

## 29. Return to Arms

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

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

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

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

"You come around trying to be everyone's friend when you're related to the enemy. Your entire family line is full of murderous lunatics and you claim to be far from it. You could be daughter to Toryn Ransom herself with how similar you look to her, and you wouldn't even know it. Saint shared a lot of important information with you, and I know you already had a head full of blackmail material as is. So again, who are you working for?"

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

“Myself. Working to survive.”

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

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

“By working with you.”

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

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

If only she’d felt that way about herself.

I remember the bang, but the shot froze every fiber of my being. I wasn’t sure if I was dead or alive for a good ten seconds, as Harley’s frame slipped from view. I don’t remember breathing or thinking further than the sound. I just stared wide-eyed into the darkness of the bar, devoid of visitors, realizing only after a solid two minutes that I had just witnessed the murder of Harley Morrow. A legend. A martyr.

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

Irish.

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

“Why?” I muttered.

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

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

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

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

Irish had just murdered a pillar of our community, both new and old. It was like assassinating the governor. I could turn her into the authorities, or at least to our brand of justice. She would die, slowly and painfully, for her crime. If she dared call anyone friend, they would suffer with her, as she had no family to be stolen from.

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

risk.

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

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

“Someone else?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No. It was self-defense. She pulled a gun on you, there was a scuffle, you both reached for the gun, but you reached it

first." She seemed satisfied with the response.

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

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

"I don't like this," I muttered, realizing the futility of it. He merely smiled.

"You don't have to like it. You merely have to survive it. Consider us even."

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

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

I just stayed on the floor, taking the swings, spitting out blood as ribs cracked and blood vessels ruptured. Saint had to make it look legitimate – I understood that. But somewhere in my mind, the constant flashes of knuckle were getting worn

out. I was tired of forgetting who and what I was, where I'd come from and why. For a split second, I hoped Saint would get carried away and I would lose consciousness, never to wake back up. Only for a second. He had his knees dug into my sides while he wailed on my face, until I reached up to grab a blood-drenched fist.

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

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

Until Relic stepped in behind him.

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

"Which one of you did this?" Her voice was clear and stern, a remnant of Harley's resolve. I started to pull myself up off the floor when Saint's voice echoed in the quiet room.

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

Relic tilted her head slowly, locking eyes on mine. "Self-

defense? That so? Did my mother attack you for some reason?"

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

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

"This goes above all of our heads. Harley was the mother of us all. Her death must be avenged. A price must be paid." Edward's words were hollow as he directed his glance in our direction. The blood reflected in his eyes, making him all the more sinister. He came over slowly and pulled Relic off of me, keeping a careful eye on Saint's whereabouts. I stayed frozen on the floor for a good few seconds, assessing my future. A vote would be had. Blood for blood; if the gods were feeling charitable today I might survive this. Key words being "if" and "might". But it was better than nothing, so I'd take my chances.

And I was led away. Locked in the coldest, darkest corner in

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

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

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

Empty and cold, he stood in the doorway like a lost soul, the pistol loosely gripped in his hand. I recognized it as the weapon that killed Harley. He said nothing, just stood there, allowing me enough room to pass. I was led to the chambers where Edward would lay wait outside. As I reached the door, I found Edward on one side...and Relic on the other. Both armed, both waiting. If Colt failed, there would be no walking away



from this one. There would be no fighting his way out. They had him squared in and he knew better than to disregard the policies he had suffered so long to protect. I went into the room and assumed the position that I had remembered from an eternity before, when a younger Irish had stood apprehensively behind me.

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

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

“Do you have any last words?”

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

“I love you.”

Time stopped.

And with that, I turned around and dropped to my knees, as I had before. His arm would swing up slowly, more apprehensively, as he pressed the barrel to the back of my neck. Another hand was locked securely on my shoulder, more to steady him than me. I counted seconds in my mind, trying to focus on the numbers as I waited for the familiar sound of the safety to click off. It never happened. Ten seconds became thirty, became a minute, then two. Colt never fired. His fingers were wrapped into my shoulder, almost drawing blood, but he couldn't take the shot. He knew that his life would end immediately outside if he failed this test. We both did. After three minutes of silence, he gave up. The gun dropped with a

clack on the floor abruptly, I wheeled around to face him.

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

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

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

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

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

Colt started muttering to himself, to me, to anyone who would listen. That this was insane and murder should never be a test of devotion. How could he be expected to kill the one thing he ever truly loved? How was this justice? What was he fighting for? Just as his voice was beginning to rise into true fury, the door flew open, as I'd been expecting. I waited for it to open, pushing Colt out abruptly, toppling his balance. I pulled the door back closed, trying to keep it shut tight while they figured out what was going on. The lock clicked softly back into place, meaning I would be granted my moment

of peace. Colt's fists assaulted the door immediately, pounding and screaming of my innocence. I could hear him fighting and brawling outside the door, trying to pry it open again. I took to my knees in the center of the room, as I had before.

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

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

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

I love you Colt.

Click.

**Bang.**