

21. May I Offer You a Proposition?

“Need a hand?”

I had my arms full, the body still barely pink, but physically cold in my clutches. I was staring up at the fire escape, wondering how I'd return the way I came with my burden. Down is infinitely easier than up, you know.

The new voice belonged to a young man, his eyes cruel and clever, moving towards me in the dark. I maintained my innocence in my mind, despite the evidence in my arms. He came within arm's reach, looking down with a slight frown at the cold and empty form in my arms.

“Hm, I'd have thought she'd be colder by now,” his voice sounded only slightly forlorn, but not the least bit concerned why I was holding a dead body. He reached out slowly, raising a brow to me as I struggled to put together the pieces of his intrusion. Figuring I was as good as caught, I handed her over softly, watching as he cradled her gingerly against his chest.

I climbed up the dumpster again, pulling the ladder down and reaching down. He helped me toss the body over my shoulder like a limp rag doll, her limbs still pliable and fresh. I snuck back to the window I'd come from, replacing her in the exact same position I'd found her when I crept in the first time. As I returned to the window, I found my new friend already at the fire escape, smoke creeping from his lips. He helped me through, sliding the window down slowly behind me. I started down, looking above to find him in tow.

As soon as he leapt to the ground, I grabbed him and brought him to the gravel. I kept my knees on either side of him, a hand locked to his throat.

“Now, as much as I appreciate the hand, I’d rather know who the hell you are.”

He still had the smoke in his mouth, despite the tumble, smiling slowly. With a series of sharp motions, he pulled himself free, leaving me sitting on the ground thoroughly confused. He reached down to help me up politely, running a hand through stark red hair as he did so.

“Let’s just say...I’m a fan of your work, Mister Dorrance. Or would you prefer Hyde?”

I nodded slowly, intrigued by his confession. “Go on.”

He stepped closer to me, a great truth hidden in his eyes. “Hyde, there is a great art in living life, and an even greater one in its termination. You have taken it upon yourself to make a statement, but nobody notices because of the subjects you choose. I have a bit of a proposition for you, if you will.”

I folded my arms, still intrigued, but slightly nervous of who, or what, I was trusting here.

“If you’ll help me create a continuous sort of living art with your talents, I will do everything in my power to help you constantly maintain your freedom to work. I have resources you couldn’t even dream of.”

“Sounds interesting lad, but how do I know I can trust you.”

He smiled wider, smoke sneaking out between his teeth. “You don’t. That’s the beauty of all this, dear Hyde. The blind virtue of it, without warning or precedent; you can either accept the possibility of a lifetime, or walk away, allowing fear to continue to rule your life.”

His words were clever, and I gave him that. He had a masterful way with people, a talent I would be eager to acquire through this partnership. I had everything to lose on one hand, but

everything to gain at the same time. He reached his hand out warmly, the final decision waiting.

“So will you be the Madman to my Martyr?”

I reached out apprehensively, but locked his wrist tight, pulling him close for the most secure and psychotic handshake possible in the world. He was pleased with the arrangement, escorting me out of the alley to somewhere a bit more private to continue our conversation.

“The name’s Corvis, by the way.” He paused slightly, “So tell me, Mister Dorrance, what inspires you?”

And that would be the story of him.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Mister Corvis Hunter.

Forgive me Father, for I have sinned.

20. An Endless Bloodlust

“Talk to me!”

Her hand slammed on the counter for the second time in the past few minutes, frustrated and unsure. What brought her back, why she was putting forth all this effort now, was beyond me. But sure enough she stood, pacing, creeping closer until she locked her fists on the front of my shirt. I locked my hands to her wrists by reflex, but I wasn’t the least bit scared.

“Do you hear yourself? Talking of ending lives like it was some sort of game, weighing people’s worth based on simple

flaws or talents? You disappear for a few weeks and return an entirely different, and slightly unstable person. Edward, what's become of you?"

I smiled weakly, pulling myself from Irish's grasp, realizing too late that I had gotten her upset for no reason. She'd been nothing but kind to me and I hadn't been entirely logical in my conversation with her. She genuinely seemed concerned, and I had to respect that on some level. I motioned to the chair so that she'd return to her seat, conceding to speak more directly to her.

"I'm sorry Irish, sometimes life just gets the better of me. I didn't mean to sound callous, you know I wouldn't hurt a fly," I paused, hoping to sound sincere. "I came to terms with a lot of elements of my life upstate, so it's time I implemented them here is all."

She sighed, obviously feeling defeated. "There's something wrong. The kids inform me of your newfound interest in the shop, which pleases me, but your quiet and peculiar tactics, the cops coming and going, it's a bit hard to grasp."

I shook my head confidently. "That shouldn't be a problem anymore. Irish, I'm fine, I'm free, and I love it."

She took a sip from her cup, pondering her counter.

"Those cops that kept after you...nobody has seen them in awhile. You wouldn't know anything about that either, would you?"

I shrugged, pretending to be bored of her conversation. I wasn't pretending – I was bored. I wished that she could understand what I was getting at, the souls I would be saving along the way. But she just sat there, visually upset and trying in vain to get some sort of answers from me. I didn't want anyone to know the particulars of my actions, to save them should an investigation ever come underway.

“Edward...what have you done?”

I raised an eyebrow curiously, trying to follow her accusations. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not a fool. A girl upstate dies, you’re the only suspect and the cops behind it suspiciously vanish. All other possible leads go dry. And you return here, right as rain, without a single explanation for your journey or discoveries along the way? You’ve not made any art in months, and now I never see you at the bar, but I hear you constantly planning, murmuring to yourself the few times I do see you.”

I was surprised by her details; by the amount of information she’d amassed on her own. Perhaps there was more to Irish than met the eye. Was she a potential risk to my operation? Would her questioning lead to further interference? Then again, she was one of my few supporters, faithful and true – losing her could be catastrophic for me. Was I willing to take that chance, risk that leap? No. I wasn’t. Irish had been too good to me over the years, always eager to keep me heading in the right direction. Just like now. She just wanted facts that I wouldn’t provide to her.

“Irish...I appreciate all you’ve done for me, and again, I apologize for upsetting you. I’m better now, and what’s done is done. I’d prefer not to harp on the past and instead focus on all the potential of my future.”

“Future? What future, you’ve never had a plan beyond tomorrow in your life.”

I smiled slowly, preparing to lay my ace on the table. “Of cleansing the sinful.”

She took another long sip, weighing her options again. She had been around for a long time, and one didn’t survive as much as she did by being foolish and asking questions. She could accept what I said as it was, turn and leave, never giving it

another thought. Or she could go for broke, slam down on the red button and hope we didn't self-destruct. I waited to see her final decision in her eyes, unsure which way she'd turn. She finished her drink quickly, standing to look around my apartment for further clues.

"Then I wish you well with that. Remember Edward, vengeance gets you nowhere, especially considering what you're chasing."

"How do you..."

Irish winked slightly, her eyes bright. "Bar keep code. We keep each other informed of any suspicious activities. I have connections you couldn't dream of. You can hunt the world over for her, but she'll only be found if she wishes you to find her."

My tongue caught in my throat. I hadn't explained my vengeance to Irish. After much consideration, I had changed my views on Seven's life. I wanted her to suffer as I had. I wanted her to feel what a lifetime of restless nights, haunted by Damiano's memory, would be like. I wanted her to bleed and cry and suffer like she never thought possible. But there wasn't a shred of evidence to finding her. I had paid every private eye I could find to assist in the search, but still kept coming up empty. I was sure my tracks had been securely covered, that nobody was aware of my interest in her. Until now. Irish could see my confidence hesitate.

"I don't want an explanation. I just want a promise that you'll walk away. Don't let the hate consume you. Anger is one of the most contagious sins."

I turned to her with a start. Anger. One of the seven deadly, and the sin I had punished Jerome Morrow for. Did she know? Or was it just a coincidence. I allowed my mind to worry over the significance of her statement for a few seconds too long, feeling her smile get wider across her lips. I wanted to shake off my insecurity, pretend this conversation never happened –

resume a time where I held control. But none of those options were realistic or rational.

"True enough," I muttered, defeated. She crept closer, kissing me on the cheek softly, holding my face between her palms.

"Don't let this become the story of you."

And she turned and left. I was standing there, frozen and unsure, amazed that I had survived that confrontation at all. I knew better than to question Irish's wisdom, or her intentions, but question I did all the same. I wondered if perhaps Dacien had gotten information to her, if they'd been conspiring against me all along. Then I focused again on Dacien, the confrontation over the gun, and my mind raged again. I had attempted to frame Dacien for my parents' murders, to keep myself in the clear. Had she turned around and attempted to turn me in, burn me out of my lies?

It seemed an awful lot of effort, but possible for someone in her position of power. I thought it best to let it alone. Attacking Dacien Ransom was more than suicide, and I had more sinners to condemn. Though she was a sinner herself, many times over, I would hold her judgment for a day when it better suited the bigger picture. I had people in mind for later on in life, when the timing was right, assuming they made it that far on their own. As quickly as I could take life, there was nothing I could do to restore it, so I had to hope for the best.

Hours became days, which turned to weeks as my mind worried over impossibly minor statistics of my crimes. I started taking my victims, one at a time, from the streets. Mostly lower class folks that nobody would miss, people whose sins polluted the entire neighborhood. As long as scumbags disappeared, nobody was the wiser. Irish seemed to see through my smiles, as I kept returning to the bar once a week to drag the old rag around. I made casual conversation and gave away

nothing about my recreational activities.

The shop grew, and maintained a constant stream of business. I was in there practicing for hours on end every day, eager to perfect every nuance of the trade. I was coming along quick, much to my master's surprise. He was infinitely proud of every stride I made though, eager for the day when I could hold appointments of my own on paying customers.

Years started to slip by, and my rage dulled. Seven and Angyl would have to answer to an authority higher than myself for their crimes, and that knowledge was enough to get me to sleep at night. I had other interests here to keep me busy, so the hunt eventually died somewhere in my heart. I still thought of Daminao fondly, remembering her soft voice every night as my mind succumbed to sleep, but the rage kept me from being at peace. I dreamed up new ways to inflict pain and new torturous methods to use on my victims.

Around the time I took up permanent residence at the shop, a curious event occurred. A young officer in the neighborhood, rookie, came in to look at some designs and get a quote. He had the dark and assuming air about him, an overwhelming sense of power hidden in his heart. I was very keen on him, trying to read into his soul. What caught my attention though, and kept it, was the name sewn onto his chest.

Bishop.

Officer Bishop. Officer Severin Bishop, I'd come to learn, and a regular customer of mine. He was the son of Sergeant Bishop. I recalled the old man, tired behind his paperwork, missing his younger days of hard fighting and important arrests. He bore his father's insightful eye, saying more than he dared speak. I was immediately interested in him, as I'd never returned the favor to the Senior Bishop for his failure in catching my parents' killer.

Severin had more interesting characteristics to him. Like his

partner – Janus Morrow. Morrow had bounced around between partners faster than anyone I'd ever seen, due to the tragic death of her brother at the hands of a madman. Severin was young, but of special interest to the boss, so he received a special partner to keep him alive. I smiled at the possibilities to finally set things right. I wanted to give Janus a chance, to recover, to let go. But she didn't.

She would spend countless hours stationed outside the shop, watching the patrons as they went. She had done everything in her power, ingesting every detail of the police reports, praying for the proof to put me away. I had done everything with gloves on in Jerome's apartment, leaving no trace that could survive a fire. And my shop workers had been able to provide an alibi for my whereabouts that night. She was accused of having a personal vendetta and her claims dismissed, even when she swore that she witnessed me light the killing flame. I maintain my innocence.

I didn't kill Jerome Morrow, as far as I can tell. The light that caught the burning kerosene was actually Janus', not mine. But that was a demon she'd have to fight on her own.

The more she lingered around, especially when Severin became a patron, the more I was reminded to carry out her sentence. Pretty and doe-like around the eyes, it seemed a horrible shame, but she had seen too much and knew too many damning details. If someone ever decided to give her a second chance, I'd be sunk. I decided to make preparations and deal with her immediately. A great personal blow to the young Severin, but one he would need to move on from in order to be a proper officer of the law. And if he failed in his test of virtue? Well I'm sure I'd have time to deal with that as well.

Tattooing was pleasing to me, creating pain and art in unison. It almost seemed like a logical marriage, one I was surprised I had not considered sooner. I was selective with my customers, or as much as I could be without seeming arrogant.

I didn't want to contribute to the butterfly epidemic across girls' asses. I wanted to create art, custom, and entirely unforgettable. I wanted back murals and side panels. Things you'd never imagine made through flesh and blood. There was a great beauty to what I was doing, and I loved every minute of it.

I closed shop a bit late that night, cleaning the counters with great care as I began to formulate a plan for Miss Morrow's abduction. I would use the same chemical I had years before, to stir old memories, before getting to the task at hand. I smiled as I locked the door, eager to see her again. Despite her vengeance, despite her passion, she did have the prettiest eyes.

I followed her towards her apartment, my eyes darting through the night as she wove through the crowds. Overly nervous and tense, I had to duck into alleys several times to ensure I wasn't noticed. Only when she was a few blocks from her building did she hasten her step to approach the scene I had delicately built.

The plan was already in motion with officers swarming the street, among them the young Officer Bishop. I had staged a fire in Officer Morrow's building, a call she would be unable to avoid. The scene was much like her brother's death – she would run in with reckless abandon. When that happened, I would make my move. Her fellow officers would see her disappear inside and never come out. I would disappear out the back with my prize. And once the flames were out, they'd find the curiously placed body of a female about Janus' size and age.

It would take them weeks to realize it wasn't Janus Morrow. If ever – given the precautions I'd already taken with my staged victim.

Leaping onto a garbage dumpster, I was able to climb the fire

escape, my footsteps lost in the sounds of screeching tires and blaring horns. I moved up the few flights, praying that a window would be open on this side. I crawled in slowly, finding one surprisingly unlocked on Morrow's floor. I found her creeping through the building carefully, coughing and gasping through the flood of smoke. I took advantage of the natural cover, my steps overshadowed by the building's collapse. Moving towards her, the syringe prepared in one hand, I wanted for her to come around the corner. Stepping in front of her, my hand clamped down on her mouth as her pupils dilated and her hands reacted with frightening speed. As her eyes stared widely into my own, I remember hearing the safety on the weapon click off. I stared down at her neck, finding the plunger had already slammed home into the empty syringe, watching the horror spread as she found herself unable to pull the trigger of the weapon frozen against my ear. I pushed her hand down slowly, smiling warmly back at her.

"Miss Morrow, how I've missed you."

I pulled her into my arms, admiring my brilliance as her limbs hung before me, staring down the hall through the chaos. Just in time for Officer Bishop's intrepid arrival. I smiled to myself, nodding to him as debris collapsed between us. The man and the monster – despite all the great lessons we're taught as children, he would watch evil triumph. And I was pleased to have been a part of it. I stepped out of his sight and back out the window, whispering to my captive.

"I do apologize for all the theatrics Miss Morrow, but you are a very difficult girl to make an appointment with. Forgive me?"

19. Eye for an Eye

The more his eyes raged, the more joy I got from the act. His rage swarmed on the surface, desperate to break free, which made me all the happier to be performing the service. I had started with blunt, one of my favorite torture subjects, leaving his body wrecked and raw with bruises. Ready for more severe pain. He hadn't lost consciousness since he woke up, which was pleasing to me. He wanted to be saved in his own way; he wanted to be aware of his salvation through bloodshed. I was glad for his participation – it added a whole new twist to things. He struggled uselessly against the bonds that held him into the chair, having already tried a number of times to tip it over. He had succeeded here and there, but I returned him right side up every time.

I spoke to him, calmly, like a child, as I carried out my deeds. He understood, in his own way, but that wouldn't stop him from attempting to rebel. I explained to him that he was correct, that I had murdered my parents. It gave him a sort of peace, the truth finally coming to the surface. I told him calmly how I shot them in cold blood, without giving a second thought to their patients or colleagues. The people who needed and depended on them would be forced to start anew, to work something out on their own. I was pleased to free all those people, to make them independent and free. Jerome didn't agree, which I didn't expect him to at such an early stage of the procedure.

I carried on for a number of hours, switching into other torture mediums, though careful to keep the noise to a minimum. I didn't want anyone to get curious and check in. I explained to him at great length how I had loved his sister, how I was still grieving her loss. That upset him greatly. The chair thudded and jumped against the floor, no doubt worrying his neighbors below. I shot him up with some more drugs, to keep him calm and sedate, less mobile, and the noise stopped

again. I spent a long time discussing Damiano, and her most painful death. However, nothing I told him seemed to console him, seemed to slow his rage. If he could have, he would have destroyed me with his eyes, ripping me to shreds.

Such is the state of power, the weak powerless to interfere in the grand design of the big and powerful. I was slightly amazed with how easy it had been to overthrow the order, to shake the balance. I now held an officer of the law captive and there would be no one to come to his aid. He would suffer and ultimately die alone, barely remembering the peace he was sworn to protect. He had served his family and community well, or so he had thought, and his position would keep him safe from the darkness that had claimed his other relatives. At least in theory, such were the thoughts in his mind before I burst into his door and changed everything forever.

What novel delusions one can survive with before reality takes true hold.

I decided that there was more information to be found here, things that Mister Morrow was intentionally hiding. How long had he known about my parents' true killer? Who was he trying to protect here? Why was he skulking around without his sister lately? There were more questions to feed into my paranoid suspicions, issues I could get answered now. His position made him very vulnerable, and I would do everything in my power to make good on that. Power made everything possible, even your wildest aspirations were in reach. The more he struggled, the harder I worked, determined for some sort of answers. Another hour or so of twisting sharp shards of glass into his flesh yielded nothing though, and I took a break.

What was worth hurting, worth dying for? Why would he hold back what he knew? If he knew anything at all...could it be? Maybe I was trying to pull a void from him, a source of pointless and useless information. Or was I second-guessing myself too soon? What could he possibly know that I didn't

already have on lockdown? My mind started arguing with itself, reasoning and disagreeing at random with my theories. Either way, I continued to inflict pain and demand answers, watching his reactions change to confusion only for a split second. For the majority of the time, he was filled with the incorruptible rage that comes with sin and madness. I was pleased with being able to force him to face it.

Our most dangerous enemies in this world are commonly ourselves. Not creatures of myth, not concepts of our imagination, but the mental doppelganger in our minds. We're fighting ourselves more often than not, rooting for the underdog and conspiring our own failure. We need to operate as such – balance is a necessary and fundamental part of life. So I would argue the pros and cons of my situation until my mind was weary and the voices weak, I would carry on my mission without an ounce of regret. I was purifying a man wrought on anger, one of the seven deadly sins. He needed to be brought into the light before things got out of hand, before he hurt others with his rage. I was fortunate – I was bold...but what about others? I was confronting this treacherous possibility before it got out of hand.

A public service really.

The day died slowly over the horizon, and I was still speaking to Mister Morrow. I explained to him why I had chosen him, how what I was doing was important. He didn't understand, or chose to ignore me. I explained that his death would serve a greater good, as a symbol, a lesson to others like him. After all, wasn't his job bent around serving others? He was being given a chance that officers seldom receive, the honor of a lifetime, a legacy all his own. Just for suffering for a day, just for bleeding a bit in return. He needed to earn the freedom I was about to bestow.

The doorknob started to shift just then, catching my attention instantly. Officer Morrow seemed to be pleased, allowing a

self-satisfying grin possess him. I smiled slightly in return, realizing that I was about to ruin his sense of security. I crept closer to the door, standing just beyond the hinge as the lock finally gave and it opened slightly. Syringe in hand, I jumped immediately on to the twin Morrow, dragging her back and plunging the needle into her throat. She coughed slightly, fighting for a fraction of a second before slipping backwards into my arms.

“You didn’t think I wasn’t prepared for visitors, did you? Sorry to spoil your fun.”

I propped her against the door, eyes vaguely open as her mind struggled to process what was real. The drug was built to immobilize her, which it did effectively. All she could do was watch as I carried out my work, which I decided was time to draw to a close. I had tormented Jerome Morrow significantly, and received nothing of value from him. Man can only tolerate so much, and I was only so patient. I would need to prove a point, to finally instill my values. Perhaps I could convince the remaining Morrow to assist me along the way.

I moved back to the kitchen, where I had gathered some supplies for my various tricks of the trade. Janus continued to watch in wide eyed horror, her muscles twitching as she fought in vain for them to function. I selected the gas can, bright red, slightly darker as the heavy liquid inside sloshed around. I moved over to the chair containing my prisoner and started to pour a healthy amount on the top of his head, soaking immediately through his uniform. He jumped with the cool temperature, but was just as nervous as before as he smelt his fate. I moved on around the apartment, watching it saturate the bed and linens, the furniture more resistant to the liquid. Finally, I made a path leading to the door, leading to where Janus Morrow sat. I propped a cigarette in her mouth, standing to pull her upright, holding her back to me.

"I'm sorry, Miss Morrow, for what I'm about to do. An apology that I doubt you will accept. But please, try to accept my gift, this enlightenment, as a token of my severe appreciation for all you've done for me."

Lighting it carefully, I lit another one for myself, careful of any unnecessary spark. I worried momentarily that I might light my hands aflame, but such was the risk for what I was about to do. Both cigarettes flared immediately, though she had noticeable difficulty grasping hers. Her eyes changed from horror to hate within seconds, as she wheeled her eyes to lock to me. I was collected and calm, smiling at the scene ahead, the struggling Morrow male strapped to the chair. The good Officer would show the pain of violence.

Show me your rage.

Scream for me, lad. Show us all what you're truly about.

It only took a few minutes, but as planned, Janus' cigarette eventually hit the floor, followed closely by my own as I threw it to ensure a steady light. The path sparked immediately as a cool red flame raced across the floor, quenching its thirst. The burning moved up the young officer quicker than expected, as muffled screams and agonizing facial expressions contorted him. I opened the door behind myself slowly, letting the smoke seep out, letting the audience in, but the deed was done. I carried Janus with me, deciding that enough was enough. She had witnessed the close of the mission, and hopefully the experience would make her better for it.

As I backed to the stairway, I side stepped and let her collapse before me, watching unsympathetically as her body bounced and blundered, landing with a sickening thud at the base of the stairs. She would survive, as the spirit in her would mandate, and live to fight another day. I wondered if she would give in to the vengeance that had destroyed her brother? In his wake, she would be a new creature, independent

and dangerous, capable of anything. I was eager to meet her on the other side of mediocrity.

With that, I went up a floor, racing down the fire escape two steps at a time. I was pleased with myself, and allowed it to play on my face. Who would suspect the merry murderer, walking away from the scene with a whistle? Perhaps I really was mad, but it was hard to say anymore. I could feel my wings spread and bend, excited for their new use, as I moved toward home. I'd sweep into the shop first and have a look around – maybe borrow some cleaners to wipe the day's grime from my hands.

I'm sure my money's bought the best sterilizers in town.

18. Method to the Madness

I'd allow them to stew for a while, trying to come up with a new course of action. Obviously, their attack had failed and they needed to consider another approach. In the meanwhile, I had issues of my own to consider, details that would need sorting out.

I targeted Jerome first, thinking he would be easier to contend with. His rage made him vulnerable, unpredictable and potentially violent. By stopping him now, I could be saving countless other victims from his wrath when his self-control finally snapped for good. As an officer of the law, his position could never be compromised. He had to maintain a certain degree of poise and professionalism at all times; a standard that he violated while speaking to me. They should never have spoken to me in my apartment, where witnesses were nowhere to be found, though I understood exactly why they hadn't wanted witnesses. In case something happened, in case I made a move, they could strike me down in an instant, covering

up the crime with whatever elegant back-story they pleased. How frightening it is to consider that one of the few factors keeping you alive is the fact that it would be highly inconvenient to get rid of you?

I worried slightly, after the Morrows left, about possible repercussions of our little discussion. They could have told others; they could have sent other officers to carry on in their stead. But they wouldn't want to involve more people than was necessary, would they? This was more than a routine investigation, it was personal on several levels, and they wanted to keep it that way. The justice of society, and the justice of self, are seldom one and the same. They needed to make amends for what they were convinced I stole from them – Damiano. They needed to make an example of me, for treating them like fools, talking them in circles. Suddenly turning their self-confidence against them.

The more time I spent by myself though, the more the paranoia spread. How many people knew the truth, how many would be able to put the pieces together? Irish had written me off for the time being, how many more would follow suit? Was I losing myself to my madness? I wondered about the crew at the shop, my employees – my loyal servants. Would they continue to defend my honor now that I was blatantly insane? Would they begin to question their employer, start talking amongst themselves about my eccentricity? I wondered constantly if I was safe with my connections, if there were any associates I might want to cut loose, anyone I wanted to test my theory of salvation on. Could I trust them? Could I have faith in them?

Then again, what other choice did I have now? Was I prepared to murder a half dozen presumably innocent people because they *might* talk? Talk to whom, and about what? They couldn't possibly know any important details about the current course of events except that I was almost never at the shop, which could be considered unusual for a new business owner. I had faith in them, despite my paranoid wonderings.

I wondered how many people I'd have to kill in order to erase my memory, to escape what was true. How many lives would be destroyed on my quest to never exist? Was it worth the risk, the cost? Such a concept wasn't really rational though, was it? I could never account for people who met me in passing, crossing the street. Customers at the shop or the bar. I'd have to consider every individual who saw my face, knew my true name, I'd always be on the run, trying desperately to clear up loose ends.

Or would I? The most obvious place to hide is in plain sight, is it not? I could let everyone carry on their lives as if nothing happened, because in their frame of mind, nothing did. They would be my faithful servants, my alibis, without even realizing the importance of their role in the grand design. I needed them almost as much as they needed me, and it was crucial that I never forgot that again. They needed a guiding light, a beacon, a shadow, something that I hadn't been in some time to them. From the time the shop opened, I'd only been there once to do a basic overview, a major failing on my behalf.

I packed a few notebooks of sorts of my older work and set out for the shop with a determined sort of start. I needed to become more familiar with my staff, and through them, more familiar with myself. Perhaps with this new medium, I could discover a part of myself that longed to be free, allow myself a creative drive that would solve the long issue of my artistic stalemate. I would seek out Dusk and Shirley immediately, assuming she wasn't relieved for maternity leave yet. And I would start a new journey, a fresh concept on my road to salvation; my ongoing alibi.

I went down to the shop as casually as I could manage, eager to get working on something new. The newer artists greeted me cordially, like I was a naïve customer of sorts. I was pleased with the welcome; it assured me that every customer would be receiving the same sort of hello. I returned their greetings,

heading straight to the back to my office, covered with a reasonable amount of dust in places, but otherwise tidy. The kids had been looking out for me, despite my absence, and I had to respect that.

Setting my notebooks down, I checked the bankbooks, making sure everything was balanced, as it should be. Unsurprised by the lack of error, I replaced them carefully, proud of Shirley and Morris' competence in my absence.

Next were the design books and the templates in the main lobby. I moved through them slowly and curiously, analyzing the possibilities from the templates presented. Thousands of tattoo ideas could be copied, or altered, from the walls themselves, without much in terms of guidance. Another entire selection of custom art was on display – most of it meaning to be gawked at more than repeated. I was proud of the talent established, but proud even more so of the strong community that had supported our rebirth and growth together.

I sought out Dusk, who was booked solid for the entire day, so he selected a few of the newer staff, with emptier schedules, to help me find my way around. Shirley was at home, counting down the days until she was free of her maternity leave, and Morris had gone to lunch. He would arrive back soon enough, but I wanted to get a start on things while he was out. I was shown the equipment, bit-by-bit, complete with demonstration of operation and cleaning. I was given an orange to play with, tattooing dots and squiggly lines onto its surface as practice. When I had exhausted that option, I was sat down with each artist's portfolio; so I could ask them some more important questions about style and technique, which I thought was a clever way to familiarize someone with the industry. When Morris returned, he was more than happy to help me figure out which artists occupied which stations, pointing me to the empty one in the back that would serve as my own whenever I decided to start my apprenticeship.

“So Boss, what do you think?” His smile was wide, a genuine show of pride in his work and his peers. I could understand the feeling and supported it entirely.

“First off, I told you guys that you don’t need to call me Boss. Hyde will do just fine, or Edward if that makes you edgy for some reason. And I think I’d like to begin my apprenticeship. Who is my master artist?”

Morris laughed a little, bowing slightly. “That’d be me, with Shirley in close second and Dusk running a cool third. We have a newbie out there racing up the ranks who might make a proper name for themselves before we know it.”

I nodded, agreeing with whatever assessment he chose to give me. He leaned back towards the wall, grabbing a broom that’d been leaning against the doorframe.

“Step one, day one – sweep. The most important part of a good shop, artists and customers aside, is sterility. If it’s not clean, it’s not safe. And if it’s not safe, it’s not going to last too long now is it?”

I laughed, glad to start somewhere immediately, despite the seeming pointlessness of sweeping an establishment entirely devoid of dust – my office the exception. I swept nonetheless, meeting the other artists as I made my rounds, becoming familiar with my customers, bidding them to return soon to continue their artistic expansion.

The name’s Hyde sir, feel free to come see us again soon.

Edward, my dear, and don’t you forget it.

Welcome to Fatali, but we like to refer to it as the Dragon.

The same lines over and over, but they seemed to do the trick. People smiled and responded politely, pleased to meet another young artist. I was careful not to introduce myself as the owner, attempting to earn respect as I worked for it. I didn’t

want people to think I was being falsely nice or overly polite. Hiding in plain sight has all sorts of nifty benefits; people are more likely to be honest with you when they don't realize what's at stake.

I spent a good few weeks sweeping and scrubbing the already pristine surfaces of the shop, becoming familiar with every crack and facet of the place. Morris seemed proud, though his nerves were noticeably shaken with Shirley's current condition. He had canceled all current appointments until he could promise a steadier hand, which I respected greatly. I had his pay increased at an overtime rate for the time being, giving him a steady income for babysitting me. I appreciated his time and infinite patience more than he could ever realize.

On the police side of things, nothing happened. The Morrors were playing things cool, biding their time until the next big break. I decided to take the chance to gain the upper hand. I would make a move, setting the great wheels in motion of my freedom. I would stop the chase for good where it was. Assuming they hadn't traded notes with anybody, which, due to the personal nature of the investigation, I'd imagine not. A series of loose ends I wouldn't have to worry about.

I decided to pay Officer Morrow a visit and have a little discussion about his antics in my apartment. I needed to get his address though, something that I couldn't just request from the front desk. I pondered if there were any options besides the traditional stalker method, but found them all useless at this juncture. So I waited outside the precinct, carefully hidden in the alley, until his familiar face came into view. I wasted most of a day there, but it would be worth it in the long run. He kept a close eye to his surroundings, but moved onto the street without much of a second thought. I was surprised to find him alone, since he was so commonly attached to his sister. I wondered what sign of providence had brought about the convenience, but I wasn't going to question

things. Maybe she had more paperwork to do than he today, who knows, who cares? It was all the same to me.

I followed a good block or so behind, the black uniform easy to spot in the crowds. He only looking behind him every blue moon, but he didn't seem suspicious. Why would he be? It's not like there was anybody out to get him, was there? At least not in his mind.

He approached a building just as unimportant as the rest and started digging for keys to bypass the front door. I doubled my pace to keep up, knowing I'd be locked out entirely if I didn't catch the swinging door. I needed the apartment number so I could plan more carefully for my return. I had no tools on me now, though I was sure I could improvise with enough observation and consideration of all the details. Jerome had to have all manner of interesting tools and toys around his apartment.

He went through the door with a single sweeping motion, just as I ran up the stairs after him, hat low, reaching out for the door without letting it slam. I caught it in the nick of time, pushing it back slowly to mask any sound. I clicked it shut quickly, as he would no doubt be listening to make sure it closed firmly behind him. Once his footsteps resumed, I kept even pace behind him, stepping only when he did to cover my tracks. He went up three flights then started down the hall to his actual apartment. I started counting in my head, making mental landmarks for my return trip. Past the first two places on the left, over the squeaky floorboard, there – he was home. I looked around again, making sure I had the number down right, listening for any details to his neighbors. Music, babies crying, loud televisions, anything in particular that might be useful as a cover or distraction; there was none. He lived in a quiet complex of simple means, completely ordinary in every aspect. I suspected he has chosen it for its peace and quiet, a stark change from the constant hustle of his career.

And a perfect setting, as long as I planned things right – I couldn't allow hours of screaming to screech through these solemn halls. I couldn't permit others to become aware and involved in my activities while I spoke to Jerome. I'd have to be on my best behavior, quiet and precise. I started to make a mental checklist of things I could use in the operation, tools that would prove useful. I might want to consider looking into some sort of chemical to keep him sedate, euphoric even. I would need some sort of restraint so he didn't rip my head off. Sharp objects were always a necessity, no matter the job. They were infinitely useful.

Yes, things were working out very well. Things were proceeding according to plan, and soon I'd have taken my first successful step along my road to redemption. As would Officer Morrow. Everything would work out for the best, and man would cower at the darkness of his sins. Hidden in plain sight, I'd carry out my dark deeds. And the ignorant would bathe in their innocence, denial keeping them warm at night. While I crept from place to place, claiming the insecure, the corrupt and devoid, they would be staring straight through me all along.

Abandon all hope.

17. Martyr Turned Madman

To say that I was at peace with the world would have been a gross understatement. I was more than at peace; I was almost connected to the universe. Despite the apparent lunacy of my decision, the pain I was entirely willing to inflict, I was satisfied with my conclusion on issues.

It took a mere day or so after my meeting with Dacien for the knock to sound on my door, the knock I'd been expecting for

ages. The infamous Morrow twins had arrived, eager to capture my soul. I smiled slightly as the knocks got louder, followed by Jerome's stern voice. They would break down the door, or so he wanted me to believe, though I knew better. The door was reinforced with a decently stable deadbolt that would keep even the largest maniacs at bay. The irony of the deadbolt made me giggle; locks designed to keep murderers and madmen out while the most dangerous party around was already inside.

After I the knocking reached a nearly impossible pace and pitch, I succumbed. I waited until I was sure his knuckles were raw from the consistent effort of it. I got up slowly, wondering if I should be worried for my own safety. Realizing the rage I was about to face, I decided to take precautions. I went to my nightstand, opening the drawer next to the bed and removing a handgun that I'd decided to invest in when I opened the business. As a new business owner, I wanted to ensure my safety and ability to protect myself. Checking the clip, slamming it back into place and making sure the chamber was loaded, I started to unbolt the door. I could almost envision him pacing the hallway, expectant and enraged, ready to pounce. I kept the weapon carefully out of sight, shoulder rolled back, opening the door slowly and stepping aside.

They stepped past me completely calm and neutral, without a word or contrary glance. I didn't allow my surprise to show, smiling politely as they passed, clicking the safety on the weapon and tucking it in my waistband, snugly under my shirt.

"I'm sorry, Officers. I was preoccupied when you arrived."

They nodded solemnly, splitting up to look around the place. Look for what? Clues that would prove my guilt – some sort of damning detail that could have been overlooked by a casual observer? Maybe they were hoping to plant something at the scene, make everything more genuine. I motioned to the table that I had sat with Dacien at a few short days ago. They took seats across from each other, leaving one on either side of

me. I allowed them to set the scene, give them control, letting them think I was completely at a loss as things transpired.

“Mister Dorrance,” Janus began softly. I had never heard her speak before, so her tone was suddenly new and interesting to me. I turned to her with a warm smile, finding peace in her gentleness. Her and Jerome were a sort of ying and yang, completing a single idea. He was the powerhouse, the rage, while she was the more contained voice of reason, her purity almost shimmering in her eyes. I kept very careful track of her motions throughout the conversation, almost infatuated with her cool demeanor concerning the issues. She motioned to get my attention back to the point at hand.

“Where were you on the night in question?”

I shook my head slightly, trying to follow the question. I knew I still had visible scarring and bruising from the assault so lying about being roughed up would get me nowhere. But I didn't have to admit where the incident had occurred. If they had evidence to the contrary, I would have them present it.

“I'm afraid it's a bit of a blur, Officers. I seem to recall getting into a bit of a rowdy bar brawl, but the details are pretty sketchy. As you can see, the injuries are still healing.”

She seemed to take notes with her eyes, pulling out a tiny notepad to scrawl a few slight details. The sheet was already littered with a series of neatly arranged notes, conversation tidbits from previous interviews. I kept my eyes locked on her motions, ignoring Jerome as much as possible. I wanted to tempt his anger, incite his rage. I wanted to see exactly how much self-control he thought he had.

She reached into her coat pocket and produced my letter to Sergeant Bishop – just as crisp as the day I mailed it. She

slid it across the table slowly, her eyes locked on mine as I recognized my handwriting. I had prepared for this part of the conversation, so I smiled warmly at the pristine condition they had kept it in. To extract fingerprints no doubt, to compare. To put me at the scene of the crime, to frame me for Damiano's murder; to prove my parents' murders. It was all part of a larger plot, and I had to be a step ahead of them all along.

"Do you recognize this letter?"

I nodded excitedly, pretending to be thrilled that it had met successful delivery. I picked it up delicately, adding even more prints to it, to verify what they already knew, studying my handwriting. "Yes, I wrote this to your boss concerning any leads on my parents' murder. Have you come up with anything?"

She shifted her notes slightly, trying to stall, trying to shake my confidence. I had prepared for this. "Yes, actually, there have been some highlights we need to go over with you. Mister Dorrance, can you account for us again where you were at the time of your parents' deaths?"

I pretended to think back, recalling a fact that was at the forefront of my memory. "I was asleep in my apartment, as far as I can recollect. A young man came to my door the next morning to inform me of the tragedy. Officer..." Dramatic pause.

"Burton, Roger Burton. He was very polite about things, considering the delicacy of the issue."

She nodded again. I shot a quick glance at Jerome, finding his knuckles wrapped around the edge of the table, attempting feebly to maintain his cool. I wanted to laugh out loud, slap the old boy on the back and tell him to relax, but I knew it wouldn't help matters any.

"Mister Dorrance, there seems to have been an incident upstate involving the murder of a young girl named Damiano, do you know anything about this?"

“Depends what you want to know?”

“Could you explain how your fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime, and more explicitly, on her body?”

Ah. Here is where things would get interesting. Janus had intentionally left out Damiano’s last name in the question, hoping to throw me off momentarily. She was testing how much I knew, how much I was going to allow her to know. Now for the parting blow –

“Of course. She was my girlfriend for a short time. I had gone upstate to visit with her for a while, but we got into a sort of fight. Frustrated, I left town, deciding that she could face me when she had calmed down. I was never given the chance – mutual friends reported her unfortunate end to me.”

She nodded once more, taking a few notes.

“So can you explain your fingerprints on the smoking gun that killed her?”

Hitch in the plan. I didn’t know there had been a gun, thus I couldn’t account for it. There was a slight hiccup in my story, but I couldn’t let my hesitation become too obvious. I pretended to look even more troubled, staring down at the table guiltily.

“I keep a firearm in my bag at all times, since my parents died. It would be registered to me of course. And being my weapon, my prints would be on it. I’m afraid someone is trying to set me up here, Officers, and working very hard to do so. I never thought to check for the weapon when I returned to the city, being so enraged and then tormented by her brutal and violent death.”

Ace in the hole, friends. Janus checked her fact sheet, considering the details. Everything settled in so far, though there was a degree of incredulousness to it. She couldn’t flat

out call me a liar without concrete evidence telling her otherwise. Despite being tipped off by Damiano's murderers to the crime, and all of their clues pointing to me, there was not one single foolproof piece of evidence that could say that I pulled the trigger for the killing blow. And what's more, I would deliver my next perfect bit of stagecraft.

I held my hand across the table slowly, palm up, reaching towards Janus. "I know you have a way to test for gunpowder residue. It's been a few days, but I'm sure something would be stuck on the surface of the skin. I can give you the clothes I was wearing at the time; I've been too beat to do laundry. That should clear up any confusion you have concerning the issue."

Again her eyes betrayed a sort of bewilderment, a confusion that I couldn't put into words. She handled everything perfectly, taking careful notes, accepting the clothes from me without blinking, swabbing the surface of my hand for any clues. Whether she was defeated or only saving her final killing blow, I couldn't be certain...until Jerome blew the scene wide open.

He got up in one single motion, leaping over the table at me, sending us both crashing to the floor. We rolled, with him landing on top of me, grasping my shirt and pulling me up to leer into my face.

"We know everything, you bastard. We know how you blew your parents away. We know how you murdered Damiano for sport. And we will put you away for the rest of your goddamn life, you fucker. Do you hear me in there? Forever." His last word trailed off almost in a hiss, his eyes narrow and severe. I coughed a bit, laughing slightly.

"Officer, I believe this is classified as brutality, completely unwarranted and unprovoked at that. If you're going to make such wild accusations, I might want to consider a

lawyer.”

His arm shook momentarily, the concept of releasing me foreign and dangerous. He pulled me a touch closer, still shivering, as his left fist connected with my jaw. Once, twice, three times, his rage overpowered him, until Janus pulled him off of me finally, leaving me on the floor coughing and spitting blood, laughing hysterically. I rolled over as fast I could, finding where Janus was attempting to calm and console the distraught Jerome.

“You have no evidence, Officer Morrow, or you would have arrested me by now. Even on the charge of my parents’ murders you have nothing to concretely prove your point. And you just assaulted a victim, a civilian. Does that make you feel like more of a man?”

He lurched in Janus’ arms, his eyes wild and desperate. “Does it make you feel like more of a monster, to destroy people, to condemn innocent lives for no reason than your own sick satisfaction at watching them die? What did she do to you, huh? She was just a child!” His voice was getting louder, his mood manic, as Janus tried to pull and jerk him from the scene. Eventually she whispered something potent enough in his ear to get him off the floor and inspire him to shift himself to the doorway, not another sound escaping his lips. Janus looked around slowly, trying to regain her surroundings, trying to come up with a plan of escape from here. I was well within my rights to press charges and she knew it; any attempt made to cover this up could damn them both. She took a step towards me apprehensively, unsure of where to start. I decided to send her for a final turn, spitting blood abruptly on the floor.

“I won’t be pressing charges,” I muttered, in my most virtuous tone. She seemed startled, trying to word an apology properly. I put my hand up to silence her. “Just get him out of here, get him help. Now. Good day, Officer Morrow.”

I turned my back majestically, hoping that it looked as dramatic and overwhelming as it felt. She pondered her choices for a while, deciding finally to cut her losses and leave with Jerome. I waited until the door finally clicked shut behind them before going over and setting the deadbolt again. Leaning back against the door, I was rather proud of myself. I think I gave an appropriate, if not stellar, performance, keeping the investigators, my captors if I failed, at bay. They had bought the bullshit, for the time being. I knew they'd be back, unless I caught up with them before that, before things came full circle. If I kept giving them opportunities to figure things out, they'd eventually catch me with my pants down.

And God knows I couldn't allow myself that sort of embarrassment; then again, what had God to do with anything lately?

I laughed despite the soreness in my jaw, pleased with myself. I had escaped the gallows for the moment, and now had the chance to turn things around on my executioners. And I would. The avenging angel would take flight, bringing to an end all investigations that could tie me to anything...damaging.

I had killed my parents, true enough, a fact I could no longer escape or hide from. Damiano was not my burden to bear and I would not carry the chains of her loss. She had been punished for her misdeeds and the issue was now resolved, set to rest until the end of time. As much as part of me ached for her still, my heart bled, I knew it was all for the best. Her death was the most virtuous way things could end, to bring an end to sin and deceit, to save us all. I was thankful for her sacrifice.

With the Officers gone, I was able to start setting up a plan of retaliation. No, I would not press charges, true enough. But I would be teaching Officer Jerome Morrow a lesson or two about the concept of brutality.

16. More than a Memory

Once upon a time, I met a girl, named Angyl Hunter. A girl who I had reduced to merely a memory, a shadow of her former self in my mind's eye, but upon closer inspection, I realized the monster I had beheld. The beast, which I'd turned my back on, would return later in life as a far greater threat. Stay with me, and allow me to explain a series of events to you much more bizarre than my parents' murder.

Once upon a time, I worked at the bar, keeping my role legitimate and clean. Once night fell, I moved to the sewers, the underground, where anything was possible. There, I kept the position of cleaner – should a disloyal soldier be tried in our court of man, it was my duty to ensure their punishment. They would be taken to their deaths, but should the executioner fail, I was to ensure that neither person saw the light of day.

Such was my dark deed, one that I performed with great passion and precision. My heart was cold and my soul void, so my place there was perfectly suited. Until one of the community leaders was murdered and a great war began. A war that would envelope us all, destroying the lives we knew and forever altering our great purposes. I had loved another girl back then.

Relic Mason. The bar owner's daughter – there was a relationship with her that seemed beyond words and understanding. As if every action I conceived she predicted. At first, I foolishly accepted it as the mere shadow of young love and idealness. With time, I learned it was something more. As the stories got out and the truth lay to light, I learned that my true love was actually my true twin, separated from me at infancy to protect each other.

A plan of which failed, as I watched her die as our enemies made demands we would not logically fulfill. With the burden of her death, I was relieved of my duty as executioner, my mental state under severe distress. I was entrusted with my parents, the Dorrances, assuming their name and identity to ensure my safety for the rest of my years. It seemed like a solid plan. All the pain and bloodshed were repressed early on, and I was able to continue living my life almost like any other teenager.

Until Angyl Hunter was brought to my doorstep. I had almost forgotten the dreary night when Dacien Ransom, herself desperate and blood soaked, had brought the body to us. Angyl was alive, but barely. We had been entrusted with a series of secrets that night, my parents' first test of faith and loyalty. They needed to keep Angyl alive, but more importantly, they had to keep her son's existence a secret. Yes, with the murderess herself came a child, just as clever and deep as his mother, taking in every detail of his surroundings. Dacien had explained to me in great length the importance of both mother and child, and their place in the world. Though Angyl had killed easily, and would continue to if necessary, her son would lead to great things with the proper potential. With the right influences; so we lent every bit to his learning.

Until a year or so back, Angyl and Corvis, her son, disappeared. To go upstate, she claimed, to save us from her burden. It made sense to a point, and again the repression kicked in. I erased all details of her existence, to further protect her in the future.

Then Damiano was tortured to death by a nameless face I had only seen in distant nightmares, a cruel smile to follow the most passionate eyes I'd ever known. I couldn't connect things then, but now, as the repression ended and a flood of memories shocked my system and destroyed my sensibilities, the truth started to fall into place. The fourth member of the Wicked

had been Angyl Hunter herself, hiding from her enemies in a new landscape, but still maintaining the brutality she was born with. I had resented her so heavily then, wanted nothing more but to destroy every fiber of her being that night, but now...I had discovered a newfound respect and association with her. We were both murderers, weren't we?

And both destined to achieve something greater than ourselves.

How I'd been able to tune out such immense details of my life...I couldn't tell you. There was no rational reason why or how I had been able to intentionally block things like that out. Perhaps that's why I was chosen for my position in the underground, since I allowed nothing to take a permanent residence in my mind. I killed the disloyal just as simply as I might have killed a spider, without a moment's consideration or pity. I did as I was told, and throughout life found myself railing against authority later on for inexplicable reasons. It was all starting to come together and the madness of it made my head spin drastically.

Thinking back on the scene, on my parents' murder, I knew that the only truth was what Daicen had provided me. I had pulled the trigger, entirely without remorse or consideration; nothing about that fact bothers me now. But why? What about my parents bothered me so much that I had to destroy them, without warning? I contemplated Dacien's initial suggestion: money. They were doctors and gave me everything I could desire, except for more drugs, but I didn't resent them enough to kill them over it. Freedom? They were a bit disappointed with my lack of creativity, and my decision to bypass their career path, but all the same. So what was it that finally pushed me over the edge?

With long consideration and a severe amount of meditation, I decided it was the consistency of everything. The pace, the normalcy, the humdrum – the lack of anything interesting or different in their lives. They were spending every waking

moment trying to achieve more, trying to make people that didn't want help – better. It seemed like a bullshit double standard, to kill yourself trying to save souls that are beyond salvation. People like Dacien Ransom can be calmed to a point, but they will always be the ruthless monsters that they began as, no matter how much you pad the truth.

I kept myself awake for hours as my mind ran over the possibilities. How I'd fallen this far, and how the truth had evaded me for so long. How I'd managed to lie to myself all this time. Were there others that saw through the lies? Had Irish been aware of my past and present, and just did everything in her power to keep up the charade? How many people had I murdered before my parents? How many people had I watched meet their end in that tunnel underground? So many questions, memories long lost in my mania.

What kind of a monster was I?

Do no evil, she said.

If she only knew.

But she did, didn't she? Angyl knew exactly who I was and what I was capable of. She was counting on it. She knew that the right combination of pain and love could create a force impossible to stop and even more improbable to catch. She knew my potential early on and had planted the seeds for the mature murderer I would become later. Was I merely part of everyone's elaborate schemes? Damiano had used me to satisfy her own ends as well. Had I been a tool my entire life, someone else's prop to get where they needed to be?

And if so, that was coming to an abrupt, and painful end. I would no longer dance someone else's dance; I would not be corrupted for their means. I would accomplish my own ends, and punish the sinful for their deceit.

There was something peaceful in death that I had recently come

to respect, a sort of quiet that could only be found in the absence of life. I spent hours wondering about the simplicity of it, the joy of no longer having to suffer for someone else's failure. To no longer toil for a mission that's a flop before you ever start. The possibilities were endless...and there was honor in dying. Especially for dying for something real, something you believed in, to achieve something noble. I was hoping to find such a peace in my travels, to discover that sort of calm along the way. If I could be so fortunate...

The role of avenging angel has been filled my friends, and I will be avenging my own sins for a change. The rest of you can kindly form a line to the right.

15. A Moment, If I May?

I wondered for a while if my writings could be used as incriminating evidence, if my art would lend any clue to my darker desires. Some nights, I was secure in my safety, others my eyes would cover the walls for hours analyzing the most damning of my pieces. I didn't go as far as harming any of them just yet, but the potential was there. I needed to make sure my motives were clear, lest I be discovered. I didn't want anyone corrupting my greater goal with some subliminal message, some meaning besides which I intended.

I decided to write things down as lucidly as I could from my own mind's perspective, though it might seem a bit vague to the passerby. The best way to keep a secret between three people is if two of them are dead? Though death seemed a bit of an extreme stance on things, the point was there. The other voices of reason needed to be silenced at the source, and I would maintain control at all times. My words would be logical

at best to me; my closest associates perhaps, but that would be stretching it. I had high expectations for my new mission, and a sudden urgency to get things underway.

Days were bleeding together as I kept myself locked away in my quarters, content in my solitude as I derived new methods for my madness. I almost didn't hear the steps echoing in the empty apartment, the scrape of the chair as it slid across the floor. Looking up abruptly from my paper, I found a face I had heard much about, though never witnessed myself.

"Miss Ransom, I presume?" I extended one hand immediately, in an abrupt and very necessary gesture of friendliness. She shook it, betraying nothing with her reaction. She had prepared for all manner of comebacks on my behalf, everything from fear to rage, and she would take everything in stride.

She nodded slowly, clearing her throat. "Only if you are Mister Edward Dorrance. Your friends, or acquaintances rather, call you Hyde. Your parents, the Doctors Dorrance, recently passed, correct?"

I nodded a bit too excitedly, shuffling my papers into an orderly pile and stuffing them under one of my sketchbooks. I started to rise from my chair, but halfway to my feet I found myself with no plan besides that motion. She stayed where she was, comfortable in my chaos, completely at ease with my restlessness. I shook my head just as randomly and returned to my seat across from her, realizing there was no need for me to go anywhere. If she'd wanted to hurt me, she would have by now, so there was no use hoping to find an implement of protection. And getting up to find one, with her hawkish eyes watching, wouldn't have gotten me much further.

"I'd like to speak to you briefly, about the unfortunate business of your parents' deaths, if you don't mind. Not that you have much choice, Mister Dorrance."

I smiled slowly, realizing her game was simple. She thought

she had control. She assumed I was afraid of her, or respected her, that I would feed her whatever answers she required for one of these two reasons. But no, my reactions to her were based on something altogether different. Allow me to explain.

Miss Dacien Ransom was a long time patient of my parents, and one with which they were continuously frustrated. She only allowed out certain parts of her character, so you never knew if what she said was the whole truth, or some minute fraction of something bigger. All the same, they kept allowing her to return, almost challenged by her mystery. Little by little they made some semblance of progress, and then they'd be pushed back all the same. Until there was a landslide one day – Dacien had admitted to murder. She had given my parents the weapon she'd used to kill a very important community member long ago.

Angyl Hunter.

I recognized the name, though I had no face to put with the equation. She had murdered a number of people herself in her time, the memories frozen in black and white for all to see. Dacien had shot her, ridding the community of the murderer's rage, and thus performed a great public service. However, the law is still the law, and her guilt was genuine. She confessed her crime to my family, pleading that they keep the wretched gun safe, lest it remind her of the deed itself. Doctors are sworn by confidentiality, so they were powerless to announce Dacien's crime to any authority. Theoretically anyway. Doctors will commonly forfeit their patient's rights in respect of those of the victim, thinking that their betrayal is an even more worthwhile public service. My parents disagreed.

Dacien had confessed to them intentionally. She was testing their limits, what they would and wouldn't tolerate. Yes, she had shot a woman with that handgun, and yes, her prints were all over it. But the woman she confessed to killing had not died, or so the whispers in the darkest corners of the

community went. We were all convinced that a murderer as ruthless and cruel as Angyl Hunter couldn't just die from a simple shot, wouldn't just lie down and take things as they were. No, there had to be more to it, a greater plan at work, one we were completely oblivious to. Or so it seemed to me. I was content with the lie, to a degree; if there were a psychotic killer loose in my town, I would have hoped to learn of her sooner or later. We might have a few things in common before long.

All the same, my parents never betrayed Dacien, and thus she never betrayed them. They were the only people she was ever entirely honest with, or so it seemed. She told them horrible, treacherous things that you could only ever hope to encounter in your nightmares. And they seemed to help her, keep the pain at bay, keeping her as sane and level as possible for a person in her position. I had heard my parents rave proudly of their progress with the most prized, as well as dangerous, pupil.

"I left a specific artifact in your parents possession, I'm sure you know what I'm speaking of."

I nodded slowly, returning to her suddenly, realizing that I had almost entirely forgotten she was there as I traveled through hearsay and memories.

"The police have found my fingerprints on it, as expected. But they're trying to connect me to a series of murders I did not commit. Would you happen to know anything about that Edward?"

I shook my head slowly, unsure of what voice would erupt if I attempted to use it. Would it be as cool and level as her own, or would be laced with madness, hysterical and high pitched? I decided it was safer with silence, allowing her to lie out her playbook so that I could carefully tip toe around her defenses.

She nodded slowly, getting up from her chair slowly. I watched her rise up with my eyes locked on her wicked smile as she

reached out and slammed my head down into the table. The shock widened my eyes momentarily, but I laughed about it soon after.

“I’m not here to waste time, I’d just like to know what makes the cops think I killed your parents. They’re making doing business rather difficult. Nobody wants to be seen associating with criminals with cops on the prowl. Now, we both know I had nothing to do with it, right?”

I wanted to pull out my most convincing tone and tell her that I had no idea what she was talking about. I wanted to tell her that I hoped she caught the guilty party. I wanted to tell her that I knew she loved my parents, in her own ruffian sort of way, and would never cause them any harm. But what I actually said was something very different.

“Your deeds are coming full circle, Dacien. How long did you think you could carry on before you were caught? How many innocent lives lost?”

She seemed pleased with my change of pace, the challenge obvious. She was accustomed to having her own way, getting things managed as planned, every time. My streak of madness wasn’t part of her overall plan, but she was glad.

“Dear, dear Edward. Do you not remember who murdered your parents?”

She got up now from the table, moving to my side, where I got up to meet her. I kept my feet planted in place, refusing to step back. I tried to match her sinister smile with my own, keeping up with the dance. She crept closer until she was mere inches of me, completely without fear. I could have spit on her, she was so close, but such a decision would have been suicide. She put a finger on my lips, slipping it down to the center of my chest. It rested there for a few seconds, while my eyes continued to remain locked on hers. She mouthed one word to me, barely allowing the sound to escape her lips.

“You.”

I laughed, taking a slight step back to escape her clutches, secure in my defenses. If I could make her believe that she had done the deed, all incrimination would stay away from me. Besides, the killer was still out there, walking free, enjoying the light of salvation. He could have been anywhere, could have been anyone, could have been...

Me?

She kept her ground, arms folded as I stared back at her. There was no way that was right, no way it was true...right? The smile spread across her lips all the wider as she watched me battle with her accusation. Where had I been when they died? I had an alibi didn't I? And the murder weapon, the firearm, it was found on the scene, with fingerprints belonging to Dacien Ransom. It should have been an open and shut case, right – or at least theoretically straightforward. No. I'd been at work, I was always at work, Irish could vouch for me. I laughed again, long and loud, entirely unafraid of the wild claims before me. Dacien just stood there, her ever curious eyes twinkling in my midst, waiting for a breakdown or a revelation of sorts to conspire. It never did.

“You can lie all you want, but only truth shall set you free, Miss Ransom.” My voice was shaky and erratic, entirely out of my control. I cursed myself for not being able to keep it more level, but at the same time, marveled that I could speak at all.

“Lie? Edward, why would I lie? What have I to gain from your parents' unfortunate passing? If anything, I had everything to lose. They knew countless tidbits of precious information that could have locked me away for a very long time. Their patience kept me that tiny bit stable, that tiny bit sane, and I appreciated their work very much. Though I may possess the means, I don't possess the motive.”

I kept smiling, trying to poke holes in her plot, trying to shoot down her theory. She was trying to frame me for what I was trying to frame her for; the irony of it was slightly hysterical.

“Now that information is secure.”

She took another step closer. “Is it? Or was it passed on to their executioner before they died? That’s the only detail that worries me, the point that would keep me up at night...if I wasn’t sure there was nothing to be concerned with.”

“You don’t know as much as you think, Miss Ransom.”

“Edward...I saw you shoot them.” She paused suddenly, her eyes narrow and severe. She was judging me with her tone, eager to carry out judgment herself – to decide my fate. Fate for a crime I did not commit; I was a victim here. Right? I thought back to the night in question, to the blank spots in my memory that I couldn’t remember. I had taken a nap perhaps? There were a few hours left unanswered for in my memory, but they had to be hours spent at rest or work. What could I possibly gain from murdering my parents? Almost in answer to my question, Dacien responded again.

“Money, Edward. Relief from pressure; you were free without them, weren’t you? And as the victim, you could always play the pity card, get whatever you needed, friendship, comfort, it was always readily available as soon as you explained that the big bad world had stolen Mommy and Daddy from you. Without them, you had the means, and the madness, to whatever you pleased, without scrutiny. Convenient, wasn’t it?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Dacien. I saw you there.”

“Ah, now you’re starting to remember, we were both there, weren’t we, Edward? I was leaving my appointment; you came in a few minutes too soon. My gun had been lying on the table as

a therapeutic tool for the session. You picked it up, and without a shred of conscience, opened fire. You wiped it off, dropped it on the floor, and walked right past me. Like a robot carrying out an order, you never thought twice about me standing there.”

“That’s not true. I saw you. I remember...”

“Do you? What do you remember Ed? How much do you think you remember?”

And she was right. I found myself questioning every detail of that night. I had only barely remembered going over there at all. I had no reason to head over; I’d been unable to sleep, so I went over to see how my parents were carrying on, if they’d had any interesting sessions. Halfway there, I knew they’d be disappointed in me, and I knew they wouldn’t give me any more drugs to help me sleep. I had to do something, I had to make a decision, or I’d forever be their lab rat. It was a Ransom night, I remembered that Dacien came the same day and time every week, her nights completely empty of other appointments. Sometimes her sessions ran longer than expected – my parents always gave her as much space as possible to vent. I had gone over there, and the session was running long, wasn’t it?

And then what happened? I went in, as Dacien was leaving, finding the gun on the coffee table. They were all talking about nothing, setting up time for the next discussion, things to work on until next week. I barely remembered it; I was lost in such a daze. Everything after that seemed foreign and unfamiliar, like memories that I was retrieving from someone else’s mind. They were clear at parts, but mostly blurred around the edges. I saw Dacien’s eyes flash as she went for the gun, turning and aiming at each of my parents in turn, pulling the trigger without a shred of conscience. But the harder I focused on the scene, the more Dacien’s outline blurred and shook in my memory. The less consistent it seemed.

I started replacing her with everyone I'd ever met in my life, soon I saw Deacon, Brie, and Irish all as potential murderers, holding the handgun loosely in one hand. They took shock and staggered though, unfamiliar aspects of the scene.

When I'd exhausted all resources, I sat down at the table again. As I substituted myself into the scenario, and my mind didn't immediately dismiss the idea, the truth came crashing down like a house of cards. I kept shaking it off, hoping that things would disintegrate as before, but they seemed sturdier now, more lucid. Dacien was pleased with herself, as she took the seat she'd taken before.

"The cops keep coming for me. You can tell them what really happened, or I can. Either way, I will not bleed for you or your madness."

I shook my head, ignoring her, tuning her out, doing everything in my power to return to the scenario as I remembered it the first time with a blood drenched Dacien Ransom holding the smoking gun. But no matter how many times I repeated the scene, it still seemed off and foreign. I could hear Dacien's voice, her real voice from the now speaking to me, but she seemed far away and miniscule as I kept repeating what I knew. What I thought I knew.

After another few minutes, frustrated with being ignored, she got up from the table abruptly, slamming her palms down on the surface. The noise brought my attention back immediately, staring from her hands up to her face, more confused than when I started.

"You want to know what's true, Edward Dorrance, then you find the stories. There's about nine of them now; if you find them, you may find peace. Or the closest thing that creatures such as ourselves do find. I wish you luck either way. But listen close...the cops will be coming for you, and I hope you prepare well for them. Good day, Mister Hyde."

And she left, just as quietly as she'd come. I was left to my chair, quiet and confused, unaware of all that had come to pass. Their murderer was still out there, loose and alive, biding his time until he could get away with more heinous acts. Right?

More monster than man, he would be a brutish creature with a severe flaw of conscience and an overriding tendency to believe things not as they were, but as he wished them to be. A creative sort, but still one powerless to stop the sway of truth, fighting an uphill war against what was obvious.

Tell me something true?

Show me something real.

14. What's Rational and What's Real

I would tell you more, if I could remember the details, but things started fading to black quickly. Repression kicked in almost instantly as my subconscious struggled to ignore what was real. I didn't want to remember Damiano's tormented face, but at the same time I found it impossible to forget. The pain in her eyes was something I would have to carry in my soul, the driving force behind my vengeance. Vengeance, something I could only dream of in my current condition.

For a while, I was sure I was dead. Black had overcome my world in so many ways I found it impossible to function any other way. Pain took a backseat to the more important anguish in my mind, which I could almost envision. There seemed to be a mental war ongoing between my true self and my better self,

the stronger, more bloodthirsty version that was slowly seizing control.

I awoke in my apartment, dazed and confused, with blurry vision and a mind-numbing headache. I recognized my surroundings immediately, though I had no idea how I'd gotten here. It didn't matter either, as the familiarity helped the chaos in my mind rest. I was able to sleep peacefully, dreaming of bloodshed and pain, the foundation of my plan planting itself deep in my subconscious. I would need more than rage to accomplish my dark desires, and accomplish them I would. Time and patience would be the most important factors, and I was notorious for both.

After an unprecedented amount of sleep was had, I woke up to Irish trying to clean off my face. The sting of alcohol roused me instantly, shooting me up from the bed. She kept a firm hand to my chest, her eyes severe, keeping me pressed down.

"This is going to hurt a lot more if you don't sit still, Edward."

She kept to her task, saying nothing else that would give me any clue to the day or how I'd managed to make it from upstate to here. I was content not knowing for now, trying to focus all my energy on appreciating Irish's efforts to patch me up. Not really a doctor, she could handle a lot of basic injuries, a talent that had come in handy over time. I tried to lock my muscles as much as possible, focusing on her work, but the occasional jump came from time to time.

"Those officers that were tailing you took off upstate, so you can breathe free for a little while," she started, her voice neutral. "Apparently they had some interest in whatever happened. I don't know the details, I was just told to come pick you up."

I nodded slowly at her, assuming Caine had made the phone call to retrieve me. My voice was lost in my throat, a foreign and

pained object.

"They're looking for me," I whispered, the tone unfamiliar and horrid. She seemed surprised I could make any sound at all, stopping her healing momentarily.

"Your letter led them north, but they'll be back soon enough when they find you've already left. I hope you have more of a plan from there. Someone called and tipped them off about the murder, they were in the bar asking me some questions when it came in. Young girl is sounded like, real quiet..."

"Seven," I muttered. She had set the wheels in motion perfectly, or so she'd thought. The elder Morrow twins would arrive on the scene to find Damiano dead, with me lying on the ground – their only clue. Except I had been removed from the scene – nowhere to be found. It didn't mean they didn't assume the worst, that they weren't trying their damndest to hunt me down and pin this on me. Like me, they would want vengeance. But unlike me, they were entirely lost in their search. They would never find peace, never find salvation; I would have to do that for us all.

Irish leaned back slowly, admiring her work with a sigh. She seemed conflicted but confident – her talent had cleaned me up considerably, but there was only so much she could do.

"Ed, I don't know what you've gotten yourself into...and I don't know how much I'm willing to risk to get you out of it. I'm sorry. I can put you back together again, but everything after that is going to be your call. The shop's up and running, as promised, a place waiting for you, but...I wish you the best."

She got up slowly, my eyes following her as she rose. Blood was splattered over her arms as she fought with gaping injuries to stitch me up; I was appreciative of her efforts. I knew though, by her demeanor and words, that she would be keeping her distance from me now. She had a business to protect, a community she was loyal to, and I had to respect

that. There were instructions in my business plans that she should enjoy a share of the tattoo shop's profits, as a show of my deep appreciation of all her support through the years. No matter how things ever turned out, I was insistent that Irish be looked after. She was a long survivor of pain in the area, and I had to marvel at her fortitude in carrying on her post. She turned and left without another word, never looking back to change her mind. I knew she wouldn't, and that was all right.

I drift in and out of sleep for the next few days, getting up from time to time to check the dead bolt. Upon further inspection, I realized it wasn't my original apartment after all, but another one in the same building as the shop. My possessions and artwork had been brought here to give the place an alarmingly genuine homey feel, but otherwise the place was structurally different. I imagined it was the only idea my subordinates could come up with to shake the cops to my true location, thus buying me some time. And I needed time right now. I needed to set up a way to shake them off, to prove my innocence...but there was none. I had no alibi for the time of the attack. Then again, I also had no motive to brutally torture and murder a neighborhood girl. But do all madmen have motives? Has every murderer in the history of time had a rational reason for his deeds? Or do some of them just like the taste of blood?

I wandered downstairs only once to take in the shop in its fully operationally form. Smelling slightly of alcohol and disinfectant, I found myself oddly at home. The sterility of it was calming to my damaged mind, reminding me of a time clear of infection or pain. I met the staff quickly, introducing myself as politely as possible. They smiled on cue, though there was a noticeable nervousness to their actions.

I moved over to Shirley next, looking over the books and hoping for good results. Naturally, they were. Our talent was

top notch and word of mouth had brought in a surprisingly steady stream of business. Most of the artists were booked solid at least 30 days, and all of them immensely talented. I was pleased. Shirley was starting to show more, an obvious sign of her looming maternity leave, which I discussed briefly with her. She seemed slightly resentful of being cast out of her post, even temporarily, thinking herself just as tough as the rest of the crew. I was proud of her resolve, and reminded myself to give her a raise upon her return from childbirth, assuming she returned. Some people aren't able to jump back on the horse at all, so I had to be prepared for that. I commended her again on a job excellently done, which she liked hearing, and allowed her to continue without any further interference.

I didn't care how the business was run, as long as it was run well. It was making money and had already established a sort of notoriety of professionalism and poise. I was glad to be a part of it from a business standpoint, but more importantly from a communal standpoint. The establishment had brought together new people in the area, and through them new friends and networking potential. More bands were discovered, new art forms unraveled, and a whole new sector of society became engaged with its long lost brothers and sisters in arms. When things settled down in my currently chaotic world, I would join the working class, the great unwashed, and apprentice under one of my own masters, hoping to acquire a talent in my own business. Such was the long-term plan, assuming I survived the short first.

I spent large amounts of time locked away in my apartment, waiting for the officers to come. Waiting for them to discover the truth and apologize. Assuming they would. They had made a grievous mistake, and they had to know that. I would never harm Damiano – never. But how could they know that? They hadn't been there, they'd been miles away, distant, entirely disconnected from her. How could they pretend to care now when

it was far too late? I discarded any sentiment I'd had for the Morrow family, any grief, since they had damned themselves in the long run. I would wait, patiently, for their return.

But it didn't happen. They never broke the door down and pulled me from my bed in my sleep. They never sent other officers to question me about the incident. From what I could tell, I had gotten away with it. I smiled quietly to myself for hours on end as I pondered where to go from here, who to hunt.

The faceless demon that had leered at me all along – satisfied with my misery; and Seven, the quiet killer, who didn't seem to mind the treacherous task on her shoulder. Both of them were entirely morally depraved, neither of them flinched in their duties as tormentor and executioner. They hadn't hesitated in the slightest, carrying on their deed with precision. Almost like clockwork.

Someone in my mind snapped instantly, as I came to a new revelation. I didn't want revenge on my tormentors. On Damiano's murderers. No. I wanted revenge on the world. I wanted revenge on anyone who had ever gained from someone else's misery. I wanted to play the part, switch the roles, and steal the scene. I wanted to inflict pain for any that contributed to madness. Anyone who thought it was better to spill blood out of ease, without purpose. My new goal was clear. I would condemn the murderer who had no motive, the man with no mystery. Seven was teaching me a valuable lesson, one that I had nearly tossed callously aside.

My greater mission here was to survive, to carry on, but to create something better and bigger than myself – a system of justice and mercy where the sinners and madmen are sorted out from the world; where liars are given their just reward. I now had a greater goal, one of ambition and truth, where the pain would be that of the sinner; the virtuous would be rewarded for his bravery in stopping the cycle forever. Seven had

granted me the chance to achieve something more with my means, and I would find salvation through it.

I didn't want revenge on the girls who had stolen the love of my life from me. No. I wanted revenge on those who had allowed my love to become tormented, who had bent her into the liar she'd become. The Officers Morrow. I wanted revenge on Damiano briefly for lying to me, for using me, but I realized the futility of that quest. She was already dead, already punished for her crime, and I had to respect that. And respect that I would, as I hunted her siblings for their indifference. The cycle of violence would perpetuate itself, an eye for an eye, and somehow, I was excited for it.

I kept myself to myself for weeks, waiting expectantly for the final turn, which had yet to come, but when it did, I'd be ready. As avenging angels in the past had raised their swords to slay the corrupt and protect the virtuous, I too would spread my wings through sacrifice.

Yes, there would be blood.

But it was for the greater good.

13. And They're Off...

The show ended after a fashion, with a very good response from the crowd on the duo's performance. I clapped as hard as my hands could handle. I was ecstatically proud of them. Yet, I was still distracted, my mind elsewhere, pulling me towards the door. I helped the kids pack up so we could get to the races earlier, so we wouldn't miss too much excitement. So I wouldn't miss seeing Damiano. The racers and the gypsies didn't get along so well, but it was a known fact that Marco

was dating Damiano, so her presence was allowed without harassment.

Caine pretended not to notice my brisk pace, my bright smile. But he knew. He had to know. He must have seen her creep in, seen us steal away. But he kept his mouth shut, Deacon kept close at his side. They whispered back and forth to each other, which would bother me ordinarily, being left out of the loop, but I found that I didn't care. Right now, my mind was in the clouds, trying to chase down my heart, which was higher still. And collected as such, as we got into Caine's car and went to the outskirts, where the races were held, parking a good piece back and walking along in silence.

The path to the course was lined with cars on all sides, but hidden in its own way. There were no street lamps to mark our place, we were simply there, and nobody knew it but ourselves.

Deacon had stayed behind at the bar to tidy up a few things, letting us come alone. It was regrettable to not see her reaction to the scene, not be able to analyze her slight facial twinges, but all the same I was glad for the peace. Her presence could have prompted Caine to confront me, if she chose to remind him of what he'd rather soon forget. I shook her presence, or lack thereof, from my mind and focused on the true lady of the hour – Damiano.

Races were more of a test of survival than endurance. The racers had a set number of laps to beat each other to the finish while staying on their machines. Should you wipe out, or be knocked off your bike in any way, you were automatically disqualified. A slightly more brutal way of doing things, but one that kept the crowds coming. The cops liked the added element of danger, hoping that a spike in accidents might shut us down for good. Every so often someone would take their last tumble, but so rarely that we quickly forgot the names of the lost contenders. I only knew of the Wicked, and barely anything about them at that. Only Marco's identity was

something of considerable interest to me, as I compared myself to him extensively tonight.

Marco Marek was everything you'd expect from a jock sort of guy, entirely secure in his masculinity but still striving to push the limits that tiny bit more. More brawn than brains, I spent most of my night trying to figure out how someone as mindless as him had gotten the gentle Damiano to stay by his side. Or to a point. She was mostly free in her heart's sense, her soul a creature to be admired more than tamed. I was entirely content with being allowed that slight privilege. Marco however, was not. He aspired to own her entirely, to keep every aspect of her personality under lock and key, something she obviously resented him for. I understood her frustration and related. Still, I wasn't able to uncover how such a brutish creature had enchanted the gypsy. Perhaps some things are best left as mysteries.

Damiano crept through the milling crowd, always within a few inches of me but keeping a casually low profile. She'd speak to me as if I was a stranger, pointing out interesting tidbits, leaning on me to get a better view. It was all staged for any idle observer, most importantly Marco. We couldn't call attention to ourselves, and I'd make damn sure to play the part as best as I could. After a few moments though, the race got more interesting, a concept I had thought wholly impossible.

The Wicked had leaned into the first corner, all astride with each other, when Marco's bike gave a very visible kick. He slowed down, fading into the pack, but carried on. Another turn or two made it obvious that there was a very important issue with the bike, one that should have removed him from the race. But being the arrogant fool that he was, he kept pushing. I could almost envision his teeth gritting, eyes narrow under a furrowed brow. And that's when the bike would give a final kick, right as he kicked the accelerator up around that fateful turn. An almost slow motion train wreck,

we'd watch the bike give up underneath him, sliding at an unprecedented pace, taking the shocked rider with it. I felt every nerve in my body seize instantly as my eyes slowly carried over to find Damiano.

Eyes locked on the tortured, mangled vehicle, one of the other Wicked running on foot to the scene, she allowed the smallest and most dangerous of smiles to creep across her lips, turning slowly to depart the scene. I looked around apprehensively, trying to keep a mental image of the crowd. Trying to figure out who would notice our departure if anyone. And right as I turned to go, my body already committed to the motion, I saw her. Deacon. Staring back at me, her eyes also returning from Damiano's back. She'd figured it out. The lights were slowly coming on in her head and I took off running before anyone else could hope to be so clever.

I was grasped by the shirt and pulled into an alley abruptly, my eyes covering the scene. A hand, soft and warm, clamped over my mouth as I reached forward to get my bearings. Damiano's familiar smile met mine, her eyes seemingly burning. I was going to contest her decision, when I saw the other two members of the Wicked go racing by, helmets coming off their heads slowly. They stopped momentarily, staring into the shadows, seeing right past us.

Girls. Both of them. I recognized neither, as they hunted in the night for...us. It took a moment for everything to click, but it started to make sense. As they shifted off, scanning the streets for any clues in their search, Damiano's hand slipped away from my lips.

"What have you done?" I whispered, my voice barely a gasp. To say that she looked sorry or upset would have been a blatant lie, since neither emotion overcame her right then. If I had to describe the look upon her...it was something of triumph.

"I've bought myself time. And a chance to be free, if you'll

help me manage it.”

I shrugged, defeated – realizing that any chance I had to escape was gone now. I couldn't abandon her any more than I could stop the sun from setting. Now we were losing time, and light, neither of which we'd get back. We needed to get back to the hotel, get my things, and return to the city. We needed to put all of this behind us, immediately. If Marco Marek ever recovered, he'd have his sights set firmly on Damiano. I had to get her out of his range.

We took back roads to the hotel, the streets abuzz with news of the crash. Marco had been rushed to a local hospital, though the outlook seemed grim. The remaining Wicked members were on the prowl for persons of interest, anyone with information on the accident. Foul play was suggested immediately. The Wicked made no error – never fell, never defeated. In order for the great leader to fall, someone must have interfered. And they would not rest until they had their man. Or woman.

Another few moments, and we were at the bus station, again hiding in the shadows. I kept Damiano pressed against me as much as possible, wrapped in my shirt. She didn't seem to mind my sudden protective streak. I loved her, and at the moment, nothing else mattered but preserving that love. There was no more conversation on the series of events that had come to pass. We both knew that she had somehow interfered with Marco's bike, that her single action might have killed a man. And somehow, we were both okay with that.

Then there was a wrench in the works. While we waited, another familiar face approached to take the city bound bus. Deacon. Packed, and slightly doubled over, I watched her make headway to the bus clutching onto...one of the Wicked. The Alpha female had her arm around her back, leading her slowly to the waiting bench. Damiano let out an almost silent gasp, her breath slowing as she watched her enemy within a few paces of her.

She crept up to the bus painfully, turning to say goodbye, and...no.

Eye contact. Only for a split second, but long enough for the girl in front of us to make the connection; we were caught. As the doors closed, we stood paralyzed as the girl before us turned slowly, her eyes locking on mine, then immediately on Damiano.

“Well Miss Morrow, what a pleasure to find you here. If you don’t mind, I’d like to have a bit of a chat with you.”

Damiano’s eyes darted from her to me in rapid succession, considering her options. Run? Fight? Or pretend nothing was wrong? Lie?

We had time for nothing, as I felt a sharp pain in the back of my head, making my knees collapse out from under me. I landed hard, almost in a slow motion picture sort of way. I looked over to Damiano to find her joining me on the ground, her eyes slightly wide and scared. I wanted to assure it that it would be all right as I met the ground next to her, rolling onto my back momentarily to stare up at the stars. Was death this sudden and painful? Or was this something worse?

The last conscious thought I had before blacking out was the cruel smile of a new female, the other Wicked, leaning down to stare into my eyes.

“Hello lover,” she whispered, leaning to kiss me on the forehead. And then black.

Blinking repeatedly does nothing to change the focus of your vision after taking a few good hits to the head. I woke up bound to a chair in an otherwise empty room in a completely expressionless building. Head pounding and eyes scrolling the room, I could find nothing to make heads or tails of. Until a human form landed with a thud in my lap, straddling the chair I was connected to. I recognized the girl from earlier, but

barely.

“Welcome back, tiger. You don’t know who I am, but I’ve heard about you. Edward “Hyde” Dorrance, right? You came here from the city, to leave some things behind, but you couldn’t exactly escape the truth, could you, boy? No matter how much you lie to yourself, it will follow. And tonight, you will learn the cost.”

I shook my head a few times, trying to shake the ringing from my ears. She got up abruptly, pulling my chair backwards in jittery motions, the noise screeching through my mind. Whipping me around, I beheld the first of my night of horrors.

Damiano. Equally bloody and bruised, bound and hanging from a rafter by her wrists. Upon closer inspection, I found her to be still alive, though thoroughly unconscious. The first girl, the quieter of the pair, stepped out from behind her slowly.

“Mister Dorrance? My name is Seven.”

I nodded my understanding, though I could find no voice. My entire heart and soul was being ripped apart as I stared at the suffering Damiano, unable to fathom how I ended up here. I remembered vaguely, the story Caine had told me, realizing that my fate was sealed. I wondered briefly if it’d been worth it, to die, simply, for a girl. Seeing her there though, thinking back on those few hours, those two simple conversations, I decided that if there was a better way to go, I didn’t know of it.

“Let me apologize,” she continued. “But she was just using you. She’ll confess soon enough. But Marco never beat her. I did. Sin does not go without redemption. I understand how you feel about her, and I’m truly sorry for what we’re about to do to you. But you must watch. You must listen. And you must fear the truth so that you never turn back. Am I clear?”

Was I just a pawn in her grand design? I refused to listen to

the girl before me, seemingly sweet and logical. If I hadn't known the stories about her, I would have denied that there was any harm she could commit against anyone. Her vicious partner, the face with no name, I could believe that she could watch Rome burn. But Seven...it didn't add up.

I wasn't permitted time enough to consider the options before the torture started, but not on me. I wasn't touched for a number of hours, forced to watch as Damiano twisted and writhed in agonizing pain. Screams and tears broke out.

And as they predicted, she confessed. She confessed everything. Using me as her escape plan, hoping to get away with causing Marco's accident, and if all else failed, she had planted parts of his bike in my bag to cover her tracks. It was all a set up to achieve something more...for herself. I was just a meal ticket for the time being, easily abandoned, more easily replaced, once she made it to the city. She said everything that they wanted her to and more, bleeding all the more for it along the way. By the end of three hours, I could no longer think, no longer function or breath freely.

Another hour later, Damiano Morrow would be dead.

Her body would succumb to a battery of physical wounds, severe blood loss and internal bleeding. I would sit there, motionless and useless, watching until the very end, feeling the cold tear slip down my cheek as life slipped away from her. As the flame in her eyes died, staring into my own, I could feel my soul wrench itself free of its chains and demand something more.

Demand revenge.

Revenge that I would have to postpone, as the battery turned to me once Damiano's body could take no more. I was beaten within inches of my life, removed from the chair when it became an inconvenience. The unnamed attacker seemed to enjoy this more than her partner, who accepted pain as a necessary

part of her job. In a way, I respected their position, but only slightly so. They had murdered the only person I had ever truly loved, and every fiber of my being was bent on their execution.

As my love before me though, I soon tired of the pain and started to give way into the blackness, the bleak cold that would hold me close for many years. Or so I thought. I stared up at the rafters, laying as flat as my battered back would allow, gasping for air through countless fractured ribs and a possibly broken jaw. Seven leaned down, kneeling at my side.

“Edward Dorrance...you will survive this, despite what your body is telling you. And you will be the better person for it, if you allow yourself to be. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, Edward.”

And she walked away, leaving me to my pain and heartache. Her partner knelt down slowly, taking a careful consideration of her hard work as blood dripped loosely from her knuckles. She seemed pleased with herself in a sort of twisted way that only a madman could appreciate. Which, part of me did. There was a quaint sort of beauty in her chaos.

“Do no evil, Hyde.”

With that, they were both gone. I was abandoned with the cold, empty body of my love, grasping onto the floor desperately to stop the pain. After a few seconds, I made the decision to get up, to pull Damiano down so that she too might rest. I made it as far as my knees, clawing and clambering, finally collapsing again on the floor, exhausted.

To the only girl I ever truly loved, and was entirely prepared to die for...I pledge to you this single promise, my only wish. Blood in, blood out. As you have suffered, as will others in your stead, for my revenge, my love, will be sweet and long lasting.

Sweet dreams, my queen.

12. Indecision

I packed my clothes quickly and abruptly; taking more care with the paperwork that was nestled carefully away. They were priceless right now, the fruits of my labors. They made this trip worthwhile. My dance with death had purpose. I wondered if I should try to find her before my departure. Then I thought of Caine's warnings and thought better of it. This was love, and this was loss, all at once. My body didn't know how to hold it. My mind was very confused in itself. I discovered something great, something wonderful and worth saving for all eternity. And in that same breath, it was snatched away from me. I packed and decided to leave at night. I'd spend my last few hours wandering just as I was always fond of doing. There was a race tonight as well, I thought about it. Caine was scheduled to be playing a show, accompanied by Deacon, at one of the local watering holes. I could do it all. I deduced that I'd make the most of this, my last day and night in my home away from home. I would go hear the kids play for a while, listening to those forlorn guitar chords echo amidst rooms filled with smoke and conversation. Then move off to catch the festivities of the races, see who came out on top. And after that, in the wee hours of the new day, I'd take my bags and hop the first bus home. As I walked out of the little inn, I dropped my mail in the box, one of which was a letter to Mr. Wolfe, the owner of the inn, with a check for my occupancy. I didn't want to hand it to him directly, since he disputed my paying anything at all. In that way, everything was clear.

I walked with my hands in my pockets, smoking as I went, over to the place that the kids were playing at. Caine was off

talking to the barkeep, Deacon was sitting fiddling around with her guitar, making sure everything was in tune. Her face seemed to light up when I came in, she jumped up and ran over to me.

“Hey, what’s up?”

I looked around, confused, bewildered. “Huh?”

She laughed, like a child. She seemed reborn, a completely different from the girl I used to know. I don’t know if Caine changed her, or sobriety, but she wasn’t the sullen girl that lived next door, who moved from chemical to chemical, guy to guy, day after night and so on. She just seemed so much...happier. She was free. I smiled back at her, shaking away the confusion.

“Hey, um, nothing. You?”

“Come for the show?” She tilted her head a little, moving her eyes over to Caine. He was straightening out a few last minute details; he looked over and smiled at us both, a slight wink in Deacon’s direction. I was happy for them both. There was love everywhere. Shirley and Moe. Deacon and Caine. And yet here I stood, my life completely forbidden. Figures. I thought of Irish, how alone she was, how she didn’t seem to mind it in the slightest. Maybe you didn’t need anybody to make it in this life. Then again, it’s nice to have company. I thought of Damiano’s warm skin, her soft touch...and I threw all of Irish’s theories out a window. I nodded back at Deacon as I zoned in, coming back to this moment.

“Course, wouldn’t miss it for the world. Going to the races?”

She nodded back. “Course. Wouldn’t miss it.”

And we both laughed, like there was some sort of secret joke that only we shared. There was some sort of underlying feeling of discomfort, but overall, here we were. Years of isolation

as both of us hid in plain sight and we were both reborn. I felt closer to Deacon now, standing here, talking about nothing, than I ever had before. Her troubled past, her case history, everything, it all seemed to slip away and she became just a carefree girl, no – young woman. She looked so much happier; I couldn't believe the physical glow she had to her now.

The beginning of something more. Of something more than this. The past was dead and gone, and we were all reinventing ourselves. It's what us artists specialize in. I thought about when I got home, looking into opening a gallery, I'd invite Deacon to showcase her work with me. I wondered if she ever intended to go home. Somehow, I doubted it. Then again, stranger things have happened in this world. Every day, the standards get tested. And every day, lines are bending, breaking, and reforming elsewhere.

I sat down in the back of the place, settling myself down to a drink and a smoke while the two kids sat up front on stools, guitars balanced across their knees. And they played. They played with heart and soul, in perfect harmony, working off of one another brilliantly. I couldn't keep a smile off my face, even as they sang their tragic melodies of loss and hardship. Maybe I'm truly insane underneath it all, maybe I'm insincere, I don't know. But that's how I felt. I can't explain it entirely, but that's just how it was.

I was sitting there, listening, for a good hour or so when my attention seemed to divert elsewhere. A vague scent flooded over me, then I found my eyes blocked by two hands. My vision all turned to black, my body shaking slightly.

"Guess who?" The voice was soft, spoken in my ear. I could feel her breath on my neck as I pulled her hands down and pulled her into a chair next to me. Damiano was dressed as normal as she could appear, devoid of anything that would make her seem out of the ordinary. She had on jeans and a coat that

covered most of her, so to the general public, she was nothing to be noticed.

“You might be as mad as I am,” I whispered, trying to keep my eyes front while the music continued. I didn’t want to create a scene. She merely smiled, leaning in to respond in my ear again.

“Might be?”

“We have to talk.”

I could feel the frown pull at the corners of her mouth; her whole body seemed to slump in the chair. I wanted to pull her out of here and explain everything. Caine’s warning – how I wasn’t prepared to die for her but I did love her. I wanted to rant and rave until there was nothing left in me. But I couldn’t. I sat there, my hand gripping her tight, my best way to tell her not to leave me. And she stayed. The kids took a break for a while, and I took that as a cue to clear things up with her. I grabbed her and ran outside, behind the building, holding her by her shoulders against the wall. It was only now, as the light hit her face, I could see the bruises, freshly made.

“What have you got me involved in?” My voice was stern, my eyes hard and unfeeling. She shrugged, pulling me closer to her.

“Trouble. Isn’t that what guys like you are always searching for?”

I shook my head, pushing myself away from her. It hurt, but I had to. She was a living siren, pulling me to my own destruction. She was the epitome of trouble walking. This was my death – right here, all sex and seduction. I took a few more steps back. “And Marco? I didn’t come here searching for him.”

She frowned again, but turned it into a sort of half-smile. "Scared?"

"Damiano...I heard some disheartening things today. About Marco. About the Wicked. I'm leaving tonight."

She smiled again, creeping closer to me. "Funny. So am I."

"What?" My mind was doing back-flips again, the possibilities raging through. She took a few steps around me, looking me up and down.

"I'm leaving. What part of that are you having trouble understanding?"

"But...why? I thought this was your home."

And she laughed, a laugh very similar to Deacon's. "Home? Girls like me don't have homes. We have temporary sanctuaries. It's time that I move on."

"And what brought this sudden change of heart forth?"

She smiled wider. "Not you, if that's what you're thinking. I hate to wound your precious ego, but no, there are other reasons to get out of this haven."

I nodded, taking the blow slightly to heart. She crept closer to me. She locked eyes with me, pulling me closer to her again. I wrapped my arms around her, slowly, as she placed them there. And as my fingers slide onto her back, she jerked, her eyes closing slightly as a slight hiss escaped between her teeth.

"That's the deal breaker."

"Marco..."

"Beats me?" Her reply was very...matter of fact. Like this happened all the time, like I should have known all along. "Course. He's protecting what's his."

I shook my head and held her to my chest, careful not to squeeze too tightly on what could have been cracked ribs. I felt guilty, for creating this situation. I wanted to face Marco, one on one, deal with this like a man. But I knew I couldn't, and wouldn't. The noise inside hinted that the break was over and the music would continue soon. She pulled away from me and turned to run off.

"You'll come to the race?" My voice was desperate as I yelled after her.

"Course. I'm expected."

"And then?"

She smiled, coming back to me and kissing me softly. "And then we run away."

I smiled back. "I thought this had nothing to do with me."

She laughed. "The timing had nothing to do with you. The new location has everything to do with you. My mother always said that when opportunity falls into your lap, make the best of friends with it."

I kissed her, letting her go again. "After the race, bus station."

She looked over her shoulder as she left, smiling back.

And the bottom of my stomach dropped out once more, my faith was restored, and all was well in the world. I could have died right there, a happy man, without achieving anything great, without any sort of merit to my name. Simply because Damiano Morrow loved me. Right there, right then, I believed in love at first sight, in all the fireworks, the bells and whistles, everything. If you told me you'd seen Cupid, I would have asked you how many arrows he had left these days. And with a heart reborn yet again, I walked back into the saloon and listened to the rest of the show with ears newly blessed.