

13. Fate of a Murderer

"He's dead."

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

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

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

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

She shook her head slowly. "No. You interfered."

"Are you trying to blame me for Colt's death?"

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

"So how am I responsible?"

She smiled slowly. "He had seduced the enemy. With Dacien on his side, he was safe. Linkon's death triggered the demon deep in her soul that we all saw her to be. Except Colt. He was so convinced that even horrible people could be decent. He loved

her despite her name, despite her fate. And he loved her until the moment his last breath left him. No matter what she put him through, and even after the ultimate betrayal, he loved her still.”

“How do you know?”

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

“Trust me.”

“So now what happens?”

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

I nodded my consent, since I had little other choice. She got up from her chair to leave, turning back for a moment.

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

And she left.

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

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

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

He kept the chart high, masking most of his face; eyes as

sweet as sin shone down on me. "Think you can walk?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I thought I'd never see you again!"

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

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

And somehow, it helped me relax.

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

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

“I think I need a dr...”

And before the sentence was finished, an open bottle was placed at the center of the table before me. I took a few straight swigs without hesitation before putting it back on the surface.

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

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

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

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

“Abandon all Hope.”

I felt the effects of the drunkenness wear off at a remarkable pace as I stood there, staring up at the body of my protector. Reduced merely to an object, a marker of insult and humor. With this simple act, the war had been ended. The martyr, the fool, all stereotypes in one, demolished. Broken and bleeding, our once great saint, our flawless, fearless leader – gone. I pushed my way through the crowd, slowly at first, then more frantically until I could finally reach him. I just wanted to touch him – to be sure the warmth was gone. But then I needed to have him lowered, to end the mockery. I tried in vain to pull him down, despite the futility of it, his weight against my strength. I kept trying even as countless hands reached in to pry me off. I fought and clawed my way back to him, even as the steel grip slipped around me, an arm locked around my throat and I was hefted back.

“Bare witness to the cost. You can not deny it now. You can't hide from the truth. He is dead...because of you.” Irish leaned her face close into my ear as the last few words slipped off her tongue. I tried to pull myself from her grasp, but her hold was impenetrable. The more I fought, the harder the hold, until I had nearly exhausted myself. I heard calls for the

crowd to clear, a voice so familiar a chill ran up my spine hearing it. And Irish kept me in that lock from behind as Dacien parted and dispersed the vulgar mob. After a lengthy look at me, she exhaled her smoke slowly in my face, at which point Irish finally let go.

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

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

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

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

What a class act.