and closed the door after myself, shutting away the entire memory of my conversation with Seven. The truth inside remained with me – the creature growing in my stomach was mine to hide. And I would do just that. I looked up and down the street cautiously, half expecting to find Seven's casual grin waiting for me, but it wasn't. She would be on her beast by now, waiting expectantly at the starting line for the race to begin. The anticipation roaring around

her, she would carry on as if nothing ever happened. As if she hadn't single handedly changed my life. But deep in her soul, she would know the truth.

As with Dacien before her, I owed her a shard of my freedom, and at some point, she would come to collect. I just had to be prepared for whatever favor she asked me to return.

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## 13. Never Be the Same

I got off the bus at the last stop. I'd been riding for hours, my mind wandering. I had nothing to keep myself occupied except my own thoughts. The passing landscape changed from the congestion of the city to the calm of suburbia, to the distant rural feel that I longed for. I was almost in farm country, distant enough where I was sure the demons couldn't come after me. So I thought. I watched the landscape fly by – smiling wider with every mile we traveled. I was secretly happy. I don't who it was a secret from, or why. Maybe it was a secret from myself, because if I said it too loud, or made too much out of it, then it wouldn't remain. It would disappear with the wind. I couldn't let this go. I had my escape in hand – I just had to keep it going. I had to live it this time. For good. Bury the skeletons in the closet once and for all. Burn the buildings and memories. Everything. Just let go.

I looked around my new surroundings. My friend from the bus stepped off with me. He nodded to me as he passed, his eyes still bright and vibrant. I thought about reaching out, stopping him. But I thought better of it. He too had a guitar case in hand, walking away with broad even steps. I put my cases down, looking up and down the empty street. I watched

the lone figure disappear into the distance. Into the fog of the night. There was an eerie feeling to this new place, but mostly because I was unfamiliar. We were the last two left on the bus. I stood there, my breath seeping from between my lips, meeting my eyes. It was cold but I could barely feel it. I looked down the road, finding I was alone. I kept zoning out, here and there, there and then, and the bus was gone too. I was completely alone. The stranger had departed in one direction. I considered following him. I wouldn't be running away if I had someone to follow. But that would seem bizarre. No. I had to make my own way. I turned my back to possibility, picking up my bags while in motion. And I started to walk.

There was nothing around for miles. I had some money on me, not much though. I'd need a new job. I'd need a better way of making money. I kept walking, watching the sun creep up over the horizon. I stopped to watch it for a few minutes, resting my body then picked up and kept going. I walked until I passed a settlement. And I went by it. I needed a hotel or something. I walked until I reached the main town. I don't know the name, I was too tired to care by the time I got there. It was barely daybreak. My muscles ached from the long trek, a journey my body wasn't prepared for. I looked up and down the few streets that lay before me. I looked at the few people beginning to creep out of the buildings. And I kept walking until I found the building I wanted.

A hotel. At the edge of town. Perfectly placed for the idle wanderer. I pushed the door in tiredly, dropping my bags at the desk. The clerk was sitting on a stool, dozing idly. I considered whether I should wait for him to wake up or if I should try to softly jostle him. I decided to be polite, being I might be in town for a while. I sat down in a chair and waited quietly for the man to wake up. Instead of waiting, I found myself dozing off in the chair, despite the pain of the upright position. I tilted my head back and let my eyes roll closed, for there was nothing else I could bring myself to do.

“Hey stranger,” I heard through a sleepy state of consciousness. I opened my eyes groggily, seeing my guitar-toting friend from the bus. He was smiling, and upside down, trying to confuse me. I almost tipped over in the chair from the shock.

“Hey,” I muttered, stretching and yawning, trying to pull myself out of the chair. He looked over at the clerk that was still napping.

“Ever hear of getting a room?” he whispered. I shrugged.

“I didn’t want to wake him up.”

“Ah, you’re not from around here, are you?”

I shook my head. I knew how out of place I seemed here, how obvious it was. I knew that everyone could see it – I could feel it. Deep, down into my bones, I felt the constant shiver. It was fear. Doubt. Discomfort. The Good Samaritan didn’t see any of this. He just saw a lost girl, a new kid in town with nowhere to go and no idea how she got there. All he saw was a lost puppy.

“Hold on a minute,” he whispered, creeping away from me. He moved behind the desk, sneaking behind the clerk. He pulled out a key after choosing carefully, then crept over and motioned for me to follow him. I took my bags and marched upwards, up a few flights of stairs that wrecked havoc on my legs.

I wanted to soak in a hot bath for hours, until the water was ice cold and I could feel it. But you take what you can get in this life, in this world. This was like something out of a movie, and at the time, I didn’t care. I couldn’t afford to. There were just more important things on my mind. Like getting a job. Getting on my feet. I needed to rebuild and there was

no time to waste. I had to get moving. Always moving.

The stranger opened the door to a room, handing me the key as he pushed the door open. I trudged inside, dropping my bags as soon as I could, trying to be quiet about it. I pocketed the key, looking around the place. It was small, but cozy. I didn't need a mansion – I just needed some breathing room. That's all. I looked back at the stranger who stood waiting in the doorway.

"Thanks for the help." I moved toward him, digging through my pocket. "How much do I owe the clerk for the room?"

The stranger shook his head. "Don't worry about it. We keep one empty for the lost every so often, free of charge."

"I insist on paying. I might be here for awhile."

He smiled. "Well, if you insist."

I cocked my head, raising a brow. "Got a name?"

He bowed, like Dusk did. "Course. Matter of fact, I've got several. Which one do you want? Or does it matter?"

"The most commonly used one will do. But I'll accept whatever you choose to give me."

He grinned. "The name's Caine. Caine Wolfe. The sleepy clerk downstairs is my father, Gus."

I nodded, my gaze venturing around the room again. He was being helpful, which was a characteristic that people seldom wasted on me. I knew better than to brush it off. The boy stayed in the doorway, still smiling idly. He was taller than me, looked about my age, and well-spirited. He had hands coarse from years of guitar practice, a texture I'd become all too familiar with. I sat down on the edge of the bed, my eyelids heavy.

"I'll let you clean up and the such. I'll be around if you need me." He moved to head out the door. I called his name involuntarily, startled by the sound. He turned briskly.

"Know where I can find work?"

"Doing what?"

I shrugged. "Anything. I'm not too old to learn." He took a step closer to me, his gaze moving up and down slowly, examining me.

"What do you do?"

And I smiled despite myself. "Suffer."

Caine laughed softly. "Art is pain, huh?"

I nodded and he left, still smiling. I felt that I could trust this new stranger. I don't know why. He didn't reek of power like Linkon had. Caine was an artist as well, we felt like professionals talking about whatever came up. I decided right then not to allow doubt to get in my way. This would work somehow.

After a time of collecting my thoughts, I stripped and took a long bath. My muscles were on fire, worn from all the sudden stress. I cleaned up as best as I could, then passed out on the bed, letting sleep claim me.

I woke up early in the evening, feeling better but sore. So this was home. This was my fresh start. I threw a coat on, moving downstairs briskly. Music had floated into my mind, drawing me out. Caine sat in the main lobby, guitar in lap, hooked up to a small amp at his side. I stopped near the base of the stairwell, leaning on the banister. His fingers moved flawlessly from fret to fret, the strumming equally perfect. I stood there, listening, the grogginess gone. And right then, I

fell in love all over again. For that moment, I remembered why I learned to play at all. Something I'd forgotten but suddenly rediscovered. Just like that.

Funny how you can just lose something so important and a minor instance can bring it all right back. I caught Caine's eye while he played, catching the head nod up the stairs. I darted up and got my case, hurrying back downstairs. I found myself a stool and set up.

"Done this before?" Caine whispered, loud enough so only I could hear. He was adjusting things so my old acoustic would be audible. I laughed.

"Once or twice."

"Take requests?"

And I smiled such a wicked grin, guitar balanced on my knee. And I looked him dead in the eye. "Never."

I don't know what I started to play, but he was right there with me on it. Whether he knew the song or not, he put out one hell of a performance. People seemed to flock into the lobby, curious about the noise. Caine's father stood behind the counter, listening silently. There was not one complaint in the house. Right there, I fell in love with music all over again. I'd always loved it, but as time passed, I allowed it to become a spectator sport. Foolish. Such is life.

We played for a few hours then sat around talking for a while.

Ask me what we spoke about – I have no idea. But time passed. When the lobby got boring, we walked around town, with Caine as my sightseeing guide. I took it all in as best as I could, trying to commit everything to memory. Although it was a very rural/suburban setting, it had all the necessities of my lost urban shelter. It had what I needed most – places to play.

The night wore on and eventually we parted, making plans to

play tomorrow. I had time for reflection of sorts. I thought about where I'd been, the people I'd left behind. I tried to discern if I'd miss any of them. Red's lectures, Jekt's comfort...Dacien's duality. My siblings were better off without me – that was a fact I'd always known. This, now, the new experience – a fresh start. Caine's almost perfect presence. It felt too good to be true. And the old suspicion that Dacien bore into me returned. No matter how hard I tried, I'd never get away from her or the overbearing paranoia. I didn't need help – after all, I'm the best at ruining my life.

After awhile of restless wondering, I dozed off haphazardly, halfway curled up in the bed. The days were seemingly endless in their possibility. What if my past followed me yet again? How much further and faster could I run? These thoughts filled my mind, fading out as everything turned to black, as everything is essentially reduced to.