

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 every 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.