

## 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?”