

The two men lay motionless on the ground.

Trunk's blood still pumped out in thick gushes, creating a thick, red pool that spread into the cracks and grooves of the alley.

Woody was similarly motionless, save for the occasional shuddering twitch as his lifeblood found Trunks to spread wider, touching the tips of his boots, but Raven made no attempt to clean his boots or back off.

*'It was either you, or them...'* Raven looked at his blade, dripping ichor.

Blood gleamed wetly in the half-light.

The bodies laid still and silent. They no longer twitched or shook as if asleep. A sleep of a different sort.

*'Was there another way?'*

It's not a good question. He felt like someone had pricked him. His muscles were shaky. His breathing erratic, his thoughts raced, and the area was growing unbearable. It was time to go.

It felt like it wasn't him who did all those things. As if the murderer was someone else, as if a totally separate entity took him over and made the decisions for him.

This wasn't like back at the bar, where he shattered a bottle on a man's head and bashed him to death.

He could've self-rationalized it was self-defense, and he was drunk.

Raven now wasn't either of those things, and it wasn't as if the bastards had the chance to kill him, though they clearly tried. This was just cold blood murder. The kind where he could've grabbed their shoulders and smashed their heads together, effectively knocking them out and delivering them to the guards.

And instead, he decided it was worth their lives.

Raven just stood there and saw them die, and so, instead of calling it self-defense and looking himself in the mirror the next morning with a sense of moral integrity, he simply wondered—what makes a man different? How many corpses before you become one?

This, to him, was very strange. He should've been reeling in shock, shaking at the knees, puking his guts out, but none of those things seemed to work out.

Not while staring at a sword and a pair of bodies on the floor, leaking the rich, red juices all around like spilled tomatoes.

But now, looking at these still forms on the ground, and realizing the finality of his decision, he had a fleeting wish that there had been a third choice. Something to compromise his ideal solution and end their lives in a much less gruesome way. But perhaps such an answer didn't exist.

Perhaps Raven had to simply accept the violent nature of this world. Perhaps, rather than mourn, or justify his actions, he simply needed to embrace the brutality that these actions entailed.

A post-adrenaline giggle nearly bubbled up, but he bit it down. Laughing sometimes was a coping mechanism.

So, like every man with blood on their hands, he moved forward, walked past the corpses, and knelt before the woman who was still staring at the two bodies with horror. Many people had likely lived out this situation in their heads, playing out the fantasy of saving a damsel in distress, but the reality was far from romantic.

"H-He..."

"I know, take a few breaths..."

"... I... he, they..."

"Look." Raven put his finger on the bridge of her nose, turning her head slightly towards him. She let out a squeak like a rat. She looked ready to break down again. But, to her credit, she didn't. Instead, with wide, glassy, and utterly terrified eyes, she simply raised her chin to gaze back at the boy kneeling in front of her. He spoke as softly as he could. He was a kid, and a murderer. He could only imagine the whiplash she was experiencing. "Calm down, breathe... there, in and out..."

"Hic—you..."

"Yes..."

"Thank you..."

"Can you walk?" He asked.

Her lower lip trembled.

Raven reached down to wipe the muck off her cheeks. She was cold to the touch, her whole body was shaking. But she didn't lean away. She remained fixed in place. Staring into his eyes. Looking so pitiful, it hurt to keep looking at her.

The resemblance with Ashley was there. A closer look and the knowledge that they couldn't be the same person shattered his fantasies of seeing her alive in this world.

Her hair was lighter, as was her skin. She had a weak frame compared to Ashley's. And though their features were quite similar, the little differences were the ones that broke the illusion.

Ashely right now was probably living a decent life.

It was for the best that she wasn't here.

"Y-Yeah..." The woman sniffled. "I-I can walk..."

"Alright." He stood up and helped her stand. She was a bit unsteady, so he remained beside her for a bit. They moved slowly out of the back alley, and by then Raven realized that it was in his best interests to run the fuck away and call it quits on the whole saving-damsel-in-distress cliché.

But he was quite tired of being a fucking piece of shit.

Raven could see a bit of Ashely in her, and that meant he had a responsibility towards this woman. At the very least, he needed to make sure that she got home safe.

Now it was a strange moment, one where his perspective shifted drastically. Here he was, someone who'd just killed two men to save a random stranger and realized that he actually gave a shit about doing the right thing.

It was only after she was fully standing that Raven took notice of her clothes and properly recognized how half-naked and exposed she was. Her torn blouse barely covered her, revealing some of her undergarments as well. She crossed her arms around her chest, trying to hide her shame and dignity as much as possible.

It was a good thing that the streets were nearly empty and the few people around didn't pay them any mind.

Raven sighed, then took off his own worn-out but relatively clean charcoal-colored tunic, and handed it over. "Here." He said. "Wear this."

She looked at him for a second, then took it from him, and put it on with trembling hands. The tunic was comically small for her, but it was better than nothing.

Hey, at least he did the gentlemanly thing. That alone did something to his conscience.

"So, where do you live?"

He might go all out, at this point. Escort this woman to her house, and then call it quits and leave her be. Maybe she'll remember him with gratitude rather than a shard of glass stuck deep in her throat.

The girl mumbled a shaky address to him, one that was barely recognizable. And when Raven didn't quite understand it, she had to repeat it, and clarify its location.

Eventually, she just gave up and pointed her finger where she was indicating.

"T-There..."

Raven wasn't familiar with the district. The location she pointed to was on the outskirts of the city, an area that Raven had never explored, but not too far from the main plaza either. He nodded. "Alright, let's go."

He led the way, walking at a steady pace. The streets were quiet, the only sounds were the distant murmur of the city and the crunch of their boots on the cobblestones.

Raven kept his eyes and ears open, and his hand near his sword.

He wasn't sure if anyone else was watching them, if someone else would attack them. It was a paranoid thought, but a realistic one. He had just killed two men. Thankfully, that back alley was the perfect place to commit a crime.

It was quite tucked away, with abysmal lighting and overall night traffic.

But still. The bodies would be found eventually. And he didn't know if the city would be on the lookout for the killer or merely shrug it off.

He didn't think the latter was possible. There were rules, after all, no matter how lax they were.

The walk was uneventful, with the woman still trembling beside him.

The streets grew narrower as they approached the outskirts, the magical light dimmer here.

The woman's steps slowed, her grip on Raven's arm tightening until her knuckles were white against his sleeve.

They stopped before a house that barely deserved its name. Leaning drunkenly to one side, as if contemplating whether to lie down and die, it was a patched-together collection of warped boards and cracked plaster.

The door hung crooked on rusty hinges, a single grimy window staring out like a cataract eye. A roof made of what appeared to be scavenged materials sagged in the middle, promising leaks with the first rain.

"Well, here we are." Raven said, his voice flat.

The contrast between this miserable shack and the sturdy dojo he now called home was a brutal reminder of how quickly fortunes could turn.

The woman didn't release him. Instead, she stood there trembling.

"You should go inside." Raven said, attempting to gently disengage her grip. "Lock the door. Don't open it for anyone except a baker with fresh pastries. And even then, make him slide them under."

She stood frozen, still clutching at his arm. She shivered and he hoped the tremors running through her body didn't mean tears would soon follow.

If that happened, it was possible that he'd just hand her over the money he got and run away. But his anxiety was somewhat in check and the adrenaline from his recent action began wearing out.

He saved her on a whim, mistakenly believing she was someone she wasn't, but now the deed had been done and he couldn't very well drop a girl, shaken and half-undressed in an alley and walk away with his hands washed.

But he had no intention of watching over her either, nor spend another minute at her miserable, droopy house that looked ready to tip over from the slightest wind gust.

"Come on, go...!" He nudged her forwards. "Go inside..."

"You-you will go?" She stuttered, glancing at him, eyes wide. There was a lot in her face to decipher, though at the time, all Raven could say was that this girl looked exhausted, broken, and probably very poor. "D-Don't... you'll leave?"

'*Shit.*'

"Do you live alone?"

She nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Adley..."

"Oh, fuck me..."

She swallowed, blushing. Why was she blushing? "If... if that is what you w—"

Raven snapped a finger up, cutting her off before the offer could fully form.

"No." He said, sharper than he meant. "That's not what I meant. At all."

She froze mid-sentence, looking utterly aghast and probably embarrassed. He was just making everything more awkward by the minute.

Did this world have loose rules about age gap relationships?

*'Great work.'* Raven scolded himself. *'She'll probably lock herself in there and cry all night, or worse, get assaulted by some other motherfucker now that you've just delivered her back.'*

To be honest, Raven should've taken a few steps forward already, but his boots were nailed to the ground, and in the back of his head, a voice was whispering: don't go; she could easily stab your back the moment you step in, or pull the guards on you if anything. She looks suspicious, too much in shock.

What if this is a ruse? What if this is all a giant trap and she has five friends hidden in that dilapidated dump that will jump on you the moment you walk through the door?

The likelihood of it all happening was low, but he didn't want to get involved any more than this. He went well out of his way to rescue the girl, and killing two men was the maximum stretch he was willing to go.

He patted her back as soothingly as he could, wrenched his arm free, and backpaddled out of the range of her hands, in case she decided to lunge for him and latch onto him for dear life. It wasn't likely, but he had learned to play things by his gut, and the paranoid voice of the detective Marcus that dwelled in his brain had just recovered from its shock-induced stupor, and now he was the one whispering all the possibilities.

She glanced around, appearing startled, as though suddenly realizing that she stood here alone. When her gaze returned to Raven, her expression became pitiful, hopeless, like a wounded pup, beaten down with a bat for the 50th time in its wretched life.

That look pulled hard at his heart.

Because he could still fucking see that woman, and with how much he loved her, he couldn't help but project these same emotions onto a near-stranger.

*'Come on, don't stare like that...!'*