

## 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.