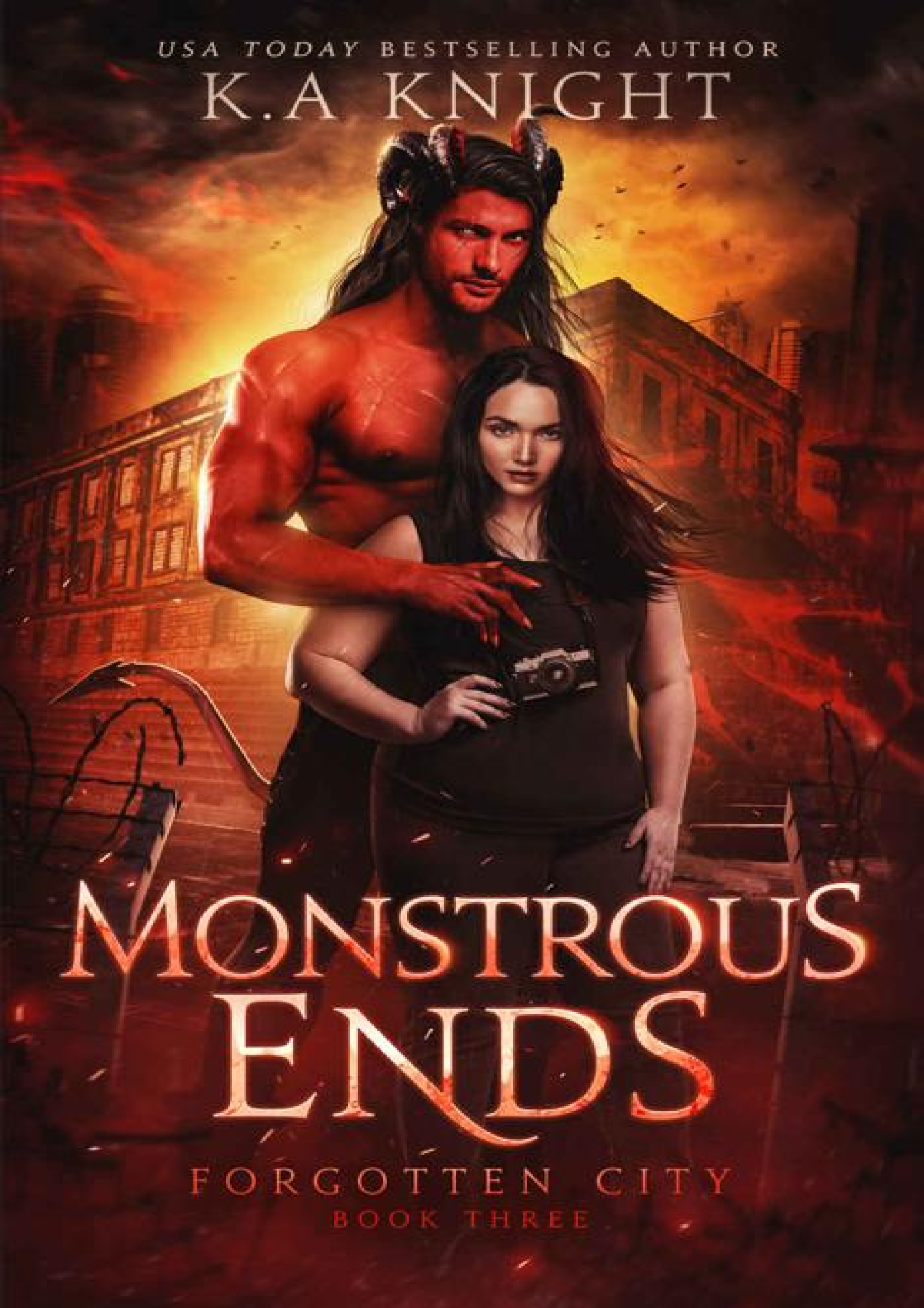


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.A. KNIGHT



MONSTROUS ENDS

FORGOTTEN CITY
BOOK THREE

MONSTROUS ENDS

FORGOTTEN CITY: BOOK THREE

K.A. KNIGHT

Monstrous Ends (Forgotten City Book Three).

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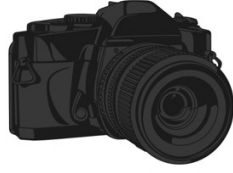
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Are you ready for the end?

PROLOGUE



LYRA

“**S**hit, shit, shit, shit,” I mutter as I shove files and folders into my bag as quickly as I can, my head jerking up at every sound. I could be found any minute now. It may be the middle of the night, and I may have bribed a guard with a date to let me up here, claiming I just like exploring skyscrapers—stupid, I know—but soon enough, they will realise who I am and just what I’m doing here.

I shove as many files in my bag as I can before leaping from the chair and racing through the empty offices of Nano Industries. I stop, my eyes going to the elevator then back to the chairman’s locked office.

Don’t do it, Lyra.

I’ve never been able to pass up a story, however, and this one?

This one is going to be incredible. I can see the headlines now—*Corrupt Scientific Lab Exposed for Its Wrongdoings*. I’ll be back on top in no time, not to mention smearing it in Dad’s smug face.

Hiking my bag higher on my shoulder, I hurry to the door and drop to my knees, pulling out my trusty kit and picking the lock as swiftly as I can.

It’s a skill I learned when I was a kid. It was either that or stay locked in my room all the time.

Pushing open the door, I scurry across the luxurious carpet, ignoring the stunning views of Athesa beyond, and plop my ass into his leather chair, wiggling the mouse to bring his computer to life. The lock is easy to bypass if you know how, and I do.

Life made sure of it.

I learned as much as I could about . . . arts that might further my career—breaking and entering being one. Hey, I

never said the job was all clean and squeaky, but it sure is fun. I stick the USB in and start copying emails and folders before one catches my eye. Hovering the mouse over it, I finally relent and click. There are video files inside, and I pick one at random. The screen opens, and my jaw drops at the contents.

I stare at the video in shock when I hear footsteps.

Quickly downloading it to a flash drive, I lock the computer and run from the office. The footsteps are closer now. Someone's checking offices. "She has to be here. You idiot, we need to get her out before they realise she's here."

Oops. I veer from the elevator to the stairs, placing my hand on the door when a light hits me. "There she is. Get her!"

"Sorry, got to go!" I call as I push through the door and fling my chubby ass down the stairs. I might have hips, an ass, and a belly to show for my love of food, but damn, can I move. Everyone always thinks the curvy girl is bad at sports, and I love to shove it in their faces that I'm not.

I just hit the bottom floor when the guards' radios crackle.

"She's a fucking reporter! Stop her now, she accessed files!"

That's my cue to get the fuck out of here.

I sprint through the reception area and break out into the night air. I don't slow my steps, not even when I hit the pavement. I keep running, aiming for my bike, but when I skid around the corner, police are surrounding it and talking into their radios.

Fucking dirty cops.

Spinning around, I spot an alley and head for it, intending to lie low, but the bloody guards call after me, notifying the cops of my presence.

This is turning into a really fun night. Let's hope I don't end up getting arrested again. I have a feeling not even my father could save me this time.

"Hands up! You are under arrest for trespassing and theft!"

I turn with my hands in the air, grinning into the bright light of their torches as I start to back away. “Um, I’m kind of busy today. Can we do the whole handcuff thing tomorrow maybe? Not that I’m not into it, I like being tied up as much as the next girl, but tonight really isn’t a good night.”

“Stop moving!” the man barks.

Glancing over my shoulder, I find I’m almost to the alley and the darkness beyond.

“See you later, boys!” I grin as I take off running.

Fuck, I have nowhere to go. I can’t go back; they’ll be watching my apartment and my work, which leaves one option—the slums.

I really need to stop trusting random phone calls, though I suppose this one might have just cracked open the story of my life ...

Two weeks earlier ...

I bend my knees, my eyes locked on the edge about two meters away. My hands grip the tiny ledge I currently hang from. Blowing out a breath, I push with my knees at the same time I let go. I reach for the other edge, and my fingertips brush over it before I start to fall back.

I jerk to a stop not far down and grunt in disappointment as I lower myself to the ground, glaring up at the fucking tiny ledge. A hand claps my shoulder as I turn with a grumble. “You’ll get it, Ly, you always do. Hell, you can out climb every man in here.” Todd grins at me, his god-awful green shirt stating proudly *The Colimv Zone*. His harness leaves nothing to the imagination nor does the skintight pants he wears.

Unclipping my rope, I rub my hands together and glance back up at the wall of death. No one has managed to climb it yet, but I’ll be damned if I’m not the first. My friends call me an adrenaline junkie, and my therapist says I do all these crazy

stunts and sports to prove I can so no one can question my size and worth.

I've never been a small girl. I have curves, and I love them, but when people look at me, they think I'm unfit when nothing could be further from the truth. I love the shock on their face when I prove them wrong, not to mention I actually enjoy climbing. "I know." I grin just as my phone starts ringing loudly in my bag on the bench beyond the mats. "I guess that's my cue to leave."

"Yup, otherwise you'd be here climbing all night." Todd laughs as he steps off to help someone else. He's not wrong. The gym, climbing area, and pool are open all night long, and since I've always been a night owl, I spend most of my evenings off here, working out my frustration from work.

Wiping off my chalked hands, I unzip the bag and grab my phone as I take a swig of water. The number is unfamiliar, which isn't a surprise. After all, you don't get many tips or unidentified sources by using caller ID.

And that's why I'm the best in the business.

"Hello, Lyra from the *Gazette* and *News* speaking," I answer.

There's heavy breathing for a moment, and I'm about to hang up, thinking it's that repeat caller weirdo who jerks off. Men have made it their mission in life to sexually harass me since I started in this career, since reporters are usually stick thin and effortlessly beautiful. They either love me or hate me, with my big breasts, ass, and curves that won't stay contained even in SPANX. Added to my resting bitch face and no shits given attitude, it's fair to say I have made just as many enemies as friends.

"I know something, something huge, something that will change everything," the man finally murmurs.

I grin. "I'm listening."

"You know Nano Industries?" the voice hisses.

"Who doesn't?" I mutter, sipping my water. I've always suspected they were dirty. No company is squeaky clean, but

I've never liked their CEO. He's a sleaze, but I was always warned away from investigating. I might get away with a few not so legal endeavours, but they were always off limits since they own most of the city and the other half is owned by those in their pockets.

Like my father.

"They have been doing illegal experiments, experiments to create a new species. Not only that, but they have also been going through the wall and nobody knows why, and now women are starting to disappear," he says hurriedly.

I grab my notebook and take shorthand notes, ignoring the world around me. "Do you have proof?" I demand, my interest piqued. Excitement races through me. If this is true, then they will have to let me investigate, but first I'll have to go rogue to get what I need and then take it to my bosses.

"You're an investigative journalist, get it yourself. It's all locked up in their tower, but they don't want anyone knowing what they are doing there. Don't say I didn't warn you," he snaps and then hangs up before I can ask more, the prick.

As tips go, it's shady, but I've worked with less.

And my intuition is telling me the man was scared of being found out, which makes the tip truthful. If it is, then this could change everything. No, I need proof before I take this to anyone. Not only will it ruin people's lives, but it could ruin my own. They could shut me down and hide me in a black site forever with the money and power they have.

I need to be sneaky about this.

Or maybe I don't.

I could go in with the ruse of interviewing their CEO and then sneak a look ...

That just might work.

Okay, it didn't work. I was thrown out, but I did manage to grab a key card on my way. Not only that, but I also found my next way in. One of the guards was very appreciative of my body, and I plan to use that to my advantage.

After all, an investigator is only as good as her bag of tricks.

That night, I dress in heels and my tightest, shortest black dress. I even slick back my black hair and outline my blue eyes. I go the whole nine yards, which I only usually do when I hunt for dick.

Yeah, you heard that right.

After all, I don't have time for attachments or complications, and as much as men say they want a woman who only wants sex, sometimes they are worse than females. I have a man for nearly every day of the week, but when they start to get attached, I have to hunt for fresh meat.

Tonight, I'm doing that, but not in the way I usually would.

I won't fuck this guard, but I will make him think I will if it'll get me what I want, which is inside that building.

Okay, so it wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. I actually had to pretend to date the idiot. After two weeks, I finally got fed up and gave him an ultimatum.

It worked, and I managed to get into the building, but two weeks later, I'm running through the slums, looking for a place to hide. The police won't let up, searching shacks and huts to find me. Whatever I took, they really want back, and they are willing to kill anyone who gets in their way to do it.

This isn't a game anymore, or even a story.

My life is at risk, and not even my name or my father could save me now.

I need to find a place to hide and go through what I stole so I can figure out how to use it to keep me alive, because the way they are firing into nothing tells me they plan to kill me and pry it from my cold, dead hands. No wonder the man on the phone was so scared. Whatever I've stumbled into, it's much bigger than I could have ever dreamed of, and now I have to survive the night to be able to tell the story.

Luckily, I was always good at hiding, something that was important in my childhood.

Hours later, I've moved eight times, and I'm starting to realise they are going to tear this place apart looking for me. I begin panicking, unsure where else I can go, knowing they are cornering me near the dump. My eyes go to the wall near me.

Fuck, it's a really bad idea.

Terrible, really.

I am willing to take my chance with the monsters, however, that may or may not exist over definitely dying tonight on these filthy streets. Yep, I'll take that choice any day, and they won't follow me there.

Ignoring my screaming instincts, I hurry into the dump, wrinkling my nose at the rotting, leftover food. Sadness claws at me when I see skinny, starving children and adults sorting through it for anything to eat.

I have no time to help them, though, not when I can hear the police's footsteps. I weave through the huge, stinking piles of rot, slip under the chain-link fence that houses the dump, and break out right before the wall. I desperately scan the surface, searching for a way in.

I'm a good climber, but I'm not that good.

No, I need a hole, a tunnel, anything ...

A door!

With no other option, I rush towards it, and when I twist the handle, it opens. I hesitate only for a moment before plunging through the wall and into the forgotten city of monsters.

ONE



SAMAEL

Sitting on my throne, made from the skulls of my enemies, I smirk as I watch my people. The drinks are flowing, their inhibitions are lowering, and the music from the band is loud and angry, just the way we like it. The darkness of this old prison feels like home. The cold, scarred concrete is littered with blood, weapons, and much more. Tables and chairs are scattered around, with women and men bent over them—some fucking, some fighting. I watch as one man throws a male from another, slitting his throat before taking his place behind him and slamming into his ass.

Everything goes here in my land.

There are only two rules.

One—I lead.

Two—we kill every human we find.

My role isn't easy. I might have created the paradise for the lost, broken, and mad, but it doesn't mean they follow me willingly. I fight every day for my position, the dead bodies of those who challenge me littered around the lands. Currently, I watch the snarling newbie heading towards me like I knew he would. He's been eyeing me all night. He's a big bastard, I'll give him that, with jagged scars that show he's fought well and survived.

I don't know where he came from, but I don't care.

All I care about is the disrespect he gives me when he spits at my feet. It's a challenge. I place my half full chalice on the arm of my chair and push a female from my lap, her mouth leaving my cock. I don't bother putting it away as I meet him head-on. Before he can speak or move, I smash my fist into his chest, rip out his heart, toss it away, and turn before his body even hits the floor.

The bloodshed makes my people roar in satisfaction. Grinning wider, I grab my drink, toss it back, and throw the chalice away as I sit and crook my finger at the woman, forcing her mouth back to my cock so she can serve her king.

They do so willingly, wanting the position. They think it earns them my favour, but it never does. I don't give a fuck about any of them; they are all entertainment for me. The only reason I let them into my lands is because I cannot patrol and protect it alone, and plus, all that alone time ...

Well, it isn't good for my sanity, or whatever is left of it.

Grunting, I slam into her mouth and hold her there as she chokes, forcing her to drink my cum before I push her away. She scrambles back, wiping her mouth, and I settle down to enjoy the festivities.

Many more fights break out, and the bodies are hauled away. As the night progresses, my people become more inebriated, and I enjoy it.

A patrol sidles in, his eyes wide as he rushes towards my throne. Dropping to his knees, he bows his head. I lean forward and drape an arm across my knees, then I grunt, allowing him to speak. He doesn't look up, knowing better.

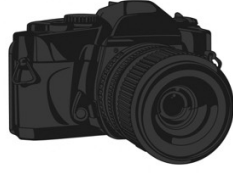
“My king, there's an alert at the border.”

I stand, my fists clenching, itching to rip some humans to pieces. “Where?”

He reels off the location, and I pass him without a word. I know my people overhear because they hoot and follow me from the prison to our stable. Once there, I mount my horse and head to the wall where the humans are trying to get in again.

They will look into my eyes as I kill them.

TWO



LYRA

It's a terrible idea really. I press my back to the door and look around at the destroyed city before me. The streets are cracked and overgrown, the buildings are half falling down, and the windows are smashed out. There are no signs of life anywhere.

Everything is dead and forgotten, just like they said.

I clutch my bag and wander into the streets, keeping my eyes peeled for monsters and somewhere to hide. It would be better to lie low somewhere near the wall so I could just slip out when they least expect it, find my contacts in the city beyond, and get whatever is in this bag on the news.

The more people who know, the less they can contain it, and killing me would only make me martyr.

I'm looking around, debating where to go, when something shifts in the darkness. My eyes widen as I freeze in terror, like a trapped bunny. I grip my bag as I scan the area, noticing more movements in every shadow surrounding me.

Oh god, monsters.

They are real, and they are here.

I can almost taste their hunger in the air, the hair on the back of my neck standing on edge as I look around desperately. If I'm not quick or smart, they will kill me, then everything I've done will be for nothing.

No, I have to survive this. I know you don't run from predators, so instead, I clear my throat and ensure my voice is loud.

"I'm not your enemy, please!" I call, unable to conceal the fear in my tone nor the warble. Hey, I'm an adrenaline junkie, but I'm not dumb. "I had nowhere else to go. My people, they were going to kill me for what I know. What I know about you!"

There's no answer, not at first, and then I see them separating from the shadows, and a scream gets trapped in my throat.

I turn to run, to race back to the human slums, even if it means death, because crawling from the shadows are my worst nightmares. The monsters your mum warns you about do exist here, and they are coming for me.

They have black eyes, huge fangs, spiked tails, and horns. Claw-tipped hands wrap around me with a sadistic laugh, and I start to fight, but they drag me into the shadows with them, and everything fades to black as they knock me out.

When I drag myself out of the darkness, I find myself being jostled around on something breathing and warm. Lifting my head, I realise I'm draped over the back of a horse with a rough, clawed hand pushing my head down and snarling something at me, so I play dead.

Maybe they'll let me go if I do. Anyway, it takes all my concentration not to slip from the horse as we gallop wherever the fuck these monsters are taking me to strip the skin from my bones and eat me like BBQ.

Fuck, why does my stomach growl right in this moment? Fucking sicko.

Time passes oddly, the ache in my head making me fight the encroaching darkness. I know if I give into it, it means death, so I struggle through the haze as the choppy movements of the horse make bile crawl up my throat.

The sound of hooves hitting cement changes to something different a while later, and we jerk to an abrupt stop. The hammering of my heart is all I can hear when I'm suddenly yanked up. My legs are on either side of the horse, and my back is to someone's front.

A monster, not someone.

Their warm breath meets my ear, making me shiver, even as my eyes narrow, taking in the surroundings before me. It's a stable of some kind, clearly handmade from wood, with

makeshift stalls and other horses. They seem well looked after though, so I guess that's something, right?

"I can smell your fear, little one."

Well, shit. "And I can smell that you need to brush your teeth," I retort through gritted teeth, hating this bastard behind me who called me out on being afraid like he wouldn't be if someone knocked him out and threw him over a horse and rode off into the darkness.

Idiot.

He jerks back like he didn't expect that, his heavy breathing loud in my ear.

I wrinkle my nose. "You better not be jerking off behind me with how hard you're breathing. These are clean pants." My mouth always gets me in trouble.

"Not anymore," he snarls, and then I'm tossed from the horse. I land hard on the straw-covered dirt with a groan as I blow my hair from my face. I open my mouth to scream at the asshole, but the words die in my throat when I get my first look at the monster who kidnapped me.

Viking is the first word that comes to mind. He's a Viking mixed with a demon. It's the only way I can describe him as he glares down at me haughtily. Sitting astride a black stallion like a horseman come to claim my soul, his sneer is filled with derision.

Horns as black as the night curl up into the sky, one broken and scarred. His face is thick, square, and sharp. His features are all pointed angles, with cheekbones models would envy, only softened by thick pouty lips, but even the bottom one has a scar intersecting it. His nose is bumpy at the top, as if it's been broken one too many times.

And his eyes ...

One black, one white. Yet they look into your soul as if daring you to be afraid.

To run.

His chest is on full display, a masterpiece of scars covering every hard inch. His muscles are so big, I actually blink in surprise. His skin is a deep red, almost black, with lighter red highlights on the contours of his body.

He's both beautiful and terrifying, and he knows it. He uses his looks like a shield as he grins down at me, expecting me to run when he flashes huge fangs. I never run, though, and I never back down. I've faced plenty of monsters in my time, so I know that's exactly what they want—my fear.

Throwing his leg over the horse, he dismounts and crouches before me with his head tilted like an animal, but a very human, very evil grin forms on his lips. "Now your pants are very dirty and the least of your concerns, human." Reaching out, he strokes my face softly before his clawed hand tangles in my hair, making me cry out in pain. His eyes widen at the sound, as if loving it, so I bite back any more.

I'm unwilling to give him the satisfaction, the sadist.

"Tell me why you're here. Tell me everything I want to know, and I'll make your death swift."

"Everything?" I hiss when he tightens his hold, dragging me to my knees as he bends over me. If anyone were to look at us, it would appear like he's bending over to kiss me. "Okay, well, you asked for it. I was born in the mansion district to Ellis Wells and Katrina Sharpe. Both were too young to have a kid, and eventually that caught up—"

He roars right in my face, and I wince.

When he's done, I smile sweetly. "I still think you need to brush." His fist tightens, and I whimper, unable to help it. "You said everything!" I yell. "Maybe be more specific, asshole."

"Why are you referring to my backside?" He frowns before shaking his head. "Enough, tell me why you are here. Tell me what you know."

I pretend to slump, keeping my eyes downcast as I play the submissive victim. I learned that at a young age too. I even let my lip wobble a bit. I should be an actress. "I know ... I know

that your breath smells like ass and you're a prick," I snarl before he throws me to my back and stands.

He turns and walks away, but at the door, I see him pause and smell his breath.

"Saw that," I mutter, and he jerks, turning that stern glare on me, one that probably terrifies everyone. Okay, yeah, it is scary, but I spent so long being afraid of everything that it's almost the norm for me now.

"Blindfold her and chain her in the dungeon." With that, he strides out into the darkness where rain falls heavily, obscuring his retreating form.

But not before I saw the massive scars running along his shoulders and the mocking skull tattoo surrounding them.

Just who is this monster?

And why do I care?

Monsters were just a scary bedtime story, but now here I am, in their midst, and they are nothing like I would have imagined. They are worse.

Two more step into the stable. They are smaller than him, though that's not surprising since he's huge. They are also a lighter red. One is missing his horn altogether, and the other has three. They both flash fangs at me and grab an arm, and before I can protest or fight, a dark bag is thrown over my head. I'm dragged kicking and screaming through the rain. It pelts my body, freezing me to my core, until it suddenly stops, and I know we are inside.

My warm breath fogs the bag, fast and quick with fear, even as I try to slow it. Their booted feet are loud wherever we are, echoing around us, and then I'm thrown into something hard once more. This time, however, my hands are yanked above my head, making me hiss. Something cold wraps around my wrists like a bracelet.

I hear the click of the shackles fastening, and then I hang from them, my back to something icy.

A wall?

It's quiet after that until there's the sound of metal grating before a cell door slams into place, a familiar sound from when I used to visit the prison to get stories. Then, there's nothing and no sound other than my heavy, ragged breathing in the bag.

I shiver from adrenaline and fear and now the cold, and panic starts to take over.

The one thing I hate most in the world is the complete inky blackness of nothingness. Memories claw at me, taking me back to being a scared little girl.

I scream and fight their embrace, fighting the fear and horror they bring. I'm unwilling to let this take me. I'm unwilling to break.

My anger at the scarred asshole drives back my panic, and I hold onto it like a lifeline.

I hold it inside of me to warm me, to shed light where there is nothing else, and I feed it.

I'm going to need to in order to survive this.

THREE



SAMAEL

Sprawled on my throne, I ignore the looks my people are sending my way. I also ignore their drinking, rowdy laughter, fighting, and fucking. My thoughts are consumed by the little human in the cells below and the fire in her eyes as she stared right into my face. She didn't back down despite her fear, unlike my own people.

Everyone fears me and looks away. I'm a reminder of what happens to those who piss off the humans. I'm a reminder of those who have given into the haze, something that lives in me every day now. Most give into it through heightened emotions.

Me?

It's always there, guiding my actions. They call me crazy and feral, and they would be right. I need bloodshed and death to feed the beast inside me or it will take over again, and I'll be lost. I clawed my way back from that killing machine, but I can never get back to living like a normal, functioning monster, and I wouldn't want to.

All the others moved on, tried to forget, and live a normal life.

Not me nor those here with me.

We don't want to forget. We want to revel in our anger. We want to remember the pain, torture, and the friends and family we lost. We want the humans to pay for that, and we don't want to pretend like everything is okay while we are trapped in a cell with a wall they built.

They crave peace, while I crave chaos.

Now the little human is here, thinking she's safe from me. She couldn't be more wrong. I want to know why she's here, why she came through the wall. Is she a spy? A warrior?

Is she the first wave of the attack I always knew would come?

Humans crave chaos as much as I do. They need a war. They need something to blame and fight against. They aren't happy or content with peace and a normal life. They need the excitement of death, and I have been waiting for the day when they will come again.

They will never capture me or my people again, I'll ensure it.

I need to learn what she knows, so I push from my throne, ignoring the calls, and leap down the stairs of the prison. I descend into the solitary confinement wing and storm towards her cell. At the bars, I linger and watch her. The black bag is over her head, which leans against her bicep, and her arms are stretched up and shackled.

Her curves press against her soaked clothes as she shivers. Good, let her suffer.

Her breasts almost tumble from her shirt, and my nostrils flare before I force myself to scan her for weaknesses. I need to learn what I can use against her and ignore that unbidden heat I feel at the sight of her chained and helpless.

"I know you're there," she calls, her muffled, silky voice wrapping around me in a way that makes me want to rage at her. How dare she try to cajole me.

I am the leader here!

I slam open the bars, and she jumps at the loud noise. An evil grin tips up my lips. I love her fear and unease as I let her hear me wander around her cell. I never speak nor touch her, leaving her guessing.

It's an easy form of torture, one I know well.

The human doesn't beg, cry, or scream like I expect. After all, they are weak, so very weak, but this one? She has steel underneath that paper-thin skin.

It will be fun to break her.

"Yeah, I can still smell you. You stink of horse," she spits. "Let me guess, it's you, asshole. I'm right, aren't I?" she

mocks, and I narrow my eyes, feeling the urge to rip off the bag and snarl in her face to see fear filling her bright eyes.

“So, if you’re into kinky shit, you should have just said so. Tying me up? Hot. Being thrown in a cell? I guess it could be in some ways—”

I rip off the bag, and she grins at me, but it can’t disguise the panic that was briefly evident on her face.

Interesting, is she afraid of the dark?

I can use that.

“Oh, look, it’s Captain Asshole,” she sneers, tugging on her hands as she looks up at them. “What? Couldn’t find any rustier shackles? Fine, so what’s next, monster baddie? Are you going to keep me here forever?”

“Just until you tell me what I want to know, and then I’ll kill you and leave you for the wild dogs to eat.” I shrug, and she narrows her eyes at me.

Her fear fills the air, wrapping around me like an addictive perfume, but she never lets it show. If I couldn’t smell it, I would never know it. Her eyes are clear and bright, tracking my movements, and her lips are relaxed.

She’s good, I’ll give her that, but she’s only dealt with humans, never monsters.

“You can play pretend all you want, little human, but the stench of your fear is making me hard.”

She jerks, her shoulders tensing as she glares at me.

“Whatever gets you off, asshole,” she retorts. “Now, can we get this over with so you’ll take your nasty breath and horse-shit stench away? I want to sleep; it’s been a long day.”

“Is that right?” I stop before her, tilting her chin up with a claw. “Now shall we try again? Why are you here? What do you know?”

She blows out a breath and rolls her eyes at me. “Do you want me to start from age five, or maybe my first sexual experience—”

I lean in and snarl, letting her get a close-up of my ugly, marred face. She doesn't shrink back though. Instead, she glares at me defiantly. "I will break you, little human, and when I do, I will bathe in your pain. The longer you hold on, the sweeter it will be."

"Asshole," she scoffs. Then, moving faster than I thought she could, she slams her face into mine. I stumble back with a snarl, feeling my nose gush blood, even as she groans and closes her eyes. "Are you made of fucking cement?" she whines.

"That was stupid." Something in my tone makes her still, and her breathing picks up, making her breasts jiggle enticingly. Curling my fists at my own traitorous thoughts, I lick the blood from my lip. "What? No witty remarks? Can't even look at me?" Inhaling deeply, I chuckle as she shivers. "Oh, but your terror is sweet, and you will pay for that, little one." Gripping the bag, I shove it over her head once more.

"No, please, not the bag," she begs, and it's the only time there's been a crack in her façade.

"Some time in the dark should make you re-evaluate, and when I come back"—I press my face to the bag with a snarl—"you'll talk, or I'll start breaking things."

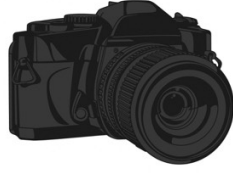
Turning away, I ignore her whimper of fear that seems to strike something deep inside me, then I slam her cell closed and head back upstairs to rejoin my people.

My hatred for her kind is twisted up with the truth of seeing her chained before me.

Weak, they are all so weak.

She will break eventually, and when she does, she's dead.

FOUR



LYRA

Tugging on the shackles, I round my shoulders to try and ease the ache there, and then I concentrate on every pinprick of pain in my body so I don't focus on the darkness.

My head aches something fierce, but my skull isn't cracked, so that's good.

No doubt I have a concussion, but I've had worse.

My shoulders pull and ache, but nothing is popped out of place, and my ass aches from my fall, but I've got a lot of cushion, so it's not as bad as it could be. All in all, I'm not in bad shape, apart from being held captive in an asshole monster's dungeon with a bag over my head.

Yay me.

At least I'm not naked.

I guess that's something.

With nothing else to do, I focus on the sound of the small drips of water that beat in time with my heartbeat. When that runs out, I concentrate on remembering what this place looks like. I got a glimpse when he came to talk to me. It looked like an old prison cell with a rusted, sliding cell door, a metal bed built into the wall, a toilet, a sink, and a cracked mirror.

Small.

Confined.

I could see nothing beyond that but darkness. However, it was better than this oppressive blackness. Even thinking about it makes me start to hyperventilate, so I run through my options. I could tell him what he wants to know, but then he'll definitely kill me, or I could try to hold out and escape when his guard is down, but that will undoubtedly involve torture.

Really, what other options do I have apart from playing the game with him?

I saw the excitement in his eyes when he saw my fear and unwillingness to break. He enjoyed the fight. Maybe I can use that against him, but to do that means I need to be strong, rested, and fed. He has the advantage, but he doesn't know me.

He doesn't know the lengths I am willing to go to in order to survive.

He thinks he stripped me of my dignity and humanity, but he couldn't be further from the truth.

This is like a fucking vacation compared to what happened to me as a kid, so I know I can survive this and anything else he throws my way. I just have to be willing to push through the pain and humiliation.

I can do that.

For now, though, I need to rest while I can, so I slow my breathing and count backwards—something I taught myself when I was younger, when I had to force myself to sleep. If I was tired, I couldn't dodge the blows fast enough.

It's strange how we fall back on old habits.

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four ...

Sleep.

I startle awake and immediately begin struggling. Something is constricting my face, and I'm unable to breathe ... unable to see.

I hyperventilate between wakefulness and sleep as memories explode through my brain, and I'm unable to discern between present and past until I plunge into the dark depths.

Curling into a ball, I press my face to my knees, focusing on the feel of the bloodied skin there and the air passing in

and out of my lungs. I'm still breathing. I squeeze my eyes shut, hating the darkness around me. I sense it creeping closer, wrapping me in its suffocating shadows.

My breathing picks up, even as I try to fight it, and my head darts up as I search for any pinprick of light, even though I know I won't find it. Whining like a dog, I crawl across the hardwood floor, feeling my way to the door. I finally find the handle and pull at it, needing to get out.

No, no, no.

I chant it over and over in my head.

I can't spend another minute in here. The darkness is closing in, playing tricks on me.

It will steal the very breath from my lungs.

I choke on it as I fall back to the floor, curling into a ball as I attempt to bring myself back from the brink of insanity.

The small cupboard is my cell, always has been. I was foolish. I knew better than to play outside. I skinned my knees, and that ruins his perfect image. It angered him, and he threw me in here as punishment. I can still hear his ugly, raging voice.

"Why do you have to be so disobedient? We have a photoshoot tomorrow, and you look like a miscreant street leech! Why can't you behave?"

Sobs catch in my throat as tears roll down my cheeks and over my trembling lips.

If he catches me crying, I'll be punished worse, so I try to stop, but it's no good. I just wanted to play.

The kids down the street invited me to play with them for the first time. I was finally making friends, and now they will never let me be their friend again. They laughed when my dad dragged me down the road, shouting at me.

Stop crying, Ly, I tell myself, pinching the skin of my belly, where he won't ever see, hard enough to draw blood. The pain pushes back the tears, and I relax into the oblivion the hurt offers until I hear the click of a light.

Scrambling, I race to the door and lie on my side, pressing my cheek to the cold hardwood as I soak up the crack of light coming through the bottom.

Is he coming for me? Does that mean I'll only spend a few hours in here rather than days, like normal?

All hope is dashed when the light turns out, plunging me into silence and darkness once more.

No, no, no.

I know I'm saying it out loud, but I can't do this anymore. Every time I'm thrown in here, my mind becomes more unchained and harder to bring back. The mental torture is worse than any physical torment he puts me through.

Why can't I just be a kid?

Why can't I just play with my friend?

Why does my dad hate me so much?

"It's not real, Ly, just a memory," I whisper into the bag as I pant. "Focus on the pain. It's not real."

I purposely bang my head back against the wall, the fresh ache bringing me back from the memories. I should have known better than to sleep in the dark, knowing it would send me back there.

A dark chuckle splits the air, and I freeze. I hadn't realised anyone was here because I was so focused on my memories.

Oh god.

Bile rises in my throat, and the blood drains from my face.

The laugh was definitely male. "And they say we are fucked up."

I relax. It's not the asshole, but the voice is growly. It's also definitely male and definitely a monster. Suddenly, the bag is ripped off my head, leaving me blinking into the bright light as I try to bring my vision back to normal, even as my brain relaxes at the darkness being taken away.

Licking my dry lips, I swallow and try to wet my parched throat. I'm desperate for water, not that I'll tell them that. The monster steps back, allowing me to see him. He's bright red with two horns and no distinguishable scars. His eyes are black, and he looks normal.

I find myself missing two mismatched eyes and scars, especially when this one leers at me, looking over my body like he is deciding what to do first.

You can use it, I tell myself, even as I swallow back my bile at the hunger I see in his eyes. I need to focus. I can do whatever it takes to get out of here. At least this monster wants me, and that gives me a certain power that I don't have with the other one.

"Could I have some water and maybe some food, please?" I make my eyes big and pout my lips as I stick my chest out. It's a low move, but it works, and his eyes drop to my tits and stay there. "I'll be good, I promise. I won't tell anyone."

He grunts. "Do you need to piss?" is all he asks. "Boss doesn't want your cell stinking up."

I falter but smile brightly like he's the best thing ever. "That would be great, thank you so much!" I gush.

He grins at me before reaching up and releasing my wrists. I moan as I rub them and step closer. He eyes me with a mix of lust and concern, like he's not sure what to make of me, but there's no outright hatred—I can work with that.

"Thank you so much." I reach up on my toes and kiss his cheek before stepping around him. I won't actually use the toilet with him watching, but maybe if I play nice—

A hand wraps around my arm and yanks me back to a solid chest. "I get the appeal. Maybe I'll see what all the fuss is about over human cunt."

I freeze, and my breath stutters as I swallow. "What do you mean?" I ask slowly.

"You smell like fear and sweetness," he purrs, burying his nose in my neck. I turn to dislodge it and grin at him instead,

placing my hand on his chest to keep him away even as I stroke his skin flirtatiously.

You've handled worse, I remind myself. There was that one time when I was locked in a room with a crime boss I was supposed to be interviewing, but instead, he tried to rape me. I talked my way out of that, and I can do the same now.

This isn't a man, though. This is a monster, and I forgot that.

He grabs me and throws me down on the bed, my face pressed to the metal. I jerk and try to flip, but he holds me down effortlessly. Despite all my training and strength, he holds me down like I'm nothing more than a fly and starts to rip at my trousers with a growl.

Just as suddenly as he's there, the pressure is gone. Breathing heavily, I jerk my head around just as a howl cuts off abruptly. Standing there, in the middle of my cell, is the asshole. Those mismatched eyes are locked on me, and his hand is buried up to his elbow in the monster's chest as he holds him in the air. With a smirk at me, the asshole pulls his arm free, holding a still-beating heart in his hand as the monster drops to the floor.

Tossing the heart away, he steps towards me, and I scramble to my feet. His bloodied hand grips my chin as he tilts my head back. I shouldn't be relieved, but I am.

"Do not play with us, little human. We are not like the men you are used to. Every monster here is a criminal in one way or another, and you are a soft, scared little human they would either love to fuck or rip apart." I jolt, and he gets in my face. "I will not kill another one of my people to save you. Remember that next time you try your games on them and it ends in more than you can chew." He tosses me away with a disgusted look, slams my cell door closed, and walks away.

He leaves me with his warm, bloodied handprint on my face and the monster's dead, broken corpse in the middle of the cell, and my tears finally come.

Curling into myself, I realise he's right.

I'm way out of my depth here.

FIVE



SAMAEL

I t's a lie.

I would kill any of my people if they touched her again. Not because I'm possessive of the little human, but because she's mine to ruin. Not theirs. I followed the newbie down here, intent on finding out what took him so long, when I saw her flirt and him attack her.

She shouldn't have taunted him, but no matter how much she was playing or flirting with him, what he did was unacceptable.

We may be mad bastards and evil, but there's one rule here.

We do not rape.

The human didn't want him, and even though she teased him, even she did not deserve that. If any other tries it, they are dead. She is mine.

Mine to torture.

Mine to kill.

Still furious at what I walked in on, I decide to head to patrol, needing to let out some of my fury before I release it on her. I want her answers, not her death—yet.

After straddling my steed, Midnight, I gallop to the very edges of our territory where those who were exiled from the other clans try to hide.

When they cross into my lands, they have to come to me for judgment. Those who don't are killed. We accept everyone, but that does not mean they do not answer to me, and to keep my hold on such feral beasts, I enforce my laws with an iron fist.

The other tribes give up on them, deeming them broken, unworthy, and too hard to fix. Me? I don't think they need

fixing.

I ride past the old police HQ to the wall, looking for any holes or gaps. When I find none, I gallop through the broken streets that fade into the giant crater that runs alongside most of the edges of my wall. Now, it's filled with bodies—a mass gravesite. There are no headstones, just their rotten corpses and bones, which makes me smirk as I ride past. Next, I ride along the edge of the border that leads into Nightfang territory, knowing Akuji is more likely to kick out monsters who cause problems.

Cato, the leader of Acumen, is more forgiving. He's all about second chances—a human sentiment.

The buildings here are more destroyed than any others in this forgotten city. This was where most of the war was waged at the end as we drove them back, and because of it, tanks still line the streets and human skeletons are everywhere. It's a cold, desolate wasteland.

Just the way I like it.

I start to grow restless, but then I sense them, so I stop my mount in the middle of the road. Midnight whinnies and rears into the air before smashing her hooves down on the concrete. Sliding from her back, I snarl as I inhale the air, tasting their fear and determination.

Two monsters.

No doubt they want to overthrow me. They wouldn't be the first, and they won't be the last.

Holding my arms wide, I let my head fall back with a roar. "Come on then!"

They emerge from the shadows and attack, showing they are smart, but not smart enough. With a laugh, I pull my axe and swing, turning to avoid one's claws. I duck under him and bring my axe down on his back, splitting it as he roars and drops to his front.

Turning to face the second, I drop my weapon and hold my claws out. With a mighty roar, he throws himself at me, and we battle in a mess of tails and claws. He manages to land one

hit, slicing down my chest, before I give up all restraint and show him I had been playing with him.

Twisting under his blows, I drive him back, and then I slash my claws along his femoral artery and step back to watch him bleed out. Turning around, I spot the first trying to crawl away, blood trailing behind him as he whimpers.

Weak, so very weak.

Even the human showed more spine than them.

Stepping on his back, I reach down, grab his chin, and rip his head clean off, holding it up with a mighty roar. Leaving their bodies where they lie, I jump back onto my steed, grinning all the way back to our nest—the prison we took over.

It's a suitable place for monsters like us. Once there, I toss the head into the masses, their roars of approval making me grin as they spike it and hang it from the wall with the others. Smirking, I accept a drink and toss it back before dismissing myself and heading up to the very top of the prison where the warden's office is.

Where my nest is.

Once there, I flop into my furs and let sleep overtake me, knowing it's been days since I rested. I hate the weakness. I hate the feel of giving into the darkness when anyone could attack and where the memories are waiting.

We have subject S1 on the table today. S1 exhibits behavioural as well as control issues. S1 is unable to push back what we are aptly calling the haze, a heightened state of the feral creature drawn on by extreme emotions. We have been testing S1 by forcing situations that will cause the haze then trying to make him gain control. Today, he is in the room with another of his kind, test subject R3, who has been pumped full of a cocktail of drugs to trigger the feral side of the basic test subject.

Snarling at the voice over the speaker, I press my back to wall, watching the other monster. He's double my height and weight, since I am so young. Where his two horns should be,

though, is a tangle of bony mass. His eyes are constantly red, and he seems incapable of speech.

He's another feral, the beasts they made without intelligence. They always put me against these creatures.

This one seems more on edge than the others, though, and I know anything could set him off. I'm still healing from the last bout of tests, which makes me slow, but I should know I will never gain a reprieve.

When I slide to the side and head to the door, it snaps and lunges at me.

I fight it off, but I'm so very weak from blood loss and exhaustion. It pins me, and for a moment, I stare at its snarling face and want to let it rip out my throat. I want to let it kill me so I can end this endless torture.

This one, however, doesn't want to kill me, and my heart pounds in my chest when it flips me, pins me to my stomach, and yanks my hips up.

No, not again.

Never again!

Whatever they gave this beast made him wild with the need to mate. Kicking back, I dislodge him and give into the haze drawn by my panic. I know they want me to control it, to use my brain, but I can't, not with that threat hanging over me.

When I come back, I'm panting and covered in blood, and its mangled body is at my feet.

There's a buzz, and then the collar at my throat sends electricity through me, shocking me to the floor as the scientists flood the room. The evil-looking man in charge stops before me, looking disappointed. "If you had used your brain, you would have seen the escape hatch, but instead, you gave in to your baser instincts and fear. This one is too weak." He turns away as the shocks continue to run through my body.

Weak? I'll show him weak.

Despite the agony tearing through me and my many wounds, I launch myself at his retreating back with a roar.

If they want a monster, then they will get one.

I lurch up from the nightmares, fighting the nonexistent hands as I pace my room like it's my old cell. I have been reduced to a snarling, snapping beast, and I know I can't keep going on like this. I need to pour these emotions out of me before I go to question the human or she'll end up dead.

Heading straight for the basement, I yank out the monster who's fighting in the ring and take his place, ignoring the crowd, hoots, and the stares. I know I look wild, and even the monster opposite me looks hesitant, but I don't give him a choice.

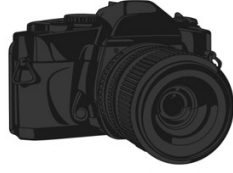
I launch myself at him, losing myself in the meeting of fists, pain, and blood.

I fight one after another, and they have to drag my opponents from the ring before tossing another one in.

I continue until there are no more and I feel more composed, the madness lurking at the edge of my mind like normal.

Without a word, I leave to find my human. I'll get my answers one way or another.

SIX



LYRA

Unable to sit still and feel sorry for myself, I pace back and forth around the cell. The dead body is dragged out at some point, leaving bloody smears.

I eventually have to use the toilet, and I hate it. It only makes me hate that asshole more.

I'm his prisoner, I know that, and I know it could be worse, but right now, I cling to that anger to ignore the fear caused by the roaring monsters, their laughter, and the unfamiliar surroundings of the cell.

This time last week, I was lying in my king-sized bed, reading a good book with warm tea next to me as rain beat against my window.

It was perfect.

What I wouldn't do to be back there now. Yet even then, I was still thinking of my next story, the next moment, and the next day, not living in the present.

I could blame my past and my dad for that, but the truth is, I've never been so completely in a moment I don't see past it, wishing my days and my life away like they mean nothing.

Huffing, I force myself to lie down and relax, but the cold metal and darkness only remind me of my past, and as if this place has called them up, memories crowd my brain, clawing to climb from the dark place I pushed them to.

"I warned you not to disappoint me, Lyra, but you couldn't behave, could you?" The sound of the belt sliding from his trousers is loud as I bend my head, tears tracking down my face as I kneel on the marbles he spread there. "You know what happens to bad girls, don't you, Lyra? What happens?" His belt wraps around my throat, jerking my head up.

"Answer me," he spits through clenched teeth, looking every inch the evil man I know he is and unlike the put

together mayor of the city.

“They get punished,” I whisper brokenly.

Heavy footsteps jerk me from the memory, and fear pounds through me before I relax and realise it was just a memory.

He can't hurt me, not now.

I feel the asshole's presence though. I would know the feel of his stare anywhere. I don't bother to turn my head, hoping he will just leave me alone. I still feel raw from my memories, so the last thing I need is to go head-to-head with that monster.

He either ignores my unspoken dismissal or doesn't care, because I hear the cell door open. Snarling, I swing my legs over the bed and glare as he slams the door shut behind him and watches me with cold, angry eyes.

There's also something unhinged in his gaze that's not his usual madness. No, he almost vibrates with it, and his movements are jerky. His chest heaves, and he's covered in blood and sweat. He looks like a beast.

My eyes drop to his muscles without meaning to, and I ignore the pulse of lust I feel as I stand up. “What the fuck do you want now, asshole?” I sneer, unable to help myself.

I have to poke the beast, and just like any animal when provoked ...

It attacks.

“Answers, now,” he snaps as he backs me into the wall, but I keep my head tilted up and meet his eyes. I refuse to be cowed or show an inch of fear ... or the insane arousal starting inside me, drawn by this primal side of him.

I hate him.

I do.

So why do my eyes drop to his lips?

Fuck!

He inhales, and I freeze, then his eyes widen before narrowing on me, and my heart skips a beat. He didn't ... smell that, did he? No, of course not. He said he smelled my fear.

No, I refuse to go there.

Instead, I take my anger at myself out on him, lashing him with my words.

“Fuck you! I came here for safety, you giant asshole!”

His eyebrow arches, making his horns shift with the movement. My gaze goes to his scarred eye, and for a moment, hatred floods the other before he presses me tighter to the wall. “Safety from what? Tell me everything now. I’m tired of waiting.”

“Well, grab a chair because you’ll be waiting for a while.” I spit right in his face, watching it land on his cheek and drip down to his lips. His forked tongue darts out and catches it, tasting me.

It’s not hot. It’s not hot, I tell myself, even as he tilts his head and his eyes call me a liar.

Just tell him! one side of me rages, but the other knows if I do, I’m dead. This monster clearly hates humans and wants an excuse to hurt me, and the madness in his gaze tells me that any little thing will set him off.

He came in here wanting to hurt me, to make me suffer, but I won’t give him an excuse.

Or maybe I will.

Either way, he’s going to hurt me, so I might as well give as good as I get. I’m sick and tired of being weak and letting men have control over me. I promised myself when I escaped that hellhole from my childhood that I would never take a beating on my knees again.

I won’t, not for this monster or the one from my past.

I will fight them every step of the way. I will never break again.

This monster thinks he's invincible, the scariest motherfucker on this planet, and maybe he is, but to me, he's a chance to prove to myself how strong I've become. He can snarl and roar, and he can bloody me and intimidate me.

I will. Not. Break.

"Last warning, human." The slow growl of his voice is a clear threat. He's on edge, already giving into the madness.

"Or what?" I retort, my head tilted back in defiance. Part of me finds the way he wears his scars so proudly attractive. I wish I could do the same. I also wish I could see the madness and evil in everyone when I first meet them instead of having to find the rot.

With this monster, what you see is what you get.

And yet here I am, taunting him.

I brace for the blow, one that never comes.

My heart is beating so fast he must hear it, betraying my anxiety, my fear, but under that is that infuriating desire.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Or are you all mouth?" I taunt.

Shut up, Lyra, I tell myself, but it doesn't work.

"I think you are all fucking mouth. Such a big, scary monste—" I scream when he rips off my trousers, and then his face is so close to mine, I swallow all my protests. All my taunts sit on the tip of my tongue as I'm consumed by those mismatched eyes.

"Such false bravado, little human, yet your cell stinks of your need," he purrs.

My heart skips a beat, and my stomach rolls as I swallow. "I don't need anything, especially you."

What the fuck is happening?

"No? Your heart is beating like a trapped little bird. Oh, you fear me, but I think you're trying to deter me from the fact that your cunt is aching for me. How fucked up are you? Desiring the monster who kidnapped and chained you?"

“Fuck you!” I shout.

“Oh, you wish,” he mocks, his lips so close I feel their heat. “Don’t you?”

“No!” I writhe in his arms, trying to free myself so I can get space to think.

Why am I reacting to him like this?

Did my childhood truly fuck me up this much?

I can’t even fight him as he tears my underwear away, leaving me bare. The cold air blows across my overheated pussy, and my eyes squeeze shut in mortification. His claw-tipped nail slides across me mockingly, touching my pussy. Hate, disgust, and need war inside me. “You’re a liar, human. You’re wet for me. How sick does it make you that you want to fuck a monster like me?”

“Fuck you!” I snarl, kicking him away, but he pins my legs, holding me open as his sharp nails drag down my pussy. Hate fills me. For him. For me. “Please stop,” I finally squeeze out.

“Tell me what I want to know,” he murmurs, his fingers stilling.

“Never.”

His brow arches as he circles my clit, making my hips buck.

Lust slams through me so hard, I sway in his grip.

“Then why would I stop when I can smell your need. Tell me, human, do you truly want me to?”

Yes. No. No, I fucking don’t, but I won’t ever tell him that.

“Well, little human?” he sneers, his hand hovering where I need him.

“Fuck off!” I rasp, even as I lift my hips and grind into his hand. He grins wickedly, the madness in his gaze too much.

“I did plan to torture the answers out of you, but this way is so much sweeter. Seeing your anger at yourself and how

much you hate that you like it ...”

He’s right; I hate him and how much I want this.

It’s as if my body isn’t my own anymore, and yet when he spears two fingers inside me, I scream. What. The. Fuck? Pleasure explodes through me as his thumb rubs my clit. His touch is almost too hard as he starts to fuck me with his thick digits, and all the while his mad eyes watch me.

I bite my lip to the point where I draw blood to stop myself from crying out, but I grind into his hand, begging for more, and he adds a third finger. The pressure of his thumb borders on being too much, and then suddenly, pleasure slams through me.

It takes me under like a crashing wave until I come back, gasping and shivering as I clench around his fingers. He withdraws from my still clamping pussy, his sneering lips making me wither. “And they call me twisted, human, and yet here you are, coming all over an enemy’s fingers. You’d rather fuck me than tell me what I need.” With a disgusted look at me, he wipes his fingers that were inside of me along his pant leg.

“Fuck you!” Tears spring to my eyes, and he laughs.

“No thanks.” He looks me over and then turns, laughing as he walks away, leaving me half naked, ashamed, and still lax from hazy pleasure.

I scream, raging at him, raging at all of this.

My body betrayed me.

I don’t want him, right?

SEVEN



SAMAEEL

I make it to the hallway before I collapse into the wall. All that lust burns through me, exploding into a tornado I can't resist. I shove my fingers into my mouth to keep her taste inside of me as I rut into the wall like an animal. The taste of her on my skin drives me wild. She takes over my every thought, my every feeling, and all I see is her pinned to the wall while riding my fingers as she glares at me defiantly.

So fucking strong.

So sweet.

Her cunt welcomed me.

She was wet for me.

I can't believe it, and yet it doesn't stop me from grabbing my cock with my other hand and quickly stroking myself to release. Her scent covers every inch of me in a way I know I will never forget. It won't take me long to come.

I ran from her like a coward, but she couldn't see how badly she affected me, which was apparently just as bad as I affected her.

My disbelief wars with such intense lust it physically hurts.

My back bows as a roar leaves my throat, and my hand clenches my cock so hard it hurts as my release sprays the wall and floor, marking the outside of her cell.

I'm marking her as mine when she is anything but.

Slumping, I listen to her scream and rant, her hate for me spewing out of her mouth. I can work with that because I can understand her hatred. It's easy and safe.

The way her body reacted to me was not.

It put me on edge and left me confused. I was unable to resist the allure of the human, and I crossed all lines and took what wasn't mine. Even now, I want to scream because I got no answers. Nothing. All I got is a cock that's already stiffening again and the insane urge to storm back in there, bend her over that cot, and fuck her raw.

I guess we are both liars.

It took a momentous effort to pull me away from her, but I did it, and when I got back upstairs, I ordered a female I trust to deliver the human clothes, food, and water. It's an apology for touching her.

Despite how much I hate humans and how much I want to know the truth and kill her, she didn't deserve that.

She didn't deserve someone as scarred and evil as me touching her.

Even if she enjoyed it.

I will never do it again, ever.

I truly am a monster.

She asked me to stop, and I almost did, but I know she didn't mean it ... right? No, she didn't. Not when she fucked herself on my hand, lying to me with her words, yet guilt still fills me.

I know the importance of consent. After all, my own was stolen.

Fuck!

I hate these emotions, so instead, I lose myself in my usual madness and anger.

Anger is easy. Anger is safe.

I lose myself in it as I head out on patrol, looking for a fight. I am hoping to forget the sweet little human who

screamed for me and let me touch her like I'm not a fucking monster.

Who, for a moment, made me believe I could be worthy of that.

Maybe it was all a game and she was mocking me.

No. It couldn't have been, right? She was wet, and she came.

Unless she's just a really good fucking actress.

Fuck.

I tug at my hair, ripping parts out before I dive off my horse and throw myself into battle. I need the scent of blood and the feel of death on my hands to replace the sensation of such life and pleasure.

Something I know I will never have.

How dare she?

How dare she give me a glimpse of a better life?

My angry roar splits the air, and even the monsters who came to fight me hesitate in fear, but they won't escape me, and neither will she.

I don't sleep, wanting to escape the memories there, and instead I find myself outside her cell.

She's curled in some furs with her back to the cell entrance, looking so small.

Her skin shines in the darkness like a light, while I linger in the dark like the evil bastard I am. I clench my hands to stop myself from touching her, despite the fact that I want to taste her again and demand to know if she truly wanted me or if it was a trick.

I'm about to turn away when I hear a whimper. It's a soft, scared noise.

Turning back, I wrap my hands around the bars of the cell as I peer in. I suck in deep breath, tasting her scent.

Fear.

Terror, actually.

It covers her as she flips onto her back and tosses her arm over her head, kicking her legs. Her face twists in fear as another whine crawls from her sleepy throat. Her heart hammers so hard I hear it.

She's scared.

I move before I realise it, and when I reach her side, I gently shake her. She cries out, battering me. "Shh, little human, it is just a bad dream. That is all," I murmur.

She shivers before relaxing and blinking her eyes open, half asleep. "Thank you, asshole," she whispers. "I hate the memories." She turns and curls into a ball.

I watch her, wondering what she meant.

What memories?

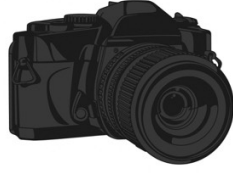
She shivers, so I cover her and tuck the fur around her body before retreating, not wanting to touch her when she is not willing. At the door, I look back at her, wondering if my human has bad dreams like I do.

What haunts her sleep? Is it me?

I must say it out loud because her sleepy reply reaches me. "You wish."

I can't help but smile as I shut the door and leave her to her dreams of me.

EIGHT



LYRA

The next day, I feel raw from my nightmare. I didn't think the asshole monster waking me up was real, especially because he was almost ... sweet. When I see him the next morning, however, as he storms into my cell like he owns it, I know it was real because he looks me over and nods to himself.

There's also less hatred in his gaze today, and I don't know how to handle that.

Exhausted from the lack of sleep and this mental whiplash between us, I slump into the cot, leaving the fur wrapped around me like a barrier as he crouches in the middle of the cell. His claws scrape the floor as he watches me with his head tilted. He looks like an animal, yet he's all man, even if he terrifies me.

Even if I'm sure that he's insane.

"Are you going to kill me?" I ask, voicing something I dared not ask before now, but I have nothing left to lose. I'm his prisoner in every way—my body is his, and my thoughts are centred around him. He's taken over everything, ripping it to pieces.

"Maybe," he admits honestly as he watches me, and I nod. Part of me knew that, considering we are enemies, through and through, and we still hate each other. I just had a moment of weakness, and it seems he did as well. "It depends on what you are going to tell me."

"And if I tell you nothing?" I hedge. A strange calmness washes over me, as if I have been dancing towards death for so long it no longer scares me, and maybe I have.

"Then definitely." He nods to emphasise his statement, but he doesn't seem either happy or sad about it.

He appears indifferent, just like me.

I hum as I watch him. “Why do you hate humans so much?” I question. There is something freeing about knowing he’s going to kill me, and it’s giving me a sense of confidence I wouldn’t usually possess to interrogate a monster, but then again, what have I got to lose?

Nothing.

He snarls, his lips lifting like a wild animal’s as he flashes his fangs, but I just sit and watch him.

“Why? Tell me. Why do you hate me? Why do you hate us? Is it because we are different, or is it a dumb rumour? Tell me, why do you hate us?” I poke and prod until he explodes in a flurry of teeth and tail.

Fury roars from him as he pins me against the wall, his bared teeth mere inches away. “Because they took everything from me! Because they made me into this!” he yells before suddenly ripping himself away and pacing the cell.

Understanding passes through me.

“Humans made monsters?” Fuck, it’s so obvious. Nothing surprises me anymore where we are concerned, and this monster has no reason to lie. “They made ... We made you, and then we fought a war with you and locked you away.”

“You think that’s all?” He laughs bitterly. “You truly believe that’s all they did? Think, little human, about what your people are capable of.”

“Great evil, I know that, but so is every race.” Setting my feet on the floor, I focus on him. “What did they do to you?”

“What didn’t they do to me, little human?” he sneers. “Not even your worst nightmares could come close to the things they did to us.”

“Try me,” I demand as I stand. “Because you have no idea what nightmares I have. Maybe we aren’t so different after all.”

He’s before me again, looking down at me in derision as he flicks his tail. “We are nothing alike. You’ve never had to fight just to be alive. You have never been locked away and

tortured and turned into nothing more than an animal that needs to survive.”

I startle because he’s wrong.

I have.

“No?” I whisper as I reach back and lift my shirt as I turn, exposing my back and the scars there.

It’s one of the many reasons I keep people at arm’s length. They don’t understand, and I can’t explain.

I hear him inhale, and then I feel a soft touch along my skin before I drop my shirt and turn to him. “I might never understand why they did that to you, but don’t ever tell me I don’t know what it means to have to fight to survive every single day of your life simply for being born.” I climb into my cot and give him my back.

I feel raw, angry, and ashamed.

“I guess I should be asking you the same. What did they do to you, little human?” His voice is almost soft, if one could ever accuse this monster of such a sentiment.

That’s the question I have been running from my entire life.

I don’t hear him leave, and when I turn over, I see him sitting against the other wall, watching me as he frowns. “They made us, yes, but they also hated us. They tore us to pieces and experimented on us. We were nothing but cattle to them, cattle to hurt and use in whatever way they deemed fit. Some got lucky, spending their lives in cages without ever having to see the true cruelty humans are capable of. I was not one of them. I have survived things I cannot even begin to ... to speak on. That is why I need answers, and that is why I need to know why you are here—to protect my people and myself. I would rather die than go through that again.” He stands and heads out, slamming the cell door behind him before his voice drifts to me.

“What would you be willing to do, little human, so you never had to face your nightmares again?”

Anything.

My monster leaves me to my thoughts.

My? He's not my anything.

I really need his name, since I should know the name of the man who is going to kill me. After all these years of fighting, this is how it will end. I guess I knew I would always go out in a spectacular manner.

They say the great die young, so I suppose that makes me great.

Or stupid.

I prefer great though. I just wish I could have broken one more story. This one would have been incredible. The things I saw on that video ... I still can't wrap my brain around it, and I need to see it again to be sure, but knowing humans are the ones creating the monsters ... There are so many stories I could tell and lives I could change, but I won't have the chance ... unless I escape.

I'm in a cell surrounded by monsters, and if my glimpse of this world is anything to go by, then they are everywhere, hiding in the shadows in the dark. Wait ... the dark.

I need to escape in the light.

For a moment, a twinge of unease fills me. My monster will not like it, but fuck him because he's readily admitted that he's going to kill me. I refuse to sit and wait for the axe to fall. I have far too much to live for, and far too much to do. Despite whatever my people have done to him, I cannot stay and fix him.

There is no fixing him, nor does he need it—okay, he could do with a haircut and attitude adjustment. *Lyra, focus!* I need to escape. I need to locate my research and then find a place to hide so I can look through it in the safety the wall offers. When I'm finished, then I'll go back and break the story before they kill me.

The quicker I do, the safer I will be.

It's a good plan, but how do I escape?

My gaze turns to the bars of my cage.

NINE



SAMAEL

Unable to stop myself, I go back to her cell that night.
I should stay away.

She's dangerous. She pushes me and tests my control.

She's human!

I crave being around her, though, and having her scent wrapped around me. My memories clash, and the pain I felt at the hands of humans mixes with the pleasure I found in hers, leaving me wild.

I am uncomfortable and far too close to the edge of my haze, but here I am, stepping into her cell. She's not asleep like I thought she would be. Instead, she's sitting on the cot, inspecting the room and then me when I stop before her.

As I stare at her, I itch to trace her scars and find out how she got them. Only warriors have scars. They are tokens of the battles they have won, and my little human's back is covered in them. Ribbons of hard, raised scars cross the entire expanse of her back, and there are so many, my estimation of how strong she is rises.

Anyone who could survive that is not weak.

They are deadly because they will do what it takes to survive.

That's the fire I saw in her, and that is the reason I can't stay away: because she's like me.

Maybe we are more alike than I first thought, but it won't save her.

I don't want to kill her, I realise with a start, but I will for my people. It is my duty to keep us safe and stop anyone else from going through what we did. I would snap her pretty little neck, even though it would kill the last part of me that feels anything other than the anger humans ingrained in me.

“What are you thinking of, little human?”

“That I don’t know your name,” she murmurs. “I don’t know the name of the man who is going to kill me. How twisted is that?” She smiles at me, but it’s a sad kind of smile, and I hate it.

“Asshole, if I remember,” I snark, and some of that fire comes back into her eyes.

Good.

“You won’t tell me?” she asks, getting to her feet so she can face off with me.

This brave, foolish little human is the first person to ever challenge me.

It causes lust to pour through me, and my cock hardens as I stare at her. I have this insane urge to tame her, break her, and show her I’m in charge, so when my voice comes, it’s hard. “You haven’t earned it.”

I turn away, needing to leave before I do something both of us will regret. Last time I stayed, I fucked her with my fingers, but this time I know it would be worse.

I wouldn’t be able to hold myself back.

She doesn’t give up, however, and she doesn’t let me escape. She moves ahead of me, blocking the exit to the cell. I snarl and turn, pacing to get my agitation out. “Seriously, what’s your name?” she demands.

“Let me go, little human.”

“No.” She crosses her arms.

“Now!” I roar at her.

“Or what?” she screams.

I grab her before I realise what I’ve done and push her to her knees. My hand fumbles with my cloth before I rip it off and fist my hard cock, then I slam it into her open mouth, shutting up that sass that drives me wild. Her eyes widen in shock as I tangle my fingers in the hair on the back of her head.

The tight, wet heat of her mouth is too much.

Fuck! I did it to punish her, but now I'm the one who's suffering. My balls draw up with the need to come.

Her chest heaves, her body relaxes, and then the strangest thing happens—her mouth tightens on my cock, and she begins sucking me.

Fuck!

I jerk from her mouth and shove back in roughly, taking her hard and fast. Her hand comes up and grips me, but she doesn't push me away or try to bite me.

She sucks my cock.

This fucking human will be the death of me.

My tail wraps around her throat, holding her still for me—not that she's trying to escape—and then I just take out all my anger and lust on her mouth.

I pummel into her, making her mumble a cry and gag as I hit the back of her throat. She still sits there, though, kneeling before me with my cock in her mouth. Her big, glassy eyes remain locked on me as tears tumble down her face.

I like making her cry.

I like forcing her to surrender.

I hammer into her mouth, knowing I'm hurting her but not caring as I chase my release. I need it, and when it explodes through me, her nails dig into my thighs. The flash of pain makes me roar, and I throw my head back as I pump my cum down her throat. After forcing her to swallow, I pull out and stroke my cock, squirting the rest on her lips and chin as she swallows.

I stumble back as she remains on her knees, the scent of her arousal filling the space as she pants.

“Samael. My name is Samael,” I murmur, and then I run away again, leaving her on her knees with my cum dripping from her abused lips, her face stained with tears.

Fuck.

I hurry upstairs, needing to escape the feel of her mouth and the scent of her arousal that chases me like a mocking reminder of what I just did.

But beyond that, I'm calmer, so much calmer it almost scares me.

My emotions are muddled for sure, but more than that, the haze is nowhere in sight. She did that, and I hate it, because now I'm even more confused. Throwing myself on the throne, I ignore everyone and everything and become lost in my own head.

"You kill the human yet?" someone shouts.

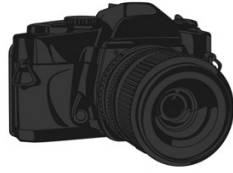
"Nah, he's having his fun first," another calls.

"Or maybe he's got a new pet. Maybe he's not strong enough to do what we need."

That brings me to my feet, and I prowl towards them, grabbing a monster blindly and throwing him across the room. My chest heaves as I glare at everyone, and they become silent.

"No one touches her. The human is mine!" I roar. "She. Is. Mine!"

TEN



LYRA

I wipe my mouth and end up licking my hand. His taste is like nothing I can describe—musky and so good. Lust continues to pour through me, and I'm so aroused, I'm dripping, wishing he would come back.

It's wrong, but at this point, I don't care, too lost in my own desire. Crawling onto my cot, I slip into the furs and stroke my dripping cunt. I arch into my own touch, lifting my hips as I circle my clit before dipping my fingers inside me, but it's not enough.

I need him and his touch.

Fuck. I rub my clit harder, pretending it's him. I recall the feel of his sharp claws there as he made me come, which is something I've never done with another person without tons of work. Yet, somehow, he effortlessly made me splinter apart, and now I'm desperate.

Almost crying with the intensity of my need, I turn over and push my face into the cot as I get to my knees and ride my hand. The wet squelch of my fingers thrusting into my cunt is loud as I rock into them and harshly grind my clit.

Little human.

I can almost hear him.

Look how wet you are. You fucking disgust me with how badly you want me. You want me to make you come, right?

Fuck, I almost scream. The vision is so real, and I'm close, so I ride my hand faster and faster until I come with a muffled moan, clenching around my fingers as I collapse from the intensity of it. I can still taste him in my throat, and my lips ache something fierce.

I feel used in the best fucking way.

Flipping over, I pull my fingers out and suck them clean, tasting us together before flopping my arm over my face.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Hours pass before I stop feeling sorry for myself. Getting to my feet, I clean up as much as I can and start to pace again. Everything is quiet, which makes me think it's daytime. I'm learning more and more about the monsters with each day I spend here.

They sleep during the day, which means my torturer, my monster, is dead to the world.

I need to escape because the longer I am here, the more likely it becomes that I will give into him. That can't happen. This is about more than just me or him. This is about a corruption so deep, it will ripple through our entire society.

I feel it.

Grabbing the bars, I tug hard, expecting the resistance of the lock, but the door slides open.

I hesitate, wide-eyed, before I peek out. Is he out there waiting to pounce? Is this another game, another test ... another way to torture me?

I don't know, but my heart starts pumping faster as I debate my options.

It could be a trap, or it could be my freedom.

There's only one way to find out.

I step out into the corridor beyond, and when a monster doesn't fling himself from the shadows, the tension in my shoulders eases a little, allowing me to look around. I couldn't see much from my cell, but out here, I realise I'm in a row of cells. All are empty bar mine. Some have blood on the floor or skeletons inside, though, so I don't look too closely at that.

Sucking up my anxiety, I tread lightly down the corridor to some stairs at the end. My breathing is too loud, and my steps almost hammer against the floor. I hate it, and when I reach the end, I almost hold my breath as I peer up into the darkness above. When I turn back to look at the corridor, something on the wall catches my eye. Stepping closer, I use my sleeve to wipe the dusty wall, and my eyes widen.

D BLOCK - SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

So this used to be a prison, huh? Makes sense.

Just as I'm about to turn away, something catches my eye, so I step closer, and there, like prize, is my bag hanging on a hook. Scrambling to it, I unzip it to check the contents and almost do a happy dance when I see it's all there.

In fact, I do dance because no one can see me, and then I flip off my stalker monster, wherever he is, wearing a smug grin.

Shouldering it, I replait my hair since it's falling out, and I instantly feel more like me and less ... this—this creature living in a cell, waiting on the touch of a monster who hates her.

I remind myself we are enemies as I slowly head upstairs.

Why does guilt flash through me?

He'll be furious, so fucking furious, when he finds me gone, but then I notice I'm licking my lips as I imagine him raining that fury down on me.

No, bad, Lyra!

Shaking my head, I focus back on escaping. I slink up the stairs, keeping my back to the wall, and at the top, I peer out. It's another corridor, stretching in both directions, with a filthy grey floor. The walls are made of the same concrete as my cell, but all the windows here have been boarded up, throwing it into almost complete blackness.

My breath huffs out of me as I shuffle down the corridor, praying it leads me to an exit and not right into a nest of

crazed, bloodthirsty monsters eager to eat me like a chicken wing. I mean, I would definitely be a tasty meal, but I'd prefer not to be eaten, you know?

My stomach rumbles loudly then, and I wince and move faster. My breath comes in pants as I hurry forward with my hand outstretched, until I smack into something.

For a moment, I panic, certain it's my stalker monster mocking me, but when I feel it, I realise it's a door.

Fuck! I grab the handle and twist and tug, but it's stuck. Motherfucker! I slam my body into it, using all my strength, and suddenly, it swings open.

I almost fall from the force, but I hang onto it, gaping at what I see.

It leads outside, and the sun is almost blinding, making my eyes water as they adjust after the darkness. When I can see again, the city is spread before me. The partially-destroyed prison wall leads to the overgrown, damaged city that, in the light of day, gleams with both tragedy and beauty.

The ground is slick from the rain, and what used to be a fence between this block and the next is completely gone. Built next to the back wall are the stables, where I see a few horses resting. I look behind me before I shut the door and see the illuminated corridor, which has more unused cells running its length and stairs at the back.

Stepping out onto the crumbling, slippery ground, I slam the door and press my back against it.

For a moment, I feel overwhelmed.

I have no idea where I am in the city or how far from the wall I am, which means I'm all alone and surrounded by enemies with no clue how to find safety or food.

I push that aside, though, and woman the fuck up because I don't need anyone to rescue me. I never did, and sure, I'm alone in a monster-filled city, but I've faced worse odds. At least I'm out of the cell.

The sunlight burns down on me, reminding me to get moving because when that sun sets, I know my monster will come for me.

I clamber over the destroyed prison wall and out into what used to be a car park. Some vehicles are still here, but they are burnt out or filled with skeletons and plants. I avoid them and instead pick a direction at random and start walking.

Trees are on one side of the parking lot, and on the other, there appears to be an old road leading away, so that's the way I head, hoping it will take me into the city and, eventually, to the wall. The humans must think I'm dead by now, so if I can just get back through and find somewhere to lie low, I'll be good.

The sun causes sweat to coat my skin, and my thighs scream at the sudden exercise after days of being trapped. I pop behind a building and squat, relieving myself, then cringe at not being able to wash my hands or wipe, but I ignore it and get back on the main road.

The buildings are closer together now, so I must be in the outskirts of the city. I see skyscrapers farther in, half crumbling with broken glass, but here, the buildings are more rural-looking and a mixture of homes and businesses, with wider streets.

That means there are less places for monsters to hide, thank God, but then my stomach rumbles again.

I need food and fast. If I'm going to make it to the wall I see towering in the distance, then I'll need energy, but where do I find something to eat? I can't hunt. My dad took me once when he was showing off to his friends, but I wasn't good at it, so I'll need to salvage something that has survived all these years.

I find myself wandering through the ruins of the city, and when I remember I have my camera in my bag, I stop to snap some pictures—not just of the decimation, but of the life that I'm beginning to spot.

The natural fauna is taking over, and species of plants I haven't seen since I was a little girl thrive here. Animals scurry about, ones we can't see outside of artificially-created creatures and breeding centres. I find myself watching from the cracked sidewalk as a family of deer leaps through the ruins of what seems to be an old beauty shop, and I can't help but smile.

There is so much life among so much destruction, yet it seems to work perfectly well together.

And the sunlight? It highlights all the flaws, but it also brings all the beauty to the forefront of the view, showing everything the darkness would hide—like the fact someone has clearly been moving rubble and bodies. The streets are clear, and I realise they take care of the city.

The monsters maintain their city more than we take care of our own.

Forcing myself to put my camera away, I find a supermarket on the next street down. I tug up my shirt to cover my mouth and nose, expecting a rotten odour, and then I duck inside the broken sliding glass doors, only to freeze. Lanterns are strung from the ceiling with planks of walkways across the aisles. The checkouts have been left untouched, and the gates that hold them are open. The floor is clean, and there's no putrid smell. Dropping my shirt, I look around. All the natural produce section is empty and seems to be clean.

I guess I wouldn't want to live with a foul smell outside my front door either.

Grabbing a metal basket that seems clean and used, I hurry down the aisles in search of food, giggling over the visual of my monster shopping.

The more I see, however, the more I can't help but wonder.

There are clothes, shoes, weapons, and medical supplies, which were clearly scavenged but laid out for anyone to take and use if they need to. There's a freezer buzzing at the back with electricity, and it's piled high with raw red meat. I cringe and hurry away to the canned aisle. It seems mostly

untouched, as if they can't stomach the metallic taste, but me? I'm used to it.

I don't take more than I need—after all, I'm an interloper here. I choose two tins of peaches, some Spam, and a litre bottle of water. Feeling guilty, I reach into my bag and tear off a corner of the notepad I use and scribble a quick note.

I owe you - Lyra

I tuck everything into my bag as I leave the shop and rip open a can of Spam, eating it with my fingers as I walk. I never thought about it before, but it's strange that we have to pay for food. It's essential and we need it, and don't get me started on healthcare products and hygiene.

Tampons? You might as well sell your liver to buy those, and even though I've always had money, it doesn't make me oblivious to the struggles others face.

I bet the people in the slums couldn't afford the same riches my father could. He had access to the latest and best healthcare systems, so he would never have cancer, diseases, or any issues at all really, and the women in the mansion I used to live in wanted for nothing, especially when expecting. Pregnancy was celebrated, but when one of my friends, a girl I went to school with, tried to terminate hers, she was locked away.

I wonder what babies are like here over the wall. They had to have some, right?

Do women have a choice here? We certainly don't over there. That's why I'm so careful when I have sex. Not everyone wants kids, and I'm not saying I don't—I've never really thought about it—but right now, you damn well bet I don't. I want the choice. We all do over the wall.

Instead, women are forced to hurry into the slums to find backwater doctors who are willing to help for a price. It's an unsafe option when perfectly good medical facilities are right there for us to use, all because some man declared babies are a miracle and protected, even over women's lives.

Blowing out breath, I stop my internal rant, knowing I could keep going. It's one of the issues I've tried to bring to light. I even went to one of the clinics who are willing to do abortions under the table. Obviously, I protected them, since it was the only clinic outside of the slums willing to perform the procedure.

What I saw there broke my heart.

It was filled with desperate women searching for a way out.

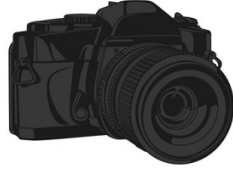
All my life, I've fought to reveal reality and not just the pretty truth they wish me to showcase. It's made me enemies, of course, like the time I exposed the truth of the slums and starving children and was locked up and fined. The only reason I wasn't executed was because of my father.

Here, though, there are no laws or cameras watching my every move, and it's freeing.

Nowhere is perfect, however, and I wonder what sort of people are in charge here. If the monster who captured me is anything to go by, then they are clearly crazy, but I can't say I blame them. Folding the tin lid inwards, I locate the bin on the corner of the next street and carefully drop it in before putting my hands in my leather jacket and speeding up. The wall still seems so far away, and I know the sun is moving through the sky. Without a clock or any way to tell the time, I'm guessing it's mid-morning, which means I need to hurry the fuck up before darkness falls and the monsters crawl out to chase me.

Two mismatched eyes fill my vision, making me swallow.

ELEVEN



LYRA

A grave.

It's a mass fucking grave.

I didn't see any bodies on the street, but as I stop before the giant crater that was clearly a bomb location, I can't help but turn and gag, throwing up all my hard-earned—okay, stolen—food.

Even with my eyes closed, I can still see the mounds of bodies, humans and monsters, all piled in the hole.

Some were skeletons, while others were fresh, with birds pecking at their eyes and insects crawling over and inside them. All the joy and freedom I felt here disappears, morphing into pure, violent sickness.

It's no different here.

Everywhere we go, there is death, and death is the norm, so I shouldn't have expected this place to be different. Sadly, I almost find it comforting, but it's also slightly scary that monsters are killing others, that there are cruel ones who kill their own people.

Is that why the one who held me is scarred?

Have others tried to kill him?

Or is this his grave? A warning not to challenge him?

When I look back, I realise that's exactly what it is—a warning to his enemies, to those who would cross the wall and invade his land.

That monster is a cruel, wicked king sitting on his throne, ready to defend his territory ... and I just dared him to come after me.

Fuck!

I practically sprint, aiming for the wall. I knew he was crazy, cruel, and evil, but seeing his handiwork only drives home just what he will do to me when he finds me. The sun is only a reminder of how quickly he will catch me, so the lower it falls, the faster I run.

I outrun the sun, or I try to, but two hours later, I skid to a stop, panting as I try to catch my breath. I'm fit, don't get me wrong, and I love to run, but after being locked up, starved, and sleep deprived, I'm exhausted.

My feet burn, my lungs scream, and I need a break.

Lifting my head, I look around for somewhere to hide, feeling the need even during the day, as if those mismatched, scarred eyes can locate me in the sunlight. My eyes widen when I realise where I've stopped. There are stone steps leading up to an impressive sprawling building.

The sign is hanging off the structure, but it's still clear enough to read.

NORTH POLICE HQ

Well, shit.

Okay.

Sucking in a deep breath, I force my aching legs to move, knowing I can't stop for too long, and I climb the steps to the broken glass doors where I push inside. I peer around hesitantly. The sun reaches inside, but deeper into the corridors, it's darker.

It's creepy, if I'm honest.

The reception room I'm in has a giant desk covering the whole back wall, with bulletproof glass from desk to ceiling, fissured with cracks from bullets. Beyond, the doors stand open, forgotten, and blood is sprayed across the walls and floors, making my stomach turn.

The bolted down seating area is ripped apart and destroyed, and the TV from the corner of the room is smashed on the floor. The vending machines and water stations are also

destroyed, preventing me from hoping the rest of the place isn't.

After all, when the monsters attacked, I bet the police station was one of the first places they came to so they could take down the controlling government and all. I heard the army couldn't even mobilise quickly enough before the main sectors of humanity were wiped out—news stations, police, and governments. A lot died in that first wave before the army came rolling in with their tanks and weapons, trying to hold back the tide as everyone fled to the outskirts of the city.

The wall didn't exist then, and I've seen enough footage with my clearance to know that the city we live in now was under construction for the rich and powerful, only it didn't work out that way, and as the army battled the monsters, the wall was constructed. Men and women were drafted to either serve in the fight or build the wall.

So many people died, even the remembrance halls cannot hold all their names.

The monsters seemed to stop attacking, however, when the wall was finished. They never crossed or tried to follow, and the footage they shot over the wall in helicopters months after, before it was banned, showed them regrouping, burying their dead, and living, as if they were fighting simply for that.

Everyone seems to have forgotten that war, although it's occasionally spoken of in hushed tones, and I know why.

Footage was erased, reports were closed, and they tried to pretend like it never happened.

The only reminder is the wall—unless you are like me, nosy and possessing a job that allows you to research. I always wondered why the monsters attacked and where they came from. There was never a clear answer on that, and I wish I asked before I ran away.

Curiosity be damned now, though, because my bag burns with the research, and instead of just relaxing, I move around the desk and through the open doors in search of a place to finish looking through what I stole.

I hope for answers, and I also hope it's enough to keep me alive.

I manage to find an office on the second floor that still has a working computer, so I have high hopes when I plug it in. Despite a few, erm ... sparks, it turns on. Shocking, I know. I wonder how they have power here, but I'm not kicking a gift horse in the mouth.

The only downside?

Half of the office wall is missing, exposing me to the city outside. I peer over the older computer screen and search the streets beyond, looking for those mismatched eyes. The sun is almost set now, and it's like I can feel the clock ticking away.

Tick.

Tock.

He's coming for me.

Fuck.

Ducking my head, I insert the USB and hope the system isn't too out of date for me to access this without corrupting it. Sitting in the leather chair of the desk that proudly declares it belonged to the sergeant, I groan as I watch the files load.

And load.

And load.

"Come on, you ancient motherfucker. I've seen old ladies run faster." I click the mouse a million times as if that will solve it. "Don't you know there's a crazy-ass, weirdly sexy monster either coming to fuck or kill me?" I almost scream at the thing.

I'm about to throw it out of the gap in the building when it finally loads. "Thank fuck!" I mutter as I click on a file, only for it to get stuck on the load screen again.

If I die because of a loading screen, I'm going to be pissed.

I go deadly silent as I point my finger at the screen. "Last warning before I kill you. You have four seconds to load. Four, three, two, one ..." The video loads, and I blow out a breath,

and then I lose myself in the files, searching and watching as many as I can.

I don't even notice the sun setting or the moon filling the sky until I lean back with tears filling my eyes and anger saturating my heart.

They did this. They made the monsters, but it's so much more than that.

The things they have done ...

I can't even wrap my mind around it.

There's one thing for sure though—I won't be safe over the wall, and after seeing this, I know they will stop at nothing to kill me. No, the safest place for me right now is here.

After all, my enemy's enemy is my friend, and it looks like the monsters and I have something in common.

My mind whirls with plans and options, but under it all are glimpses of the videos I watched, and I don't know how to process them.

I need time and safety.

Standing, I pack my bag once more and wait for him to come.

A furious howl splits the night air, and I know he's on his way.

TWELVE



SAMAEEL

I wake with a roar.

Before I scramble down to her cell, tossing away those that get in my path, I know she's gone.

It's in the pull inside me, stretching out into the city like a rope stretched taut, ready to snap.

Snarling, I tip my head back and inhale, sucking her scent into my lungs and following it right out of the fucking side door. My head falls back under the moon, and I howl a warning to all those around to stay off the streets because tonight, I hunt.

Wherever she is out there, I know she hears it and understands I'm coming for her, and this time, nothing will save the little human.

Stomping to the stables, I leap onto my horse's back and turn, kicking him into action as I track her into my city.

How dare she escape.

I'm going to wring her fucking neck and tan her ass red ...

Fuck!

Even now, my need for her wars with my anger, and when we stop outside of a supply outpost, I stomp inside, tracking her scent before finding a crumpled piece of paper on a shelf with writing on it I can't read. Pressing it to my nose, I suck in her sweetness.

My length hardens in my trousers as I imagine bending her over these shelves and reminding her whom she belongs to.

The little human is mine.

Mine to punish, touch, taste, fuck, and kill.

Snarling, I shove the note deep into my pocket and rush back to my horse, and then I set off into the city to find her.

When I do, I'll remind the human that she belongs to me, and afterwards, she will tell me everything I need to know.

Midnight rears up with his own clatter of hooves before we gallop out into the darkness. Every monster in my territory hides from my wrath, knowing all too well what I am capable of.

I'm tempted to make her walk behind us, tied to my waist, naked and covered in cum and blood just to make my point.

As we thunder through the city, I feel the others hiding in the darkness, trying to avoid my fury. No one has stood against me and lived—until her.

Her scent leads me to a building, and as I dismount Midnight, I lift my head and sniff before circling the structure with a snarl.

She's standing in a giant hole in the floor above, where the wall has crumbled away to the building below. I narrow my eyes as she smiles at me mockingly, and then I crunch through the rubble and leap, grabbing onto the ledge of the second floor and hoisting myself up until I'm crouched before her like a nightmare coming to claim her soul.

"I can explain," she starts with a defiant tilt of her chin, as if her bravery will save her.

I'm moving before she can finish, unsure if I'm going to kill her ... or worse.

When my hand is on her throat and I lift her into the air, I make my choice. "You left," I snarl before slamming her against the desk behind her. The air whooshes from her lungs with an audible gasp, and she stares up at me with wide eyes but doesn't cry, beg, or scream.

She does, however, kick me, like a moth hitting a brick building. Groaning, she lifts her foot to do it again, but I capture it midair and squeeze. "I wouldn't suggest fighting right now, little human, because it will only make what I'm going to do much worse."

"Fuck you!" she yells. "You kept me prisoner, so of course I fucking left!"

My hand squeezes, cutting off her words as I bend over her, forcing her leg back into her chest as I let her see the fury in my gaze. The haze is taking over, and if I'm not careful, I'll kill her without meaning to. Humans are so fragile, after all.

“You are my prisoner, and now you will be punished. Did you really think I wouldn't find you? That I wouldn't come for you?”

“Was ... betting ... on ... it,” she wheezes as her face turns red.

I loosen my grasp a little, allowing her to suck in deep breaths.

“Listen to me. The humans hate me too. I'm not going over the wall—”

I slap her across her mouth, snarling, “I don't give a fuck what you think. Give me one reason why I shouldn't rip out your heart and bathe in your blood this very second.”

She's still beneath me, her big eyes darting between mine, and when I peel back my hand a tiny bit, her tongue darts out to lick her lips. I groan, remembering what it felt like to stuff my fat cock in that teasing mouth.

Even after my threat, she doesn't seem scared. Every other fucker here would be pissing themselves or running, but not her.

Not this brave, foolish little human.

“The cleanup would be a nightmare.” She grins but swallows when I snarl. “Because you want me.”

It's a dare, and she's right.

I need to quench the bloodlust or she's as good as dead.

She only helps that along when she moans as my fangs sink into her neck, her body writhing below mine. Her hands flutter up to grab my shoulders and tug me closer, and one leg wraps around me.

My hard cock stiffens further, jerking as if trying to get to her, and my tail thrashes behind me as I taste the sweetness of

her blood.

“Please,” she murmurs, her voice so sweet, it makes me feel even more like a monster.

I rip away from her neck, letting the blood trail down her pale skin, and then I grab her and bend her over the desk as I tear off her trousers and slam my hand down on her ass. I need to let some aggression out, so I make her hurt, wanting to see hatred flaring in her eyes alongside need.

She cries out, jerking from the force as her plush cheek reddens with my mark. Something akin to possession and satisfaction roars through me at seeing my mark on her unblemished skin.

“You will be punished,” I tell her in a growl. “Your body will bear my mark, and I’ll march you before my entire fucking tribe and let them see what I did to the human who dared to defy me.” I reach down and grasp her hair, yanking her head back until my lips meet her ear. “Their gazes will sweep across every inch of this body, and then I’ll take you back to your cell and lock you up like a good little prisoner ... if you’re lucky. If you’re not, I’ll let them watch as I rip you to pieces for your defiance.”

“I’d rather you fuck me,” she rasps, pushing back into me, her plump ass dragging along my ridiculously hard cock.

Others whom I have indulged my primal needs with never dared taunt me like this, nor did they want me like this either. They did it out of fear or the need for rank and power.

I tighten my grip in her hair until she groans in pain, and then I nip her ear, fighting that urge more than I’m fighting the impulse to kill her. “You do not make demands, prisoner, and I don’t fuck humans.”

“Well, you fucked my mouth,” she taunts, her voice liquid fire. “And loved it. You’re also forgetting I can feel how hard you are for me, how badly you want to fuck me right now, even while it disgusts you.”

“Shut up,” I snarl, the sound vibrating my whole body and making her moan.

The sweet musk of her arousal wraps around me, making it hard to think, so I slap her ass once more, making her whimper. “Fucking make me or kill me, your choice, monster. Pleasure or death.”

“Maybe I’ll do both,” I purr.

“Then hurry up because I’m tired of waiting.”

“You betrayed me.” I don’t know why I say it, since she’s my prisoner and I know what it feels like to be trapped, yet the sentiment is there, buried under the lust and hate.

She left.

“I had to,” she replies. “Now decide, monster. Are you going to kill me, or are you going to fuck me?”

I stand on a precipice, looking down at the human before me, her eyes glazed with lust as arousal drips down her silken thick thighs, her ass marked by my hand.

She’s so fucking beautiful it hurts.

She’s the enemy, I remind myself, but those lines have long since blurred.

I tell myself it doesn’t mean she’s safe from me, that I can fuck her and still kill her, so I do what all beasts do and give into the urge to satisfy my wants.

Pulling out my cock, I press it against her tight little cunt, letting her feel it. “You want this? You want this big monster cock stuffing that little pussy?”

“Yes,” she moans.

“Do you want me to fuck you here, letting my people watch as I rut you like a beast, use you, and fill you with my cum?”

Her hips roll back against my length, dragging it through her wet pussy.

“Yes, okay, I want you to fuck me.” She tries to flip in my grip, but I hold her in place, denying us both as she huffs and sags. “Unless you’re scared?” she mocks, fighting back with the only weapon she has—that silver tongue of hers.

“Scared?” I stiffen.

“Scared you’ll like it. Scared you’ll come so quickly in this human cunt you hate so much that you can’t even—” Her words end in a scream as I grab her hips and impale her on my cock.

I make it hurt, stretching her tight pussy around my length as she howls, clawing at the desk like the animal she accused me of being.

I’m not much better because my claws pierce her skin, making her bleed. Her tight, wet cunt grips my cock so good, I almost come immediately.

It shouldn’t feel this good.

She shouldn’t fit me so perfectly.

Her plump ass pushes back to take more as I yank myself out to the tip, watching her hole stretch around my dripping cock, and then slam back in, knocking her into the desk from the force.

Even the females of my tribe fear me, fear this, and I’ve never cared about their enjoyment, but something in me wants to see this little human shatter and feel her cum dripping down my length like a battle scar.

I also want to shove how easily she comes for me in her smug face.

It becomes my mission as I lift her hips and slam her onto my cock, my balls slapping against her skin. The wet sound of our joining is only overpowered by my snarling.

We fight with our bodies, but I should have known she wouldn’t give up so easily. Oh no, my little human gives as good as she gets.

She swallows my cock with her tight cunt, clenching around it with each thrust, until it’s the best form of torture, her moans echoing my growls.

“Harder,” she demands. “I won’t fucking break, so fuck me like you hate me.”

“I do,” I snarl.

“Good because I hate you too, so make it fucking hurt,” she snaps, pushing back to swallow me whole.

Giving up all pretence of humanity, I bow over her back like a beast and rut her.

I force her to take every hard inch of my cock as I hammer into her, uncaring as her cries grow and her blood slickens her hips, her body writhing as I take her.

My fangs pierce her neck again, making her jerk against me, and then I still.

Shock fills me as I pull my fangs out and stumble back, my gaze going to her pink, puffy pussy to see her hole clenching as she groans, her cream dripping down her thighs.

She fucking came.

She came under my brutality, shattering so prettily for me.

For a moment, I stand there with my hard cock dripping with her cum before I wrap my hand around my length and stroke, lifting my palm to my mouth and licking every drop of her off. I taste her submission, her weakness.

Snarling, I slide my hand across her cunt until I drip with her cum, and then I flip her and show her. “You hate me, little human?” Her eyes flutter open and land on the glistening hand I hold up. “Then explain why you came so fucking easily for me when I used and abused you. Explain why you are dripping for me.” Her cheeks heat, even as her hips roll below me. “Explain why you still want me to fuck you, to stuff you full of my cock and take my fill.” I lick my hand in front of her. “You taste so sweet, like surrender, little human. I bet if I slid back into that tight cunt, you’d come for me again, wouldn’t you?”

“You wish,” she snarls, trying to hop down, but I hold her there.

“Oh no, little human, you got to come, and now it’s my turn. You want to hate me? You’ve got it.”

Grabbing her legs, I toss them over my shoulders and thrust into her milking cunt.

She falls back with a cry, sliding her hands up her body and gripping her breasts until I smack them away. Powering between her thighs, I lean down and bite her tight, hard nipples through her shirt. She screams, and then I rip the fabric down the middle before licking and biting the plump mounds, making it hurt even as she comes for me again.

A ridiculous sense of male pride roars through me, and I show her exactly what I am, exactly what people like her made me—a monster.

I wrap my tail around her throat, holding her to me, as my claws pin her to the desk like the prey she is.

Moaning, she turns her head and sucks the tip of my barbed tail into her mouth. I roar as I fill her with my cum, thrusting it into her.

How can I stop with her cunt fluttering around me, milking me of my release?

Pulling my tail from her mouth, I slide it down her body as I lift her into the air and drop her onto my cock. Her hands grip my horns as she rolls and slides her body against mine. Her head drops back, arching her neck which is dripping blood from my bite.

A sick sense of satisfaction fills me at the sight, and when she's crying out again, I slide my tail down her back and thrust it into her unprepared ass.

The scream that leaves her lips has birds taking flight, and a growl escapes me. Thrusting into both of her holes, I take her in every way I can. I lift her head and make her watch the animal she decided to fuck, forcing her to see whom she submitted to.

When she comes again, I roar out another release, pounding into her before I still. My heart thunders as I stare into her glazed eyes. She's weak against me as I slide my tail from her ass and pull my cock free, smearing my cum across her there before reaching between us. I let it drip from her and

into my palm, and then I rub it across her marked chest and neck to her lips, where she licks them with a whimper.

“Still hate me, little human?” I purr, sounding nothing like myself.

Realising that, I drop her and let her stumble to her feet before falling back to the desk as I tuck my cock away.

“Because you fucked me an awful lot like you didn’t.”

Eyes narrowing, she tosses her sweaty hair over her shoulder. “And you came a lot for a man—no, sorry, a monster determined to kill me.”

“Oh, I’ll still kill you, sweetheart,” I promise, “now that I’ve had my fill.”

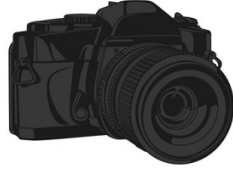
Rolling her eyes, she tugs her trousers back up with quick, jerky movements. She’s mad, but the smell of our joining is still in the air, driving me wild as I pace before her, unsure what to do.

When she lifts her head, she suddenly looks tired. “I wasn’t lying. The humans will kill me for what I know.”

That makes me stop before her. “And what do you know?”

“Everything,” she whispers, and for the first time ever, I sense fear.

THIRTEEN



LYRA

He watches me from the shadows, listening intently the entire time. The moonlight shines across his scarred face, and it's hard to look at him without remembering ... well, everything. My pussy and ass still ache every time I twist or move, the burn so satisfying that it has me gasping. Every time I do, his eyes darken and his tail reaches for me, but I don't think he realises it.

I tell him everything.

How could I not?

Between him or the humans, I need a common enemy.

I need an ally, and right now, he's the lesser of two evils.

He doesn't speak until I nervously tug at my shirt and sit back at the desk. I showed him the videos, told him what I found and how, and explained how the humans will never stop hunting me. I also told him that I need to get this out so everyone can see what they have done.

"Well?" I demand recklessly.

He doesn't scare me—okay, he scares me a little, but not as much as what waits behind that wall.

I know he will kill me if he gets the chance, but his rules are simple—betray him or his people and I die. Their laws and reasons are understandable. Humans are so sly and hard to read, it's almost a relief to have such a straightforward knowledge of my boundaries.

"Why?" is all he says.

"Why what?" I ask, unsure, and he suddenly steps from the shadows and is before me.

His hand circles my throat like a collar. "Why did you steal it? Why do you care? Why do you want to expose your own people?"

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” I rasp, meeting his eyes. “Because someone needs to. They can’t get away with this. I want to make them pay. Not only to save my own life, but thousands of others. They shouldn’t get away with this.”

He searches my gaze before releasing me and stepping back. “This isn’t just self-preservation?”

“If it was, I wouldn’t have told you, now would I? I would have buried it and gone about this like a good little girl so they didn’t kill me, but we are past that now, so you can either decide to help me or not, but either way, I’m showing this to the humans ... the people who did this to you and your people, and I’m letting them all see the truth.”

“And what’s that?” he sneers.

“That they created monsters, and you are not a freak accident or aliens. That they created them and continued to experiment. That we ... we aren’t fully human either. That we are all fucking experiments.” My breath shudders. “That I am an experiment. I don’t even know what I am. The files say we are all mixed with something, but nothing more. I need to know what we are. Are we human? Are we monsters? Are we in-between?”

“Finding out what you are won’t make it better, trust me,” he retorts, but he scrubs at his face. “But I’ve always wanted to eradicate them all and make them pay for what they did ... so fine, little human. If you think this will work, then I’ll help you after I’ve considered it. For now, we go back, and you behave.”

“When have I ever done that?” I mutter.

He cocks an eyebrow, but I see a twitch of his lips. “Come on, little human, gather your research.”

I do as he instructs, and when I stop by his side, he looks down at me. “This doesn’t mean I like you or won’t kill you.”

“I know.” I shrug. “It doesn’t mean I like you either. For now, we are just using each other.” Patting his chest, I wait at the edge of the building, and with a huff, he grabs me and effortlessly drops us to the ground below, cushioning the blow

before he throws me up on his horse. He climbs on behind me, gripping my hips and pulling me back against him before he turns us and gallops into the city.

With each bounce, I am thrust against him, rubbing against his hard, bare chest as my ass brushes his length, which is hardening once more. I close my eyes, fighting back the pulse of desire I feel, knowing he can sense it.

When we slide to a stop outside of the prison, he doesn't get down straight away. Instead, his mouth comes to my ear. "I can smell your need. You are practically wetting my trousers, little human," he murmurs, making me snarl as I jump down from the horse. I almost fall, but he tugs me upright, and after steadying me, he leaves me as he leads his stallion to the stables.

He wipes him down and gives him water, muttering to him.

It's almost ... kind.

I can't help but watch, and when he finds me staring, he scowls. "Move, human," he snaps, grabbing the base of my neck and dragging me inside the prison. This time, I get to look around—well, as much as I can while he's dragging me at a neck-breaking speed.

He's about to turn to some stairs and go up with me in tow when a monster steps from a dark corridor beyond. His eyes widen at the sight of me, but when the monster at my side snarls, he jerks his eyes to him. Unlike my big, scarred bodyguard, this one appears almost tiny. Even though he has to be eight feet of muscle, with two black eyes and curved horns, he's small and weak compared to the behemoth next to me.

"What? You have three seconds before I rip out your throat," my monster snarls.

I'm glad to know he doesn't just speak to me like that.

Swallowing, the other monster thrusts a message to the one next to me. He doesn't take it, so, looking between them and

seeing my monster get angrier, I extract the paper and flip it open. When neither stop me, I read it out loud.

“There is a meeting of tribes tonight.”

“And I just got this now?” he snarls.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think they wanted us to get it at all.”

Ignoring the other monster, he turns and drags me down a familiar corridor and into my cell, when he none too gently thrusts me inside.

“Stay here while I’m gone.” He slams the door and storms off, leaving me gaping after him.

That motherfucking asshole!

FOURTEEN



SAMAEL

I only go to the meeting to spite them, the paper smelling of my human burning a hole in my pocket.

The fury on her face when I'd left her locked up makes me grin as I ride into the night, knowing I'll be coming back to a fight. The thought shouldn't excite me as much as it does, but that little human does something to me.

Yes, we have to work together, but I won't let anyone else know, not even the other tribes. They will use it against me; they always do.

They constantly try to keep me out of discussions because they fear me even as they pity me, and I fucking hate it. Hence why I always show up to remind them that I'm alive and they have no control over me, just like the humans who did this to me.

They can all laugh if they want, but I will never break again.

To say the meeting shocked me would be an understatement.

Humans, they all had humans.

Though, don't I as well?

I loved the scent of their fear and the disgust in their eyes as they watched me. They were so weak compared to my little human.

Not mine, I remind myself.

She never shies away from the ugliness in life, and maybe that's why I'm drawn to her. Either way, we have bigger problems than the tribes getting their dicks wet with humans.

The ones outside the wall, for example, that a rider told me of on my way to the meeting.

I let them scramble to shore their defences and figure out what they want, but I already know.

Let them come in and try to take her.

I'll kill them all.

Needing to see her and feel her wrath across my body, I head straight back to the prison. I could go to her, but my hatred won't allow me to.

Instead, I sprawl on my throne and send my men to grab her, needing to look like I'm in charge. At least now I have an excuse to keep her alive and around, since my men heard and will no doubt have spread rumours about the humans' impending attack.

She struggles as my men hold her arms and drag her into the throne room, which is filled with music and monsters. They throw her to her knees, and she glares at them, ripping her arms from their grasp before turning that frosty gaze to me. I don't bother hiding my smirk as I look her over.

"I have met with the other tribes," I call out, addressing my people. "The humans are at our border, ready to attack." A cheer goes up, and I can't help but grin, knowing they are aching for the fight. "The other tribes have humans just like us. We are to keep her alive because she might be important in the war to come. If anyone touches her other than me, they will die."

"Is she your pet?" someone calls out mockingly.

"Yes." I look her over, and she glares harder. "For now."

"I'll give him a fucking pet," I hear her mutter.

I don't even look at the man who hands me a chalice. I sip the ale as I watch her, knowing she's safe from my people for now. No one would dare touch her with their life hanging in the balance, so for all intents and purposes, she's mine.

"I'm thirsty," she snaps from her knees, watching as I sip the drink.

“Is that so?” I stand and walk over to her.

“Yes,” she snarls.

Loving the fire in her eyes, I take a big gulp from my chalice and wrap my tail around her throat, then I reach down, grip her jaw until her mouth opens, and spit the drink into her mouth.

“Then drink,” I demand, expecting her to revolt, but her eyes flare and they stay locked on mine as she swallows it, wiping her mouth after. “Better?” I mock.

“Much,” she hisses, the sound going straight to my cock.

Turning back to my throne, I sprawl there once more. “Let us celebrate the impending war and deaths to come!” I call, and the music becomes louder as ale is passed around. My eyes lock back on her. “Now be a good little human and come sit on your master’s lap.”

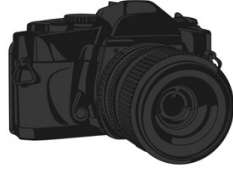
She’s almost jostled by another monster, and I watch her debate resisting before she sighs and gets to her feet.

“No. Crawl,” I order.

Nostrils flaring, she drops back to her knees and crawls to me.

I did it to show them she’s my pet, nothing more, so they won’t kill her, but seeing the sway of her hips and the fire in her eyes as she crawls towards me, I’m fucking lost, and when she slides her hands up my thighs when she reaches me and plops into my lap, wiggling her ass against my erection, I’m unsure who is the master and who is the pet.

FIFTEEN



LYRA

I sit stiffly in the king's lap.

I refuse to cry or show fear in front of this nest of monsters, knowing it would be a death sentence. Some watch me like I'm the enemy, which I guess I am, while others watch me hungrily. Leaning back into the asshole behind me, I feel his hand stroke my waist the way one would pet a dog.

His gaze remains focused on the crowd, but he can't hide his stiff cock pressed against my ass, so for the next hour or two as he ignores me and watches his people, I wind him up.

Stupid, I know, but I can't seem to stop.

I rub my ass against his cock, and when he pricks me with his claws, I pointedly sigh and allow myself to sprawl against his chest. Moments later, I stroke his hands and his legs, and I wiggle as I pretend to get comfortable.

Finally, he grows bored, and when his voice comes, it's dark and angry. "Keep moving like that, little human, and I'll think you want to ride my cock right here before my people, and I'll make you."

A pulse of lust shoots through me, and he snarls, pressing his nose against my skin and inhaling it. "Such a naughty little thing."

"I'm hungry," I snap, trying to change the subject.

Despite him being an asshole, he snaps his fingers, and a plate appears before us. He doesn't let me take it, instead picking at the food, pulling the best meat from the bone, and pushing it to my lips. I open my mouth, and he feeds me slowly, giving me all the prime pieces and the sides, and when I can't eat anymore, he grabs all the leftover bits and shoves them into his mouth.

He drains his chalice and throws it at a monster, who quickly fills it and brings it back. "Bring her one," he

commands.

He hesitates. “My king?”

“Did I stutter?” he growls, the vibration travelling through my body.

“N-No, sir.” He quickly fills another goblet and hands it to me, careful not to touch me, and I sip it. The fruity taste of the ale tingles on my tongue as I sit back and watch. My stomach is full but uncomfortable, and the longer I’m forced to sit on his lap like a pet, the angrier I become.

He stands abruptly, taking me with him, and without a word, he pulls me behind him, leaving his people to celebrate. I’m not led to my cell, which is good because I would have stabbed him. No, he guides me up the same stairs he was taking before, down more corridors, and up more stairs to what I’m guessing used to be an office.

He unlocks and opens the door, and then he shoves me inside, locking it behind us.

I take that moment to attack, kicking and hitting him. “I am not your fucking pet, you horned bastard,” I snarl.

He turns to me, his eyebrows arched as he lets me pummel him. He doesn’t wince, even as I feel my own skin bruising from the force and the hardness of his skin.

“Is that all you got, little human?” he purrs.

Snarling, I bring my knee up to his balls. He blocks it, takes my other arm, and twists them both behind my back, arching my chest up as he leans down.

“That’s the only free shot you get,” he warns, then I’m flying through the air. I land heavily on a mound of furs, and suddenly he’s above me, blocking out the light. “Now, pet, I’ve been smelling that pretty cunt all night, so it’s time I feasted on what belongs to me.”

As if to confirm what I knew, he grips my pussy with his whole hand.

It’s a promise, one I shouldn’t want so much.

“Like fuck you are,” I protest, even as I grind into his hand.

“No?” He arches a brow. “Are you going to stop me? We’ve already established you are weaker than me, little human. Feel free to fight and scream if you want. No one can hear you here.”

He leans back and strips me in one fell swoop, leaving me naked beneath him.

I snarl and thrash, trying to escape, but his big hand spans my chest, keeping me pinned as he rips my thighs open.

“Let go!” I scream, and he huffs out a laugh, nuzzling along my thighs before inhaling my pussy. “Fuck you! Let me go!” I yell and rant, but just like he promised, no one comes, and when I sag, he lifts those mismatched eyes to mine.

“Finished?” he purrs like I’m a brat.

“Not even close,” I spit.

“Good, keep screaming for me,” he growls as he seals his big mouth on my cunt, pressing his fangs into my lips like a threat.

The moan that leaves my lips should be something straight out of a porn film. I have never been so wet, so needy, but I’m used to humans, and he’s determined to prove me wrong as he licks and sucks every inch of me before dipping that forked tongue inside me.

As his tongue slides across my nerves, making me jerk and cry out, I reach down to grip his horns.

His claws slide down my body, twisting and plucking my nipples cruelly as he tongues my cunt, making me rock onto it, and just as I’m about to come, he pulls it free and hums against my clit.

“You say you hate me, pet, but you sure do love riding my face and squirting that delicious essence onto my tongue.”

“Shut up and make me come,” I order.

“Ask nicely,” he mocks.

I debate my options, but I feel like if I don't come, I'll be in pain or might even die. If I say no, he'll close my thighs and ignore me, leaving me wet and unsatisfied. "Please," I grind out bitterly.

"Good girl," he praises, his tongue darting out to lash my clit.

Fuck!

My head thrashes from side to side as he thrusts two fingers inside of me, letting me fuck myself on them as I roll my hips. All the while, his tongue lashes my clit until I scream.

I grind against his face as I ride the waves of pleasure, my legs shaking from the force. Growling, he licks up every drop of my release before tonguing all the way from my ass to my clit and back again, and then he sits back with a smug smile, patting my legs closed.

"Sleep now, pet," he orders.

"What?" I gasp.

"Sleep. That was my reward for being good tonight. They had to see that I was in charge in that chair and that you were behaving as a pet and nothing more, or we would both be dead." Crawling up my body, he licks my nipple before stopping at my mouth. "We live amongst wolves, little human, and this one wants to devour you, but they would rather roll in your blood."

"Make me crawl to you again, and I'll cut off your cock and feed it to those wolves," I warn.

A wide, unchecked grin curls his lips before I push him off me. "If you say so, pet," he purrs.

Huffing, I roll onto my side, giving him my back. I'm not expecting to sleep, but the last few days catch up to me, and before I know it, I'm snoring with a warm body behind me.

A howl jerks me awake. Flipping over, I search the dark before my gaze lands on the writhing monster next to me. His horns smash into the nest and rip it, and his eyes are squeezed shut as his body twists and turns.

He's caught in a nightmare.

Sitting up, I cover my mouth with my hands as I watch him scream in pain.

No wonder no one could hear me before.

They hear this every day.

He's my enemy, and I hate him, but I can't let him suffer, and watching the big bad monster succumb to terror in his nightmares has my heart softening.

After all, I know their power all too well.

Scooting closer, I start to hum softly before laying my hand on his body. He stills and turns his head towards me, so I slowly start to stroke his skin as I speak in a soft, cooing voice. "It's okay. You're safe. I'm here. You're not there. Your nightmares can't have you. I have you, so come back to me." I watch each muscle in his body relax until his eyes slowly blink open, half asleep and dazed.

"Human," he croaks.

"It's me, your human," I reply as I sweep the hair from his face and do what I've wanted to since the first moment I saw him—stroke the scar on his eye, watching his eye close as if in pain. "Everything is okay; it was just a nightmare."

"I know. I get them every day. That's why I don't sleep." He sighs, his voice vulnerable for once.

"You need to rest. You are exhausted. Go to sleep. I'll be here. I'll watch over you. I'll protect you."

He grins such a wide, happy smile that it steals my breath as he nuzzles into my side, draping his arm over me, and then he sighs, going back to sleep.

I sit, all day, wrapped around a monster, stroking every inch of him I can reach. I trace the multitude of scars as I talk

and sing and protect him as he sleeps.

Somewhere along the way, the hate I feel for him starts to lessen, like a white flag being thrown.

SIXTEEN



SAMAEL

I wake with a start, just like always, and search for a threat that isn't there. My body vibrates with adrenaline until a soft hand brushes over my forehead. The scent and touch make me relax until I turn to see her.

The human.

My human is lying next to me, her eyes tired but watchful, as she strokes her hand up my arm and face as if she's soothing a child. Then I remember the promise she made during the night, during one of my nightmares. She said she would stay awake.

That she would protect me.

Did ... Did she stay awake all night to keep my demons at bay?

One search of her crinkled eyes tells me that yes, yes she did.

Unsure what to say or do, I stare back.

My body almost brims with energy I haven't felt in years thanks to the rest.

Thanks to her.

"Thank you," I croak.

"No problem," she whispers, snuggling deeper into the furs as a yawn splits her lips. I panic for a moment. Do humans need more rest? Probably.

Shit.

"Rest, little one," I order, the barking command not making her jump as her eyes slide closed.

"Will you keep watch?" she asks, her voice already soft and half asleep.

Reaching out, I hesitate before being unable to stop myself and stroke her face with a fingertip, my scarred red skin a stark contrast against her perfect, soft pale flesh, so I pull away. This is a different type of intimacy than the one we have already shared, a much scarier one. "Always," I find myself saying without thought.

I lie here, wide awake, needing to move and patrol my lands. My duties war with the need to spar, and yet I do not move. I keep watch, like my little foolish human did for me.

When she inches closer, I move away to give her more room, only for her to do it again and again until I'm on the cold floor, and yet she still moves closer. She practically climbs on top of me and drapes herself over my body like a blanket, and with a soft sigh, she goes back to snoring.

My eyes are wide as I stare at her in fear, wondering what the fuck to do.

I should shove her off and chain her up.

How dare she touch me.

Yet, I do none of those things, and instead, I wrap my arms around the shivering human and hold her tight as she slumbers.

Ignoring my hard length, I shift her and settle back, staring at the ceiling as she snores. If my people could see me now. The great, mad king has been reduced to a sleeping mat for a tiny little human. If anyone asks, they are dead, and if she tells anyone, I'll kill her.

Even though I still hate what she is, I find I am unable to move.

My claws tangle in her hair as I brush out the knots, and my other hand strokes down her back, obsessed with the little sigh she makes every time I do.

I lie here for hours, my back aching, but I've had far worse torture, and I would endure much worse to keep this little human asleep and safe in my arms.

When she wakes, making an adorable noise and blinking those big eyes at me, I freeze, drop my hands, and thrust her away.

“I need to piss and eat.” Lumbering away, I rip open my door and slam it behind me, needing that violence to remind me of where and who I am before I get any crazy ideas.

After all, monsters like me don't get the girl.

Feeling raw, I head downstairs to spill blood on my claws and rebalance myself.

LYRA

I watch him go, feeling bewildered, before I shake my head and climb to my feet to stretch. My muscles are surprisingly lax today, but I still run through some basic yoga poses before wandering around the room.

There isn't much here, and it looks like a mix between being barren and cluttered with rubbish.

It looks as if he wants to make it home and needs to make it feel safe, but he also doesn't want anyone to think he cares.

There's a stop sign on the backside of the door. The old desk is long gone, and in its spot is the nest of furs which overtakes most of the room. The bookcases are filled with objects that I pick up and analyse. Some are just little figures, but there's one coat hanger, a toothbrush, a signed baseball, and a few other human objects, even though he hates us.

There are no pictures, nothing that makes it his—apart from the alluring scent filling every inch of this room, which is almost muted and dark, but only makes it feel cosy.

I know it's a red flag, but honestly, red is my favourite colour.

Treading behind the blankets, I run my hand across the stained wallpaper, only to stop when I realise there's a board shoved across a door. Grunting, I manage to move it and open the door, then I peer inside before gawking.

It's an en-suite with a shower and toilet, which is sparkling clean and untouched.

I hurry to the sink, and after a few sputters, the water runs. It's cold, but I duck my head, pull my hair out of the way, and drink before washing my face. I dare not venture to the shower, so I wash my pits and pussy in the sink before flushing the toilet to see if it works.

When it does, I sigh in relief and use it before washing my hands and flicking them dry. I leave the bathroom and shut the door once more, deciding to explore the rest of the room, when the door slams open in the same way he left.

Announcing him with thunder.

When I glance at him, I note the blood coating his arms, face, and chest. He looks like some evil, medieval king, yet he delicately holds a metal bowl in one hand and a mug in the other as he kicks the door shut and thrusts them at me.

“Eat,” he snaps.

Taking it, I sip the water as I drop into a cross-legged position and glance down to see it’s some kind of broth. It’s better than nothing, I guess. Lifting the bent spoon, I stir it as I watch him pace back and forth.

When I take the first bite, he seems to settle and lowers himself to a crouch before me, his bloodied claws dragging across the ground as he tilts his head adorably.

Not that I would ever tell him that.

I’d say he seems almost ... awkward, but that’s not ever a word I would associate with the killer king before me.

“What’s your name?” I finally ask.

“You don’t need it,” he snipes. “Call me King.”

“Yeah, no.” I chuckle, ignoring his glare.

I know he’s dangerous and unhinged, and he could decide I’m better dead than alive, but he genuinely thinks he scares me.

As if death would scare me.

I feel him watching me, so I lift my gaze from the broth and raise my eyebrow. When his voice comes, it’s rough and growly, like it was ripped from the deepest part of himself. “Samael.”

“Samael ... I like it.” I nod. “I’m Lyra.”

“I don’t care,” he snaps, but when he turns around, I see him silently repeating my name, and the grin that blooms on my lips can’t be contained.

“So, Sammy ... ”

He’s on me in an instant, spilling broth all over the floor as he pins me. “Samael or King,” he hisses in my face, lashing his tail across my thighs like a whip.

A punishment.

I arch up into him, unsure who is the master and who is the pet. “Sammy.”

“Last warning, little human,” he snarls.

“Or what? What will you do ... Sammy?”

I’m in the air before I can even protest. My side hits the furs, and I roll before coming to a stop, then I sit up and glare at him as he advances on me with an evil, mad grin.

Crawling over my body, he grips my throat and twists my head until it hangs at an unnatural angle, and then he gets to his knees, yanks on his trousers, and frees his hard cock, painting his precum across my lips.

“Open,” he demands.

I shake my head, and he pulls my hair. “Open now, pet, or I’ll fuck that ass and make it hurt.”

Glaring, I open my mouth, telling myself it’s because I want to.

Darting my tongue out, I lap at the head of his cock before he can shove it into my mouth like last time. I grip his dick and pump, giving as good as I gets.

If he wants to punish me by forcing me to suck him, then I will.

Spitting on my hand, I stroke him hard and fast as I lick and suck his tip, making him groan. With his hand tangled in my hair, he slams into my mouth all the way to the back of my throat. I gag and my eyes water, but I hold on, circling and twisting my hand while the other grips his balls and massages.

The roar that rips from his throat makes me clench my thighs together, trying to stifle the ache in my core. I watch the tightening of all of those huge, bloodstained muscles as he takes my mouth and uses it, even as I drive him crazy with my touch.

When he starts to fuck into my mouth like a deranged man, I hold on, gripping him painfully, and with one last thrust, he roars and slams into my mouth, holding me there as he spills down my throat. I slap and claw at him, and he finally lets me fall back.

My mouth is sore and my jaw aches as I wipe at my face.

“Asshole,” I snap, my voice raw.

Tucking his wet cock away, he grins at me, looking far too happy with himself, even as he settles between my thighs and holds me beneath him. His nose drags across my chest to my neck where he inhales.

“You need to bathe; you stink.”

“Gee, thanks.” I slap his chest. “The water was cold—”

“Where?” He frowns.

I point out the bathroom, and he growls. “I didn’t know what that useless room was, so I locked it up.”

“It’s a bathroom. Wait, where the hell do you go to the toilet and bathe then?” I ask, confused.

Huffing like I’m an idiot, he climbs to his feet. “Follow me, pet.” He exits the room.

Rolling my eyes, I do as I’m told because, honestly, I don’t want to be left alone in this prison of crazy monsters. Instead, I choose the mad king. At least he might not kill me.

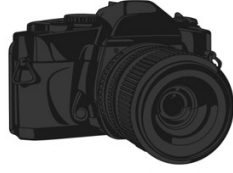
Fuck me to death? Sure.

But deep down, I think he’s starting to like me.

A little.

Maybe.

SEVENTEEN



LYRA

I follow him down the cell block, along some plain grey corridors, and through an open doorway. Inside, there are showers to one side with small, tiled partitions between them and plain silver showerheads. There are also stalls of toilets with a door, and to the left is a bank of sinks with mirrors above it, but the place that draws my eye?

In the back is a huge, claw-foot tub. It's so out of place, I can't help but stare. Next to it is a table with flickering candles, and more candles are spread throughout the entire room to light up the dim space.

"A tub?" I ask.

He stiffens and doesn't look at me. "I prefer it," is all he says.

"So you dragged a tub from somewhere in the city?" I chuckle.

"Yes, now do you want to bathe or not?" he snarls.

"I do, I'm just asking." I grin. "I can't imagine you dragging—"

In a blink, I'm in his arms and dropped right into the warm water. I resurface with a gasp, wiping my hair back and glaring at him as he grins down at me.

Rolling my eyes, I strip in the water and toss my sopping clothes at his feet. He picks them up, and as I watch, he hangs them over a wire pole that seems to be for that exact reason.

Dunking under again, I scrub at my body, feeling the grime and sweat sluice off, and I feel so much better. He watches the entire time, and when he hands me some soap, I put on a show, stroking it across my breasts and nipples before sliding it over my stomach to my pussy, where I groan and part my legs.

His hands fist at his sides, and his pants tent with his erection.

“Wash my back?” I ask sweetly.

“I am king of the maddest rejected monsters in the tribes, in the city, and responsible for thousands of humans’ deaths. I do not wash anyone’s back, especially a puny human’s,” he snarls.

Eyebrow arching, I meet his gaze with my own challenge.

“You missed a spot,” I tease.

Snarling behind me, he grabs more soap and runs it across my back before rubbing it in and washing it away, making me grin as I lean back into his touch. Pleasure winds through my body.

Guess who’s king now, baby?

His legs are on either side of mine in the big tub, and his body is pressed against every inch of my back, with his cock wedged between my ass cheeks as he washes my back for me.

“So why do you prefer baths?” I ask, sighing as I watch water run down his big red thighs bracketing my body.

I feel him stiffen behind me, and I know it’s not just some simple pleasure he is indulging in.

He’s going to run. I can feel it.

“I hate the dark,” I admit. It’s hard to voice that fear, and I have to blow out a breath before I can carry on. “My dad wasn’t a good person. He would lock me in tiny, pitch-black places, and ever since, I hate it. It brings back bad memories.”

“Human,” he murmurs in my ear.

I don’t say anything, unable to elaborate. I’ve never spoken about what my father did to me. After all, who would believe me? I find it’s harder than I thought, the words sticking

in my throat until I'm drowning in them, but then he throws me a lifeline.

When he speaks, he gives me something to cling to, keeping me afloat when I would prefer to submerge under the water and drift away again.

“They used to force us into the shower after a particularly ... bad experiment, which would consist of either cutting me open or forcing me to kill another. I would watch the blood go down the drain and knew what would come. The guards took pleasure in it, since it was the only place without cameras. They would follow me in, and there was nothing I could do. I was just a kid, and I was so fucking weak back then.”

My breathing becomes laboured, as I know what he's hinting at.

“Samael.” I grip his clawed hand and drag it to me. He rests it on my soft stomach, holding me to his big, strong body as if I am protecting him.

“They would take turns, loving when it hurt me and made me bleed. There were too many of them, and I was always so weak from what they had done before that I just had to endure it.”

“Not weak,” I correct. “You survived that, so you are anything but weak, my king. You are fucking strong.”

I am so fucking angry, I want to rip someone's head off for what they forced this child to endure.

“Yes, well ...” He shifts, clearly uncomfortable, before his hand strokes up my belly and squeezes my breast, changing the mood. “I prefer baths, and now I have another reason, like having this soft, wet body against mine, so ripe for the taking.”

“Then do something about it.” I drop my head to his shoulder, leaning into his touch.

His fingers plunge into my tight, wet pussy, making me cry out as he starts to fuck me with them before pulling them free and working them into my ass.

Moaning, I writhe in his arms, and his other arm bands around my stomach, holding me to him as he works his thick digits inside of me and fucks me with them.

My clit throbs in pain, and my nipples are so tight they hurt, as pleasure spirals through me.

“So fucking tight,” he growls into my ear, his cock jerking against my back as he fucks my ass before suddenly removing his fingers, and then the thick head of his cock is there. “I did say I would take your ass,” he warns before thrusting into me.

I scream, and his hand slides up my body to clamp down on my mouth as he pulls out and thrusts back in, impaling my ass with his cock.

The pain from the stretch is too much. I whimper in agony, and his other hand reaches around to rub my clit until I’m rocking on his length and chasing my release.

He fucks me slowly, taking my ass as the water laps around us. Before I know it, he’s bending me forward over the edge of the bath, my tits pressing to the cold metal as he ruts into my ass, fast and hard. His hand tangles in my hair, and he growls in my ear as his tail slides over me and flicks my clit.

I’m wild, begging and crying out for more as I push back to meet his thrusts. We are creating a tsunami, so water spills onto the floor, but I don’t care, not even when he pulls me up onto my knees and hammers into me. His hand circles my throat, keeping me locked against him.

“Fuck, I love this. Your tight little ass is wrapped around my cock, milking it for more. You’re crying because you fucking love it, don’t you, pet? You love the filthy way I fuck you. Love the way I use my tail and monster cock on you.”

“Yes!” I shout.

“Good, then let them all hear. Replace those memories for me, Lyra. Let me hear your screams ring out as you come all over me.”

His growl ends in a groan when I reach back and hold onto him as he hammers into me so fast it hurts. Pleasure and pain mixes, and my heart thunders so loudly, it might explode. His

tail lashes my clit until I can't take it anymore, and when I come, I scream his name just like he wanted.

His own roar follows as he fills my ass with his cum.

EIGHTEEN



SAMAEL

Back in my room, I watch the human sort through the pile of clothes I dumped on the furs for her. Hers are filthy and need to be burned, but she demanded I wash them instead.

I don't know why I let that slide, but I did, and now I watch her pick through the clothes stark naked.

My hand leisurely strokes my cock as I watch her supple body move.

Her peachy round ass parts for me as she leans forward, showing me her pretty pink pussy.

Groaning, I stroke faster as she mutters to herself, completely oblivious to the effect she is having on me as she stands and turns, holding some trousers up to the light, showing me her rounded belly and heavy breasts.

Fuck.

I didn't think I'd ever get an erection again after admitting what the humans had done to me. I don't know why I even told her. I've never told anyone. It marks me as weak since I couldn't fight them off, couldn't protect myself from being violated, and if any monster knew, they would laugh and use it against me.

But my little human? She took my filthy, used cock inside of her and came on it so prettily, like I'm not ruined or destroyed.

Claws dig into my length, and the stab of pain makes my hips jerk. I drop my half-mast eyes down her curvy body once more, my fangs biting into my chin and drawing blood as I imagine her tight cunt wrapped around me. When she bends over and slips some trousers on, I come with a silent roar.

She turns, her mouth dropping open before she throws her hands onto her hips. "Are you wanking while I dress?"

“Yes,” I admit unashamedly, stroking through the mess on my stomach and bringing it to my mouth to lick as she watches. “I couldn’t resist with you bare before me like that.”

Her eyes sparkle with desire even as she huffs and turns away.

She liked that I touched myself to the sight of her.

And who wouldn’t?

Fuck, all that soft, perfect skin and all those curves?

She’s fucking perfection, even if I hate her.

“Samael,” she murmurs, shaking her head.

I fucking hate the way she says my name, her human tongue rolling over the word like a caress.

It’s a warrior’s name, taken from the first human I killed, so she should treat it as such, but I still don’t tell her.

She begins to wander around my room, stopping at the shelf displaying the skull. “Did you steal this from a museum?” she asks curiously.

“No, he was a scientist,” I answer.

She stumbles away and turns to me in shock. “The skull is real?”

“Of course. Why would I display a fake skull of my enemy to inspire fear?”

“Why would you display one at all?”

Sitting up, I frown at her screeching. “Human, stop that noise, it grates on my nerves.” She snarls and crosses her arms. I don’t tell her it’s not scary and that it just pushes up her magnificent breasts. “I display it as a reminder to myself of what I am capable of, of where I came from, and to also remind others what I am willing to do.”

“He hurt you?” she asks, searching my gaze as she treads nearer. I track her movements, watching my prey, and when she’s within reaching distance, I pounce, dragging her down onto my lap where I can stroke her curves.

“He was a bad man,” is all I share, distracted by the way her sides squeeze in my hands.

Fuck, that’s so hot.

“Sammy, focus.” She huffs. “Bad?”

I meet her gaze. “He was the head scientist at the bunker I was kept at. He was the one who ordered all the experiments and torture. Before he died, I wrung every detail out of him, and then I slowly cut away his limbs and organs until he eventually died. Then I skinned him and kept his skull.”

“Well, shit,” she mutters. “Can’t say it’s my usual interior decor, but I like it.”

Grinning, I focus back on my task, squeezing her curves until she slaps me away.

“Stop it.” Grabbing her hands, I grip them so I can lean down and sink my teeth into the curve of her waist, making her wiggle with a cry.

The scent of her arousal coats the air, making me wild.

If I’m not careful, she will distract me all day, and I have duties to attend to, so I slap her ass and get up. “Time to go to work. Being king is a busy job, and remember your place, pet.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she mutters, so I grab her face and squeeze until she gasps in pain.

“I mean it, human. They will kill you.”

“So will you,” she whispers.

“Maybe, but I’d much rather fuck you first. They would fuck you after.” She shivers, and I nod. “Good, so behave. Always stay a step behind me, sit when I say so, and stay silent. I know that’s hard for you, but if you don’t, I’ll stuff my cock in your mouth to silence you while they watch.”

It’s a threat, but the widening of her eyes and the increase in her musk has me shifting away.

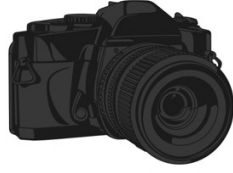
The dirty little human.

She will be the death of me.

Or her.

No, definitely her ...

NINETEEN



LYRA

He displays the skull of his human enemies like a fucking trophy, and the worst thing? I don't seem to care.

I understood it. Fuck, if our world was that simple, I might have never been abused.

I could see my dad's skull sitting on a shelf somewhere where I could gloat over it.

Maybe I'll let Samael torture, skin, and de-skull him.

The thought of that, despite being bloodthirsty, keeps me going as I'm forced behind him. His head is held high like the king he proclaims himself, and his hard cock is proudly on display. He wanders through the compound, checks on his horse, and then returns back inside. All the while, I stay silent, ignoring the curious, hungry gazes or the downright gleeful hatred from some of the other monsters.

I start to notice that each one is slightly different, either by colour, size, scars, or markings. A lot seem ... rugged here. They are very scarred, their thorns are broken, and some are even missing tails. It makes me hate what the humans did to them.

They suffered, and I understand why they hate me because of it.

I don't wither under their looks. Instead, I stare right back, showing them how sorry I am.

I'm not the same, and I'm not here to hurt them. I'm here to help them.

This goes far beyond my role as a journalist. After getting to know Samael and what has been done to him, how could I do nothing other than try to make the people who are responsible pay?

We might be enemies, but part of me is aligned with him, even over my own kind.

After all, what have they ever done for me?

At least here, over the wall, everything is simple. You fuck if you want to, and you die if you make a mistake. There are no political games, and they wear their secrets like badges of honour.

Here, strength, determination, and the ability to survive is praised, and maybe that's why I feel so at home.

We end up in what I can only assume is the bowels of the prison. Where the tables used to be, there are beds and furs spread around. In the middle is a chalk square.

Stepping closer, Sam looks back at me and points at the floor. "Sit, pet."

G glaring at him, I sink to my knees and sit back on my heels, feeling the gazes of the monsters in the shadows. Flinging his stuff near me, he steps into the square, cracking his neck and arms.

Scanning the room, I see the subtle changes come over him.

He straightens to his full height, his muscles bulge, his fangs protrude more, and his eyes are sharper. Even his horns are tilted down, as if he's bracing for an attack. That's when it hits me—he is. He's on guard around his people at all times, worried he will be attacked.

He might have created this sanctuary for misfits like him, but he's continually worried they will turn on him, and that makes me a little sad for him.

"Challenges, present!" he calls, his voice ringing out.

At first, no one moves, and then slowly, a man slinks from the shadows, and as soon as he steps foot in the ring, a crowd gathers, yet they leave a huge gap around me as if not daring to touch the king's pet. I guess that's something.

"I want that throne." He wipes his face, tossing what I'm really hoping is a chicken bone away, and then charges Sam. I

sit up taller, telling myself I only care that he doesn't die because he's my only protection.

That's totally the reason why.

I shouldn't have worried. He dodges the attack and rips the man to pieces with his claws, almost dancing around him as he still tries to fight with his innards tumbling out. I don't cover my mouth or say anything, knowing it could be my death.

The man swings, his eyes crazed as blood pours from him. Sam laughs and moves around him, kicking him over and then taunting him to get back up.

He plays with him until the man can no longer stand, and with his eyes on me, Sam slams his claws into the man's throat, rips it out, and holds it up with a roar.

His people stomp and roar back, shaking the floor, and dust fills the air until I sneeze. Tossing the throat away, he kicks the body from the ring, still dripping in blood, and grins at me as if to say, *See why you should fear me, little human?*

I should. The things he can do ... No one could stand against him, but I don't fear him, not the man who curled into me to escape his nightmares, or the man who is proudly scarred from what he survived.

"Any more?" Sam roars.

This time, a woman steps forward.

She's lithe and almost beautifully feminine, but she moves quickly. There are no words or taunts. She throws herself at him. He dodges her and nods in respect, taking this challenge seriously. They circle each other, and she watches his every move carefully and choreographs her next in time with his.

She's a worthy opponent, with a wicked scar across her throat like someone tried to take off her head. Her skin is almost black with red streaks, and she is dressed in nothing but furs. She's kind of badass, and she holds her own against him for so long, his people start to hesitate, but then he shows he was holding back, and with the respect she deserves, he ends it quickly, snapping her neck.

She drops to the floor, her eyes unseeing, and I almost feel bad for her.

No one can stand against him, so she shouldn't have tried.

"Pet, bring me a drink," Sam roars. Getting to my feet, I hurry to a tapped barrel at the back and pour a drink, ignoring the leering before moving back to him. I hand him his drink, and his fingers stroke mine as he takes it and slams it back before reaching down and hoisting me over his shoulder.

His bloodied hand grips my ass. "Now for my prize!" he jokes as he storms away. My nails dig into his skin in warning, but otherwise I don't react.

I might be crazy, but I'm not dumb.

When we are out of earshot, I slap him. "Where are we going?"

"To patrol, but they don't have to know that. It's time you saw the city, little human. You can see why we fight and what you humans did to us."

I don't respond, sensing his barely controlled anger and need for blood.

I can never quite tell if Sam wants to kill me or not. I think he would if it came down to it, so I don't want to push my luck. I stay silent as he tosses me on Midnight's back and, without a word, leaps up. Off we go into the city, his bloodied hands holding my hips as we ride.

His rock-hard cock presses against my ass, and I have a sense of déjà vu.

I'm still his prisoner, but now I know the monster who has captured me.

He's the cruel, mad king, but I do not fear him. I want him.

I crave that edge of protection he offers and the wildness under his skin.

Cantering through the city, Sam offers me the protection of his species and name as king to allow me to see it all. I know

if we are attacked, he will kill them, human or monster. Nothing can stand against the man at my back.

I don't stay silent out of fear, but out of awe. While I was running, I didn't focus on my surroundings much, but from up here, I see it all. Yes, it's beautiful. There are still mass graves, skeletons, bloodshed, and death everywhere, but there is also new life.

There are flowers, plants, and animals all over, reclaiming the city.

Some buildings have been cleared, and I see lights inside. "Not everyone lives in the prison. Some need solitude, and I allow them that," he explains. "Every building in my sector has been checked thoroughly. Some humans hid in them at first, but we cleared them out."

"I've seen a prison, a grave, and a police HQ. Show me something good." I look over my shoulder at him. "Show me why I'm risking my life for this."

For a moment, those mismatched eyes just stay stuck on me before he glances at Midnight, and with a click of his tongue and snap of his heel, we turn to the outskirts of the city.

We pass the prison and still keep going, past the now empty rows of houses and abandoned homes.

There's one way in the distance with a light on. It has flowers and vegetables planted outside. It's a huge brownstone, and the curtains are tightly shut, but something about it screams loneliness. "Who lives there?"

Sam stiffens. His eyes go to the house and then back to the road as he steers us farther away.

For a moment, I don't think he'll answer. His hands tighten on me, and he speeds up from a trot to get away from the house. "Do not go near there, little one, I mean it. The monster there ... I respect him, but he's even more vicious than I. He simply wants to be left alone, and I have respect for him, but humans? He ... eats them."

"Eats us," I mutter. "So the rumours are true. Do you eat humans?"

I feel his mouth ghost over my neck and I shiver, making him hum. “Only in the way that has that pretty, juicy pussy dripping for me.”

Shit.

Clearing my throat, I shift, ignoring his chuckle. “Are there others like him? Who ... eat humans?”

“Yes,” he says without remorse. “There are only a few, and I keep my eye on them. None have seen you or been around you if you are wondering. They tend to live on the outskirts. I don’t tolerate their tendencies, but I also do not kill them for it. It helps keep my lands safe.”

“What if they try to eat me?” I murmur, suddenly afraid.

“They wouldn’t even get close,” he snarls. “You are mine, pet, remember? Even if they hate humans enough to want to, they wouldn’t dare stand against me.” Holding me tighter, he nips my neck, making me moan. My fear turns to pleasure once more. “Do not fear, little one. I’m finding I only like the musk of your terror when it’s because of me, not others.”

“Sadistic bastard,” I hiss, even as I rub against him.

He laughs before falling silent, but he strokes my body as we clamber out of the housing area and beyond. The wall stands before us, and he steers Midnight to a hole I didn’t see before. Gasping, I lean forward.

“There is no escape from it,” he explains. “No entrance. It leads straight onto a cliff that you cannot climb from.” With a click, Midnight surges through the hole, and I see he’s right. It goes right onto a cliff. It’s a steep but steady climb. Midnight easily navigates the rocks, and I lean farther back to let Sam hold me up. We suddenly break out into a flat area, and I realise we are at the top of the cliff.

The edge of it hangs over the wall, and I can see as far as Athesa beyond.

The sight steals the air in my lungs.

The moon is huge before us, as if I could reach it, and the light filters through the skyscrapers and city, lighting up the

beauty and masking the horrors. The lights of Athesa barely reach us, and there's something so beautiful about the natural light and silent city.

The juxtaposition of the cities isn't lost on me—the straight perfection of the human world, where they huddle around the light, compared to the rough, distorted edge of the monster city, where they embrace the dark.

“There is never any reason to fear the dark with me, little one,” he murmurs as if knowing my thoughts. “I would never let anything hurt you.”

“Not even you?” I murmur.

He's silent for a moment. “Not even me.”

I try to turn, but he keeps me pressed to his front as I lean back. “It's beautiful, Sammy,” I whisper. The nickname slips out, and he growls, but when he doesn't punish me for using it, I can't help the quirk of my lips.

“For so long, all I could see was agony and pain in our city. All I saw was the humans and everything they touched. I hated it, hated the reminder of the people who made me into this, but I slowly fell in love with this place as I made it my own. The truth is, little one, I hate them so much because I hate myself. You make me question everything, and I hate that too.”

“I know,” I admit softly.

“I was ripped apart and made into something my own people don't even recognise. How can you possibly look me in the eye, or worse, want me?” he asks, and there's a hint of vulnerability in his voice. I know if I don't answer properly, I will never see this side of him again.

“You wear your scars on the outside, and I wear mine on the inside. Even when I met you and hated you, I saw something lost in your eyes, something I see in mine whenever I look in a mirror. It's the reason I've spent my life chasing highs.” Grabbing his hand, I drag it down to my pussy. “Feel my truth. We both know words can lie, but not actions. Feel how my body wants you, how my soul recognises yours, even

if we are enemies. At the end, even if it gets us both killed, it wouldn't stop me from wanting you, Samael. You might be a monster to everyone else, but to me, you're the hand in the dark, admittedly a clawed, deadly one, but still the hand."

"Little one," he snarls, gripping my pussy through my jeans. "Don't you know you shouldn't tempt monsters?"

"I never did do as I was told." I grin as I rock into his grip, the pressure at my core building. Desire spirals through me, making my clit throb in time with my slamming heart.

"I'm beginning to see that," he murmurs.

His claw digs into the jeans, making me gasp and lift. Shuddering, I hear the slice of material as he cuts away the crotch of the jeans, and then his hand presses in, cupping my dripping pussy and grinding into me.

He inhales behind me, shuddering. "I love the way you smell. Every time I smell your cunt, your desire, I can barely believe it."

Lifting his hand, he holds it to my face to show me the proof of my desire. "Taste how much you want me."

Leaning forward, I lick him clean, even sucking on his claws.

"Lift up, little human, and take the monster who's claimed you," he snarls, fighting to get closer to me. "Claim him for the whole fucking world to see. Show them how eager you are to ride a monster's cock and how quickly you come on it."

He holds me as I reach between us, grab his hard cock, and position it at my entrance before slowly working my way down it. I fight for every hard, huge inch. He doesn't help one bit, and when he lets go of my hips, I drop.

My scream rings out loud and true.

His snarl follows as he thrusts up into me. "Move, little one, before I take that ass and let them hear your scream."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I have to hold onto Midnight as I grind and lift as much as I can, riding his cock like he told me. His huge length borders on painful, but with each slide, I become wetter, my desire pooling and easing his entrance.

“That’s it. Such a good little human, taking this monster’s huge cock.” His hand comes around so his claw presses against my clit each time I rock forward, and the sensation almost makes me spasm and clench around him.

He fists my shirt and rips it away, the cold air hitting my chest as I arch my back with a moan. His mouth meets my ear as he grips my breast and squeezes, the action hard, fast, and brutal as I ride his cock. “I bet the humans can see you right now, little one. I bet they think I’m raping you, and they are just thankful it’s not them. You are dripping down me, desperate to come and feel me fill you with my release.”

“Sam!” I yell as he twists and plucks my nipples.

“Let my monsters hear what they wish to fuck, hurt, kill, and eat. Let them see what they will never have,” he snarls, fighting my tightening cunt as I reach for my climax, and with one last, mean twist of my nipple, I tumble over the edge, screaming my release to the moon.

He pushes me forward with a hand in my hair, and my face meets the softness of Midnight’s mane as he thrusts into me while the horse stomps with the rocking movement.

He fucks me as hard as he can, and I simply hold on as he builds me back up to another release. When he roars, pumping his cum into me, I can’t help but come again, clamping to keep him inside of me. Snarling, he spurts until he slumps over me, and here, under the moon, he holds me as we both recover.

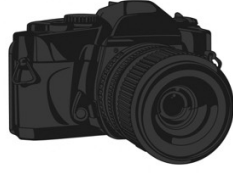
Two people brought together by hate and a common enemy.

He pulls free, plugging my pussy with my ripped jeans to keep his cum inside of me, and then we silently head back into the city. I lean back into him, lax with pleasure and exhaustion. He holds me up, keeping me warm, and before I know it, we are back at the stables.

Naked, spent, and covered in blood and cum, I am carried
back into the prison, held high and proud.

His little pet.

TWENTY



LYRA

Eating the soup with the spoon I was given, I watch Sam as he stretches and exercises in his room. I slept when I got back, and after washing up in the shower, he brought me food. There seems to be a fragile peace between us, and when he thinks I'm not looking, I catch him staring at me.

Neither of us brings up the obvious issues, like his people or mine, as if not to bust our little bubble here.

When I'm done, I reach for my bag and start to flip through the folders I stole. He moves closer, sweaty but not out of breath, the asshole. Ignoring him, I scan the documents again, taking my time since I'm not in such a rush now. I catch him spying over my shoulder, so I grin up at him.

"Reading notes on how incredible your species is?" I joke.

He jerks back, his eyes wide. "Is that what it says?"

"No." I laugh, but then it fades. "What do you mean? You can see." I hold up the folder, and he steps back. I watch him turn away, almost hiding from me. "Does your eye affect your sight?"

"I can see perfectly fine!" he hisses at me like a caged animal, and I nod because I didn't think it did, but I had to ask. After all, he has better vision than I.

Then I remember the note he refused outside with his people.

"Samael," I call softly, and his back stiffens, but he doesn't turn. "Can you read?"

"It wasn't deemed necessary for an experiment like me," he snaps. "Most of the others can read the human language because they were taught by their parents or others."

"But not you," I conclude.

Turning, he eyes me. “No. Happy now? Happy now that you know I’m even more of a fucking idiot? I can’t even fucking read normally like everyone else. I’m just a fucking monster.”

I hold out my hand and wait. He watches me carefully before taking it, and then I yank him down. He sits, and I crawl into his lap, turning sideways and holding out the folder. Snarling, he tries to move away, so I slap his chest. “Stay,” I snap. “I will never tell anyone, so you don’t have to worry, but if you want to, I can teach you to read.”

“Why?” he demands, searching my gaze.

I shrug. “Everyone should have been given the basics, like being able to read. I’m here, and we are stuck together, so why not? I have no ulterior motives, and I won’t use it against you or force you. It’s your choice, Sammy.”

The nickname seems to bring him back from the brink, and he blows out a breath and focuses on the folder. “How do we start?”

For the next few hours, I teach him how to read. He’s incredibly smart and picks it up quickly. Despite what he thinks of himself, or what the others think of him, Samael is probably one of the most intellectual men I’ve ever met. His brain simply works differently, and I seem to know how to get through to him.

“Good, read this one.” I point at a sentence.

Nervously, he grips the folder and licks his lips. Fuck, he’s adorable when he’s nervous. “The ... The speci—” He winces, and I jump in.

“Specimen,” I add softly.

“Right, specimen has shown great restraint in regard to pain.” He looks up hopefully, and I grin, leaping at him with a laugh.

He braces, but I simply kiss him, and he melts into it. I pull back, blushing at my outburst. “Perfect, you are picking it up really fast.”

“It’s fun,” he admits. “And you’re a good teacher.”

“Nah, you’re a good student.” Settling back into his lap, I point at the next one, and we read the reports like that. By the end, he doesn’t stumble as much. He’s still not absolutely sure, but he can definitely read most things now or at least try, and I can keep helping.

The confidence I feel for contributing makes me grin at him, and when he closes the folder, the look he gives me makes me gulp. “I suppose I should thank you, little one.”

“I don’t get the impression you thank people,” I tease.

“Never,” he admits, grabbing my hips until I straddle him. “So don’t go around bragging, but ... thank you, Lyra.”

Hearing my name on his lips makes my eyes widen. I’ve been human, little one, and pet, but he has never spoken my name. The soothing tone, with something akin to respect, coats it, and I become almost feral with the urge to kiss him again.

“You’re welcome, Samael,” I murmur, caressing his name.

In here, we can be like this—no master, no pet.

No enemies.

We are just two scarred people with a bond we never wanted but can’t resist.

“Now, little one, how about a real thanks.”

I yelp then laugh as he flips us and pins me down, but before I can tease him, my jeans are stripped off and his mouth is on my cunt.

He draws a moan from me as my core clenches and my thighs fall open with need—a need he stokes in me, the likes of which I’ve never felt before. I’ve always been a sexual being, and I like getting off, but it’s never been this almighty need.

I feel like I will die if I don’t have him inside of me, and every moment I’m around him, my need for him gets worse until I can barely breathe through it. Every touch, every kiss,

and every moment with him is so raw and earth-shattering, I can barely remember any others before him.

He consumes all of me.

His tongue drags possessively across my pussy, knowing exactly where to taste, where to flick, and where to apply pressure to have me reaching for his horns. My chest arches into the air, and I cry out his name at the attack.

His fingers slide into my already wet pussy, two at first, and he slowly pumps them, but as they grow wet and he stretches me, he adds a third, making me moan. He seals his lips on my clit, sucking hard and building me up to a release before stilling, then letting it pass me by. He chuckles as I thrash, and then his fingers start to move again, slow at first, while my clit throbs as he licks it.

“Let me feel you come, pet. Let me taste it on my tongue. Give in,” he murmurs. “Now,” he demands as he bites my clit, and like my body is his, I fall over the edge once again, screaming his name as my body locks up.

My eyes slam closed with the force of the pleasure that crashes through me before it lessens and finally releases me.

I collapse back, and he slides up my body before flopping half on me, half next to me, wearing a smug grin on his face as he watches me from inches away. That long tongue darts out to lap at his face like a cat with cream. Huffing, I try to push him away, but it’s like trying to move solid rock.

“What else can you teach me that I can reward you for?” he purrs.

“Oh, a great many things,” I tease, making him throw his head back as he laughs.

When it tapers off, there’s a strange look in his eye, and he leans forward and gently kisses my head. The sensation of it, the warmth, and the feeling of safety slide through me, and before I know it, I’m slipping back into the dark to sleep as my monster watches over me.

SAMAEL

I sneak a look to make sure she's deeply asleep before I unfold the note and try to read it, stumbling over the words.

I repeat them, trying to memorise them, and when I'm happy that I have, I fold the note up, lingering over it before inhaling her scent and pocketing it once more.

Looking back down at her, I gently shift and get up, moving around the room and lighting as many lights as I can since it's growing darker. I know she doesn't like it, so when the room is sufficiently lit, I shut the door and lock it behind me.

I need to get away before I do something stupid, like start to like the little human.

That can never happen. I may protect her as I would anyone I call mine—and she is mine, my pet, my little human, until this thing is over—but I can't allow myself to be overly friendly with her or let her in, as much as a part of me wants to.

A mad king can only hold the darklings for as long as he is feared and mad.

Falling in love with a human would make me weak, and they would all try to kill us. I can't protect her from every monster, despite how strong I am. No, this must remain just as it is, with her helping me get back at the humans. She has my protection until that is over.

And after, I will hunt her and do my duty.

Letting the transformation come over me, I enter the ring below once more. I drink and fight, keeping up my image so no one doubts me. I spread lies about my little human, saying how she's good in my bed and nothing more. I make them believe because everything I felt and thought has shifted with her.

I don't even know when it happened.

Before, I sat on my throne and truly felt nothing but bloodlust and hatred.

Now, I'm worried it's still too dark in the room and that she will wake up alone and locked in and hate me like she does her father. I want to slip back and watch her sleep to protect her.

Humans are more dangerous than anyone realises, and I ignore my urges until everyone is done for the night.

When I open the door, she is awake and reading. She isn't angry. She just smiles at me and goes back to reading, curled in my furs, and something inside of me snaps, making me stumble. I shut the door, heading straight for her, and then I curl around her back, pulling her into my arms. She makes a quiet little noise that I know will stay with me forever as I stroke her soft skin.

She is soft, beautiful, funny, kind, and fierce.

She is nothing like the hard, cruel humans who hurt me, and maybe that's why I'm having trouble hating her.

"Interesting read?" I murmur.

Sighing, she shuts the folder and turns to see me. "No, it makes me sick." The flash of fury in her eyes instantly makes me hard. She's just as angry as I am at what they have done, and I feel myself grinning as I lean back. "Distract me, please."

"I have nothing good in my life to distract you with, little one," I tell her truthfully. I have never known anything but hatred and blood and death until her.

She stares at me before reaching out and laying her hand on my chest. "I am sorry, Samael. I wish I could erase what happened and protect you. I can't, but I promise I'll make them pay."

Covering her hand with mine, I meet her gaze. "I know." My little human is worth ten warriors, and I know in my heart that she won't stop until we have justice. "But I'm so tired of

being angry and in pain. You distract me, so tell me something good.”

“I have never known much good either,” she admits brazenly, refusing to be ashamed like me. Lyra has had a hard life, and she survived things that would have broken others and uses it on her search for the truth. “We do have gun ranges over the wall though. You’d like them.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Well, you pay to shoot at targets to practice.” She shrugs. “Lots of violence and noise.”

“Moving targets like people?” I wonder.

“No, like paper cut-outs.” She giggles.

Frowning, I stare at her intently. “Then how does that sharpen their skills? Skills are born from battle and use. They are simply trying to show off.”

“I always thought that too.” She laughs. “Such pussies.”

“Pussies? As in this?” I grab hers, and she groans.

“It’s an expression to mean they are weak.”

“Weak? Pussies are anything but weak. They bring men and women to their knees. They could control empires and kingdoms. They stretch and bring more pleasure than anything else. How could they ever be weak?”

“I don’t know,” she replies as she watches me with a soft smile on her lips.

I huff. “Humans are idiots.”

“True.” Cuddling close, she quiets for a moment. “I like to climb.”

Climb? “Explain?”

“Well, they have these fake outside walls where you can climb different surfaces with different difficulties. It’s safe, of course, since you’re clipped in it. I like to beat everyone there and push myself. The high of bouldering or climbing ... Sorry, it probably sounds lame.”

“Not at all, tell me more.” I tug her close and listen as she explains about her hobbies. They are all fast-paced, dangerous ones, just like my own. I don’t know if my little human realises it or not, but she seeks the same high I do.

Adrenaline reminds us we are alive.

“We aren’t much different, you and I,” I find myself saying as I start to plait her hair without realising it.

“No? The tail and horns say differently.” She giggles, a sound that burrows into my chest and makes my lips kick up without meaning to.

“Smart ass,” I mutter. “I meant in the way we move through life, surrounded by people but completely alone, addicted to the next high.”

She turns and meets my eyes. “Strong, different, and tenacious.” My voice is lower now as I wind the plait around my fist and use it to tug her head back, making her eyes flare.

“Is that how you see me?” she rasps.

“Tell me how you see you,” I demand.

“Different, too loud, too brash, a know-it-all—”

“Not how others have said they see you, how you see you,” I snap, tugging on her hair until I get the truth.

“Lonely,” she whispers. “Fighting a never-ending battle to be seen, to ... to do something, anything. I ... I’m strong but still weak, and a scared little kid underneath.”

“Then you don’t see yourself clearly,” I murmur. “I’ll make sure you do.”

I turn us swiftly and rip off the shirt she wears so she is exposed to me, all pretty pink dripping pussy and plump ass.

I lick a line across her and bite her ass cheek, making her cry out. “What are you?”

“Strong,” she whispers.

“Again,” I demand as I nip her ass then lick across her hole.

“Strong,” she cries out.

“Good girl, keep telling me,” I order as I drag my tongue over her delicious pussy, desperate for a taste of her cream. It explodes across my tongue, and she tastes so good, I almost drool as I thrust it inside her, searching for more. She fists the furs and cries out, pushing back, but I don’t hear her talking, so I stop.

Her head falls forward as she whimpers. “Strong. Beautiful,” she starts, so in reward, I fuck her with my tongue as she chants the words, starting to believe them and see herself the way I see her.

When she comes on my tongue, screaming the words, I’m almost puffed up with pride. With one last lick of her pussy, I crawl up her body. “Shall I tell you what I see, pet?”

“Sam,” she murmurs, and hearing my name is my undoing.

My dripping cock jerks, trying to find her entrance, so I press it to her hole as she groans. “I see an incredible woman. She is so smart she makes every other person look stupid. I see a determined, self-sacrificing woman willing to do whatever it takes to save everyone else. I see someone so beautiful, she makes others jealous. I see such a kind person, she can even tame a beast.” I lick her racing pulse in her neck before I bite her ear and grip her hip. “I see perfection,” I growl as I slam into her.

She yells, trying to pull away, but I keep her there, propping my arms on either side of her as I start to move. With quick, hard thrusts, I fuck her into submission, so she will never doubt what I say. I give her everything so she can taste my desperation, my truth.

Biting her neck, I keep her pinned in place as I hammer into her. Her nails rake along my arms, making me growl as she draws blood. The pain is incredible. I want her to slash every inch of me with them and mark my entire body, claiming me as hers.

Because I am, and she is mine.

She is absolutely fucking perfect, and I will spend every day reminding her of that.

Fuck anyone else, her opinion is the only one that matters.

“Oh god,” she cries.

“No, a king, pet,” I taunt as I lick my bite mark, rocking and rolling my hips. My tail slides down and presses against her pussy, until each thrust pushes that bundle of nerves tighter against it. Her pussy tightens, her body shakes, her breath hitches, and I know she’s close.

My balls are tight, and my back is almost bowed with the need to come, but I fight it off. I will never come before her. Ever.

“Your king,” I snarl, fighting her cunt as I give up and just hammer into her with my thick cock as her juices drip down me. “Yours, my perfect human.” I bite her neck again, and she screams, shattering around me.

Her pussy clenches so tightly, I don’t stand a chance. It milks my cock, and I roar my own release, pumping her full of it as my cock jerks inside of her tight, wet heat. I come with the taste of her blood in my mouth and the sound of her screams in my ears.

Perfection.

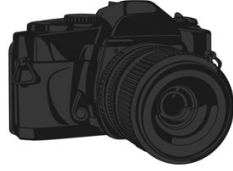
She slumps, and I carefully pull from her pussy, watching my cum drip from it. I use my tail to press it back in and stuff her full, and then I keep the tip inside her to stop my cum from leaking out before I wrap my body around her, closing my eyes in bliss and happiness.

“Sleep now, pet. I will remind you of that lesson tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait,” she murmurs, holding me tight as we both fall into a dreamless sleep.

Together.

TWENTY-ONE



LYRA

Sam and I fall into a routine. We wake up, bathe together, fuck, practice his reading, and then go on patrol. After, we spend the night with his people where I play the part of a good little human pet. Some of the monsters have even gotten used to me and talk to me, but Sam never lets them get too close, protecting me like he promised.

Tonight, though, I know something is wrong.

I sit on his knee as he talks to a commander of his people, scanning my surroundings. Years of training and survival prick my senses, telling me something isn't right. My instincts scream at me to fight or run.

Scanning the room again, I search for the threat, even as Samael pets my hair, sensing my unease and assuming it's because of all his people. His arms tighten around me and he turns slightly, which leaves his side vulnerable.

And that's when I see it.

The monster holds a blade, and his eyes, which are locked on Samael, are filled with hate as he moves through the crowd with purpose. I track him, not wanting to do anything if I'm not certain, because Samael will kill first and ask questions later. That death would be on my hands, so I watch, straighten, and shift slightly on Sam's knee to get a better angle.

He reaches us and leaps towards Samael, moving so quickly that Samael won't have time to react.

I know it will be a killing blow, and something inside of me rebels at that idea, so I move almost inhumanly fast.

"No!" I yell, throwing my body at the attacker and forcing him back. My training kicks in as I slam his hand down, stealing the blade and stabbing it into his neck without thought.

My breathing stops as I stare down at the monster who's choking on his blood.

Silence reigns around me as I stare into the monster's blinking eyes. His mouth moves as he tries to speak, but he just chokes on his own blood. I hear footsteps, and my head is yanked up. I blink uselessly at Samael as he crouches, stroking my chin as he searches me for wounds.

"Are you okay, little one?" he asks, and when I don't respond, he squeezes my chin. "Lyra, answer me!"

"I'm fine," I whisper. "He was going to kill you."

Samael glances down in disgust. "He would have," he murmurs. "His name is Echo. He was one of us until I kicked him out for breaking our rules. He wanted the throne." He looks back to me then, and I see shock and respect in his gaze. "You saved me."

"She saved him."

"The human killed Echo."

Whispers ripple through the crowd, so I keep my eyes on Sam, terrified they will kill me now, but he smiles and leans in, pressing his lips to my head. "You did good, little one, so fucking good."

"I—he's dead." I stumble over the words, no doubt in shock.

"Not yet," Samael murmurs. "We have a rule here—we kill what we attack," he explains as more monsters draw closer, lured by the bloodshed.

Samael yanks the blade from Echo's neck, who quickly covers the wound with his hand, and turns to me.

"He's yours to kill, little one," Samael murmurs, holding the blade out to me, his eyes alight with desire.

I should rebel, but I see the truth in Samael's eyes.

I have to do this, and he's right. I can't leave this monster to bleed to death. I caused this.

I have to end this, especially because the other monsters are starting to look at me like I'm weak again. If I don't kill him, I'll be dead myself.

I gently take the blade, my grip slipping on the blood, and slam it through his eye and straight into his brain. He stops moving, stops kicking, and his hand falls away, allowing blood to steadily pump out of his neck.

More shocked whispers fill the air, and the others move so close I can barely breathe.

I killed him.

I killed a man.

It's all that echoes in my head. I know I had to. He would have killed Samael, and then I would have been dead, but I've never hurt someone before, never mind killed them. I find myself consumed by shock and horror at what I am capable of when it comes down to it.

Have I truly changed that much since arriving in Sam's land, allowing madness and the lack of morals to infect me? Or was the capability always buried within me?

I don't know. All I know is that I'm lost.

Lost in a sea of fear, horror, and monsters.

And then he's there, my demon, my devil.

My saviour.

Scooping me into his arms, Sam carries me back to the throne and turns me so my back is to his people. He searches my face before pulling me closer and stroking my back. "Lyra, you saved my life." He still seems shocked by that. "Shh, it's okay, pet. The first one is always the hardest."

Pulling away, I look at him as I tremble in his arms. "I ... I don't want it to get easier. I don't want to kill."

"I know," he answers. "I will do it for you."

"You said the first one is the hardest. Do you remember yours?" I find myself asking, clinging to him for help.

He debates it for a moment before inclining his head sharply. “Later, I will tell you.”

I realise then he doesn’t want anyone else to know, doesn’t want to expose his weakness, so I smile and relax into his arms. When my shaking stops, he turns me to face his people, sitting me on his hard cock. “Tonight, this human saved your king!” he roars, ignoring the shared glances. “She risked her life to protect me. She killed one of us.”

I try to shrink, but he holds me steady.

“She did what none of you were capable of. Tonight, we celebrate in her honour!”

A roar of approval goes up, and I relax when all eyes turn to me, noting they are not filled with hatred like I expected ... more like respect.

I guess killing here truly is the way of the people.

“Come on, little one, let’s get you warm and find you some food.” Picking me up, he leaves his throne without another word and takes us back to his room, where he tucks me into the furs and then meticulously makes sure every light is on before bringing me some warm tea and food.

He forces me to eat it before pulling me into his arms.

Earlier, I felt like I could cry, more due to mourning the loss of my innocence than the random monster’s death at my hands, but now I just feel numb, soaking in his warmth as he holds me to his chest. His head is on top of mine, and when he begins to speak, the vibrations slide through me and bring me back to life with each heart-wrenching word.

“No one has ever protected me before, little one. Not ever. But you did without a second thought. You asked me if my first one was hard. It was. It broke something inside me, something I’ll never get back, and with each kill, another piece of innocence breaks away. I’m not a good man or a good monster, Lyra. I have never been, not after what they did to me. I enjoy killing, and I enjoy death because I find oblivion in it, along with a strength that keeps me alive. You don’t have to understand that; it is simply true. But back then, I was

young, and I had never killed. I knew death and bloodshed, knew what humans were capable of and the torture they put me through. It was before I was singled out to go to the bunker—a terrible place. I was a kid, but I had always been unable to keep my mouth shut and stop fighting back, even when the others told me to. I couldn't understand how they could let what the humans were doing slide.”

He laughs bitterly. “One day, a scientist came for me and ... he tried to bring on the haze to test it in younglings. I gave it to him. I gave him the haze. It was my very first one. As younglings, we are taught that our first experience will be supervised since we are unable to control ourselves in it. Control is something you learn over time, but I was not supervised. I was poked and prodded, and when I gave in, something inside me snapped. I barely remember what happened, only the end bits when I ripped out the scientist's throat. He wasn't a good man, Lyra, but feeling his life drain away, watching it extinguish from his eyes, and knowing I had done it? It changed me. I was horrified, terrified, and I paid for it.

“They called me unstable, even though I had simply done as they had asked. I was a child, Lyra, a fucking child giving into my instincts—instincts they created and blamed on me. I was tossed into a place they called the bunker, a place filled with nothing but death and cruelty, and that is where I grew up. Some were sent there for punishment or execution, but me? I lived there, and every time I gave into the haze and killed someone, I came back as a different monster, until it stopped bothering me and started to feel right. I felt stronger and safer in the haze. Most others can separate it, but me? I live in it continually.”

“Samael,” I whisper as he clutches me tighter.

“It is why they call me mad. I did it to survive, little one. I would do it again. I bear many scars from their cruelty, including ones I cannot hide, like my eye.” I lift my head then, and he smiles. “I know what it looks like. They took it from me, curious if it would grow back. When it didn't, they plucked one from another monster and put it inside of me,

only the orb didn't fully take. My body tried to reject it, and it started to die, hence the white. Now I can see from it, but only in black and white."

"You can't see colour?" I ask.

"I can with one eye." He chuckles. "It used to give me headaches. Now I'm just grateful I can see the colour of your hair and eyes."

"Aww, Sammy, look at you being all sweet," I tease, and he huffs as my smile slides away. "I'm glad you did what it took to survive as well. Otherwise I never would have met you. You would have never saved me. I'm sorry for what they did to you, Samael, and I'm glad you killed them."

"My bloodthirsty little pet." He grins as he rolls us so I'm beneath him. "Now, let me thank you properly. I'll make you forget what you had to do. I would take it from you if I could, but I won't lie, seeing you kill for me almost made me feral."

"You are so messed up." I groan as he slides down my body and rips off my trousers, sealing his mouth over my pussy like a starving man.

"I am," he rumbles against my wet flesh, making me gasp. "And you love it. Now be a good pet and scream for me."

"Make me," I taunt.

He lifts his head, flashing his fangs as his forked tongue darts out. As those wicked mismatched eyes lock on me, I reach down and grip his scarred horns, making him groan. "Oh, I plan to, Lyra. Better hold on tight."

My head falls back with a moan as his tongue wraps around my clit and his fangs press to either side. The mix of pain and pleasure makes me lift my hips.

His fingers slide down my pussy and thrust into me, curling to rub that spot that has me grinding into his face. Gripping his horns, I tug him closer, my legs thrown over his shoulders as I cry out. The pressure of his tongue coupled with his fingers quickly causes me to come apart.

I don't scream, though, and his snarl of anger makes me gasp out a giggle, but the sound ends in a scream when his fingers pull free and his tail thrusts inside me.

The size causes me to shout as I writhe, letting him force it deeper and fuck me.

“There's my scream, little one. Now let's see if we can get another,” he snarls as he licks and sucks every inch of my cunt, all while fucking me with his tail as I shake below him, on the verge of coming again.

He turns me, and his mouth moves up to my ass, licking and tasting as his tail thrusts into me. “That's it, pet, ride me and take what you need,” he demands.

I squeeze my eyes shut as I rock and push back to take his tail deeper, and I do. I give into it, fucking myself onto his tail as his tongue spears my ass.

Every nerve ending explodes, and I forget everything but a pleasure so deep, I fade into the waiting darkness as he catches me.

TWENTY-TWO



SAMAEEL

I hold her while she sleeps, wrapping her in furs and ensuring the lights are bright enough that there are no dark corners. I should rest, but I can't.

I watch her.

The human who saved me.

She risked her life to save mine without complaint or compulsion.

She did it just because she wants me alive.

I don't know which shocks me more, but I cannot stop myself from holding her close. The very being I hate is the very one I am obsessed with. The little human is worming her way into my heart, and what I told her is true—I will never let her kill again if it upsets her that much.

I will kill the entire world for her so she never has to bloody her pretty, delicate hands.

I'll be her monster, her killer, and the mad king she needs.

She's sleeping soundly, and I know I should let her rest and escape the harsh truth of what she did tonight, but I can't. I'm too wound up and too needy for the woman who is willing to risk everything for a monster she said she hated less than a week ago. It's a compulsion as I turn her slightly and slide my hard cock into her while she sleeps.

A moan escapes her lips as she sleepily rocks back. She's so trusting, so perfect, and so fucking mine.

My pet, my human.

If she had died tonight ...

Fuck, the thought is one I can't bear, but I don't consider why as I hold her tighter and speed up, slamming my hips into her until she wakes up with a cry, grips the furs, and holds on.

My name is on her lips, a plea to keep going and give her everything.

I give her every inch of me. I give her my madness, my cruelty.

I give her my willingness to kill, maim, and torture as I shield her from the outside world, knowing I will never let my guard down again, not when she is close. I will protect this little human with everything I am.

“Please,” she gasps, turning her head, and I lower mine until I cover her lips.

I taste her pleasure, her need, as it mixes with my own, and I fuck her until we tumble into the waiting abyss together, swallowing each other’s pleasure.

For the first time ever, I fall into a deep sleep locked inside my human, holding her tight.

I wake first. She’s sprawled across me with her pussy still tightly wrapped around my cock, which is already hard. My hips thrust shallowly, claiming her even in sleep. Her teeth lock on my skin as her eyes open, her pussy clenching around my length.

No doubt she’s sore and tired, but I don’t stop.

I roll my hips slowly, letting her feel every hard inch of me as she releases her teeth. “Sorry,” she whispers.

Gripping her head, I guide her mouth back to my skin. “Harder,” I order. “Mark me.”

She slowly lowers her mouth, and as my tail slides between her wet thighs to dance over her clit. She grips onto my skin with her teeth almost delicately. “Harder,” I snarl as I speed up my hips, holding her to me.

Biting harder, she worries at my flesh as my eyes slam closed and my back arches, my release slamming through me so fast and hard, I don’t even have time to prepare for it. My

cum fills her as I roar, and when I come back, she's licking her mark on my chest with a happy glint in her eyes.

She sits up and goes to slide off my cock, so I grab her. "Where do you think you're going?" I snap.

"You came—"

"And you didn't. I blame you for that. Your teeth felt good, your pussy too." Lifting her off me, I guide her dripping cunt to my mouth. "So, ride my mouth until you come."

She gasps as she looks down at me. Her body looks like a perfect fucking feast, with her thick hips in my grip and her dripping pussy poised over my face. Her soft stomach and huge breasts make me drool to taste her.

"Sam, I'll hurt you. I'll suffocate—"

"Then fucking suffocate me," I snap. "Fuck, can't you see I want you too? That I would die a happy man between these thighs? In fact, pet, that's how I demand to go, okay? I will die between these pretty thighs with your cum on my lips and tongue, so be a good girl and ride your king's face."

Shaking her head, she holds herself up, and I narrow my gaze.

"Do I need to remind you of our lessons?" I purr. "Or that I'm a giant monster who has survived torture and at least forty assassination attempts? No? So get your beautiful ass on my face. I'm starving and you are good enough to eat." Uncaring about her protests, I slam her down onto my mouth, moaning at the first taste of her.

Her juicy cunt grinds against my face, filling my nose and mouth so deliciously, I almost come again. I lick and suck, and as she starts to move, I encourage her. My cock hardens once more as my tongue plunges into her cunt, and she finally drops the rest of her weight onto me as she cries out. I almost laugh at how light she is as I tug her closer and eat her, feeling her drip down my chin as she rides my face. When she squeezes my head between her thighs, I reward her by nipping her clit.

Desperate to feel her come like this, I thrust into the air, licking and sucking until she cries out, clenching on my

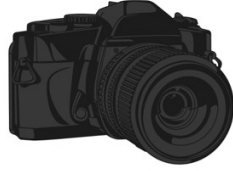
tongue and gushing into my mouth. I can't help but groan as I come again, lapping up every drop. When she slumps, I hold her up to clean all of her cream from her, and then I roll her gently until she's on her side.

I take her hand and drag it to my stomach. "Look what you did to me by riding me like such a good girl, pet."

Her eyes crack open, and she looks down to see my cum splashed on my stomach.

Leaning closer, I kiss her. "Such a good girl."

TWENTY-THREE



LYRA

He scoops me into his arms and shushes me when I protest. Sighing, I curl into his chest, feeling safe and protected. It's strange, since I so vehemently hated this monster.

A pulse of shock slides through me. I used past tense.

Do I not hate Samael anymore?

No, I don't think I do. I guess it's hard to hate someone when you know what they have been through and who they truly are beyond all the scars and bravado. Like now, when he gently sets me in the bath and climbs in after me, tugging me into his arms like he can't bear to be apart from me.

Does he still hate me? Why do I care if he does?

Surely you can't hate somebody and touch them the way he touches me? I'm too afraid to ask, though, so instead, I turn in his arms and straddle his body. He leans back, draping his arms on either side of the bath as he watches me with lust-filled eyes.

"Your mind is working overtime, little one," he purrs.

"Just thinking," I admit, not willing to explain how I'm suddenly scared shitless that I'm attached to this crude, mad king. Nope, I'll just keep thinking of our next move. Needing a distraction, I reach out, grab the sponge, and wet it, and then I start to slowly wash his chest, lingering over every scar. He stiffens when I touch the first, so I lean in and kiss it gently. "How did this one happen?"

"Lyra," he snaps. "My life is not a pretty story—"

"I want to know." I grip his throat like he has done to me on so many occasions, using enough pressure so he meets my eyes to see the truth. "I am not someone you need to protect from the dark, Sammy. I have seen evil, and I have lived in it. Nothing you could ever tell me will make me run. Horrify me?"

Yes. Anger me? Certainly. But I will never turn away from you.” It’s the truth, and I need him to understand with a desperation I cannot quite fathom.

“Knife,” he whispers carefully, watching me as if I might bolt or suddenly disappear. That’s when it occurs to me that not one single person in this fucked-up city has ever asked Samael if he is okay or what happened to him.

I want to kill them all.

They accepted his bloodthirsty nature and called him a mad king. They followed him and trusted him to feed, clothe, and protect them, but they never bothered to understand him.

Samael will never be a good man, but that’s fine. I’m not a good woman, and something in his tortured soul calls to my own.

When I just stroke my fingers across it, he shudders and closes his eyes like he cannot bear my touch, and when his voice comes again, it’s rough and fearful. “During the war, a human was hiding in an abandoned apartment building we were clearing for families. He leaped out and tried to kill Akuji, another leader, but I took the blow. He almost gutted me, but I ripped out his throat.”

“Did he say thank you?” I demand.

“Who? The human?” Samael frowns, opening his eyes.

“Akuji.” I stumble over the name.

“Why would he?” he replies, sounding genuinely confused.

“Because you almost died protecting him,” I snap, and a slow smile curls his lips, making me huff. “Men.” Leaning in, I run my lips across the scar, making him gasp.

“What about this one?” I trail my fingers across a particularly jagged scar between his pecs.

“They tried to carve out my heart to see if I had one,” he murmurs.

Gritting my teeth, I kiss it as I touch another, asking wordlessly, and he answers. “Metal electric prongs from the scientists.”

I touch another, lower down on his abs, and he stiffens further. “The first time I was taken against my will, the monster speared me with his claws and pinned me.”

My head jerks up as he swallows, meeting my eyes with shame and fear. “What happened?”

He glances away, so I reach up and turn his face back to mine, unwilling to let him reject me when I am right here with him. “Samael, you don’t have to hide from me.” Knowing I’m losing him, I squeeze my thighs to pin him, knowing he won’t hurt me to move me, and then I grab his hand and bring it to a scar over my hip. “Feel that?”

He nods slowly, holding me tight as if I gave him the permission he needed.

“My father threw me into a glass shower. He found me eating in my bathroom. I hadn’t had any food in days, since he declared I needed to starve to lose weight. He got so angry he attacked me. The shower screen splintered, and the glass cut into me. He wouldn’t let me go to the hospital, so he left me there, and I had to pick the shards out. This was the biggest wound, and I knew it wouldn’t heal properly.” Covering his hand, I drag it over my thick stomach to my side where a circular scar sits. “This one was from the Cuban he was smoking over dinner. I didn’t pay him enough attention.” Bringing his hand to my back, I let him feel the scars alongside my spine. “From his belt, for many reasons—not being pretty enough, not being smart enough, him not getting the promotion he wanted, you name it. I took the brunt of his wrath.”

“Lyra,” he whispers.

“You do not have to be ashamed of your scars with me, Samael. I understand.” I cup his face. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but do not ever think you are lesser or be ashamed of them around me. They tell the story of your survival, of your strength. Every one is like a broken building

in this city, a beautiful memory. The stars scar the night, but you do not think they are ugly or shameful, do you?”

“They are shameful. I wasn’t strong enough, Lyra. Don’t you understand that? We pride ourselves on being strong, on our victories, and without it, we are nothing. I am nothing, and I was weak. They wanted the other monster to mate me. Do you understand? They injected him to make it happen, so they could see the way we would react. It was funny to them, and it wasn’t the last time. Every time, I wasn’t strong enough to stop it.”

“You are not at fault!” I shout, getting in his face with my own snarl. “Those sick sons of a bitches are at fault. Do not fucking blame yourself for something you couldn’t stop. You are so strong, Samael. I don’t know how you survived it. You might not have been able to stop it, but your strength kept you alive to endure it. God, Samael, you are the strongest person or monster I have ever met.” He tries to look away again, so I grab his skin and dig my nails in, making him hiss. “What they did to you does not define you, Samael, my mad king.” His eyes narrow as I lean in and kiss him gently, whispering against his lips.

“What you do now does. I cannot take back your past, although I wish I fucking could. I wish I could kill them all for you, but I can’t. You will always have a choice with me, Sam. You will always have a place to mourn what you lost, to be both weak and strong, and to be what you need. There will never be judgement, only kindness, and ... friendship. I’m here, Samael. I see you, all of you, and you are magnificent.”

“How can you stand to touch me?” he demands, truly not understanding. “How can you want me after I told you that?”

“Want you? No, Samael, I don’t want you.” He flinches, so I hold him tight. “I need you so badly it hurts. Always. I fucking crave you, and I’ll prove it to you.” Kissing him, I bite and eat at his lips until he groans and opens his mouth so I can sweep my tongue in and tangle it with his, cutting it on his fangs. When he goes to grab me so he can haul me onto him, I slide out of his grip, panting as I look at the scarred man

before me—the one who watches me like I hold the answers to everything ... as if I am everything.

“Can I touch you?” I ask, putting my words into actions.

“Please,” he begs, reaching for me.

“Do you want me?” I murmur, sliding across his body and pressing my breasts to his chest.

“Yes,” he snarls, reaching for me again, so I slide out of his reach with a grin. “Little one.”

“Prove it. Touch yourself while I watch.” I lick my lips, staring at his hard cock. “Feel how good you feel to me. Feel how perfect you are.”

“I want you to touch me,” he begs.

“No, you,” I demand, taking his hand and guiding it to his cock. “This is your body, Samael, yours, and it’s incredible. I want it so badly.” I reach between my thighs and stroke myself with a moan before lifting my hand to show him. “So badly I drip. How could that ever be wrong? How could you not want that?”

He leans forward, no doubt to capture my fingers in his mouth, so I suck them clean, making him snarl. His claws slash at the sides of the tub. Perching on one of his thighs, I rock my pussy into the solid muscle there as he watches me, and the hand on his cock slowly starts to move.

“Fuck, you should see how hot you look right now.” I whimper, and it’s true. He looks like a fallen god. He’s so beautiful and strong and all mine. His scars are stark against his red skin, his mismatched eyes are half-mast with pleasure, and his cock jerks in his fist as he watches me.

I grip my breasts and play with them as he growls and fucks his hand. “Do you want to touch them?” I ask breathlessly.

“Yes,” he hisses.

Grinding into his thigh, I lick my lips as he fucks his own hand.

“Please,” he snaps.

Leaning down with a grin, I push my breasts together and guide them to his lips. His hips lift so hard, the water splashes around us, and he sucks one and then the other into his mouth. I drop my head back as I groan, gripping the edge of the tub to steady myself as I grind my clit against his thigh until I scream and come all over him.

“Fuck,” he roars as I fall back.

He watches me as he thrusts his hips up. “Stop,” I demand, my voice hoarse.

“Lyra,” he snarls.

“Stop or I won’t be able to ride you.” I pout, and he drops his hand, panting as he gnashes his fangs.

Sliding my hand down my body, I cup my pussy before lifting my fingers to his mouth. “Feel how hard I came from watching you touch yourself. The thought of feeling you inside me made me scream.”

Grunting, he grips my hand so delicately, his claws barely touch my skin as he guides it to his mouth and laps my palm clean, making my cunt clench, but this is about him. The snarl he lets out as he licks every inch of my hand goes straight to my clit as his cock jerks.

“You want to feel that around your cock?” I purr.

“Yes,” he hisses into my skin.

“Then tell me you deserve it. Tell me you are worthy, that this body is yours.”

He shakes his head.

“Fine, then tell me it’s mine.”

“It is yours; I’m yours,” he growls. “Now fuck me.”

“Tell me,” I order, sliding up his body. I place my hands on his shoulders to keep myself steady as I tease him by sliding his cock across my body, making us both groan.

“I deserve it. I’m worthy. This body is yours,” he snaps, trying to yank me down, but I resist.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” I question. “Consent.”

His eyes widen, and I feel his heartbeat stutter, and then a whining snarl leaves his lips. “I want you to fuck me so badly, I can barely think, little one. I want you so badly it hurts. I consent to anything you ever want to do to me.”

Groaning, I slam myself down on his cock, and he roars. I watch him as I lift and drop myself, riding him like I promised. I focus on his pleasure, on teaching him that love doesn’t have to hurt. Pleasure can be just that—pleasure.

Every time we’ve been together before, he was in charge, so the fact that he’s allowing me to have control shows me just how much he trusts me. It staggers me, and I refuse to prove him wrong, even when his eyes close and he’s no doubt fighting memories.

I slide my hand up his chest and grip his throat to force him to watch me ride him. Every stark scar on his body is on display for me, and I let him see the truth in my eyes. I will protect him. I think he is beautiful. I want him when no one else ever has.

It’s his undoing.

He snarls like a wild animal and bucks underneath me. “Lyra.” My name is practically a growl, and the vibration moves through his body to mine, making me groan and clench around him. I try to hold back my own release as I wind my hips and ride him faster, hearing the water splash over the edge, but I don’t care.

His eyes blaze as he watches me, the unstoppable monster weak in my thrall as I take him, and when he roars his release, taking me with him, I can’t stop the smile that curves my lips.

Slumping forward, I kiss his chest over his racing heart as his trembling arms circle me and pull me closer, holding me as we both pant.

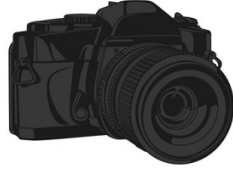
“Little Lyra, what are you doing to me?” he whispers.

I don't answer because the truth is, I don't know, and I don't know what he's doing to me either.

We are just two people, who never should have been together, thrust into a partnership that seems to be evolving into something much, much deeper.

And harder to get over.

TWENTY-FOUR



LYRA

After dressing and checking on his people, Samael watches me differently than normal. It's as if he doesn't know what to make of me or what to do. I feel it too. After this morning, I am raw and exposed to him.

Something shifted between us.

I shouldn't like it so much, but I do.

I'm about to suggest we head back to bed when his head snaps up as a siren sounds. The sharp noise shoots fear straight into my chest. Grabbing me, Samael sprints through the prison and throws me on Midnight, and then we take off with his people behind us before I can even catch my breath.

"What is it?" I yell over the galloping of hooves, his hands gripping my waist to steady me.

"That is the border siren. It means we are being attacked. The humans are trying to get in," he snarls into my ear. "Stay close at all times. I will not let them hurt or take you." The fact that he instantly knows my worries makes me nod, but I am concerned, and even though he's galloping to protect his lands, he extracts something and hands it to me.

It's a knife. The handle is made of bone, and the edges are sharp and clean. "Here, keep this. If they come at you, you attack, little one. Kill them all."

Curling my hand around it, I nod jerkily, feeling both scared and determined. I won't go back there without a fight, knowing it will mean my death. I refuse to return to the people who can torture someone like Samael and our own people. He's right, he'll protect me, but I'll protect us as well.

This is my fight, not just his, and I have no doubt that they are here for me.

After all, there had been no other attacks before I snuck through the door, and when we slide to a stop where the door

is thrown open, I know it's true. They followed me in, knowing what I had. They probably already assumed I was dead and that they could just retrieve the research and never have to face this again.

“Stay here,” Samael snaps and taps Midnight's side. “Anything happens, you get her home,” he orders the horse as he yanks an axe from his back. He heads towards the door alongside at least ten of his monsters, the sound of the siren lost back at the prison. It makes me wonder how they set that, but that's a question for later.

I grip the blade so hard, I almost cut myself as I watch him, my heart pounding in fear and excitement.

Men pour from the surrounding destruction, firing guns. I see a monster fall, and I cry out before covering my mouth. Samael roars, shaking the ground with the sound, and then he charges at them. Sweeping his axe in a wide arc, he splits them in two. Their screams fill the air, and they try to fire again, but he's too fast, and soon they are overrun with monsters. The fight is brutal, and blood splashes the ground behind them as more men pour from the rubble.

Thirty or forty humans surround them, trying to get in a shot.

There are so many, but Samael just laughs and rips the head of a soldier clean off, using it to smash in others' skulls. He's brutal and bloodthirsty, poetry in motion, and I can't take my eyes off him. Even as the bodies pile up at his feet and a circle of dead surround him, he looks magnificent.

They cannot touch him.

A noise draws my gaze to the open door.

More humans step through it, their eyes locked on Sam and his people.

I cover my mouth, glancing from them to Sam as he cuts a path through the humans with his axe. He's distracted, so he doesn't see the humans sneaking up on him.

No.

They won't take him; I won't let them. I know how it would break him. Despite what he said, I slide from Midnight and stumble before righting myself. I could call out, but there are too many and it might distract him, so instead, I do the only thing I can.

“Hey, assholes, you want the research? Come and get it!”

The humans spin to see me as I wave. Samael's head snaps up, seeing what he missed. Snarling, he fights to get to me, but he's overrun by a wave of soldiers as the humans storm towards me.

Shit.

I turn and run as fast as I fucking can, sliding around the streets as I remember the paths Sam showed me until I reach a run-down chapel and skid inside. I slam the wooden doors, and something hits it. I know I'm running out of time. Holding the knife, I search the darkness for a hiding spot.

I'll have to fight, but they don't know this city like I do, and they are uncertain in the darkness. I am not.

Hurrying over, I duck behind a pillar and wait.

The door crashes open, and the sounds of their boots fill the chapel.

One rounds the pillar, walking past me, and I strike. I channel every lesson I've ever learned and tackle him into the wall, stabbing the blade into him. He screams as it sinks home, but his elbow comes back and knocks me off. With a yell, I lunge at him again and stab deeper. He falls just as hands grab me. Kicking back, I smash my head into someone's skull. I feel the pain but ignore it as I spin with the knife and slash. I freeze when the man grabs his slit throat and drops to his knees.

Oh god.

Then more are before me, and I don't have time to think. They don't want me alive; they want me dead, as evidenced by one snatching the knife from me and trying to stab me with it. I dodge, but it slides across my shoulder, making me scream in pain as my skin splits.

“You bastard,” I hiss as five men circle me. I move into the middle of the church, and they come for me. One grabs me and flings me across the space. I hit a pillar with a groan but climb to my feet, wiping at my nose as I grab a chair and throw it at him. His arms come up to block it, and I use the opportunity to leap at him, taking him down with my legs on either side of his head. I squeeze my thighs as I smash his head into the ground, but a booted foot hits my side, kicking me away.

I glare at the man as he comes towards me. I have no weapon, but I’ve trained my whole life, so when he reaches for me, I fall back, making him stumble, and then I wrap my legs around him and flip him, smashing my fist into his face over and over. Blood spurts from his nose, spraying everywhere.

Another man grabs me as he climbs to his feet.

“You bitch,” he hisses.

His knuckles meet my face, snapping my head to the side. I feel my cheek split as I crawl, but he grabs my legs and yanks me back. My hands scramble over the floor, looking for a weapon, and I grab one of the fallen men’s guns and turn, unloading into the man holding me.

Flipping, I spray the remaining men, then I climb to my feet, holding my aching shoulder. I feel blood drip down my cheek and arm as I survey my surroundings. They are all dead.

Their broken bodies surround me like some macabre playhouse.

A noise shatters the silence.

Panting, I lift my head to see Samael and his people standing in the broken doorway, their mouths hanging open as they take in the dead humans around me.

Notching my chin higher, I meet his gaze. “They tried to touch what’s mine.”

“Holy shit,” one of the monsters whispers.

Samael drops his axe, and in two strides, he is before me, running his hands over me to check for injuries. “Are you

okay, little one?”

“Better than them,” I croak.

He meets my eyes with a wicked grin before he looks at them. When his gaze returns to me, his eyes narrow on my cheek. “Which one?” he demands.

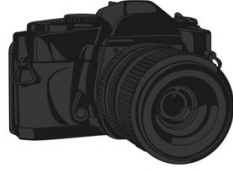
I search their masses and point at the man. “He’s already dead.”

Sam is gone, ripping the dead man to pieces, and when he comes back to me, covered in blood, he yanks me to him and kisses me hard. “You are fucking incredible, pet. Now let’s get you home. As much as I love seeing you covered in blood, you are all mine, not theirs.”

I nod, and he picks up my blade and hands it to me. I take it gratefully, and then hand in hand, we head towards his people.

They have nothing but respect on their faces as they watch us approach, and when we reach them, they part, allowing us —*me*—to pass.

TWENTY-FIVE



LYRA

Once we're back at what is starting to become my safe haven, I sprawl across Samael's knee on the throne. I'm exhausted, hurting, and covered in blood, but he has a monster look over my wounds. The whole time I'm being stitched and touched by the other monster, Sam snarls at him. The poor man looks like he's ready to cry by the time he runs away with a shouted, "Don't get it infected!"

Tugging me closer, Sam holds me tight as his people start to celebrate their victory against the humans, and this time, people actually come up to me. They speak to me, not just over me to Samael. It's almost like I've passed some sort of test and have been accepted.

"Here, *vegal*." One thrusts a plate of food at me. "You must be hungry."

Sammy snarls, snatches it, and then sniffs it. "I can provide her with food. You do not."

"Of course, my king," he grumbles, looking at the floor. "I simply thought you would not wish to leave the queen to attend to such matters."

We both freeze as the monster shoots us a friendly smile and fades back into the masses.

"Queen?" I squeak.

"So it seems." Holding the plate for me, he turns me in his arms and starts to feed me pieces of charred meat, but his expression is far away, as if he's thinking.

"Sam." I grab his hand to stop the meat heading towards my mouth. "Why did he call me a queen?" I demand.

"It is a hard-won title. You protected their king, and I respect you and killed for you. In their eyes, you are their queen."

“But they hate humans,” I mutter, completely confused.

“As do I, yet here I am.” He smiles, biting the meat from his claw with a grimace. “I will never understand why humans cook their meat. It is nasty.”

I can't help but giggle as he spears another piece and feeds it to me. When I can't eat any more, he demolishes the plate, grumbling the whole time about ruining the flavour. Curling up in his arms, I doze, trying not to think too hard about what I did today.

About killing people ...

When I startle myself awake, Samael is there, soothing my hair back and kissing my neck. My body instantly hums with desire as his big hands stroke my sides. His lips drag along the sensitive flesh of my neck, and I wiggle on his lap when I feel his hard cock pressing against my ass.

“Behave, pet,” he warns. The rest of the celebrating masses do not even spare us a glance as they drink, fuck, and fight. At first, it shocked me, but now I'm sort of used to it. I'm not a prude, but I do look away when a monster takes a cock in her mouth and another in her ass.

I don't avert my gaze due to propriety, but because heat flushes through me.

“You're injured, rest,” he orders.

“What if I don't want to rest?” I ask, my voice breathless with need. He stiffens against me and inhales my scent before letting out a feral snarl.

“Fuck, Lyra, I can taste your lust.” Sam groans, sliding his hand down my stomach to cup my pussy. “But you need to rest.”

“Fuck rest,” I snap, trying to turn in his grip, but he doesn't let me. “We could have died today—” The growl makes me huff. “We could have. I don't want to rest. I want you,” I admit without shame.

“Here?” he asks, frozen against me.

“Anywhere I can get you,” I retort, even as my pussy clenches at the idea of him fucking me for everyone to see. He must taste my desire in the air because he chuckles.

“You want me to fuck you on my throne, little one? You want me to show them how much I desire my little human? How easily she comes for me?” he growls in my ear, making me groan and lean back. I roll my hips into his hand to try and get some friction. My clit aches, and my heart slams. I feel eyes turn to us as if they, too, smell my lust. “I think you do. I think you like watching my people fuck. I also think you want them to watch you ride their king’s cock like a good little pet. You want them to watch me claim you ...” His fangs dig into my neck, making me cry out. My eyes shut when I see people turn to me.

“No, eyes open, Lyra. You’ll watch them, watch their hunger. Can you see it? I can. I can see how much they want to taste you, and how much they wish they were me. Look how wild you make them.” Panting, I run my eyes over the masses, noting the desire in their greedy eyes.

“Sam,” I whimper, trying to pull away, not sure I can handle this, but he holds me tight. One hand grips my pussy while the other curls around my throat.

“No, little pet, you started this, so you will take it. I won’t let anyone touch you. Not one single one of them. I could fight every single fucker off one-handed all while fucking your tight human cunt if need be, so relax, little one.” I do as I’m told, and he purrs in my ear. “Good girl, I can smell your cunt. I’m betting you’re dripping for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I mutter without shame.

“Was it all for me, or did you like watching them fuck?” he asks, and there is no jealousy or revulsion in his tone.

“Both!” I gasp as his hand slides into my trousers. My eyes fly wide open when others move closer, their tongues darting out and swiping across their lips. Every eye is on us now, the room vibrating with lust, want, and hate.

“Sam,” I whimper, lifting my hips, unable to help it.

All those eyes, all that need, is directed at me.

Fuck.

His hand slides lower, cupping my pussy and playing with it softly. He doesn't touch where I need him to, petting me until his hand comes out dripping, and he holds it up for his people. Embarrassment flows through me, and I try to close my eyes once more, but a feral growl makes me freeze. All eyes are locked on his glistening hand, and with a chuckle, Sam sucks every inch of my cream from it, like a victor with his spoils.

A male monster snags a nearby female and slams into her, his eyes on me the entire time. "He wishes she were you, but he cannot have you, Lyra. You are mine. They can look, and they can pretend you are riding their cocks, but they will never have you. They will never know how your tight wet cunt feels and how you grip me so sweetly when you come. They will never taste your delicious cream or mark your skin."

"Please, Sam." I shiver in need, needing to be filled so much, my pussy aches. My skin is overheated, and I can barely breathe through my desire.

"I've got you, little one," he promises, and without even breaking a sweat, he rips my clothes away, leaving me fully exposed to his people. For a moment, mortification fills me, but his touch and growled praise, and the clear want in his people's eyes, make me relax.

I roll my body as they watch, looking for their reactions, and I get one.

They want me, every single one of them. Some debate fighting Sam for the right to claim me. One sneaks closer, and without letting go of my throat, Sam's fist darts out, slamming into the monster's face and knocking him back.

The fact that he's willing to fight and kill to claim me in front of his people is ridiculously sexy.

"You're mine, Lyra. I told you that. Now show them." His hand, now covered in blood, slides back to my pussy. His thighs part my legs farther until I'm spread over his front, on

full display, no doubt glistening with my own need for him as his claw circles my clit. I cry out, and my head falls back. His hand slides down, cupping my breasts and rolling my nipples as I shatter with barely a touch. “Look how pretty you come without me even touching you.” His fingers slide down my pussy and slam into me, making me scream as they invade my fluttering channel.

My release still flows through me as he fucks me with his fingers while his people watch. His hands and lips claim every part of me, and his fangs dig into my neck, pinning me as he forces me to come once more.

“Good girl,” he purrs into my ear as I shake on his lap. A moment later, he lifts me and slams me onto his cock as his people watch. His resounding roar is echoed by them.

“Ride me,” he orders breathlessly, leaning back and leaving me in charge. “Claim me while they watch.”

At first, I’m hesitant, but I’m emboldened by his thick cock jerking inside me and the desperate fucking and fighting going on around me, so I start to ride him. Gripping the chair for leverage, I lift and drop on his cock, and my eyes close in bliss. As his huge length spears me, all eyes are on me. All the desire and yearning makes me feel more beautiful than I’ve ever felt.

More powerful too.

My eyes snap open when there is a grunt, and Sam leans forward quickly, wrapping one arm around me to hold me tight. The angle changes, making me cry out as I speed up, even as his other hand darts out and rips out the throat of a monster sneaking closer.

His bloodied hand wraps around my throat. “Every pet needs a collar with her enemy’s blood,” he mocks. “Ride me,” he snarls, lifting his hips. I bounce, and pleasure spirals through me.

“Good girl, look at you,” he snarls. “And look at them, fucking desperate to feel this.”

His hands come up and grip my breasts possessively, pinching my nipples as I cry out and speed up, needing to come. It's right there. I'm reaching for it.

“Let them watch their queen come apart. Let them watch her claim her king.”

My orgasm slams through me at his words, and I scream his name as I come. He bounces me on his cock, never stopping, and with a snarl, he stands and sets me on the throne. Sam stands between my thighs as he hammers into me. My back arches, and his mouth seals on my breasts as I drench his cock and throne. Reaching out, I grab the edges of it and lift my hips. As I take him, my eyes go behind him to see an orgy happening while all eyes are still on me.

Grinning, I lift one hand and cup my king's head, tugging him closer until he's sucking my nipples as I claim him, fucking him for all to see. His tail slips between us, rubbing my clit, and I lose all sense of what is happening.

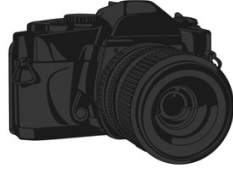
Nothing else exists but immense pleasure, and with each thrust, he drives me higher again. I drag my nails across his back, needing more, and like he hears me, he bites my nipple at the same time his tail slides down and into my ass.

My scream echoes around the room as Sam roars, stilling inside of me as he pumps me full of his cum. Yells ring around the room as everyone else finds their release.

Gathering me in his arms, Sam kisses my head softly. “Rest now, little Lyra. I've got you.”

I know he does.

TWENTY-SIX



LYRA

The next few days pass slowly. Samael forces me to rest as much as I can, and he feeds me and brings me drinks and presents. He even bathes with me, but he won't fuck me, saying I need rest. It's driving me nuts, and on the third day, I get out of our nest despite his ordered demands when he left earlier.

I have more freedom now. It's as if I've been accepted and I'm one of them. People greet me as I pass, no one attacks or glares at me, and I can come and go as I want. They know if they ever did anything, Samael would kill them. His protection makes me bold as I explore the prison, and when I get bored with that, I go in search of him. After looking for him inside, I head outside, where the moon is shining down brightly, and finally find him in the stables.

He's so absorbed in what he's doing, I have the rare opportunity to sneak up on him, so I watch my big bad monster delicately brush his horse and talk to her with so much softness, I can't help but smile.

If everyone else could see him like this, would they still call him the mad king? I feel like he acts up for the title, as if they labelled him so he cannot be anything else, but with me, he feels like he can, and stolen moments like this only make me care for him more.

"Yes, you are going to look so pretty all brushed," he coos. "Are you warm enough out here? I know winter is coming soon. Maybe we should move you inside."

Curling my lip inward, I hold back my smile, but eventually, I can't stop my giggle. His head jerks up, and he's prepared to snarl, until he realises it's me, and then he grins. "Hey, little one. Stalking me?" He frowns. "Wait, you should be resting."

“Fuck resting, I’m fine.” I huff as I push off the doorframe and go to him, sliding my hand across Midnight’s head as I do, and then I lean up on my toes and kiss his lips. “I missed you, but I see you’re busy.”

Laughing, he tugs me closer, continuing to brush her as he holds me. “You’re bored?”

“Deadly.” I groan. “I’m so used to being on the go all the time—”

Chuckling, he hands me a brush, and we clean every inch of Midnight together before feeding her and walking back inside, hand in hand. For the next few hours, I teach Sam how to read and write. He’s getting really good, but once that’s done, I sprawl out, needing purpose and direction.

We’ve been almost hiding here, my bag forgotten in the corner, but my eyes land on it and I sit up. Samael lies next to me, and his eyes are closed but he’s not asleep.

“Sammy.” I shake him.

He huffs, so I shake him again, and his arms dart out, pulling me to him. Groaning, I wiggle free and sit astride him. That makes him open his eyes, and a slow, sexy grin stretches his lips as he lifts his hips, making me groan.

“Focus, Sammy,” I mutter, even as I ignore my own pulse of desire.

“Oh, I am, little one,” he promises, his eyes dropping hungrily to my body.

“Samael,” I snap, hitting his chest. He’s so solid, he barely even moves. “What are we going to do with the research? I can’t stay hidden here forever.”

“Why not?” he asks, cocking his head.

My heart stills as I eye him. “You want me to stay hidden here forever?”

Sitting up, he wraps his arms around me, his mismatched eyes locked on mine. “Lyra, if I didn’t want you to, I wouldn’t have brought you into my space. Even then, when I thought I

hated you, I knew deep down that this thing between us is forever.”

“But ...” I lick my lips, searching his eyes. “Your people, my people—”

“Do not matter. Do you want me, Lyra?” he asks.

“Always,” I answer without hesitation.

“And when you feel safe, where are you?” he asks.

“With you.” The response is automatic.

“And when you’re happy, where are you?” he presses, gripping my ass.

“With you,” I reply softly.

“And when you see your future, where is it?” he questions rapidly.

“At your side,” I admit without thinking, and my eyes widen as he grins.

“Then that’s your answer, Lyra. Everything else can come.” He kisses me, but when I pull back, I carry on.

“Okay ... but what my people did, what they are still doing, Sam, we can’t hide from that.”

“Sure we can.” He shrugs. “I owe this world nothing. It never gave two shits about me.”

“But you care about me,” I begin, and his eyes narrow. “And I care about this. We have to get the truth out there. We can’t keep going on like this. We both know it will end badly. Humans won’t stop until they have it back, and there will be so much death.”

“So what do you want?” he grouses, clearly annoyed we can’t just spend forever fucking and fighting.

“You said there are other ... tribes here, right? Maybe the humans are attacking them too. I think we need to do something with the research,” I admit.

“Something like what?”

“Expose it ... but we would need more. There isn’t enough there. We need data to prove our story and to oust the people behind it,” I muse, debating our options. “The lab was cleared. I think I got everything. There’s the implication of the scientists and their company there, enough for the humans to investigate, but someone has to be behind it.” I meet his eyes as something darkens within me. “I—what if my dad knows?” I scramble to the bag and rip it open. He watches me carefully as I search for something I hadn’t noticed before, and when I find the sheet of paper, my heart clenches. “I knew he was a bastard, but this?”

There, on the bottom, is his handwriting. I would know it anywhere.

“Lyra?” Sam calls.

“My dad is involved,” I tell him, lifting my head to see him once more. “He’ll get away with it. He’s the mayor, and he’s rich. We need evidence. We have to do this, Sam, before we expose it. I couldn’t even open some of this on the computer. I need better equipment.”

“I know where to find some,” he admits reluctantly.

“You do?” I crawl back over. “Will you take me? We can get this into order and stop it, right?”

“I will do it for you.” He sighs. “But make no mistake, little one, I do not give two fucks about anyone else. Only you.”

Leaning forward, I kiss him deeply until we are both gasping. “Good,” I murmur. “Now get your sexy ass dressed, we have a world to save.” I get to my feet, and I feel him watching me as he groans.

“Why the fuck did I have to become the type of monster to save a world that never cared about me? Human pussy,” he says seriously. “It’s magic; it has to be.”

Rolling my eyes, I stop with one foot in the air, my shoe half on. “And don’t you forget it, big guy.” I wink.

I scream as he tosses me over his shoulder and flings me back onto the nest. “Maybe I need a reminder—” His words

end in a moan as he rips off my clothes and buries his face between my legs.

“Maybe you do.”

The world can wait a little longer ...

When we finally get out of our nest and into the city, sunrise is only a few hours away. I worry about Sam, but he pats my shoulder and says, “Do not worry, little one, we can spend the day there. I figured you would need time. I don’t particularly want to, but we can.”

“What is this place?” I ask as he leads me through his land on Midnight’s back. “Why don’t you want to go?” I have a bad feeling, and Sam doesn’t speak until we stop before a building hidden at the back near the wall. “Sam,” I demand as I slide down, taking his hand.

“It’s the place where it all started. It’s the entrance to the bunker, the place where I was tortured and experimented on.”

“No, we don’t have to go—”

“It’s the only place with the equipment you will need, little one.” He turns to me and searches my eyes. “And you will be with me.” He sucks in a deep breath. “But if I start to—start to lose it, leave, okay? Get your ass into the sun and leave me.”

“Never,” I snap, leaning into him. “I will never leave you to those memories, so don’t even ask me, but I don’t need to do this. You are more important.”

For a moment, he just watches me before he smiles. “And that’s why we are doing this.” Squeezing my hand, he nods. “I will be strong enough to hold them back. Come on, pet.”

“Sammy.” I hesitate, and he holds me closer.

“I will be because you’ll be at my side,” he murmurs, and I nod.

“As soon as we are done, we can leave and never come back here,” I promise, making him smile softly.

Taking a deep breath, he leads me into the building. I can clearly see there was some sort of fight here. The furniture is broken and tossed around, there are old blood stains on the floor, and towards the back is a giant hole in the wall.

I look up at him, and he shrugs. “I was not happy when I escaped.”

I can’t help but laugh, and he brightens at the sound as he leads me to the hole. There’s a door on the floor that clearly used to lead down, but now it’s destroyed. Stepping into the hole, he searches it before tugging me in. There’s a metal staircase, and I lean over the edge to see it must go down at least twenty stories.

“Underground,” I whisper.

“As far as they could to hide their horrors.” He wraps his arms around me. “Hold on, little one.”

Without warning, he jumps over the edge of the railing. I bite back my scream as we free fall and my adrenaline surges, and I find myself laughing. He chuckles with me, and we land with a thud. He holds me for a moment before letting me slide to my feet, but then he instantly takes my hand as if he needs my touch, so I offer it freely. After all, I would feel like this going back to my dad’s house, but his trauma and past are so much more horrific. I can’t even believe he’s willing to return to the place where he was scarred and tortured.

My love for this strong man only—

Love.

I slide to a stop, barely breathing.

Love ... No, it can’t be.

“Come on, little one. I know it looks scary, but I promise nothing down here can hurt you.” He tugs me after him.

“Right,” I mutter, blinking as I follow him, still caught in my internal thoughts. I have to force myself to concentrate, since I am unable and unwilling to analyse how easily the

word *love* slipped through my brain. Instead, I look around, seeing what he means. There's another jagged hole that we have to duck through, and when we do, we step out into a bunker, but this looks like the inside of a giant lab.

There are cells on each level, and all are empty bar some bodies.

I categorise it all quickly—labs, stairs, rooms.

It's huge, and I look up at Sam, knowing he spent the majority of his life locked down here. "What do we avoid?" I ask, and he frowns. "Places that would trigger you."

"I—" He clears his throat and swallows. "The cells, the testing site, and ... the punishment chamber."

I nod, squaring my shoulders. "Okay then, let's go somewhere you either have no memories of or you can easily handle."

"Yes, pet," he murmurs, but his voice is tight, and his grip is bordering on painful. I say nothing, knowing he's fighting back his bad memories. I wish I could help. I wish I could fight them for him.

He almost drags me after him as if he's running from his demons. I do not complain, and he eventually leads me to an office. Inside is a state-of-the-art computer, which has broadcaster and editing software. "This is great," I tell him and release his hand to go to it, but he holds tight, breathing heavily.

"Sam, we can leave," I tell him.

"No, the sun." He pants, his eyes squeezing closed. "I'm fine, just ... just can you talk to me while you work? Your voice helps."

"Always," I assure him. I slide my hand free and step back. "There was this park down the road from me when I was a kid ..."

I continue to talk as I sit, and he slowly relaxes, but he also starts to pace. I ramble, talking about everything and anything,

hoping my voice can help a little since he's only doing this for me.

Opening the bag, I stick the first USB into the computer as it boots up, taking its time. It is password protected, but luckily, I know a trick for that. I don't even know what I'm saying as I hack it, grinning when I get into the terminal.

"You punched him?" Sam grunts.

Blinking, I raise my eyes to him. "Who?"

"The man who called you a useless bimbo at work?"

Oh. "Yep, in front of everyone, live on air." I grin, and he laughs, but he's shaking.

Narrowing my eyes, I get up and drag him over, pushing him into the chair. It creaks under his weight but holds as I plop myself on his lap, take his arms, and wrap them around myself. "Better?" I ask.

"Better," he murmurs, burying his face in my neck and inhaling. I feel him shiver and settle. Leaning into his warmth, I search through the files, trying to decipher as much as I can and figure out what we can use apart from the whole they created the monsters thing.

The videos have long endings and beginnings that don't need to be there, so I flag them for editing. As for the folders of notes, I don't understand some, and I can't read others, so I need help there. Some are easy enough to read, and I scan them, memorising the names and information. If we are going up against the humans and Nano Industries, I need to come in guns blazing. I know companies like that have multi-million-dollar lawyers who will get them off with every excuse and coverup, willing to stop at nothing.

After all, this bunker is proof.

No, I need to be sure, and I need proof they don't want exposed before they can conceal it. There's just so much information, though, and I spend hours combing through it. Sam doesn't complain or move once. In fact, I would think he was asleep if not for the constant stroking of every part of me he can touch.

It's so easy to get lost in the work, even as it disgusts me, the notes on the experiments making me sick to my core. I'm on the last stolen hard drive, and I feel hopeless. This is good stuff, but it's all in scientific lingo I can't understand. I need something simple and solid that they will be unable to fight against.

I'm just starting to lose the will to live when I leave it loading, stand, and stretch. "I need to pee," I tell Sam. "Do you want to stay here? I'll find—"

"No, we go together. I'm not letting you out of my sight." He stands and takes my hand, and we head back into the bunker. When we were inside the office, it was easy to forget where we were, but as he leads me down the length of the structure and I see the cells, the more the cold truth invades, reminding me why we are doing this.

We find a labelled door for the bathroom, and I slip inside, not even complaining when he stands at the door with his arms crossed. He does give me his back, though, so that's something. After I'm done, I wash my hands and meet him outside. I'm about to speak when I see his eyes.

"Sam?" I ask worriedly.

I follow his gaze, and my heart stills. The door opposite us is open, and I can see the blood and bars inside from here.

"Let's go," I demand, but he steps closer, his tail thrashing angrily. "Sam," I beg.

"That's where they would punish me, which was often," he murmurs. "For not eating, for eating, for not performing for them, for giving into the haze, for not giving in. I could never win. They loved punishing me. The more blood they shed, the more fun they had. I once overheard them say that they used it as an excuse to torture me, to relieve their stress." His laugh is bitter. "I can almost hear them now—their taunts and clinical words as they ripped the flesh from my bones." He looks back at me, appearing lost and scared. "I can hear them."

Suddenly, his eyes turn red, and he spins, breathing heavily as he smacks his head.

“Sam?” I murmur worriedly, stepping towards him. His tail lashes out and forces me back.

“Don’t,” he growls. “I—haze, can’t tell who’s friend.”

I cover my mouth, watching him fight it, and he falls to his knees with a roar.

But he’s wrong. He won’t hurt me, and I have to trust in that because he needs me now more than ever, and I refuse to be like those humans and watch him suffer.

Slowly, so I don’t spook him, I step closer. His head snaps up, and a growl comes from his snarling lips. His hair falls into his face, giving him a menacing look. He’s pure animal. “Shh, Sammy, it’s me. It’s your pet,” I speak softly, but the growl continues as I lower myself to my knees before him. I don’t touch him, though, as he watches me like a wounded animal.

He’s dangerous but still expecting the blow.

“It’s me. Come back to me, okay? I need you. You can’t leave me here alone. What if someone hurts me?” The growl increases, and I lick my lips nervously. “Please, Sammy, I need you.”

His tail snakes across the floor and wraps around my legs, and I cry out as it yanks me onto my back. He leaps onto me, his claws slamming into the floor on either side of me as his tail presses across my throat like a threat.

His red eyes are locked on me like I am his prey.

But I’ve always been his prey.

I cup his cheeks, ignoring his tail as it tightens. “Sammy, it’s me. Please come back to me. I can’t lose you, I can’t. You are all I have. I have no one else,” I admit, tears filling my eyes. “My own family hated me and hurt me. My friends don’t care beyond their own problems. They probably don’t even miss me, and I never let anyone else close enough. Please, Sammy, it’s me. Your pet. I’m here. I’m yours. Please.” I lean up, despite the threat in his eyes, and kiss him softly.

He stills, not kissing me back as I press kisses over his face. “They cannot hurt you anymore, my love,” I promise. “They are gone. It’s just you and me. Do not feed the ghosts, the memories. Do not let them win. Don’t let them have you, not now. You’re mine, not theirs.”

I kiss him harder, letting him feel my determination. “You hear me? They cannot have you. You’re mine.” I bite his lip, and he hisses. “That’s it, baby, come back to me.” I rub myself against him, trailing my fingers down his body to cup his cock. “Come back to me.” The red mixes with white and black as his hips thrust into my hand.

“Lyra?” The way he growls my name in confusion sounds like a blessing.

“It’s me,” I promise, kissing him in relief. “Come on, baby, I need you.”

“My Lyra,” he growls, thrusting into my hand as his tail loosens against my neck, and when his eyes finally turn back to normal, I sag. He looks us over and groans as he shoves himself away from me, his eyes closed as he rubs his head. “Shit, pet, I’m sorry. Why didn’t you fucking run like I told you?” he snaps.

“Fuck that,” I scoff as I sit up. “I’m never running from you,” I retort, unwilling to let him beat himself up or start a fight and push me away. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. You wouldn’t hurt me.”

“You don’t know that!” he roars. “You don’t know what I’ve done, Lyra.”

“To survive,” I yell right back.

“Yes! But because I liked it! I liked the taste of their blood. I liked their deaths!” he shouts in my face. “I’m a fucking monster, Lyra.”

“So what?” I yell. “Stop this shit, stop trying to make me hate you, it won’t work.” I stand and glare down at him, and he laughs, but it’s a horrible sound.

“No? I bet I can, just like you did when you first met me. Oh, Lyra, you have no idea.” He’s on me in an instant, but I

push him back, not wanting him like this, not this time. He laughs. “See, pet? Your body knows what your mind won’t admit.”

“Stop it,” I mutter. “This is just the fear talking—”

“No, human, this is me. The real me. The monster you hated, the one you were terrified of, that they are all terrified of. You think you could change me with a little bit of pussy?”

“You’re being cruel.” My heart thumps in pain at his words. I know he’s feeling exposed and vulnerable and he’s lashing out, but I feel the crack as his blows land.

“No, I’m being me,” he sneers, looking me over. “If you ever thought I was anything other than this ... this beast, then that is your fault for wanting more.”

“Stop it, Samael!” I yell, swiping my hand through the air. “It won’t fucking work, okay? Throw your best barbs at me, I’ve heard them before, but it will not make me leave you here.”

We’re both panting, our breaths ragged and hearts hurting.

Snarling, he grabs me and slams me into the wall. His hand rips at my trousers before he slams his fingers inside me, making me cry out.

“When are you going to learn that I always want you? Even when I hated you, I wanted you.” I groan, wrapping my arm around his neck as I grind into his fingers.

“Why do you want me? I’m broken,” he murmurs softly.

“So am I,” I admit. “So let’s be broken together, and everyone else can fuck off.” I cup his face. “I’m not going anywhere, Samael. It’s you and me.”

His forehead meets mine, and he closes his eyes. “You and me,” he croaks. “Even when I’m a cruel bastard?”

“Even then.” I nod, knowing he was trying to push me away to keep me safe.

“I’m sorry, Lyra,” he murmurs. “I just—”

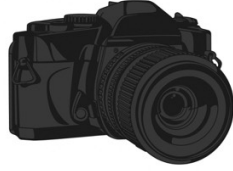
“I know,” I whisper. “I forgive you.”

He pulls his hand free and just holds me, both of us locked together in our decision to have a better future.

To fight.

Together.

TWENTY-SEVEN



LYRA

I can feel the day passing on, but I still continue working. My life, being taken, running over the wall, Samael having to come here—all of this had to have been for something. I just need to find it. I have to.

Samael tries to help, but he cannot read easily and gets annoyed. Instead, he starts to sort everything into piles for me as I hand it over, and he rubs my back when it hurts, bringing me water and snacks from his bag. He supports me, never once letting me give up.

Just when I'm on the verge of calling it quits, something draws my attention. It's a file, a locked one, and it's hidden so deep, I hadn't even scrolled that far.

It takes two hours to get into the locked file, but when I do, it changes everything.

I start reading it, just like the others, but the more I read, the more sick I feel. I barely blink, and my whole world shifts on its axis. When I sit back, Samael crouches at my side.

“Pet?” he asks, concerned.

I turn my head, but it feels robotic, my tongue too thick to speak.

My head feels fuzzy.

It can't be true, yet even as I think it, it makes sense. It's a secret big enough to kill for, to start a war for, and big enough to destroy the world, and it's in those pages before me.

The whole of humanity has been living with it without even knowing. “I'm not human.”

“What?” He snorts. “Don't get me wrong, you fuck and fight like a monster, but—”

“Samael,” I snap, “I'm not human ... not fully. I'm an experiment like you.”

“What?” He looks as confused as I feel.

“I’m an experiment. All of the humans over the wall are. We are mixed, just like you. We’re all just one big experiment,” I whisper, searching his gaze, wishing he could tell me I’m wrong. “You monsters were mixed with other things, and we ... we were too. It’s all one big experiment. I’m not human, Samael, not fully. I—” I stop, unsure what to say.

“Okay, calm down, let’s go through this—”

“No! There’s nothing to do. It’s true, right here in black and white!” I shout before collapsing back.

My whole world, my whole life, has been a lie.

I’m not human ...

So what am I?

Who am I?

Was my every decision, my life, all someone else’s game?

“I don’t know what I am, Sammy,” I cry as tears well in my eyes.

Snarling, he grips my throat and forces my eyes to his. “You are mine. You are my little human. You are the love of my fucking life. You are my queen. You are my everything. Fuck what they said. Fuck what the research says. Fuck our DNA or anything else. Any time you forget or feel sad, remember this. You. Are. Mine.”

I nod, even as I wipe at my face. “I guess we know why they are willing to start another war.”

SAMAEL

We leave the lab as soon as night falls, both of us silent.

I can feel Lyra's worry, and she seems fragile, which isn't a word I would usually use to describe the spitfire I'm obsessed with, but it's true. Her eyes are shadowed, and she clings to my hand, her steps almost hesitant.

I always knew what I was and how I was made, so I can't begin to imagine what it's like to find out this way. I didn't help by being triggered and pushing her away. She needs reassurance and solid ground, and I've never been very good at either, but for her, I'll try.

“Want me to kill them?”

Shit, okay, maybe that's not exactly what I had in mind, but it just blurted out. Her head jerks up, and I wince, wishing I could give her the pretty words and comfort that she needs, but then she laughs. The sound is so sudden and loud, birds startle and fly away. I stop and gawk at her as she leans into me, laughing so hard tears start to fall.

Wide-eyed, I pat her back. “Erm, are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” she says through her laughter, and then she quickly sobers up. “I'm fine,” she repeats, her brow furrowed.

“That's ... good?” I ask, totally unsure.

“No, Sammy, I mean it. I'm okay. I wobbled back there, but I'm okay.” She blows out a breath, and some of her colour returns, as does the fighting sparkle in her eye. She fucking glows with it, and my cock hardens.

She's fucking magnificent.

“But I've been thinking. We can't hide and forget we know this. They will never stop, but it's bigger than that now. People deserve to know the truth, they have to.” She begins pacing, eyeing me like I will protest or try to stop her.

“You’re right.” She stops and blinks incredulously at me, so I grin. “It does happen every now and again, little one.”

“You agreed with me. Fuck, am I dead or something?” she jokes as I huff, wrapping my tail around her and bringing her closer. I need to feel her hands on me, because her touch calms me.

“Don’t get used to it, but I do agree. This is bigger than we ever imagined, and as much as I’d rather lock us away and spend our days fucking and killing, people need to know. My people and yours.”

“So, we are going to tell your tribe?” she asks.

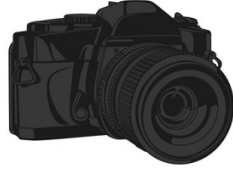
“Mine ... and the others.” She cocks her head, and I blow out a breath. “I know what I said, and I avoid them as much as I can, but they need to know this. I will send a message.” I close my eyes for a moment. “If you can help me write it.”

“Of course,” she offers without a hint of reproach, leaning on her toes to kiss me. “Until then?”

“We go back and talk to our people.” The *our* slips out, and the smile she gives me makes it all worthwhile.

Back at the prison, I hold a meeting, and we tell them all what we found. There is some anger, confusion, and mistrust, but they all support our decision, and as soon as we are able, I help her write a note, and it’s handed to a messenger to reach the other tribes, imploring them to meet. I lace the words with urgency, and then all we have to do is wait.

TWENTY-EIGHT



LYRA

I t's been several days, and we still haven't received word back from the other tribes. I'm getting antsy, needing to do something with the information, and I'm annoyed they are ignoring Samael. It doesn't matter what they think of him, our note made it obvious that this was important. Either they don't care or they don't trust his word much.

I can see Sam trying to act like it doesn't affect him, but it does. His own people won't meet with him. On the third day, I've had enough.

"Pack your bags," I tell him as I stand.

"Where are we going?" He huffs from the nest he's sprawled on.

"We are going to find those other fuckers from the tribes and make them listen."

"They don't want to meet—"

"I don't give a fuck. This is more important than their petty bullshit. I don't care if they don't like you, and I don't care if they don't want to meet. If we are going to expose all of this, then we need their help, and I need you to help me do that. So despite the fact that they are clearly assholes, I need you to be the bigger man and hunt these fuckers down with me." I cross my arms as he leaps to his feet, getting in my face with a snarl, but we are long past the days when I feared him.

"I am the bigger man. I am bigger than all of them," he states seriously, but I can't stop myself from laughing.

"I mean emotionally and metaphorically, babe." I pat his chest. "But keep trying."

"Oh," he mutters. "They are not assholes, well, not all of the time. I understand why they wouldn't trust me, little one." I gear up for a fight, so he covers my mouth. "I never gave them the time or respect they deserved. I ignored them, hated

them, and was cruel to them. In all honesty, I don't blame them."

"Sammy ... " I sigh behind his hand.

"They are good men, little one. I don't want you thinking otherwise. They may not be as good as me at fighting or surviving, but they are good men. Let's find them, and we can come up with a plan. If this is going to work, we need all the tribes to work together. It's going to be a bloodbath." He groans as he turns and starts packing.

"You respect them," I observe.

"I do. Once, I would have even called them friends, but that boy died a long time ago." His back is turned to me as he sighs. "They are not bad people, Lyra, but I did not give them a chance to be good to me. I was so closed off from the world and angry, I pushed everyone away and attacked like a feral animal, yet they gave me the time and space I needed. Yes, they probably hate me, and yes, they probably judge me, but some of that is on me, I never gave them the chance to do otherwise. I see that with you here."

"They should have tried harder," I snap. "They saw your scars and thought it was easier to turn away than to face them. They were probably fucking scared it could have been them. They gave you this land and then ran as fast as they could. I don't care if you say they are good men; they are going to have to prove it to me."

Laughing, he moves closer and kisses me softly. "So protective." He groans. "I wish we had the time so I could bend you over and show you how hot I find that."

"Well ... ," I start, but he just laughs and smacks my ass.

"Nope, you're right. Let's go, little one."

"I preferred you when you were angry," I mutter. "At least then you ate my pussy."

The laugh he barks out makes me smile as he watches me haul my bag up. "I'll still eat your pussy, pet," he purrs, cornering me at the door as he slides his hand down to cup it. "But first, I need to settle that overworking mind of yours."

“Asshole,” I mutter as he pulls open the door and shoves me through it. After leaving instructions for his people, we mount up and head into the city. This time, we travel to the borders he showed me once. He hesitates at the first one, and with a tight grip on me, he urges Midnight through.

It’s quiet, very quiet, and looks almost the same as Samael’s lands. “If I tell you to run, you fucking run. They might kill me for coming across uninvited.”

“Yeah, not happening.” I pat his hand. “But keep dreaming.”

“Stubborn little human,” he grumbles. “Fine, at least Akuji likes humans. He had one of his own last time I saw him.”

“And you’re telling me this now?” I gape at him over my shoulder.

“They were not important,” he says like that explains it all, and to him, it does.

“Fine,” I mutter. “Where do we begin?”

“I haven’t been into his territory much, so I do not know where his nest is, but maybe we could look in the middle.” He seems as confused as I.

“The humans attacked us. What if they attacked them too? If they were looking for us, for this research, is there a place where they might go?”

Sam growls and kicks us into motion. “The lab,” is all he says.

I don’t talk, noticing he’s on high alert. He scans rooftops, streets, and shadows as he holds me tight, his axe strapped to his back. I can almost sense the worry threading through him, but not for himself, for me.

“Sam,” I whisper.

“I know we are being followed. It’s his people, but they are curious about where we are going, so they are just watching for now. I’ll allow it. If I kill them, Akuji might be ... less inclined to help.”

I giggle at that, unable to help it, and he drops a kiss on my head. “Stop being cute. I’m trying to look menacing.”

“Oh, you need no help with that, Sammy.”

Groaning, he tugs me closer. “Do not call me Sammy in front of them.”

“Got it, no calling you Sammy in front of your little monster friends. You’re the big bad monster,” I tease.

“Woman,” he warns.

“Monster,” I retort in a deep voice, mocking his.

He tries to stop himself, but I feel him shaking with laughter behind me. His amusement sobers up, however, when we reach a huge skyscraper in a bombed out square. “The lab,” he tells me as he slides down. “I sense the monsters.” He lifts his head and inhales. “And humans. It seems we got lucky.”

He holds out his arms, and I leap into them. He lets me slide down his body with a growl. “Go in behind me, and let me do the talking—”

“Yeah, no. Sorry, babe, but you’re more likely to kill them.” Taking his hand, I lead him over, ignoring his mumbled comments about stubborn humans. We hesitate at the door and look around before he cocks his head, and then he guides me over to a door where I can hear voices.

Human female voices.

We still and listen for a moment.

“They are changing our DNA, and it’s not natural, but it made me realise some of our DNA wasn’t natural to begin with. I think they are experimenting on us. I think this is one big experiment.” I glance over at Sam. “And I don’t think we are human at all.”

Well shit, I guess they already know. The question is, how? Why are humans here, and why are they helping the monsters? I know why I am. The uncertainty is killing me. I always like a full story when I go in, but sensing it’s now or never, I take a deep breath and step into the lab, ignoring Sam’s growl since he’s stuck behind me.

I grin, unable to help it when two human females and two monsters turn, wearing identical shocked expressions. There's a soft-looking human in a lab coat, and the big red monster behind her tugs her closer. The other human eyes us like she's a warrior, while the big monster at her back tenses.

Always one to cause a scene, I say the words that I know will get a reaction.

"She's right, and I have proof."

It had the desired effect. They all jolt, but then they continue to stare at me with the same unsure, shocked expressions. Sam continues to growl, so I elbow him. "Stop being rude, you're making them uneasy."

"Pet," he snaps, making the big monster with the red-haired female narrow his eyes.

"Sammy," I mutter mockingly before descending the steps, ignoring him as I hop up on a table and swing my legs. "I'm Lyra."

"Erm, Talia," the soft one squeaks, her eyes going to Sam. Fear fills her gaze as she hides against the monster next to her.

He nods, keeping his eyes on Sam. "Cato."

"This big lump is Akuji, and I'm Aria," the confident one says, crossing her arms as she eyes us. "Are you okay? Talia told us Sam captured a human. We were going to try and steal you back."

"I'm good. They could do with some more manners, but they aren't too bad once you get past the pile of bodies and skeletons."

They all gape again, and Sam groans.

"Anyway," I say, "that's not why I'm here."

"Sorry, did you say I was right?" Talia asks, and I turn my gaze to her.

"You worked for them, right? I think I saw you inside that building once. You're a scientist?" She nods hesitantly. "What the hell are you doing over the wall?"

“I was sent here. It’s a long story.” She sighs. “But we are helping the monsters now. What about you?”

“Same.” I shrug. “But it’s a lot bigger than just the monsters.”

“You have proof?” Aria demands.

“Some.” I don’t look at the two monsters much, angry at them for how they treated Sam, but the bigger one, Akuji, steps forward.

“Samael, we can handle it from here. Thank you for bringing her. You can go.” The clear dismissal in his voice ruffles my feathers, and I narrow my gaze.

“Like fuck he will,” I snap just as Sam growls, “No, she’s mine.”

“This is not important right now.” I glare at Akuji. “What is important is what the humans are doing. They are searching for me because they want to kill me and steal back the proof I have. We need your help to get it out over the wall so we can show everyone the truth—that we aren’t human, and that Athesa is all one big experiment. We have to.”

“We’ve been working through some research, which is how we found out, but how did you?” Talia says accusingly, and I turn my glare on her. I hate the way they are watching Sam like he’s a wild animal.

I wanted help, a team, and maybe to bring Sam back to his people, but I am more annoyed than anything, realising that they might not trust whatever I say.

Sam continues to growl, and I realise this could turn bad really fast. They are watching him like he’s a threat, and if they attack, he’ll kill them, including the humans.

I won’t let him live with that on his conscience or let them hurt him.

I hop up as I glare at them. “You want proof? All the proof? I’ll get it.”

I don’t tell them I have a lot already, but even I know it’s not enough to prove the guilt of everyone involved, and some

part of me wants to prove these people wrong about Sam.

About everything.

We came here for sanctuary and for help, but it's clear we aren't going to get it. Their mistrust of Samael is so bad, they cannot see past it.

So we will show them.

They think he's the bad guy, but I'll prove them wrong.

"You should stay and help us," Aria offers, but when her eyes slide to Samael, it's obvious she's only offering to get me away from him.

"No," he snaps, sliding before me as he snarls at them. "She stays with me."

"Let's go," I whisper quietly to him. "Come on, Sammy."

He tenses but nods. "We'll be back." That's all he says as he takes my hand and drags me out of here. He doesn't stop until we are back on Midnight and in his territory again.

He's stiff at my back, and when his voice comes, it's weary and sad. "I'm sorry, little one. I thought they would listen to you and help."

"Do not apologise for them," I snap, and I turn to hold onto him, hating that he won't look at me. "Samael."

"Would you like me to take you back to them? I never asked if you would prefer to stay," he asks instead.

"Samael, look at me," I demand, but he won't.

"I should have. I'm sorry. They have humans, and they are not as messed—"

"Samael, fucking look at me." I drag his eyes back to me, seeing the shock in his gaze. "Fuck them. We'll show them, and hell no, I'm not going back to them. I go where you go. It's you and me."

"Lyra, you do not have to stay with me out of guilt."

It's my turn to get angry. "You think I'm staying with you out of guilt?" The words are slow and deadly.

“I just mean—”

I slide from the horse and storm away in the direction of the prison. “Lyra!” he calls. “It’s dangerous, do not walk away.”

“I cannot even look at you right now!” I yell. “Fucking idiot monster, telling me what I need and want.”

I hear his footsteps come after me, and then I’m turned. “Lyra, it’s dangerous out here,” he chastises.

“Fuck you, Sam!” I shout. “I chose you, I keep choosing you, and you are trying to get rid of me!”

“Never!” he roars. “But I care about you too much to drag you down with me!”

“That is my choice!”

We stare at each other, our eyes narrowed as anger courses through us. Suddenly, he grabs me, yanks me close, and slams his lips onto mine. Anger quickly turns to lust and need as he sucks on my tongue, lifting me so I wrap my body around his.

His hands grip my ass as he spins us, and my back hits a partially destroyed brick wall. Wasting no time, his tail slides into my clothes as he pulls my jeans down and slams into me.

I scream, but he swallows it, his claws piercing my ass cheeks. The sharp pain makes me writhe. He holds me still, snarling against my lips as he hammers into me. His tail presses against my clit and vibrates with his growl. All the anger, pain, and need combines as I bite down on his lips. The sudden invasion makes me cry out, but it hurts so good.

It’s too much.

I can’t.

I can’t.

I come so hard I taste his blood in my mouth, and with a roar, his cock jerks inside of me, filling me with his release. Slumping in his grip, I shake from the aftershocks as all the anger and worry fades into pleasure.

Panting, I begin to laugh, and he joins in. “Stubborn human.”

“Infuriating monster,” I reply fondly.

“I just didn’t want you to think you had to come with me,” he offers softly, stroking my face.

“I know, but I feel safe with you. Do you want me to go?” I ask.

“Never,” he hisses before swallowing. “You’re my Lyra,” he states as if that explains everything, and maybe it does, because he’s my Samael.

TWENTY-NINE



SAMAEEL

“So you’re saying we need more?” I sigh, scrubbing at my face.

“Yes, much more, everything we can get our hands on, but it’s not on this side of the wall.”

“Nope,” I snap, narrowing my eyes on her, knowing what she’s thinking. She crawls into my lap, distracting me with her body. “Still no. You could wrap those pretty lips around my cock, and it would still be no.” I grip her hair and tilt her head back until she gasps. “You are not going over that wall again. You said it yourself, they want to kill you.”

“Yes, but they won’t be looking for me there. If I can sneak through—”

“No,” I bark.

The idea of losing her, of her going over that wall and never seeing her again, is abhorrent. I can’t even put how I feel about it into words, but the suggestion alone is enough to almost trigger the haze.

“Sammy, you’re being unreasonable.”

“About refusing to let you go over a wall into a city where I cannot follow, filled with people who want to kill you for what you know?” I growl. “Not unreasonable. Smart.”

“Sammy,” she murmurs. “I have to do this. All my life, I’ve been trying to find a story worth telling, wanting to change the world, and I finally can. I can save our people.”

“Fuck my people, I only care about you.”

“That’s not true,” she replies with a smile. “We have to save them, Sammy. The humans will never stop, and we both know that. It’s only going to get worse, and do you really think they will leave you alone behind this wall? Eventually, they

will try to take you and this city back. They have to for their experiment.”

I hate her logic.

Pressing my lips to hers, I try to distract her, but when I pull back, she arches her brow. “I’m still going.”

I stand and start to pace, trying to think of a way to stop her. I could lock her up again, but I don’t want to chain my pet to me—after all, I know the harm chains can do. I want her to be here, to be with me by choice.

“Sam, what are you so scared of?” she asks.

“Losing you!” I roar. “I’ll lose you, Lyra. I’ll have to fucking watch you walk through that wall, and I’ll never see you again. It will be just like my parents, just like my friends, but so much worse. You are the one thing I care about in this entire world, Lyra. Can’t you see that? The throne, my people, my land, I’d give it all up to stay with you.”

She climbs to her feet and places her hands on my chest as she looks into my eyes. “I cannot change who I am, Samael. I can’t, not even for you. I have to do this.” Her eyes plead with me to understand. “Please.”

Unable to take it, I rip open the door and slam it behind me, leaving her there.

The last image of her sticks with me as I descend into the bowels of my nest to take out my anger.

My fear.

Because my Lyra is going to leave me.

LYRA

I pace, waiting for him to come back.

He can't just walk out when things get hard, but that's exactly what he did. He left after rocking my entire world.

Losing you.

The words repeat over and over in my head. Samael is scared, which is not something I ever thought I would see. He's scared of losing me, and it makes my heart feel like it's breaking at the same time I nearly gasp with joy. He cares for me the same way I care for him.

Instead of fighting for us, though, he walked out.

Flopping back, I cover my face, wondering if I'm right. Can I really just hide here for the rest of our lives? Can I pretend I know nothing and wait for the eventual knock at the front door when they come to steal us back? No, I can't, and more than that, I have a duty to tell the truth. I know I have to do this.

I just wish he could support me because I'm going to have to leave. I would hate to do that with him despising me. Either way, it's going to hurt. I've been here with him for what feels like years, even though it's only been weeks, and in that time, he's become my safe zone. He challenges me, pushes me, protects me, and cares for me.

He's become my home.

I'm going to lose that as the world once more pulls us apart, forcing our duties to come between us.

He said he would give it all up for me, but I know I cannot do the same for him. Giving them up would mean changing who I am, and I can't do that, not even for him, and I would never ask him to do the same. His people need him.

Maybe the odds were stacked against us this entire time, and maybe we never stood a chance, just two ships bound to crash in the night.

The door opens, and I sit up, my heart slamming in hope.

He stands in the doorway, hesitating, his gaze hard and sure.

“I shouldn’t have walked out,” he mutters as he shuts the door. “I can’t lose you, Lyra.”

“Sam—”

He interrupts me, blowing out a breath. “I can’t lose you, so I guess I’m going with you.”

“What?” I whisper.

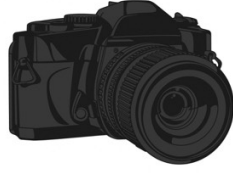
“You said it yourself—where you go, I go. If you need to do this, then we go together.”

My mouth drops. Out of all the possibilities I expected, this wasn’t it. “Sam—”

“I hate every single thing and person over that wall, but I will go for you.” He doesn’t stop until he stands before me, searching my gaze. “Say yes.”

“Yes,” I whisper before throwing myself at him and kissing him hard. “Yes, Samael, together.”

THIRTY



LYRA

It takes us almost a week to get sorted for the trip. We have to tell his people and get them organised, which mostly means putting someone in charge to stop them from killing everyone and everything. Then, we have to pack food and water, health supplies, and other such items, not knowing if and when we will be able to find them again.

Of course, we have to come up with a plan as well. We find an old map and spend days pouring over it. I mark new areas and changes, crossing out any zones where I know we will be caught instantly. We have many arguments, which usually end in my screaming his name with either his cock or tongue buried inside me. Finally, we decide on a plan we are both somewhat happy with, and as night falls on the seventh day, we set off to the wall.

We ride in companionable silence, absorbing the peace. We know once we are across the wall, we won't be able to relax or breathe until we have what we need.

At the wall, where Sam said there was an exit, we dismount.

“Goodbye, girl, go home,” Sam orders, but when he starts to walk, she follows with a huff. “You can't come,” he explains softly. “But I'll be back. They'll look after you, okay?”

I watch him say goodbye, and when he smacks her rump and watches her go, I slide my hand into his. “Time to go, Sammy.”

Nodding, he turns and leads us through a destroyed building. We have to pick through the rubble, and once we step out on the other side, he hauls open a hidden grate. “In you go,” he orders.

Taking a deep breath, I look back at the city before climbing inside and starting to crawl. It's a tiny tunnel, barely

big enough for him to fit through. My eyes widen as I try to see before me, the dark closing in.

When something furry touches me, I scream. Sam's tail lashes out, grabs the rat, and rips it away. "Keep going," he demands.

Nodding, I scurry as fast as I can, and at the other side, I have to turn so my head is near him before I slam my booted feet into the gate. With a grunt, I kick again, and it falls off, hitting something below with a crack. I wait for alarms to sound, but when nothing comes, I crawl forward and stick my head out, gawking.

The dump is on the other side, and the city is lit up in the distance. Mounds of rubbish and debris block our path, but there is no one else out here, not this close to the water. The grate hit a car below, but the drop is only a few feet. Without saying anything, Sam wraps his arms around me and slides us out. He lands on his feet on a pile of rubbish that sinks under our weight as he holds me aloft.

"Well, now we walk." I shrug my bag on when he sets me on my feet. Taking my hand, he starts to pick through the mounds of trash before leaping down.

"Jump," he tells me, so I do, and he catches me, placing me on a small path that cuts through the mounds.

He waves me on, letting me lead the way. He scans our surroundings, leaving his tail wrapped protectively around me as his gaze glints in the light.

"We will need to stay hidden, get through the slums—"

"Then where are we going for your proof?"

Stopping for a moment, I close my eyes before looking back at him. "The only place I never wanted to—my father's house. His name was on those documents. He's involved, and he keeps anything he's involved in that's not exactly legal close. It will be there, it has to be, but to get there, we have to cross Athesa to the mansion district. It could take us a week to make it there without being seen."

“We move only during the night. It would be too easy to spot us during the day,” he murmurs.

“And the checkpoints. When it was just me, I could have sneaked through or bribed someone.” Shaking my head, I look back at him. It’s the same argument we have had all week. “It’s not too late for you to go back.”

Gripping my head, he kisses me softly. “Together,” he murmurs. “We will figure this out. Come on, let’s get away from the wall.”

Nodding, I turn forward and start to wind through the mounds of rubbish, my nose crinkled at the stench. I feel sorry for Sam. His senses are double what mine are, but he never once complains, watching my back until we reach the last huge mound. Beyond it is the flatter, newer areas of the dump. Usually, it’s crawling with people from the slums who search for things to sell, food or clothes, but right now, it’s empty.

“That’s weird,” I whisper. “Usually it’s busy.”

“Maybe they are all home,” he suggests.

“Maybe,” I reply, but something doesn’t feel right. We have to keep moving, though, and this means there’s less of a chance of being spotted, so maybe it’s a good thing. Keeping low, Sam pulls up his hood to hide his horns and tucks his tail under the cloak we found. He hunches down, and although he’s still massive, he might just pass for a big human—unless someone looks too closely. It would be fucking terrifying if you didn’t know him.

With his clawed hand in mine, I run, heading for the entrance of the dump before darting out, and then we move to the outskirts of the slums. We remain near the wall, but not too close in case any humans are patrolling.

The shacks here are run-down but usually occupied, yet every one we pass is empty and half destroyed, as if someone fled in a hurry. Crouching at the door of one such shack, I look inside and cover my mouth when I spot the body lying there.

“Little one, all I can smell is death here, death and decay.”

“This isn’t a typical killing in the slums. That’s from gunfire.” I note the shells around the body, turning to Sam in disgust. “They killed this person, but why?”

Sam shakes his head and presses his back to mine, searching the darkness. “We have to go.”

I know he’s right, but I can’t leave the body like this. It has to mean something, even though I feel sick. I pull out my camera and take a picture for evidence, for proof, of what they are doing. Tucking it away again, I sneak inside, covering my mouth and nose with my arm, and drape a sheet over the body. It’s the only thing I can offer them.

“Little one,” Sam coos, and he takes my hand when I get out, squeezing it. “You can’t help them here, but you can with this mission. You have to survive for them.” He tugs me away, and I let him, the tears in my eyes drying as anger takes over.

How dare they so carelessly take life, as if we mean nothing.

No matter what, we are more than an experiment. We are people.

We deserve respect, love, and kindness.

I’m going to make them all pay for the deaths they have caused and the pain they have collected like coins.

The trek through the slums is horrendous. We find more bodies than we can count, and I document every one, even the little girl with the bloody bear, which made me sob into Sam’s chest. He never once stops me or promises me it will be better. He stands in the middle of all the death and destruction with me, knowing it intimately.

We move closer to the wall as we progress, and I feel exposed, so Sam takes me into his arms and leaps us onto one of the top shacks, only to freeze and shove me into the darkness as he peers over the side and crouches.

“What is it?” I whisper, my eyesight not nearly as good as his.

His head cocks to the side before he turns. “Stay,” he commands, and then he disappears into darkness like it’s where he belongs. Shuffling nervously, I chew on my lips, my eyes straining in the dark to see him or anyone else approaching. I am very much aware of the huge target I have on my back.

“Sammy,” I hiss when he doesn’t return. The minutes tick by, and worry makes me edge forward. What if he’s caught?

He suddenly appears with something glinting in his hand, and he passes it over. It’s only then that I realise it’s a scope from a rifle. “The gun was buried under a bed, twisted and broken, but here, use this to see,” he explains, placing me at the edge of the shack’s walkway.

Lifting the scope, I put my eye to it so I can scan the area, searching for what he’s talking about. For a moment, all I see is the wall stretching so tall and high, a feeling of safety fills me. It still astounds me that they were able to build it so quickly, but war seems to make everything possible.

“Here.” He moves the scope, and I finally see what he did, a gasp leaving my lips.

“Why are they there?” I demand.

He shakes his head, eyeing the humans who are gathered before the wall. Tents and command posts are set up, and soldiers mill around everywhere, watching the wall like they expect something to happen. “It can’t be just for you. Maybe it’s for the other humans?” He rubs at his face. “Or maybe they are planning more attacks. We can’t be sure, but as much as I hate it, it helps us. If their soldiers are focused on the wall, then it will be easier for us to get through their city.”

I nod but glance back worriedly. “What about the others?”

Sam laughs. “More fool the humans if they go over that wall. You, better than anyone, know they won’t make it back.”

“I did.” I grin, and he grabs my chin, his dark eyes locked hungrily on me.

“Only after I’d played with you, little human,” he purrs. “Plus, you are not like them. From the moment I saw you, I

knew you were different, a warrior. It just took a long time for me to realise exactly what it was.” Swallowing, I lean into him for a moment. “Come on, we are losing the night, and we still need to get somewhere safe before the sun rises.”

Pulling myself away, I tuck the scope into my messenger bag and let him lead me this time. My own hooded cloak conceals my face and hair as much as possible. We look like some cheap assassins, and the image makes me giggle. He glances back with a question in his eyes.

I just smile, and he chuckles as he pulls me into his arms and leaps from platform to platform. Some of the old railings here are broken, as if something heavy was thrown through them. It doesn't escape my notice that most of the slums are abandoned or filled with bodies.

I don't know what happened, since I've been over the wall, but none of it was good.

We haven't seen anybody. It's like the slums are deserted. Usually, people are crammed in like sardines, but every shack, house, and brothel stands empty. Beds are half slept in, and food is left to rot, yet there are not enough bodies for all of them to have been killed ...

So where did they go?

It bothers me as we move through the destroyed and abandoned sections of the slums, heading towards the river where we will need to cross into the main section of Athesa. I'm starting to give up hope of seeing anyone when there's a clink, like a tin can being dropped.

We whirl, and standing in the shadows with a bag full of food is a woman. She goes to run when I call out, “Please stop. What happened here?”

“She said stop,” Sam growls, his tail lashing out. I wince, but the human freezes.

“You ... You're ...”

I step before him. “Mine.” I bare my teeth. “He will not hurt you. Please do not call the soldiers.”

She straightens. “I would never. Come with me.” She turns and moves quickly.

I glance back at Sam, sharing a look as we hesitate.

She sighs loudly. “I’m a friend, let me prove it. You’re not the only one working with the monsters.”

We hurry after her, confused but needing to know what she means. She ducks and weaves like she knows her way around, getting us all twisted and confused. If this is a plan to rob us or kill us, then it’s a good one.

Instead, she leads us into a shack, and she rips back the rug and the grate there before she hops down into the waiting darkness. My eyes widen when her voice calls to us. “Come on, before the soldiers see us!”

That gets me moving, but Sam grabs me then leaps down with me in his arms. She hurries up the ladder, pulling the grate back into place and hopping down into partially drained water.

We are in the sewers.

“This way.” She strikes a match against the wall, lighting a half-burnt candle like she does this often and holding it up as she leads us through the curving tunnel. We take a few twists and turns, crossing sections of the streets before she pushes open a round door.

Sam and I stop and gape.

Inside is a home. A full home.

It has sofas, beds, a fire, and even a stove to cook over, but in the middle is a huge, scarred monster.

“What did I tell you about going up there alone?” He whirls, and when he sees us, he grabs her and shoves her behind him. “Who are you?” he hisses. “If you’ve hurt her—” It’s then I realise that he has no tail or horns.

“We didn’t.” I push back my hood and step inside. “I’m Lyra, and this is Sam.” I grab him and tug him inside. He grunts as he reaches up to pull down his own hood.

The monster eyes us warily. “You’re an ugly one,” he snarls at Sam.

“You’re one to speak,” Sam retorts before they both smile and relax.

“If you had let me speak, I would have told you.” The human huffs, pushing her monster aside. “I found them up top, wandering around. If they had stayed, the snatchers would have got them. Did you escape from the facility too?”

I blink, unsure what she’s talking about.

“No, this one ...” Her monster inhales. “This one is pure. You’re from over the wall.”

The human stares at us in shock as I nod. “The facility? Snatchers?”

“A lot has been happening.” She sighs. “Where are my manners? Come, sit down, eat, and drink, and we will explain.” She takes off her cloak, and I wince. Her head is shaved, which she is totally rocking, but it’s the wicked scars running along her skull and exposed sections of her body that caused my reaction.

It looks as if she was cut open time and time again.

She notices me looking, and her eyes drop shyly to the floor, her hands hesitating on the cloak as if deciding whether or not to tug it back on.

“Do not ever hide,” her monster snaps, throwing me a glare.

“He’s right,” I add. “Your scars are beautiful.”

She jerks her head up, and her mouth drops open.

“She’s not lying; she loves my scars.” Sam puffs up proudly.

That makes her smile, and she drops the cloak before hurrying into the kitchen as her monster watches her lovingly.

I go to sit, but Sam pulls me onto his lap instead, the couch groaning under his weight. A few minutes later, two bowls are handed to us, as is water, and as we eat and drink, they watch us. The monster grips his human's neck possessively, no doubt still wondering if we are a threat. As soon as we finish, he leans forward.

“No offense” —he glances at his human to make sure he got that right, and she nods, beaming proudly— “but what the fuck are you doing here?”

I smile. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“True.” She shares a look with her monster. “I’m Sascha, and this is Henrik. He was mainly raised in the lab on this side of the wall. A few years ago, I was snatched from the streets so they could experiment on us. When they grew bored with me, they threw me into the breeding program. I met Henrik, and we have been together ever since. Just a week or so ago, two humans and monsters freed everyone from the lab. It caused chaos, and most of the escapees went over the wall, but the others were tracked down and killed. We were trying to get over the wall where we thought it would be safe, but we were caught in the death squad’s path. They were coming to eradicate the slums, preparing for war with the wall, and wanted everyone out of the way. Anyone they deemed ... not useful, that couldn’t be drafted as soldiers or ...” She closes her eyes. “Or experimented on, were killed.”

“Fuck.” I rub at my face. “So everyone here is gone?”

She nods. “And the city has a curfew so they can monitor the streets. There were some monsters who broke through the wall.” She rolls her eyes. “So soldiers are everywhere and running everything.”

“I’m Lyra, and this is Sam. Sam was born over the wall, and he was an experiment, but now he’s a tribe leader. I was a journalist in Athesa when I stumbled upon a story that led me over the wall.”

“Then why are you back now?” She eyes us.

“The story is about the truth behind what they are doing. I came here for more proof, to show the people of Athesa—”

She laughs bitterly. “They won’t care. Half of their staff is from Athesa, and the other half doesn’t care as long as they stay fed and looked after.”

“I have to believe things can change. The truth has to come out,” I argue, noting her worries. She’s right. Some humans work for Nano, so they won’t care, but others will ...

Right?

“It’s your death.” She shrugs. “Nobody here has ever done shit for me. They actively helped.”

“But not all. They have a right to know. If there’s going to be a war, then they have to choose sides, and we might be able to stop it.”

She simply looks away, so I blow out a breath.

“We need to get to the mansions,” I tell her, looking for help, a truce, anything. We might not agree, but we are both in the same boat. “And when we come back, we will get you through the wall, where you will be safe. Sam runs three quarters of the city.”

That makes them sit up straighter. Sam simply watches me, letting me decide despite the fact that he’s the king here, not me.

“Do we have a deal?”

They share a look, communicating silently. “Fine, we can get you through the city, but you’ll have to go topside to get into the mansions, and they are heavily guarded right now since everything went down, so we can’t help you there.”

“That’s fine, thank you,” I reply seriously. “I mean it. I’m sorry for everything that has happened to you. I promise to try and make it mean something.”

“I actually believe you.” She smiles. “Maybe I’m just too jaded.”

“You’ve been through a lot, so you have a right to be,” I offer, taking her hand. Tears roll from her eyes, and I just hold her hand as she cries.

Henrik rubs her back until she nods. “We will go when the sun rises. It’s a few days’ walk.” She snuffles, and Henrik winces, clearly hating the idea.

“Then we will come back here. If you ... If you survive, we will meet you here.” He nods. “Is that okay?”

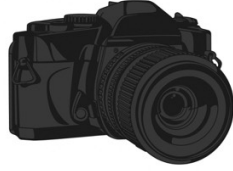
“That’s fine with us,” I murmur in thanks.

“Get some rest, you will need it,” Sascha tells us sadly, and with that, she and Henrik move over to the corner of the room and shut a curtain behind them. Sharing a sad look with Sam, I curl into his arms, just breathing him in, happy to see his face again.

“Is she right? Is this pointless?” I murmur.

“Trying is never pointless, little one,” he promises. “Now rest.”

THIRTY-ONE



LYRA

I only manage a few hours of sleep. Sam watches me the entire time, and when I wake up, Sascha shows me to the bathroom. It's clearly hand built, but it works, and after giving us some supplies, they pack up. They are both sad to leave their home, but they are willing to give this a chance. At the door, they look back worriedly and flick off the light before shutting the vault door.

"We'll make it back," Henrik promises her. "We haven't survived all this, my love, just to fail now. Remember what I promised you?"

"A happy life." She smiles up at him, and the expression is so unguarded and filled with love, I turn away to give them a moment.

"I meant it. We will get it, no matter the cost. Come on." He holds her hand like Sam holds mine, and with a narrow-eyed look our way, Henrik heads off into the tunnels with Sascha in tow.

We follow behind him, their lights illuminating the way. Sam turns every now and again to watch our backs as if they will find us down here. It's smart, actually, because the soldiers and people of Athesa would never sully themselves by coming down here, so we can move about freely to a certain extent.

There are grates that allow sunlight to shine down, and every time we walk under them, Sam winces, so eventually, I start making him slide along the wall to avoid them. He just rolls his eyes and tells me he won't combust, but I hate his discomfort.

"So you're together?" Sascha asks after a while of comfortable silence.

"Sascha, remember what we talked about when it comes to asking people things." Henrik sighs, but it's a sound filled with

love.

“We don’t mind.” I shrug. “Erm ... yes?” I hesitate, and Sam huffs.

“What the troublemaker means is yes, we are together.” He throws me a look that promises retribution for my hesitation.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted them to know,” I hiss at him.

“Why the fuck wouldn’t I want them to know? You think I’m ashamed of you?” he snarls, stopping to glare at me.

I cross my arms, glaring back. “I never said that,” I snap. “I was—”

“Just hiding me—”

“No, I was not—”

“Are you two always like this?” Sascha asks with a wide grin.

“No,” he snaps.

“Yes,” I reply, making them both laugh, and Sam and I share a secretive smile.

“I’m not ashamed of you,” I murmur, and he pulls me closer.

“I know, little one,” he replies, kissing my head. “I was just picking fights because it’s fun.”

I smack him, but we walk closer, occasionally touching as I comprehend the truth of my words.

I’m his, and he’s mine.

SAMAEL

There is no one to kill, no one to attack, and I can't fuck my girl.

I'm bored as we walk ...

And walk.

And walk.

For a while, I make her walk in front of me so I can check out her ass, but that just leaves me hard and wanting, and when she denies my request for a quickie, I huff and walk at her side. She keeps laughing at my bad mood, and the sound is enough to make my heart soar.

I don't tell her that, since I can't be seen as a sop, especially in front of the other monster. Henrik smells ... wrong, different, but he's helping us, so I let it slide. After all, a lot of shit has been done to our people, so we don't judge here. We are all one. He will be welcome over the wall, and so will she, though if she upsets my girl again, I will kill them both.

As if knowing my thoughts, Henrik glances back at me and quickly turns forward. He might be a big bastard—not as big as me, of course—but he doesn't stand a chance, and he knows it. I would rip out his beating heart before he could even move. I'd easily end the human, knowing it would upset my girl if I didn't.

I grunt as an elbow connects with my side, and my gaze turns to Lyra. "You're growling. Stop it."

"You like it when I growl." I grin wickedly as I slide my hand down to her ass. She pushes me away and stomps off, but I can scent her desire, and my growl only increases. Henrik hurries up, clearly trying to put distance between us, but Lyra is intent on staying with them despite her own wants and desires.

More than once today, I have had to remind her to drink and eat. The foolish little human would starve if I didn't make her eat, so I stole more supplies to make sure I'm well stocked and keep passing her snacks every few hours to keep her strength up, but to also add more of those delicious curves to her body.

Hours pass, and we eventually come to a stop. "There are two maintenance rooms here. We will rest for a few hours then carry on."

"No, we keep going," Lyra protests.

"It's a few days' walk, and I need to rest," Sascha admits, and Lyra instantly winces. "Sorry, Lyra, we are not all as strong as you." She seems sad, and Lyra sighs.

"I'm sorry, Sascha, that's not what I meant. Please rest." She steps back, and guilt almost wafts off of her, so I grab the back of her neck and ground her. I need it as much as she does, and it's a possessive move, but I don't care, especially when she leans into my touch.

Henrik takes the door on the left, jerking his head at the one on the right. "In there. Lock it if you are planning to sleep, but knowing you, you probably won't." We both share a knowing look.

Opening the door, I throw Lyra over my shoulder and tote her inside, shutting it and locking it behind me.

"Rest, Sam." She huffs, dropping her bag and looking around. She heads over to an old lantern and turns it on. Slowly, a soft light flutters around the room, showing a single bed pushed against the wall. There's also a toilet, a sink, and a table, but nothing else.

The bed won't do.

Instead, I pull out a fur I packed so she wouldn't be cold and lay it on the ground. "What are you doing?" she asks curiously.

"The bed won't fit us both." I shrug.

"Then you can take it, and I'll take the floor."

“Little one, where you sleep, I sleep. Stop being a brat and get your sexy ass onto the fur,” I order.

Rolling her eyes, she takes off her jacket but leaves her shoes on as she crawls onto the fur and splays out.

I huff. “Shoes.”

“It’s in case we need to move quickly,” she replies.

Covering her, I nudge my leg between hers and force her eyes to mine. “No one will ever get you, pet, I promise. You can relax. Trust me.”

“I do,” she murmurs, reaching up and pulling down my hood. “That’s better. I hate not seeing your face.”

“In all its ruined glory,” I joke.

Eyes narrowed, she leans up and bites my lip.

The sharp pain makes me slam my hips into hers as pleasure explodes through me, and I growl.

“Do not. It’s a very nice fucking face. I’d know, I sit on it often enough.”

“Not nearly as often as you should. Let’s rectify that, shall we?” Ripping off her clothes, I roll onto my back and drag her on top of me, her knees on either side of my head.

She groans. “Samael.”

“Ride my face, little one, and let me watch you come apart.”

Her eyes close as she whimpers and widens her thighs to allow me between them. The delicious scent of her pussy makes me shudder beneath her.

I lap at her cunt, my cock jerking at the taste of her on my tongue. I’d die a happy fucking man between her legs with her cum on my lips.

I show her that, show her what she does to me and how I was made for her. I hold her tightly against my mouth as I drink down her pussy, lashing her clit with my tongue as her

juices drip down my chin. She cries out, grinding her pussy into my face for more, so I give it to her.

I give her everything because her pleasure is my pleasure. Every whimper, every cry only makes me that much harder until I roll my own hips in time with hers.

“Sammy,” she begs, “Oh god, don’t stop.”

“Never,” I murmur against her flesh, feeling her shudder, so I start to growl, knowing she loves the vibrations. As I do, I slide my tongue inside of her and feel her give into me, to us, and she shatters above me.

As she clamps down on my head and tongue, coming on my face, my own release slams through me. My back bows as I spill inside my trousers just from the taste of her alone.

She falls to the side, and I catch her before tucking her into my arms. I lie with my back to the door so if anyone comes in, they will have to go through me first to get to her. “Sleep now, little one, I’ve got you.”

Mumbling, she turns and buries her face in my arms. I greedily lick her cum from my face, wanting more, so an hour or so later, I slide down her body and slip my tongue inside her. She wakes as she comes and then falls back to sleep again as I hold her, and this time, I promise to let her rest no matter how much I want to feel her come again.

My eyes slide closed with her in my arms.

THIRTY-TWO



SAMAEL

When I wake, the light is out. I slide from Lyra's arms, wincing when she whimpers, and I hurry to the lamp, but it's either out of oil or broken. Spinning, I search for any form of light, knowing she hates the darkness. Finding her bag, I search for anything, and when I find some matches and old candles, I light them and spread them out. I sigh when it's done, only to turn around and find her grinning at me.

She holds out her hand, and I move to her, placing my palm in hers. She pulls me to my knees as she climbs to hers before me. "How did I get so lucky?" she whispers.

"I am the one who is lucky, Lyra," I tell her honestly as I cup her face, memorising every feature, every mark, until I know it better than my own. Leaning in, I press my lips to hers. She sighs against my mouth as I deepen the kiss. My hand tangles in her hair as I push her back, covering her body with my own and feeling her softness where it belongs—under me.

"You are so beautiful, Lyra," I murmur as I pull away, turning my head to kiss both cheeks, her forehead, and then back down. I kiss her adorable little chin then move across her supple neck and shoulders. She moans, and her legs fall open. I kiss all the way down, and then I drag my tongue across every inch I just kissed.

I move meticulously, like an attack.

She watches me, her chest heaving and flushed.

I taste every single mark and imperfection she has, loving them. Every man who has ever come before me is a fool to let such a creature escape their grasp, but knowing Lyra, she was the one who ran away. Not this time, though, not from me.

This is forever, I realise with stunning clarity.

We are forever.

When I reach her lips again, she drags me down and wraps her legs around my waist as she tastes herself on my lips. “Sammy, I need you.”

“I’ve got you,” I murmur as I line up and slowly push into her. Her tight, wet pussy grips my cock, and both of us moan at the feeling. Pressing my fists to the furs next to her head, I lift myself and stare into those bright eyes as I flex my hips.

This is more than sex, more than fucking.

“Making love,” she tells me as I stare. “That’s what this is, Sammy.” She hooks her ankles behind me, urging me on.

“I’ve never made love,” I admit with a wince.

“Me either,” she replies without shame. “But between us, we’ll figure it out.”

And we do.

Our lips meet in a tangle of tongues, and our bodies come together as one. Her pussy grips me as I slowly take her in a steady storm that leaves both our hearts hammering. Her name is on my lips as I leisurely fill her, loving the feel of her, the sight of her, and the smell of her.

“With me,” I order.

“Always,” she promises, and together, we shatter.

The explosive release rolls through us both, drowning us under so much pleasure, I actually black out. When I come to, we are both panting and sweaty, the candlelight showing her curves in exquisite fucking detail.

I pull her onto my chest and we relax, our hearts beating in sync as a foreign emotion fills me.

It’s happiness and something else, something I cannot name, but I don’t need to, and neither does she.

We say it with our bodies, with our actions, and when the banging comes on the door, we both sigh sadly.

“Time to go, lovebirds!” Henrik calls.

“Come on, little one. Get dressed. If he sees you naked, I’ll have to pluck out his eyes.”

Laughing, she swats my chest and hurries to dress, all while I watch her, and when she’s close enough, I tug her down and kiss her until she’s moaning and gripping me again.

“Come on!” Henrik yells.

“Want me to kill him?” she asks.

I laugh as I get dressed, and then we go to meet them, ignoring their knowing looks as we set off towards the mansions again with a new understanding between us.

THIRTY-THREE



SAMAEL

We spend two more days walking. Henrik explains that the city is huge, and it could usually be crossed in a few hours, but that's with transport like cars or trains, so instead, we are stuck walking, and we have to break every night. After the first night, we don't have privacy. We have to sleep in alcoves or big rooms we find underground, but I get to hold my girl the whole time, so I'm not complaining.

Lyra insists on getting to know Henrik and Sascha and never stops asking them questions. It turns out Sascha is something called a Pisces and believes in some weird star things that they talk about for a ridiculously long time. She grew up in the slums and loves Henrik something fierce.

It gives me hope for Lyra and me.

Midday on the third day, we stop at the end of a tunnel with a simple ladder leading up. "This is it." Sascha nods. "It leads right into the small woods before the mansions. We can't go any farther."

"Thank you," Lyra gushes. "I mean it. Go back and wait, we will come for you."

Sascha suddenly hugs her. "Don't die, okay?"

"I won't," Lyra promises. "I have too much to do."

Reluctantly, the two humans part, and I nod at Henrik as he leads his girl back into the tunnels.

"It's a few hours until sundown; I can sense it."

"Should I go up and scout?" she asks.

"No," I snap. "We go together. You know this area, Lyra, so what's our best way in?"

We left this part of the planning until now, not knowing if we would make it or where we would be, but now that we are here, we need a better way in than the front door.

“There is no other way in.” She sighs, pacing.

“There has to be.”

“Trust me, there isn’t. I tried to escape frequently when I was a kid.” She laughs bitterly. “The fences are electrified and too tall to climb. The gate is the only way in and out, and it’s going to be guarded.” She rubs her face. “They might not immediately attack me, so maybe I can bribe them. I used to know some of them.”

Her eyes are far away as she thinks, and I pull her into my arms. “You’re adorable when you’re thinking.” I grin, making her huff.

“It’s our only shot. Hide in the woods while I try to either bribe them or get close enough to knock them out.”

“It’s a shitty plan,” I remark.

“It’s the only one we have. If we kill them or they raise the alarm, we will never get back. Trust me, Samael,” she says, repeating my own words back to me.

“I do.”

“Good. What shall we do to pass the time?” she asks, wiggling her eyebrows. She screams when I lift her and slam her against the wall, but it turns into a moan as I show my girl just how much I do trust her.

Three times.

LYRA

Lifting the grate, I peek out to check that it's night, and when the reassuring darkness closes in, I blow out a breath. I lift it completely and wait for shouts or shots to ring out, but when nothing comes, I slip out with Sam behind me. We are in a grove of trees and hidden for now.

At least we made it this far.

After shutting the lid carefully, we move to the edge of the trees. I left home when I was sixteen, walked out of those gates and never came back, so I never really hung around outside the mansion area, but I know it well. I spent years looking through the fence, wishing I were beyond it.

Now it's the other way around.

At the edge of the protection of the trees, we wait and watch the guarded compound. Sascha was right, there are guards, but they don't patrol the fence, which is good. I guess they have been pulled out for other things, but there are three at the main gate in soldier uniforms with radios and guns.

"No," Sam snaps.

"I can do this." I let my hair down and take off my jacket, placing it into my bag as I pop a few buttons on my shirt. "Easy-peasy."

"They could shoot you before you even get close," he snarls.

"They won't." I groan when he slams me into a tree. "Like every man, they are distracted by boobs."

"We are not all—" He glances down, and he growls louder. "If they look at you, they are dead."

"Good." I pat his chest. "If you see me in trouble, come running, otherwise we stay quiet. We need this to be silent, no alarms." I break from his grasp and step out of the trees. I

don't run. I just wander straight up to the gate as if I should be there.

They see me, moving their hands to their guns and pointing them at me as I stop just a few feet before them. The gate is a huge, hulking, automatic metal contraption with a guard box to the left, and beyond it are the manicured lawns of the mansions, which stretch as far as the eye can see, lined with private driveways, sprawling buildings, and streetlights.

"I want to see my father," I announce with a tilt to my chin.

One of the guards steps forward, his eyes narrowing before widening. "Lyra, is that you?"

"Benji?" I ask, truly shocked. We went to school together. He always followed me around like a little puppy, so that works well for me.

"It is you." He smiles. "Your dad isn't here. Why are you out after curfew?"

Shit, think.

"It's important," is all I offer, sliding closer. The other two look between us, hesitating to call to him when I clearly know him. "Please, Benji." I pout, leaning into him to display my boobs. My hand slips down his chest as the other two sigh. Gripping his gun, I lift up on my toes as if I'm going to kiss him before I point it at the other two and shoot.

They instantly drop, and as Benji grabs for me, I knee him in the balls and bring the gun up, unable to shoot him.

"Sorry." I wince as I slam the butt of the gun into his face.

Stepping back, I turn only to see Sam shoot past me. He picks up Benji with a growl and rips out his throat. Blood splatters them both as he turns to me with wild eyes.

"I smelled his desire," he purrs, bordering on the haze.

To calm him down, I step closer. "Shh, he's dead. I'm here. I'm yours."

He nods as he drops the body, and when he finally comes back, I sling the gun over my shoulder. “We need to move the bodies so if anyone pulls up, it’s not so obvious.”

Picking all three up effortlessly, Sam dumps them in the woods, and when he comes back, he’s grinning. “I don’t even want to know,” I mutter as I open the gate. On the other side, I hit the switch again to make it look like no one has been through it.

Taking his hand, I run towards the cover of the first house. I haven’t been here in almost ten years, yet it all looks exactly the same—rich houses, rich people, and fancy cars left in driveways and garages collecting dust. Each house tries to be bigger and better than the last. We move through the valleys of lush back gardens, sprinting the three miles towards the mansion on the top of the hill.

My old house.

Sam looks around, but I do not. I know every twist and turn. I remember the koi pond, the maze, and the greenhouse. I explored all of it when I was a kid, searching for a shred of happiness or a good hiding spot. Everywhere we look holds memories of being sad and alone.

None of the neighbours ever got involved, not even when they saw the bruises, so I won’t get involved now. If they want to blind themselves to the truth, more scared about their reputation and money, then I won’t lift a finger to save them.

Sam feels my anxiety the closer we get to my house, and when we stand in the shade of the last house, staring up at the bright, white, cheerful mansion, I can barely breathe. The flowers are in bloom, and the lights are on even though I know he’s not home. It looks happy, but looks can be deceiving.

“This is it?” he asks.

I nod, and he wraps his arms around my waist. “I’ve got you, little one. Let’s get the information we need and get back out before he comes home.”

Nodding, I lead him around to the back gate, which is unlocked. My father was always too cocky. We slink across

the perfectly trimmed garden and pool to the back doors. They are locked, but I climb up the trellis at the side and find the spare key I hid there when I was younger.

When no alarms go off and no one comes running, I push the door open and step into the spotless, ornate kitchen. The lighting is dim, casting the room in shadows.

The hallway in the back with the closed cupboard door is the place of my nightmares. The dining room is to the right, visible with the open doorway, where I was forced to watch him eat.

If you didn't know what happened here, you would think the place was beautiful, and it is. It's decorated in cream and off-white, with state-of-the-art furniture and technology. Even standing here, I feel filthy and out of sorts. I ache to sink into the jacuzzi tub that's in my old room upstairs, but I won't. Instead, I carefully wipe my boots, so I don't leave any tracks, even as a childish part of me wants to stomp the mud through the house. Keeping a tight hold on Sam, I move down the hallway. I hesitate outside the cupboard door but push the memories aside, and then I hurry down the hallway, ignoring the living room, games room, downstairs study, and garage.

What I want will be in his private office, the one place I was never allowed.

As we hurry up the wooden stairs, the carpet quiets our steps. Sam doesn't speak, but I feel his worry for me as he looks around. He's probably wondering how a girl like me came from here.

The truth is, I felt more alive, more safe and happy in that prison, than I ever did here. We had everything—money, riches, and status—but it meant nothing without happiness.

It's when I learned that money cannot buy happiness, and I would gladly forsake every penny to stay with Samael.

The stairs creak when we reach the top, and I turn to my father's wing. I ignore the elevator, and instead, we climb more stairs, bypassing his bedroom and sitting rooms, as well as his spa and other rooms I've never ventured into, until we

reach the double doors of his office. They are locked, but I know a few things I didn't as a kid, so I kneel, pull out my tools, and easily pick the lock. I grin up at Samael when it clicks.

“That’s my good girl,” he murmurs, lifting me to my feet. “You’re so fucking sexy when you’re naughty.”

“Later,” I remind him.

Pushing through the doors, I whistle as I look around. “No wonder he never wanted me in here.”

It’s filled with priceless books, paintings, and artifacts. It looks like a men’s club threw up in here. Ignoring the hideous décor, I hurry to the desk and wiggle the mouse on the computer. There isn’t even a password, since the cocky son of a bitch thinks no one would dare to come in here.

Idiot.

While I’m on the computer, Samael moves to the filing cabinet and starts to grab whatever he can, shoving it into the bags we brought.

The desktop is empty, so I load up his documents. “Come on, Daddy, let’s see where you hide your dirty laundry.” I ignore the downloaded porn, because eww, and scroll through the emails blackmailing a lot of influential rich people. No wonder he got where he is today.

There are files after files of boring paperwork about his legitimate businesses, and I’m just about to give up when I find a hidden folder way below all the others.

“Gotcha,” I whisper, grinning as I open it. I’m about to scan through the files when the sound of a car door makes me jump.

Sam hurries to the window and looks back at me. “Hurry.”

Nodding, I grab the hard drive I brought and load everything onto it, but it’s going to take ten minutes. Fuck. I count down the minutes, sweat beading on my forehead as I hear him thanking his driver and coming into the house.

I hear him moving around downstairs, no doubt hanging his coat, shining his shoes, and grabbing a whisky. At least that gives us some time. We have four minutes left when the stairs creak. Hurrying to the door, I glance out and get my first glimpse of my father.

He looks old and haggard. Not a hair is out of place, but his eyes are surrounded by wrinkles and his clothes are skewed. Reaching the top of the stairs, he turns to head my way when his phone starts to ring. The sound is more familiar to me than my own heartbeat. It usually meant he was going to be called away and would leave me in peace. Holding my breath, I watch him pull it out and press it to his ear.

“What?”

There’s silence, and I watch anger cloud his features. “What the fuck do you mean you can’t find them? How hard is it to find a ragged human and a fucking monster in the slums?” My heart clenches, thinking he means us. He knows. “Well, they escaped from the lab on your watch, so fix it.”

I blow out a slow breath but panic when I realise he means Henrik and Sascha. We need to get to them and ASAP.

“Fuck, fine, I’ll be right there.” Hanging up, he downs his drink. “Fucking scientists.” With that, he turns away, and I sag, but I don’t move until I hear the car, knowing we are once again alone.

“That was close.” I turn, only to come nose to nose with Samael. “Sammy?”

“You are still terrified of him. He’s a weak old man, and you are scared.” His tail thrashes. “I hate it. I’m going to kill him.”

“Yes, I’m scared,” I admit. “If you came face to face with the people who hurt you, wouldn’t you be?”

“Yes,” he admits without shame. “But I hate that you feel fear, even when you are with me. What can I do?”

“You’re doing it,” I answer truthfully. “Let’s get out of here. That will help too.” After making sure the hard drive is transferred properly, I put it in my bag and send the computer

to sleep, leaving the office just as we found it before we head downstairs and to the back door, ready to leave the way we came in.

Outside the cupboard door, I hesitate once more, knowing I'll never be back and have another chance to face my fears, so I rip the door open. I stare into the small space that was my lifeline for so many years.

He hasn't repaired it, as if to prove what he did to me if anyone dared to look, which they never did. My scratch marks line the wall and door, smeared with dried blood. There's a discoloured patch in the back section of carpet where I peed myself more than once.

My first sad thought is that it seems smaller. The second is that this place still terrifies me. I back away, hitting the opposite wall as I stare at it. "That's where he locked me when he said I misbehaved. He left me in the dark to starve and defecate myself." I find my eyes filling with tears as I look at Samael. "I thought I was strong enough, but seeing it now?" I wrap my arms around myself as I slide to the floor.

We need to move, but I'm stuck between my past and my present.

Samael crouches and cups my face. "It will never have you again. Do you hear me? Not the memories, not the dark. You're mine." I nod, and he grips me tighter. "Say it, say you're mine."

"I'm yours," I croak.

"Good girl, it can't have you." Pulling me into his arms, he hurries out the back door and places me onto my feet on the grass. "Wait here, my love," he purrs, looking me over before hurrying back into the house.

I call out for him, but he's gone. I hesitate, unsure what the hell he is doing.

The minutes pass, and I start to get nervous. I'm just about to head back to the house when he rushes out, throws me over his shoulder, and sprints through the mansions and out of the gate, only stopping when we are under the cover of trees.

“What—” I start just as there’s an explosion.

I turn, my mouth dropping open when I spot the flaming mansion on the hill.

Slowly, I look at him, watching the light flicker over his face. “I can’t destroy my demons, but I can destroy yours,” he states sternly, his mismatched eyes holding mine. “Now they can never get you. Plus, it’s one hell of a distraction—”

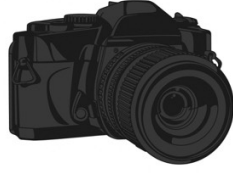
I fling myself at him. I don’t have time to show him just how grateful I am, but I cup his face when I pull my lips away. “Thank you, Sammy.”

“Anything for you,” he murmurs just as we hear sirens.

“It’s a good distraction, but we are about to have a hell of a lot of company. Let’s get the hell out of here. I say we keep running until we reach them. Hopefully it will draw some soldiers from there to here, and we can get over the wall.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me, pet.” He grins, dropping me to my feet and pulling the grate back. With one last look at the burning building, I finally let go of the past and drop into the waiting darkness and his arms with a smile.

THIRTY-FOUR



LYRA

I run as long as I can, barely stopping. It's a good job I'm fit, but even as fit as I am, my legs start to burn, and I begin to flag. Without missing a beat or complaining, Sam pulls me into his arms and keeps running. He already suggested we rest, and I denied him—four times.

We need to make the most of this window while they search for whoever set the fire, not to mention we need to warn Henrik and Sascha that they are coming for them. He stops insisting, and soon, the rhythmic motion of his body sends me to sleep as I curl into his chest.

When I wake up, he's still running, and I can tell we've covered a lot of ground. "Sorry," I mumble, my tongue thick with sleep.

"Shh, pet, go back to sleep. I am used to going a long time without it to escape the nightmares. I will get us there safely," he promises.

My heart pangs for my scarred monster, the one who avoided sleep to escape the memories of what my people did to him. The one who still holds me like I'm precious, despite the fact that every fibre in his being should hate me. The one who watches me like I'm the fucking sun and moon.

He deserves better from humans and his own people.

Everyone has let him down, but I never will.

When I slip into sleep again, his name is on my lips.

I wake up as Sam sets me back on my feet, and holding hands, we run together. It's not as fast as he ran, but I need to stretch my legs, and a few hours later, we are banging on Henrik and Sascha's door.

There's no answer, and we share a worried look. "Guys, it's us!" I hiss.

The door opens slowly, and Henrik peeks out. He's visibly sweating and clutching his side, which is crudely bandaged with blood seeping through. "What happened?" I demand. "Where's Sascha?"

"We went to scout for food when they caught her. I tried to get to her, and they almost killed me. I barely got away." He stumbles into the wall, so I rush in and help him sit. Unlike the last time we were here, the place is dark and cold.

Tears drip down Henrik's face. "I couldn't get to her." He grabs my arm, half wild. I hold back Sam, who growls. "Please, you have to save her. I can't lose her; she's my entire world. I'm not strong enough." It's clear it's hard for him to admit that. "I'll do anything. Leave me for dead, but get her to safety, okay?"

I share a look with Sam, and he narrows his eyes. "No, we had a plan."

"Now we have a new one."

"No, Lyra. I'm putting my foot down."

Two hours later, Sam is still grumbling about women getting their way. I grin as we sneak through the top of the shacks in search of her. God, I hope she's okay.

Henrik was in bits when we left him, fighting to follow us, but he's too injured. He needs to heal, so instead, we crawl through the slums as night sets in. The place is eerily quiet, and now that I know what happened here, I feel sick as I look around at all the empty houses.

Everyone was rounded up like cattle and either taken or killed.

How can they do this? It shouldn't shock me. After all, look what they did to the monsters. When we hear a noise, Sam points in the direction and stays low. In the darkness, we slowly make our way forward, having to stop as soldiers on patrol pass us. Those surrounding the wall have lessened in numbers, either being called back since the mayor's house is

on fire or because of Sascha. Either way, we don't know, but I have a bad feeling.

We end up crawling to the square near the brothel and shops. It's been cleared of debris and bodies, and soldiers are asleep in sleeping bags or patrolling the shacks around it, their guns ready and lights up. We have to duck down to avoid being seen, but then my head jerks around when there's a groan.

In the middle of the square is Sascha, and she's tied to a pole. Her head falls forward, and her face is matted with blood and dirt. For a moment, I worry she's dead. Her clothes are gone, and her body has been lashed with what looks to be a belt, but then I blow out a breath of relief when I see her chest rise and fall.

"She's alive."

She's surrounded, though, and it's clearly a trap. They made her bleed and put her on display to attract Henrik.

Sam and I share a grim look. "There are too many," he warns, speaking the truth.

Crawling back the way we came, we meet Henrik at the entrance to the tunnels where he half stands, half leans. "Well?"

"She's alive." I don't tell him what state she's in because he can't handle it right now. "But it's bad. She's surrounded. It's a trap."

"Then use me as a distraction," he offers instantly. It's the very same thing I had been thinking, but I did not want to suggest it. We both know it means he won't make it out alive. "I'll make some noise and let them chase me in the other direction, while you get her out of there and over the wall."

"You'll die," I say without remorse.

"Yes, but she will be alive, and that is enough. I cannot live in a world where she does not exist, and this way, she has a chance, a future. I love her so much, Lyra. I'm more than willing to die for her."

“She wouldn’t want that!” I practically yell. “There’s another way—”

“We will do it.” I turn to Sam, glaring, while Henrik steps away, giving us the illusion of privacy.

“Sam—”

“I understand where he is coming from, pet. I would do the same thing. This is the only way to get you and her safely over the wall. I will not risk you, not even for her. I won’t apologise for that. Let the warrior die with honour, protecting the one he loves. Do not ask him to sit idly by as she dies. I wouldn’t.”

“But—” I protest as he gathers me close.

“It’s his choice, and he’s made it. You cannot save everyone, Lyra. We will save the human and go over the wall.”

Henrik moves closer again, offering me a soft smile. “Tell her I love her. Tell her I have loved her since the moment we met. She is the best part of me, and without her, I would have died a long time ago. Tell her ... Tell her to find happiness and to forgive the world for what they did.”

“I will.”

“Then I will go to death at peace.”

“Listen here, buddy. You will lead them away then get the fuck out of there. Lose them and meet us at the dump. We will wait there with her.” I ignore both of them, cutting them off. “That’s the only way I am doing this.”

“Fine,” he agrees, but it’s clear he doesn’t think he will make it.

“I mean it, Henrik. We will wait there, so you better be there, or we are all in danger, including your Sascha.”

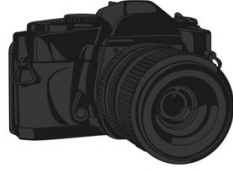
Growling at me, he nods.

“Then let’s do this,” I snap.

I am angry at the world and angry at humans.

I am angry at everything.

THIRTY-FIVE



LYRA

We wait while Henrik moves through the city, using the tunnels as long as he can. When we hear a yell over the radio, and soldiers pour towards the distraction, we make our move. Some soldiers stay behind, though, but we have no choice.

Sam rushes into the courtyard, taking two down, while I pick another off. I check on Sam to see he's nearly to Sascha when I'm tackled to the ground. I knock my chin, but quickly kick back to dislodge the man and then leap to my feet. His gun comes down in an arc, but I block it, glaring into his black helmet, and with a yell, I manage to wrangle it free.

I use it like a bat to hit his body.

Just as the guard I'm fighting finally falls back, I see one sneaking up on Sam, who is hauling Sascha down from the pole. The soldier has his gun raised and is wearing an evil grin on his face.

Fuck no.

I throw myself at him, causing him to stumble, and he turns, but I'm already on him with a roar that would make even Sam's people happy.

Whirling, I smash my foot into the guard's face, and when he's on the ground, I slam my boot into his head again. "He's mine," I hiss as I reach down and take his gun.

When I look up, Sam is grinning at me with Sascha tossed over his shoulder. "That was hot."

"Later," we both say at the same time.

"Go, I'll watch our backs," I tell him.

He hesitates but looks at the gun I hold, nods, and hurries between shacks. I can hear gunfire farther off, but I can't think about Henrik right now. Instead, I focus on holding off the

soldiers, firing as I run. Every so often, I glance back to see Sam hauling a now screaming Sascha through the shacks to the dump.

I have to duck to avoid gunfire and speed up to catch Sam. Just as we break through the dump, I turn and shoot a random stream of fire before reloading with the clip I took.

“Go, go, go!” I scream as we hurry through the dump.

It’s too fucking quiet, and when we slide to a stop just beyond the huge towers of rubbish to wait for Henrik, a bad feeling blooms inside me.

“Wait, we have to go back for Henrik!” Sascha yells, sliding off Sam. I block her with an arm, scanning the darkness.

“He’s meeting us here,” I snap. “Just wait.”

Nodding, she wraps her arms around herself, and without hesitation, I rip off my jacket and hand it over. She puts it on with a grateful smile and belts it to hide her naked body, wincing in pain. I’m about to give her my boots when Sam stops me.

“No,” he snaps. “I’ll carry her, so she’ll be fine. Keep your clothes on unless you want everyone dead.”

“Fine.” I look back at the entrance. “Come on, Henrik,” I hiss, knowing he has to come.

He has to.

Just then, as if we conjured him by speaking, I watch a red blur speed towards us with soldiers right on his tail, yelling and firing.

Shit.

Dropping to my knees, I blow out a breath and take aim. When I squeeze the trigger, I miss, and the shot goes wide, but I try again, and this time I manage to hit one.

“Run!” I yell, lifting the gun and firing at the humans chasing him. They duck and hide behind barrels, but they continue shooting.

Sascha grins and shouts for him, and I grin too, knowing he's going to make it.

Just one more push, one more sprint. His head goes down, and determination is etched onto his features as he pumps his legs and arms faster, blood pouring down his wounded body.

“He's going to make it!” I yell, still providing cover.

But then he stumbles, and I freeze. My heart stops as blood blooms on his chest. “Henrik!” we all scream.

He keeps trying to run, but he's slower now, and another bullet finds its home, this time through his neck.

He stops and falls to his knees as his body jerks with each bullet that rips through him.

“Henrik!” Sascha howls, making a break for him. Sam grabs her around the waist, stopping her from killing herself as she kicks and screams.

His eyes are only for her, even as he bleeds. “Love you,” he mouths.

“We have to go!” I shout, still firing, but they are creeping closer. Sam starts to drag a screaming Sascha with him, her eyes never once leaving Henrik, and when I turn and race after them, I duck behind a rubbish pile and look back.

As the humans start to pass him, he roars, the sound shaking the entire earth with its fury.

It's a roar of agony, anger, and love as he grabs those trying to pass and starts to rip them to pieces, protecting his Sascha even in death.

His eyes meet mine for a moment, and I give him a nod, telling him what I can't say with words—I will protect her, I will make sure she's okay, and he will not be forgotten—and then I turn away.

Her screams turn into sobs as Sam shoves her through the grate, and when she stops, he pushes her through. I climb in behind them, and his tail wraps around me, dragging me with them, clearly worried I'll be left behind. Sealing the grate, I follow as tears fall silently down my face.

I barely knew Henrik, but the love he had for Sascha was so strong, so visible, it was impossible not to respect the guy. He was willing to die for her and to sacrifice everything to ensure she has a future. It's then I realise I would do the same for Sam.

As if knowing my thoughts, his tail wraps tighter around me, yanking me closer so I'm practically crawling on top of him, and when we get out on the other side, Sascha collapses into a sobbing heap. I wrap my arms around her.

There is nothing I can say that will make this better, so I hold her as she breaks, all while Sam blocks the grate so they can't follow us through.

All of us remain silent, with only her heartbroken cries filling the air.

SAMAEL

The human will not stop crying, and Lyra is looking more and more upset by the moment. She looks at me, her eyes filled with tears. I can handle the other human's cries, by Lyra's?

"We have to move." I have sealed the grate, but I can smell the stench of blood and infection on the other human. Her wounds are infected, and who knows what else they did to her.

"Henrik," she cries.

Wincing, I rub at my face, guilt eating me. Maybe I should have ran to him and defended his back, but then I would have been dead. Their bullets would have ripped me to shreds, and I have Lyra to think about. I owe no one else anything, but I made promises to her.

She looks to me now like she can see my thoughts. "You couldn't have done anything," she whispers.

"Neither could you," I reply, knowing she's feeling just as guilty. We kept our promise and saved Sascha, so that has to be enough. Just then, there's a noise, and I spin, relaxing when I see Midnight. "Hey, girl."

Rubbing her face, Lyra whispers to Sascha who continues to cry.

I move over and crouch. "You are injured. We need to get you checked over."

"Let me die," she sobs. "Let me be with him."

"I can't do that."

Her head snaps up, and some fire returns to her eyes. Good, she's not dead yet. Half the battle is the one in your mind.

"I made a promise to Henrik, and I intend to keep it. Now, you can either climb on that horse so I can save your life, or I

can force you to. Either way, I am saving you. I am keeping my promise.”

She wilts.

With my tail thumping in agitation, I look to Lyra and back, but she’s just as lost as I. “He wanted you to live. Tell her, Lyra.”

“He did, it’s true. He told me to tell you to live and that he loved you. He said you should forgive the world.”

She starts sobbing harder, so I smack her thigh with my tail just hard enough to sting, not wanting to use my hand in case Lyra gets jealous. “You must fight and carry on. You owe it to his memory. He sacrificed his life so you can live. Do not dishonour him.” Standing, I hold out my hand to her.

This has to be her choice. We can drag her, but in the end, it would kill her if she has given up. She has to choose to survive and go on, even if it hurts.

I know that all too well.

“We will make them pay,” I tell her. “But for that to happen, you must survive. Are you strong enough to do that, or was Henrik wrong about you?”

She peers up at me, broken-hearted and hurting.

“Are you as strong as he thought?” I demand. I refuse to keep her alive if she’s intent on dying. I will never take the choice from another, and this is her battle, her battle alone.

Lyra comes and stands at my side, both of us staring down at her. Sascha reaches up and lays her hand in mine. “I’ll do him proud,” she says.

Nodding, I tug her up as softly as I can, then I release her hand and lead her to Midnight, where I lift Sascha up onto her back. “We will walk, since you are hurt. Rest now, and when you wake up, we will be at your new home.”

Crying softly, she leans into Midnight’s neck, wrapping her arms around her. Clicking, I start to walk and Midnight follows, while I take Lyra’s hand and look down at her sad

face. “You did good,” she tells me with a watery smile. “So good, Sammy.”

“I am sorry I touched her hand. It was only to get her up,” I reply with a wince, knowing my Lyra is possessive.

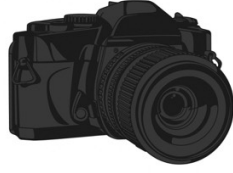
She just laughs. “I’ll let it go this once.”

Exhausted and covered in sweat, blood, and rubbish, we walk through our land.

“Let’s go home.” She sighs, leaning into my side. “I want our nest.”

“Me too, pet, me too.”

THIRTY-SIX



LYRA

We leave Sascha in a cell near our room. The door slides shut and locks so she feels safe, and Sam strings up a curtain for her. She has a bed and a pillow, and we get her food and water. Sam even brought a monster he claims is a doctor—or as close to one as they get. Apparently, he was kicked out of Cato’s tribe for helping humans. When he admits this, sparing Sam a tense look, Sam just laughs and calls it fate.

Once I’m sure he will look after her, I leave with Sam. I caught a glimpse of Sascha’s injuries, and they were extensive. The whole front of her body and back were shredded by whips and belts. She will bear more scars than before, but internal healing, which none of us can help her with, will be the hardest.

When we get back to the nest, I curl into Sam’s arms, and we just hold each other.

Henrik’s screams follow me into a restless sleep.

A few hours later, I slip from a sleeping Sam’s arms, and after dressing, I check on Sascha. She’s crying in her sleep, and her body is covered in a sheet, but it’s stained with blood. Outside her cell, the doctor sits with his head back against the door.

“How is she?” I ask quietly.

He startles and almost falls from his chair before rubbing at his face with an awkward chuckle. “She’s ... as good as can be expected. Her body will heal. Unfortunately, I can’t do anything about the scars, but I have covered her wounds to stop the infection. All she can do now is rest, eat, drink, and let her body heal. I didn’t want to leave her, though. I wanted her to feel safe.”

“That’s good, thank you.” I peer through the cell door, my shoulders slumped in defeat. “She lost her lover out there, a

monster, so she will need all the friendship and support she can get.”

“She will not be alone.” He sits up straight, a softness to his expression. “I promise you that, my queen.”

I ignore that and watch her for a moment longer. “Get me if anything changes, okay?”

“Of course.” He nods.

“Oh, and when Sam comes tearing out screaming for me, just tell him I’m going to bathe and look through what we found.” I chuckle.

He whines but nods. Waving goodbye, I slip through the prison. I head to the bath and soak there, letting the water wash away all the dirt, blood, and death. I wash my hair four times before I finally get dressed in some clean clothes. I pick up a plate of food on the way, smiling at those who greet me, and then head to an old computer room I found when I was exploring. My bag hits my side as I slip through the door. Putting the plate down on the table in the middle, I wipe away the dust with a cloth before opening my bag.

After all, there is no time like the present.

Shoving a bite of potato into my mouth, I chew as I scatter the bag’s contents. I put the hard drive to the side, knowing I’ll need to check if any of the computers here work well enough to load the contents, then I focus on the files Sam found, sorting them into piles before I settle back and begin.

Some hold receipts, invoices, and business inquiries, but nothing interesting. I sort them into a useless pile. Another has deeds for businesses, and I keep them just in case they come in handy. The next pile is much better—it has emails and letters from the lab as well as from him. Insurance perhaps? I flag them to read through later, and when I open the next pile, I sit up straight.

Buried between paperwork is a small, brown leather book addressed to the mayor, not my father.

When I open it, I gasp. It has letters dating back fifty years, and when I flip through, I realise each mayor has added to the

diary, keeping letters, secrets, and information to pass down.

I'm just about to start reading when Sam's roar shakes the building.

I grin. "Computer lab!" I scream, knowing he's looking for me. Propping my feet onto the table, I wait with my head turned to the door. "I'm betting one minute," I mutter.

I start to count, and I've barely reached thirty seconds before the door slams open and a grumpy-looking Sam stands there, rubbing his eyes. "You were gone," he mutters. "Come back and cuddle."

My heart fucking melts right then and there. "I'm working. Come sit with me."

Groaning, he shuffles in and drops into the chair, pulling me into his lap. "Damn workaholics. Being king should come with privileges."

"It does." I grin, patting his arm where he curls it around me. He nuzzles my neck and inhales, making me sigh in pleasure as I cross my legs on the table once more. "You get to watch me work."

"Yay me," he mutters, kissing my shoulder anyway. "Whatcha got there?"

"I'm not sure yet." I return to the first letter and settle down to read it once more, his heat warming me.

To the Mayor of Athesa,

By now, you will have been sworn in. This is a sacred duty, more than you can ever know. You probably have some questions or some reservations about life beyond the walls of Athesa. I am here to pass on the knowledge from one leader to the next.

The wall must never be crossed. It is there for your protection, but also so the results are not affected. You may have been debriefed, but in case you haven't, you have been chosen to uphold our laws, our way of life, and most of all, to protect the experiments at all costs.

The city of Athesa and the tests being run inside are the future of our people. The whole world depends on you finding a way to extend the human lifespan as well as make us stronger and more capable to adapt to this rapidly changing world we find ourselves in.

The residents must never know. This is vital because they never volunteered, and to make the results as trustworthy as possible, they must live their lives in ignorance, as must their children. Do what you must to uphold this and the experiments. The lead scientist, Alberto, is young but capable. He will be with you and, in time, will pass his learnings onto the next he selects. The research must always come first. There are no more Geneva Conventions, and no more laws to stop this.

Do what it takes, whatever that entails.

Fill this journal with your successes and failures so the ones after you may learn from them. Know we are out here, and you are not alone, even as you endure this lonely yet vital role.

The whole world is depending on you.

We must protect this secret.

When the time is right, we will come for the results.

Professor Rickard Athesa.

“Well shit,” I mutter.

“What?” he murmurs.

“It seems the founding father of Athesa was behind all the experiments. I think this is a book to pass onto future generations to explain where they are in the process,” I explain as I pick a page at random and start to read the letter there.

“Malcome—shit, that’s to my father. Okay, Malcome.” I clear my throat. “You have always suspected this, but here is the truth—things in Athesa are not what they seem. I know you are against what I have been doing, and you want to save the world, but this is how we’ll do it. The experiments must

continue, especially now more than ever with the wall between us and them. We must figure out what went wrong. We must do our duty. You must do your duty as well. You are young, idealistic, and in love. It will fade, and you will soon realise what I say is true. Our people depend on this, and without them, there is no future for any of us.”

“It’s from his father,” I whisper. “My dad was never the kind, saving the world type, was he?”

“People can change,” Sam offers hesitantly, clearly not wanting to upset me.

Slamming the book shut, I rub my head. “We need to see what’s on the hard drive. These letters will help prove it, but the more evidence we can show them, the better. We could film it all and edit it together, making one easy show we can slip into their broadcasts so they can’t stop it.”

“What would you need for that?” he asks rather than telling me it’s impossible. It makes me want to kiss him, so I turn and do just that.

“An editing lab, computers, a camera ... We would need a broadcast station, a news center.” I huff, thinking through our options. “We can’t go back over the wall right now, but they have the news—”

“There is one here.” I blink, and he grins. “We did not destroy it. They wanted the war broadcast until the very last minute so the humans would leave us alone after. It is not destroyed. In fact, it’s even in my lands, near Cato’s territory.”

“You are a fucking miracle!” I kiss him hard and fast. “Then we go there tomorrow.”

“Why not tonight?” His frown is so cute.

“Tonight, I want to keep my eye on Sascha, and I also want to suck your cock to thank you for saving us and proving how incredible you are.”

“You have a way with words,” he deadpans, his eyes simmering with heat. “But no man would say no to that.” He moves everything into my bag, shoves the rest of the food into his mouth, and tosses me over his shoulder, making me laugh

and smack his back as he rushes through the corridor. Before I know it, I'm dumped on our nest and his hands are at his pants, my smile wide and carefree.

Samael freezes, lifting his nose into the air, and a growl escapes his lips. His claws come out as he turns to the door. "Eaters. Get a weapon and lock the door." He rushes to it, but I leap to my feet, grab my gun, and follow him. "Pet, I do not have time to argue."

Checking that the safety is off, I press my lips together. "Then don't, let's go."

Huffing, he rips open the door and grabs his axe. "Do not leave my side."

"Gotcha."

We pass some of the cells, and I peer over the edge to see madness below. There are monsters fighting more monsters, their roars filling the air. Sam takes in the scene and snarls, pointing at me. "Stay," he orders, and then he flings himself over the balcony, landing delicately on his feet below.

"What happened to not leaving your side?" I look at the barrier leading to the ground floor where they are fighting. Grabbing it, I take a deep breath, ready to throw myself over, until I change my mind and throw myself back instead. "Nope, not happening. That's dumb. I'm not a fucking superhero or some shit," I mutter, lifting the gun as I head to the stairs, but there's an eater, which appears to be a monster that, judging by the limb in his mouth, I'm guessing eats people.

Great.

"You're one ugly bitch," I remark as I lift the gun and fire as he begins to leap at me. Glancing back as he falls, I point at the doc. "Stay in that cell with her and protect her with your life."

"Got it." He nods as I stop at the top of the stairs, using it as cover as I peer over the top and fire. It's hard to pick out which monsters are ours and theirs, but some have erm ... decorations, like thumbs, tongues, or skulls hanging from their necks, so I pick those out and hope I'm right.

I keep firing, focusing on breathing slowly and pulling the trigger, trying not to waste ammo since I don't have more, but when the gun clicks empty, I swear.

A huge, one-armed eater clammers up the stairs with blood dripping from his mouth as he snarls at me.

“Oh, hell no. Only one monster gets to eat me!” I yell as I use the gun like a bat and smash it into his face. He falls back and then tumbles down the stairs. Sam is suddenly there, and he rips off his head, tossing it away as he winks up at me before throwing himself back in the fray.

I keep hitting anyone who comes up the stairs, and the doc takes out those who get too close to Sascha's cell. We hear a roar, and we all stop and look. Standing tall, with his tail twitching and body coated in blood, is Samael. He holds a head in each hand as he roars again before dropping the bloody skulls onto the ground.

His people copy him, and the cannibals turn and try to run, but with a wicked smile, Sam orders, “Hunt them down like the dogs they are!”

Shit, okay, not hot. Focus, Lyra.

He turns to me, grinning in triumph and, yep, covered in blood and death, but he has never been so beautiful. He strides my way as his people cackle and give chase, and I can't help but grin, dropping my gun. Just as Sam is climbing the stairs, I see him.

It.

The eater is sneaking through the massacre, a dagger in hand, and it is focused on the king.

My king. My Samael.

Not fucking happening. Reaching down, I grab the blade in my boot, the one Sammy gave me, and his eyes widen. For a moment, I see worry in his gaze as I lift it and throw it right at him.

He never moves, never hesitates, even though he thinks I'm going to kill him. The dagger sails past him and sinks

home in the cannibal's eye, the force sending him flying back. Samael turns before whipping his head back to me.

“Run, pet. When I get you, I'm going to fucking claim you.”

Shit.

I see the possessiveness in his eyes, so I do what any smart human would do—I turn and run, but right back to our nest. I lead him where I want him, wanting exactly what he promised. The roar he releases is one of promise.

Lust.

Need.

Possession.

It seems my monster is finally going to claim me, and I can't wait, but I don't make it easy. I slam the door and drag as much furniture as I can before it, grinning as I wait in the middle of the room. I know nothing will stop him from getting to me, but it's fun to watch the door splinter as he slams into it.

“Little pet,” he croons. “Open the door. I won't hurt you.”

His voice is silky but coated in danger.

“Nope.” I giggle. “Guess you'll have to find a way in. Do you want me, Samael? Prove it.” I get undressed quickly, knowing he will rip them away and clothes are hot commodities here. He slams into the door, and I give it props for standing up so well against his strength. I let out a long, needy moan as I cup my pussy, parting my legs to grind into my hand. “Sammy, shit, I'm so wet. You should feel it.”

“Do not touch, that is mine!” he roars, battering at the door. “Lyra!”

I gasp as I slide two fingers inside of myself with a moan. He slams against the door once more before it stops. I freeze and tilt my head for a moment. All I hear is his breathing. “When I get you, pet, you are going to beg for mercy.”

“Sure,” I reply, fucking myself with my fingers. “Or I'll have already come.”

I lift my other hand and slide it over my curves, squeezing as I rock my hips, but he's silent, and for a moment, I worry I've pushed him too far before I smirk in victory.

He can't get in—

Smash.

I whip around, my mouth gaping open when I see Samael there. Behind him is the shattered window and the boards that covered it.

He climbed the building and smashed through it.

I'm so fucked.

I race for the door, but he leaps at me, tackling me to the floor and pinning me in seconds. "What did I tell you, pet?"

Panting, I throw back my elbow, but he just chuckles and pins me harder. "Beg, pet."

"Never!" I yell, trying to wiggle out from under him, even while I grin.

His fangs descend, making me scream as they pierce my shoulder and hold me in place. He pulls them back as I whimper. "I'm going to fuck you like I hate you, like I wanted to the first moment I saw you." He drags my hips into the air. "And I'm not going to let you come until you beg the big bad monster to let you come all over his cock you hate so much."

"Never!" I cry.

His wicked tail spears into my pussy. He fucks me with it, stretching me. I claw at the floor, trying to get away even as I moan, but just as suddenly as it filled me, it's gone.

He replaces it with his cock as he hauls my writhing body back and impales me on his length.

His fangs go back into my neck, and the pain and pleasure merge until an inhuman noise leaves my lips. He hammers into me, using me as my blood drips down my back. Possessiveness pours off him in waves as his claws cut into my skin, his fangs scar me, and his tail wiggles between us.

“Sammy, don’t you dare!” I scream, but my words end in a cry when it slides into my ass, my nails breaking on the floor as I gasp and moan.

He doesn’t relent, pushing us across the room with the force of his thrusts. He growls as he presses his fangs deeper. Moaning, I push back, stretched to my limits even as an addictive scent pumps through the room, nearly making me come on the spot. It wraps around me, priming me because I have never been this feral.

His name is a howl on my lips as my whole body comes alive. My nipples ache so badly I rub them against the floor, and my clit is so sensitive that when he brushes a claw across it, I almost splinter, but then he stops moving.

“Samael,” I whine.

“Beg,” he growls against my skin.

“Sammy.” I push back, trying to get leverage to fuck him, but he bands his arms around me and hauls me up until I’m speared on his tail and cock, unable to move. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I need to come so badly it’s not even funny, and that scent sinks into my skin, making me sweat and overheat.

“Please!” I scream.

“Please what, pet,” he growls.

“Please fuck me! Please make me come!”

“Mine!” he roars as he bends me over and slams into me, pressing his claw to my clit. It rubs across it with every thrust, and within seconds, I come apart, but he doesn’t stop. He fucks me through it, wringing another orgasm out of me.

One release blends into the next until I’m just continually coming.

“More,” he demands. “Mine, fucking mine.”

“Yours, yours, yours,” I chant. “Please!”

“What do you want, pet?” he growls pulling out of me. I’m flipped, and then he lifts my legs into the air, throws them over

his shoulders, and thrusts back into me, making me detonate again.

“I can’t—no, Sammy!” I don’t even know what I’m saying as he powers into me, snarling above me. My blood drips from his fangs, and his body is covered in his enemies’ blood, and yet I’ve never been more in love with him.

Love.

Everything in me stills until he lashes my breasts with his tail. “Stay with me,” he snarls, and the sharp edge of pain brings me back from my screeching thoughts, so he does it again.

The pain blends with pleasure, and when I come again, he roars, his head falling back as I feel him pump his release into me. I drop down, limp and barely able to breathe or think, only to watch through slitted eyes as he grips his cock and jerks it, spraying my entire body in his cum and that delicious scent.

He massages it into every inch of me with a wild look in his eyes. When he’s done, he leans down and kisses me softly. “My Lyra, my perfect Lyra. Rest now, mate, I have you.”

THIRTY-SEVEN



SAMAEL

I hold her close. I know I should bathe her, but she smells like me, and it nearly makes me feral as I bury her in my nest and hold her against me.

I bit her. I bred her ...

Mate.

She's my mate. I don't know how I didn't realise it before now, but she is. My Lyra, my perfect little human, is my other half, and I spent so long not realising what my body already knew. High from the fight and pumped full of bloodlust and adrenaline, I was compelled to chase her, and when I got my prize, I bred her. My hand slips down to her belly and grips. It's my favourite place to hold, and she moans in her sleep. She needs rest, but she's mine.

My forever.

I can't resist. I slide down her body, and while she's asleep, I lick her sweet pussy until she comes without waking. Then I fist my cock and, for good measure, come all over her once more and rub it in. Now, no other will ever touch her or doubt whom she belongs to. I will do this every fucking day.

"No, you won't," she croaks, cracking her eyes open for a moment.

I raise an eyebrow, and she jerks up. "You didn't say that out loud, did you?"

"No, little mate," I murmur as I drag her back into my arms.

"Oh god, I heard your thoughts." She smacks my chest, swinging her leg over me as she stares down at me. I nudge her farther down while she's distracted. "How are you not freaking out right now?"

I shrug. “You can have all my thoughts if you wish.” Apart from my memories, since I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy, never mind my mate.

“Sammy,” she murmurs, sounding panicked as I keep nudging her down and lift her slightly. She’s too unnerved to notice until I slam her down on my cock. She gasps as she automatically rolls her hips. I watch my cock in her tight little cunt as she shakes her head and glares at me, trying to move away. “I mean it, we need to talk. What—” She moans when I reach down and flick her clit. “How—why am I awake? How am I not sore? I couldn’t even walk.”

That makes me hesitate for a moment. I run my eyes over her body, noting she’s completely healed. Even the cuts on her hips from my claws and the bruises from my rough handling are gone. Only the mating bite on her shoulder remains unhealed. “I guess since we are now mated, you are changing to accommodate me and probably healing faster.” I lift and drop her again, watching the enticing sway of her full breasts.

“Sammy, focus!” she yells, and it’s only then I realise she has been talking. I rise and lick her nipples until she gasps and finally pushes me away. She crosses her arms, but the joke’s on her because it only pushes her tits up and makes me jerk inside of her. “I mean it.”

Sighing, I cross my arms behind my head but keep her locked to me, needing the feel of her tight cunt wrapped around me. It’s the only time where I feel both wild and grounded at the same time. “I can’t focus when you are near or looking at me.”

Her eyes narrow, and I grin at her. She smiles, and I beam triumphantly. “Fucking cute,” she mumbles. “No, wait, okay, why am I healing? What is a mate, and why can I hear your thoughts?”

“Can I answer that while you ride me?” I ask.

“No, answer first, and if you’re a good boy, I’ll ride your cock.” I bounce her once, and she narrows her gaze, making me grin mischievously.

“Fine, you’re my mate, that’s why.”

She groans. “Not helpful.”

“A mate is ... everything. A mate is the perfect half of our soul, the one you spend your life with. The one you want to wake up with and go to sleep next to. They are the person you want to walk into battle with and for. They are the person who sees your flaws and loves them, who kisses your scars better. They cherish every inch of you and don’t try to change you. A mate is different to everyone, but you, Lyra, are my mate. It took me a long time to realise it because I’m a fool, a blind fool, who was so intent on holding onto my hatred and anger, but you have and always will be my mate, Lyra. That bite on your neck is proof that I claimed you. You’re mine.” Her eyes narrow, and I smile. “As much as I am yours. It is a natural instinct. I never thought ... I never thought I would have one.”

She softens, and tears well in her eyes. “Sammy ...”

“And then you came along and changed everything.” Sitting up, I wrap my arms around her. “I don’t know about mating between humans and monsters, but between monsters, they usually get stronger, closer, and can even read each other’s minds. If I had to guess, I would say you are adapting to handle my mating.”

She blows out a breath. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I already promised forever, dummy, so this changes nothing.” She smiles softly. “Mate.” The groan that leaves my lips has her grinning wickedly as she pushes me down. “You were a good boy, so now I guess it’s time for me to claim you.”

“Fuck yes,” I beg, gripping her hips, but she smacks my hands away and pins them above my head, moaning as she sits back on my cock. The position puts her breasts right in my face, so I suck and bite them as she rides me.

The pleasure arches through me so forcefully, I struggle to breathe. This tiny little human makes me weak, so weak, and when she dips her head and bites, I’m lost.

Her human teeth dig into my neck, and the sharp pain mixes with my joy and possessiveness that she's claiming me. I roar my release as I hold her head to me, urging her to bite harder and scar me.

It's the only one I will ever wear proudly.

We spend the next three days in my nest. My people can wait, as can the world.

I have a mate, and I keep her under me, over me, and with me at all times. I cover her in my scent and cum, fucking her as often as I can, until finally, on the third day, the mating haze lifts enough for her to push me away. She's healing quickly, but the mark on her neck doesn't, and every time I see it, I smile smugly and get hard.

Today, though, she's determined to leave our nest, and as much as I don't want to, I know I need to check on my people. Hand in hand, she leads me to Sascha who is sitting up but staring blankly at the wall. I stand at the cell door as Lyra whispers to her. Tears roll down Sascha's cheeks, but other than that, she doesn't move or speak.

"What's wrong with her?" I ask the doc.

"She's got a broken heart." He sighs, rubbing at his head. "I cannot heal that, only time can."

I nod, knowing if something happened to Lyra, I wouldn't live on. I would be catatonic like Sascha is. I would kill everyone who hurt her and then take the blade to myself to join her in the afterlife.

"Congratulations on your mating," he murmurs.

"Isn't she fucking perfect?" I grin down at him.

He smiles widely. "She is, my king, and it's good to see you happy. For so long, you were miserable and lost." He glances at Lyra. "She guides you home, and we are all grateful for that. We need you; we need you both."

I blink at the respect and friendship I hear in his voice. After all, I've never done anything to earn it. He must see my question because he grins.

“You are a bastard, that's true, but you kept us safe and gave us misfits a home. We might be fucked up, but all the best monsters are. Do not doubt yourself, my king. Without you, the world would be a much different place.”

“Quiet, you mean.” Lyra grins as she joins me.

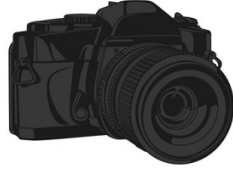
“Watch your mouth, pet, before I fill it,” I warn, and the doc blushes and looks away. She just rolls her eyes and hits me.

“I'll be back to see her later. Try to get her to eat, okay?” she asks sadly.

He nods. “I will try. I fear this is one fight only she can battle, but I will stay at her side the entire time.” He moves to Sascha, sitting and talking to her like Lyra did, and I know with him at her side, she will heal. She will have to if she wants her vengeance.

Lyra forces me to eat with the others, fielding questions and checking in on patrols. It seems the humans are still surrounding the wall, but they haven't attacked. I order them to be alert just in case, and then I pack us a bag and get Midnight ready. Together, we set out into the night, heading to the station so my girl can work her magic and save the world.

THIRTY-EIGHT



LYRA

The stairs are blocked, a last-ditch effort to hold off the attack, and the elevators are long since out of service.

The reception area is covered in vines and plants, and the glass doors are gone, so nature has come in. Mice and other small animals scuttle around as Samael turns to me and offers me his back. “We climb up.”

“Climb up there?” I point to the empty elevator shaft he pried open. “Nope, I like climbing, don’t get me wrong, but no fucking way.”

He slings me over his shoulder. “Hold on.”

I wrap my arms around him, and with an effortless leap, he slashes his claws into the other side of the wall and starts to climb, fast and with ease, ten floors up without breaking a sweat. He forces open the door and climbs out, letting me slide to my feet.

“Your kingdom awaits.” He gestures, making me snort, but then I look around.

It’s set up very similar to my old workplace. There are desks and offices, but beyond that, I see doors for the recording studios and live sets. That’s where we will need to broadcast from, but first, I need to edit, so I wander through the office space as Samael sets up lanterns we brought and grins at me. There are no shadows now.

I could suck his dick right now.

I turn around, ignoring his leer since he can smell my desire, and pick an editing suite at random. There are no bodies or blood. It’s almost normal up here, almost easy to forget where we are and why we are here, until I dust off the old leather chair and sit, wincing at the creak.

The computer is old. It must have been the latest model back then, but it’s ancient now. Luckily, it still boots up. I

don't need the internet or anything else right now, so I wait impatiently, drumming my fingers, for the editing software to load.

It takes forever, so I swivel in the chair and hum to keep myself distracted.

“Is this ... editing?” Samael stumbles over the word as I spin to a stop and grin at him.

“Nope, this is awesomeness. I'm just waiting for the software to load.”

“I can think of something we can do while you wait.” He wiggles his brows, making me chuckle and hold up my hand.

“Nope, keep your dick in your pants or we will never get any work done.”

“What about my tongue and fingers?”

“Bad Sammy.” I laugh as he reaches for me, sliding his hands over me in a tickle as I giggle. The sound ends in a moan as he kisses me, but just then, the computer booms out a noise that has him snarling and ready to kill. Laughing, I pat his side. “Just the software. Let's do this.” I crack my neck and plug in the hard drive. “I haven't edited a story alone since my first year at university, but I can do this. In the meantime, why don't you scope the place out and make sure we are alone and that all the cameras aren't broken?”

He leans down and kisses me. “Then tongues and fingers?”

“Then tongues and fingers.” I grin without looking at him.

“I'm a king, yet I'm not allowed to touch my mate while she works,” he complains as he wanders off. “Maybe I should just destroy everything and then we can fuck all the time.” I hear him grumbling, and I shake my head as I load the footage. I section them off into different folders, and then I create a timeline to drop clips into and edit them with sound and subtitles. The easier it is for people to understand, the better.

I lose myself in the editing process, focusing on editing the clips just right. I have to sort through them as well, and some

of them make me sick. They show them experimenting on monsters, humans, and our blending. There are even some from the breeding programme Sascha mentioned. The more I watch, the sicker I feel, so after several hours, I stand, needing space.

I venture out, but I don't see Sam, so I wander over to the studio with the door pushed open to see him sitting behind a news broadcast desk, making faces at the camera. I giggle, and his head snaps up as he grins. "I was bored. I already checked and cleaned the cameras in here. I also found you some water."

Wandering through the studio, I hop up on the desk and grin at him. "I always wanted to fuck around in these places, but they never let me."

"Is this like where you ... worked?" he asks, gripping my thighs as he rolls his chair over.

"Sometimes. I often worked in the office or on the streets chasing a story. I was more of a research journalist, the one who broke the stories out in the city, but sometimes they would have me come into the studio for interviews. It was always too stiff and formal for my liking. I much preferred being out on the street."

"No wonder you fit in so well with us heathens," he teases, laying his head in my lap. I brush my fingers through his hair. "How's it going?" he asks after a minute of silence.

"Hard," I admit. "I'm having to watch all the clips. It's not easy, but I have to do this. It's going to take me a few days though. I'm not as fast at editing as I once was, and this is important. We have to get this right, not to mention the software is hella fucking slow."

"I'm sorry. Can I help?" he offers without hesitation.

The men I used to date hated it when I talked about work, and they definitely wouldn't offer to help with such sincerity. It would be a fake, "Oh, maybe I can help," and then they would grow bored, especially when they realised I actually worked hard and earned a lot of money. It intimidated them. Turns out men only want an independent woman until they

actually have one, and then they don't know what to do with them.

Fragile masculinity.

Samael has none of that. He's secure in who he is and will do whatever he can to help me. He's not afraid to act like a fool or to kill a man who looks at me wrong. He can be goofy and cuddly while also ready to rip the shit out of someone.

I love him so fucking much.

As if knowing my thoughts, he grins up at me. "Is it time for a tongues and fingers break? And maybe some tail if I'm good?"

I can't help but laugh. "How do you do it? How do you make me laugh even when I want to cry?"

His face loses all humour as he sits up. "Because if you cry, I have to kill everyone involved, which would be the world. I mean, that's fine, but I have plans to have you under me all night, so that gets in the way." His lips tug up a bit. "I'd do anything to see your smile, pet, anything. There's been enough pain in our pasts, and both of us deserve happiness."

"Even now, in the middle of this?"

"Especially now." He nods. "We both know from experience that you have to find little slices of happiness and cling to them when everything else gets dark, or what do you keep fighting for?"

"Sammy," I whisper.

"I fight for you. Even before I knew what you were to me, I fought for you, and I always will." He kisses both of my hands as my heart fills and speeds up. "You'll never face anything alone again, Lyra, good or bad, and on the worst days, when you want to cry and give up, I will always be there to make you laugh and remind you how strong you are. Now, little one, we have a world to save—no, you have a world to save—so tell me, how I can help you."

I slam my lips to his before he can move. "This, being here," I tell him. "You're doing it, Sammy."

The kiss is soft and loving, unlike the last few days during the mating rush where we couldn't wait to rip each other's clothes off. I moan, and he holds me tighter before pressing his forehead to mine, those mismatched eyes I love so much locked on mine.

"I've got you, Lyra, even when you are not strong enough to stand alone. I always have you."

That's what it comes down to—two souls, scarred and locked away in fear, meeting and becoming one.

We stay holed up in the news studio for days. Sammy never leaves my side. He brings me food, drinks, and presents that make me smile, and when I'm so exhausted I feel like I might collapse, he drags me to a nest he made and curls up around me. When I wake, he's there to help me through the day. He never once complains, nor does he try to pull me from my work. He supports me, and if I didn't already know that I love this monster, then I would now.

On the fourth day of editing, I sit back and eye my work. It's not great, but it's good. I just need it to create an impact. I need more footage, and not just from the past, but from the present.

Knowing this might upset him, I glance up at Sammy to find him sitting delicately on a chair, trying to fill in a crossword puzzle, and my heart melts. "Keep looking at me like that and I'll bend you over the desk," he warns without looking.

I grin, but it soon fades. "I need more footage," I admit.

"Okay, where from?" he asks without even questioning me, his head lifting as he watches me, ready to help in any way.

"I need real footage. Of now. I need interviews with monsters and the places ... the places it happened." He stiffens and closes his eyes for a moment. "Not you, Sammy. I would

never ask you, but do you know anyone who might be comfortable?”

“No, no one will want to talk about it, especially to a human.” He winces. “Sorry, pet ... but if I do, they will.”

“No, I was wrong. I can work with—”

“You need the footage, so I’ll get it.” Rolling his shoulders back, he blows out a breath. “I might struggle to talk about it, but I’ll try, pet, for you.”

“Sammy.” I get to my feet and clamber onto his lap, searching his gaze. “Are you sure? I can do without if it means not hurting you. Fuck the world if it means revisiting that.”

The smile he gives me nearly makes me gasp with its beauty. “You cannot save me from this, pet. Plus, like you’ve told me before, they are only memories. They cannot hurt me anymore, and if it will help you, I’ll rip myself open raw, you know that.”

“I love you,” I murmur as I glance between his eyes. “I’ve known it for days, but I do, Sammy. I love you.”

“Okay.” He nods. “When do you want to film?”

My mouth drops as I gape at him. “Samael, I just told you I love you, and all you have to say is okay?” I stand up and cross my arms as he blinks at me in confusion.

“Yes?” He hesitates. “Why do I feel like we are about to fight?”

“Because we are,” I hiss, anger filling me as I glare at him. Swiping at my tears, I turn away.

“Whoa, pet.” He grabs me and yanks me down onto his lap. “Why are you crying?”

I struggle to get away, but he pins me, and when I pant and still, he arches a brow.

“Finished?”

“Fuck you.”

“Later, after you tell me what I have done to upset you so I can fix it,” he demands. When I just glare, he narrows his eyes. “Lyra, do I have to punish it out of you?”

Looking away, I swallow around the lump in my throat as my heart clenches and aches. “You don’t love me?” I ask.

“What does love mean? It seems like an important word to you. I thought it meant something else, but it clearly does not.”

“You don’t know what love means?” I query, jerking around. “So you’re not rejecting me?”

“Rejecting you?” His head pulls back, and shock coats his features. “Lyra, we are mated. How could I reject you?”

“It’s just that ...” I struggle, realising this is an error in communication and I need to swallow my hurt and explain my feelings. “Love means ... everything. It means you cannot imagine your life without them. It means they are your chosen person for the rest of your life. It’s what humans tell their partners. When I told you I loved you and you simply said okay, it felt like you were rejecting that, rejecting me.”

He softens against me. “I never meant to hurt you, pet. I mated you, and I wouldn’t have done that if I didn’t ... love you. Love is a human concept, a human word, and we show how we feel through actions. How could you not know that I love you? I worship the very ground you walk on, and I would do anything for you. Love isn’t a big enough word for how I feel for you. You have my forever, Lyra. You have all of me. One word cannot contain that meaning, but if it’s what you need to hear, then I will say it every minute of every day.”

My heart explodes as I stare into his eyes, watching him struggle with the words.

“I’m not good at this,” he mutters. “You have to know how I feel about you, Lyra. You’re my everything.”

“I do know,” I whisper as I smile, crying for a whole other reason now.

“Fuck, what did I say now?” He grips my face, wiping away my tears like they offend him. “Please, little one, tell me how to fix this.”

“You already did.” I slam my lips to his, and he sighs against me. Pulling back, I press my forehead to his. “I love you too.”

“Good.” He grins. “Because I love you, mate, and you’re never getting away from me. Now let’s get your footage so I can spend the next fifty or a hundred years buried between your thighs without worrying about getting an axe in the back.”

Giggling, I hop up and take his hand. “Let’s.”

Sammy is clearly uncomfortable. Monsters crowded into the news building at his calling, and he’s going to expose himself in front of all of them for me so they will talk and help me as well.

If I didn’t know he loved me, I would now, and he’s right. It’s in his actions, not his words.

I hate that he has to do this, and I’ve offered him a way out, but he refuses.

“Are you sure?” I ask again. The cameras are set up in the area where they used to record the news, and it’s being broadcast across all TVs that still work so the others can see and hopefully decide to help as well. I haven’t hit record yet, so I grip his face and get him to look at me. “You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone, Samael. You owe them nothing.”

“No, but I need to do this. I need to help. This is how I can.” He smiles at me softly. “Don’t worry, Lyra, I’ll be okay.”

I search his face once more, but all I see is determination, so I sit in the chair opposite him. “If you need to stop, signal, okay? And we can.”

“Okay.” He sits taller, with his arm thrown over the back of the chair and legs parted. He looks like the king he is, and no one else would see the shimmer of unease in his eyes or the slight tremor in his hands, but I do.

I nod and turn the camera on. “Today, I am interviewing one of the tribe leaders, Samael”—I emphasise his name, making him human to them—“who has been leading for many years and keeping his people safe after spending years locked away in a bunker”—I make a note to cut to some footage here—“where he was not only experimented on by those who lead us, but tortured and used for fodder. As you can clearly see, he bears many scars from their abuse, but the stories he has to tell you will not only stain your soul but also show you exactly how evil those who are willing to do this are.” I look at him. “Sam—Samael.” I almost said Sammy. Shit, I’m out of practice. “Can you tell us how old you were when you were first taken to the bunker?”

“I was four or five years old, I believe,” he murmurs, his eyes on me and not the camera. We discussed that and came up with the idea, thinking it might make it easier for him if he feels like he’s just talking to me.

“And what happened in the bunker, Samael?”

“Experiments like at the lab. Our blood was taken, our bone marrow was harvested, and our bodies were tested for strength and speed. We were also tested for obedience. The experiments they did there, though, were more brutal than the ones at the lab. There were fewer rules. They were allowed to cut us open and harvest organs until we bled out and died. They were not scientists; they were butchers. We were forced to fight so they could watch us and take bets. We were allowed to be ... to be raped by others, including the guards for their own pleasure and entertainment.”

I stiffen, biting back my own anger.

“This was not in the name of research or science. This was pure greed and evil. They enjoyed carving into my flesh and beating me. They liked taking their belts and batons to me until they felt my bones snap.” He turns then, flashing his fangs at the camera. “Those men were pure evil, and in the bunker, acts of inhuman malevolence were committed. We never asked to be created or brought into the world, but those who did chose not to protect us, instead viewing us as less than animals. We had no rights and no protection. They started this

war when they stole our children, killed families, forced matings, and abused their power. We never wanted a war. All we ever wanted was equality and to be free—the same freedom everyone in your city is given.” His tail lashes. “I will protect my people from those who want to do that to us again, who already have been. No child should ever have their innocence stolen. No child should have to know the agony of their body being torn apart or having their consent taken away. They called us monsters, but they made us this way.”

“Samael—”

Leaning forward, he glares into the camera. “We did not start this war, but we will finish it.”

“Thank you, Samael.” I reach over and squeeze his hand, and he softens as he looks at me, accepting my comfort. “These men, could you identify them if you saw them again?”

“Yes,” he says without pause.

“Do you know any names?”

“Nano was in charge, but there were other names mentioned within the government. The corruption ran deep.” He reaches up then, touching his white eye. “This was done by a governing official who was bored and came to visit. He wanted to release some tension after he found out his wife was cheating.”

I jerk, not knowing that. “Others came to torture you?”

He nods. “They said it was their right. There was a child a few years younger than me. They ripped him to pieces and posed with his remains. Some were hunted through the underground bunker for the chase. They wondered why we fought back, why there was an uprising. We tried to keep casualties to a minimum as we freed ourselves, but your government was willing to kill their own kind to protect what they had been doing.”

“The government, the mayor, and Nano worked together to create a new species, then torture and kill them for sport,” I interject, “and when that same species fought for their rights, they were eliminated and labelled as monsters.” I take a deep

breath. “The very same monsters we are spliced with. So tell me this. If they are monsters, then what does that make us, since we are half monster? Our world is one big experiment, one big test. We are treated like lab rats, and our children are starved and used. It is time for us to fight back. It is time to stand together for their freedom and ours. It is time to take back the world. This time, we do not fight the monsters. We stand with them.”

I cut the cameras, and Samael pulls me closer, burying his head in my neck. I stroke his back as he struggles to breathe, his body shaking with the force of his confession.

“You did so good, baby,” I praise him. “So good. You’re so strong.”

Lifting his head, he meets my eyes. “For you, only for you.”

“We’ve got this, Samael. We are going to end them for everything they did. I promise.”

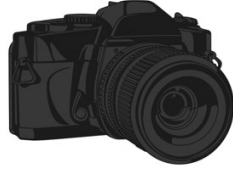
“I know, pet.”

There’s a knock, and we clamber to our feet and open the door to see the room beyond surging with monsters. All at once, they drop to their knees with their arms over their chests. “We will tell our story. We will help the human.” They look at me. “For our king and for you, our queen. Tell us what to do, and we will do it. If this will help, then we will. If our king can be brave and tell his story, then so can we.” One man speaks, but the others nod, and I look back at Samael with a smile.

“You did this.”

“No, *we* did this,” he murmurs, and I glance back with a grin. “We need more film.”

THIRTY-NINE



LYRA

I took everyone's stories. I will use some, but not all. Really, I felt like I owed it to them to listen. I broke down more times than I could count, and when they watched me cry, something seemed to heal inside them. I grieved for their innocence and their loved ones, and then I spent the next two days editing the footage.

There is so much pain and anger, I wish I could include them all, but it needs to be short enough to make a statement. After, I can showcase their stories so the whole world knows.

They deserve it.

After all, there's an entire city with a story to tell.

Samael gives me some space, though not much. He helps his people, listening to them and validating them in a way he never did before. I can see their love for their king, and I'm just leaving the toilet when I nearly run into a monster. He grins down at me and then glances around before lowering his voice.

"We all want to thank you for giving our king his heart back. With it, you have given us ours as well—our purpose, hopes, and dreams we had all given up on. He gave us sanctuary and safety, and now you are giving us happiness. We are forever grateful to you for mating our king."

Before I can respond, he's gone, and as I move through their masses, they all smile and greet me. When I spot my king in their midst, laughing at something one of them said, I can't help but stand taller. I always wanted to make a difference, and it seems I have, but I know it won't be enough, not until this stops and they don't have to hide anymore, so I go back to work.

I barely sleep or eat until, after two weeks, I finish. "It's done."

Samael jerks up from where he was sleeping. “Huh? What?”

Laughing, I rub at my eyes. “It’s done. It’s ready.”

“Can I see it?” he asks, and I nod before I nervously click play for him. When it ends, he looks at me. “It’s incredible, Lyra,” he croaks. “You ... You told our story and did it justice while demanding change. It’s perfect. They cannot deny this now.”

“I know.” I rub at my face. “Okay, we need to access the broadcast system and get it out across the city.”

“How do we do that?” he asks.

“There has to be a system in the control room. Come on.” I download it onto the hard drive, and we go to the control room beyond the live broadcasting area. Once inside, I see the equipment is old, maybe too old, but I hold out hope as I hurry to the desk and plug it in, load the video, and then try to figure out the system. It’s not the same as the one I learned in school, but I make some quick guesses, lean back, and watch.

Only for it to be denied.

Fuck.

“Lyra?” Sam asks as I hammer away, trying to figure out what’s wrong. When I do, I almost scream. “Lyra,” he repeats.

“The bastard put up a wall around the broadcasting system in Athesa. I should have known. We can’t see what they broadcast, and we can’t broadcast to them. Think of it like a wall around their channels.”

“What does that mean?” he asks.

“Fuck, it’s not strong enough,” I practically scream. “All of this was for nothing! They won’t ever see it. We would need to be inside the system to broadcast—”

“No.” Sam glares, no doubt knowing where my thoughts have gone.

“Yes.”

“No, Lyra.”

“Yes, Sammy, we are going back over the wall.”

“No,” he snarls.

Groaning, I flop back on our nest. I can't believe I'm saying I missed this prison, but I did. We have been arguing for hours. “Yes.”

“They will be searching for you, for us. We don't stand a chance.”

“A small team could sneak through.”

“And get killed. Remember Henrik?” he snaps. I wince. I checked on Sascha when we got back. She's awake, and she's eaten, but she's not there. Her eyes are completely empty. It's hard to see, but for a moment, I saw a flash of life when the doc was talking to her, so maybe there is hope.

“Okay, then a bigger team so we can protect each other.” I sit up. “We have to do this, Sammy. We cannot let those people's sacrifice be in vain. We have to get this out there, we have to.”

Pacing, he mumbles to himself as I worry on my lip.

“Maybe ... Maybe we should ask the others for help.”

He growls, and I sigh.

“I know they weren't exactly welcoming, but maybe we just need to give them a chance. Clearly they want this too. Sammy, they were wrong about you, so maybe we were wrong about them.” He freezes, his head swinging to me. “I know you don't like asking for help, but I think we need it. This is how we end this, Sam. This is how we stop them. We have to see this all the way through to the very bitter end.”

“And if it gets us killed? If we can't get back over the wall after? They will be angry,” he snaps.

All good points. I'm hoping after we can sneak back through in the chaos, but I know that might not happen. “I'm

okay with that. I'm okay with dying for a reason. Both of us have lived with death for so long, Sammy, so let's not back down now."

"I can't lose you," he croaks.

"You won't," I promise as he crouches before me, gripping my head and pulling me to him until our foreheads touch.

"If we die, we die together. There is no way I could live with you gone," he snarls. "Know that before we go over."

The idea of being the reason for his death is terrifying, but I can't let that hold me back. Being brave doesn't mean you're unafraid; it's doing it even though you are.

"Together," I agree. "We need them, Sammy."

FORTY



SAMAEL

I hate that she's right. I also hate that I'm going to have to go to the people who hate and fear me and ask for their help. For her and my people, though, and the hope she brought to their eyes, I will. This is bigger than me, bigger than us and our issues. We have a chance at change, one chance, and we need to take it.

It's too late to travel tonight, so instead we spend it with our people, both of us knowing full well this could be our last time, and then I drag her back to our nest to spend the day between her thighs, worshipping her.

She's right; death and I are old friends. I never feared it before, but now I do because I finally have something to live for. I want a lifetime with her, even though that won't be enough, so we have to make it back, and they are our best shot.

Pushing all thoughts away, I pin my mate to our nest, watching her eyes dilate as she rolls below me, arching up to rub against me and make me hard once more.

“Make me forget, Sammy, just for tonight.”

“Anything for you, mate,” I vow as I get to work to do just that.

A meeting was called, and I wait nervously with Lyra at my side. I don't think they will come, but she believes they will and seems quite relaxed as she lounges in my lap where we sit in an abandoned restaurant.

“They aren't coming,” I grumble just as the door opens. I sit up straighter, and so does she. I watch the human—I think her name was Aria—stroll in with Akuji behind her. He glares

at me and guides her over, putting her as far away from me as possible. Both of them look at Lyra, and she smiles.

“Hey, thanks for coming. Sorry for the radio silence.”

“We thought you were dead,” Aria replies happily.

“Damn it, Aria, we discussed not saying that,” the other human, Talia, calls out as they walk through the restaurant, Cato watching me carefully. I notice the bump the human is toting, and my eyebrows rise.

“Holy shit, are you pregnant?” Lyra blurts.

“Lyra,” I groan. She elbows me, making me grunt, and then she grins at Talia. “Congratulations, that’s going to be one big baby. It’s yours, right?” she asks Cato. He nods, sits carefully, and pulls Talia onto his lap to protect her—even though that’s stupid, since it will slow him down if he were attacked, but I don’t point that out.

“Well, we did,” Aria carries on, watching us as Lyra leans into me. “Clearly they have been busy fucking though.”

“Aria,” Akuji grumbles.

“She’s partially right.” Lyra shrugs, and then she presses her hands to the table. “We have some things to discuss, very important things, but first things first. You owe Samael an apology.” My head snaps around, and she ignores my growl of warning. The others all blink in confusion. “He is one of you, and I know he’s not the easiest to get along with—”

“Understatement,” Cato mutters.

“But he is one of you, and he has always protected you and your people. Not one of you ever asked him if he was okay or even cared about why he was so angry.”

“Pet,” I snap. Aria touches her gun in warning, hearing my tone, but Lyra is unbothered.

“They didn’t,” she snaps at me. “You were hurting, you needed your people, and they shunned you. They owe you an apology, and before I tell them jack shit about what we have found and done, they will give you just that, Sammy.”

“Sammy?” Aria whispers to Talia.

My eyes close, and Lyra giggles. “Oops, sorry, Sammy.”

“Dead, you’re dead,” I mutter, but she just laughs before it fades as she looks back at them.

“I mean it. Samael has been through a lot. I know you all have, but you had each other. He didn’t.” She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. I’ve never been so in love before. “Now will do for the apology.”

“She’s right,” Cato says, and I jolt in surprise. “We never took the time to understand what happened to you, Samael. We just saw your anger, and instead of trying to work through it with you, we let it fester inside you and pushed you away. Lyra is right. We owe you an apology. I’m sorry, Samael. We should have been there for you.”

Talia smiles up at him with tears in her eyes.

Aria smacks Akuji, who sighs. “They are right. I’m sorry, Samael. I did what I thought was best for my people, but that should have included you.”

I never thought I would see the day, and part of me feels like I don’t deserve it, but it’s all thanks to my little Lyra. Uncaring about the repercussions, I pull her onto my lap, and she melts. They notice and smile.

“It seems Lyra has tamed the beast.” Aria grins. “So now that that’s out of the way, let’s talk about you dropping that bomb and disappearing.”

“Sorry.” Lyra grins sheepishly. “I went to get proof.” I listen as my girl explains everything. They all are shocked about us going over the wall, but they seem impressed, and then Lyra pushes the hard drive into the middle of the table.

“The research, videos, and the edited version are all on this. I need to get over the wall to broadcast it everywhere so they can’t hide it.” God, she’s beautiful. She can undoubtedly feel my hard cock, but she ignores it. “We need your help. They will be waiting for us over that wall, so we cannot get through with just the two of us. I know it’s a risk, but we have

to stop them before they start another war that leaves us all dead.”

“And if it doesn’t work?” Cato asks.

“It will work. I have proof, and I’m a face they will recognise. They will be unable to deny the truth, and when this is over and we are safe, Talia, you can work on the research and figure everything out—safely, of course.”

“We’re in,” Aria says.

“Us too,” Talia agrees. “We have been trying to find proof and a way to stop this. I have all of the research, but they won’t understand it, although it has helped me with my pregnancy and our mating. I think, with time, I can help fix all the issues.”

“I cannot promise you will come back over,” I admit. “I cannot promise your safety. Lyra and I have accepted that we might die for this, but you do not have to.”

Cato grips Talia closer and nods.

“Someone needs to stay here, just in case we don’t come back, to command and lead our people. I think it should be you.” I look at him. “You are the smartest and the most level-headed, and you’re the future of our people.”

“They won’t follow me,” he mutters.

“They will,” Akuji interjects. “They really will. He’s right. Cato and Talia should stay here. They are the future. This is our fight, but we cannot do it if we have nothing to come back to. We are willing to take the risk.”

Talia starts to cry. “But what if you don’t make it back?” She grips Aria’s hand.

“Nah, you know I will.” Aria winks. “I’m too badass to kill.” Aria reaches across and takes Lyra’s hand, connecting the three humans from very different lives. “We can do this, we have to do this, but they are right, Talia. You are holding our future in your body and in your brain.” She looks at Lyra. “Are you okay with dying?”

“I’ve nearly died every day of my life, so what’s one more?” she replies, and I kiss her neck, making her sigh.

“Then it’s decided,” Akuji states. “We go in two days. That will give us time to prepare and make the announcements. Our people will cause a distraction again, and we will sneak through.”

“We cannot go the way I did before; they will be watching it,” I admit.

“I have another way,” Akuji offers. “We will meet at the lab at sunrise in two days’ time. Any objections?”

There are none, so I stand with Lyra’s hand in mine. “Thank you for helping us.”

Reaching over, Cato and Akuji clap my shoulder. “You were always one of us, Samael, even when you didn’t think you were. We are both honoured to help you save our people. I cannot think of a better monster to do just that, or one more deserving of happiness.” Akuji looks at Lyra. “Thank you for loving him, even when he doesn’t make it easy.”

“He’s worth it,” she replies as she looks up at me. “And in two days, the whole world will know how much you survived and sacrificed to save your people. I am the one who’s lucky.”

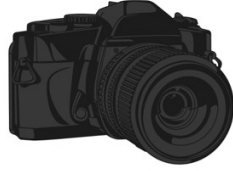
Throwing her over my shoulder, I nod at them. “I need my mate.” I storm from the building, their laughter following me.

Two days.

That’s all we have.

I’m going to treasure every second.

FORTY-ONE



LYRA

Two days isn't a long time when it comes to going to war. Samael and I are very aware that we might not make it back over the wall. It's a risk we are willing to take, but it doesn't stop me from stressing about what is to come. We eat, drink, and celebrate with his people like normal, but I know he can sense my apprehension. He drags me back to the nest and spends the remainder of our time between my legs, reminding me how much he loves me.

"I can hear your thoughts whirring, pet," he mumbles, burying his head deeper into my breasts where he's sprawled on me. "Shh, and sleep."

"I can't," I admit softly, stroking his head until he lifts it, his eyes squinting in his sleepy state.

"Fine, if you can't sleep, I'll keep you entertained."

I scrub every inch of my body in the bath and wash my hair twice. I don't know why, but some part of me will feel better if I look better. I need to be confident, and I feel anything but, so I do everything in my power to fake it.

Samael helps me, and then he dries me off, leaving me standing in a towel as he grabs a paper wrapped parcel from the side and hands it over.

"What's this?" I ask with a smile.

He shrugs nervously, avoiding my gaze, so I take it from him and unwrap it.

"Sammy," I whisper.

"Now you will look like the queen you are," he murmurs. "Do you like it?"

“They are beautiful.” He’s taken an old pair of black jeans and sewn fur into the belt, and then across the right hip is a sewn claw mark, no doubt his, the possessive bastard. The shirt is plain, but the jacket is a fur-lined coat that screams royalty, and tucked within is a diamond necklace. “Where the hell did you get that?”

“There are plenty of abandoned jewellery shops.” He chuckles as I finger the diamond that would cost an entire year’s salary, maybe two. It has a teardrop red jewel at the end. Turning, I lift my hair and let him put it on me, feeling it hang between my breasts. “How does it look?” I ask when I turn back.

“Magnificent, just like my mate,” he murmurs as he tips my chin up. “Now get dressed, pet, it’s time.” I nod, and he cups my chin. “We are going to make it through, Lyra. I know we are. We have to. I refuse to only have these last few months with you. We get forever, do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I murmur as I lean into him. “Forever.”

He nods, and I get dressed, and then we head back to the nest to pack. I double-check my bag at least ten times before taking a spare copy of the video I made just in case. I should give it to one of the others in case anything happens.

I go to shove the spare copy I made into Sam’s trousers, only to freeze as my fingers stroke across some paper. I pull it out to see my note there, along with one of the photographs I took of us, folded neatly but crinkled from use.

My heart beats faster as I stare down at them.

We have to make it out alive.

We just have to.

FORTY-TWO



SAMAEEL

I want to turn around, lock my mate away, and never let her risk herself, but that would make me a coward, which I am not, and neither is she. My mate is a force to be reckoned with, and I follow her gladly. Part of me is happy to be getting back at the people who did this to me, but now I would give up my revenge if it meant I could keep her safe and happy. She will not, however, so I bring us to the lab once more.

We find the others gathered outside, waiting. Lyra and I stay back as they say their goodbyes—after all, they are clearly friends, and we are not—but Cato and Talia surprise me when they head our way.

Talia hands something to my mate. “Just in case,” she murmurs with tears in her eyes. “Come back, okay?”

“We will,” Lyra replies.

“That goes for you too,” Cato tells me, clapping me on the shoulder in a warrior’s greeting. It surprises me, and I simply nod. “Both of you come back. This world needs you. We need you.”

“Thank you,” I mutter gruffly, and then Talia turns to me.

“Samael, I’m sorry for what our people did to you.” She smiles softly. “Make them pay, okay?”

“We will.” I nod once more, dumbstruck, and Lyra covers my hand, making me move closer to her.

“It’s time,” Akuji calls, and with one last look at Cato and Talia, he and Aria turn. We follow them, Talia and Cato watching us. If we do not make it back, it is up to them to keep our people safe, to maintain order, and to protect them from the war heading their way.

I couldn’t think of a better pair to do it.

We don't look back again, instead gazing forward towards the wall and what awaits us beyond.

I expected Akuji to guide us to a hidden door, but a couple of blocks before the wall, he turns into a subway. Lyra gives me a look but shrugs and follows after them, plunging into the darkness. I follow after her, and once inside, I realise it's completely dark. I hear her heart start to race so I grab the torch out of my bag and hand it over without a word. I feel her shock as she looks up at me, and I smile down at her.

"I'll always look after you, pet," I murmur as I cup the nape of her neck, feeling her heart start to slow. When I look up, Aria is gripping her chest.

"Be still my heart, the psycho is a romantic," she exclaims.

Akuji groans and rubs his head before he wraps his tail around her and tugs her closer. "What did I tell you? Do not annoy him. I would hate to have to kill him."

I'm about to get offended when Lyra steps before me, pointing the torch at both of them. "If either of you tries that, you'll both be dead." Taking my hand, she leads me past them, making me smirk as they laugh.

"I really like her," I hear Aria murmur. "I think we could be besties, you know, if we survive this."

"Little one, what did I tell you?" Akuji mutters.

"Yeah, yeah, we are surviving this because you are a badass." Aria speeds up to walk next to us, and Akuji slips past us to lead the way, throwing his mate a loving yet exasperated look. "My tiger wanted to come. He's up there right now, causing chaos in Akuji's den, so you'll have to forgive him. He's cranky."

"I told him if he rips my furs, I will skin him," Akuji grumbles.

"Sure, sure." Aria looks at us and pulls a face, making Lyra laugh. "So you're a journalist?"

I let them talk as I watch our surroundings. We have to climb down some frozen escalators, and the bottom two steps

are missing, so I help Lyra over them and then Aria, while Akuji waits to catch them. We go down another set, and then we break out into a station with a train, which is long since dead.

“I’ve been scouting the city since Aria came over the wall. I guess part of me knew we might need a way out or in one day. Paranoid, I know, but I could feel the change coming,” Akuji tells me.

“We all could.” I look at Lyra. She and Aria have their heads bent together. “I think that’s why I fought so hard when I found her, because I knew what she represented.”

“And now?” he asks.

“Now, she can change it all. I don’t care as long as it keeps me with her.”

He claps my side with a laugh. “Welcome to matehood, brother.”

I jerk, but he doesn’t notice, and my eyes go back to Lyra as she shines her torch around the abandoned platform. She winces at the skeletons farther down and the blood and decay here, but she doesn’t say anything. I guess my girl is getting used to it.

“Which way?” I ask him.

“Down the tunnel. If we go through the empty train then down the tracks, we can follow it right under the wall to the other side. I checked a few weeks ago, and it still wasn’t boarded up at the end. You ready for this?” he asks me, lowering his voice. “I want you to promise me something.”

“What?”

“Get them out and keep them safe, no matter what, okay? Leave me if you have to, but save my mate and yours,” he implores. “There is no one I would trust more with this. Keep them alive, Samael.”

“And if it comes to it, you do the same for me. Leave me and save my love, because without her, there is no me,” I demand.

“Deal.” He holds out his hand, and I take it, shaking it like humans do.

“They will murder us,” we both say at the same time and share a smile.

“Have you finished stroking each other’s cocks?” Aria calls, and Akuji grins as he pulls away. “Good, then let’s get going. I’m not digging the ambiance in here. I’m all for skulls, but it stinks.”

“Nope, that’s just you,” I retort, and she gapes at me before turning to the others.

“Did he ... Did he just make a joke?” She grabs Lyra’s face and kisses her on the mouth. “You, woman, are a miracle worker and have some golden pussy. If I wasn’t mated, I would be tempted to find out.”

Lyra laughs, even as I drag her away, glaring at Aria. Her mate grabs her and tugs her with him onto the open train. Grumbling, I follow them, keeping my hand on my mate. We have to change to single file, and we both put the women in the middle.

I have to duck and squeeze through now and then, and at the end, Akuji drops down onto the tracks and helps them both down, and then we are off again. We walk quickly and silently across the tracks. The tunnel is round and stinks like death, rotting food, and stagnant water. There are no lights bar my girl’s torch, and I keep a close eye on her to make sure she doesn’t stumble, but she has sure footing. It might seem abandoned, but both Akuji and I keep a vigilant eye, knowing anything could be hiding down here.

We follow the twisting tunnels and eventually come to a section that has emergency lights overhead, so Lyra turns her torch off as we pass another empty station. “We should be near the wall now. If we turn left up here, it will take us directly through and into the slums,” Akuji calls.

We speed up, all of us wanting to get this over with.

Up ahead, two tunnels branch off, one left, one right. We turn left, but fifty meters down, I stop, and so does Akuji.

Something feels off.

“Go back,” he murmurs.

I nod, searching the darkness beyond for the sense of wrongness I feel. I drag Lyra behind me as Aria pulls out a knife, and we slowly start to back away. Lifting my nose, I close my eyes and inhale, searching for a sign of what I’m sensing.

“Sammy?” Lyra asks, trying to see beyond.

Hissing, I open my eyes and meet Akuji’s gaze. “Cannibals, I know that smell anywhere.”

“Shit,” Aria mutters.

Akuji turns to face the dark. “There can’t be that many. We hunted them in my lands years ago.”

“And drove them underground it seems,” I mutter, just as I see the first shadow shifting and a cackle rings out. Eating their own kind for too long drives them insane, altering their brains and making them beyond feral. Most are locked in the haze, and when I spot the first one, I realise that being in the dark with only each other to feed on has done more damage.

They are completely insane, and more appear.

And more.

There are at least a hundred of them, all drooling for the taste of flesh, and with a roar, they charge at us.

“Go right, run!” I yell at Lyra. “Aria, get her out of here. We will hold them off and catch up.”

“Fuck.” Aria takes another look at the oncoming surge, grabs Lyra’s hand, and takes off running down the right tunnel.

Turning, I spread my arms and legs as I wait for them to hit us, ready to fight and die for my mate.

LYRA

I look back, searching for Sam, but Aria forces me to keep running, our breathing loud in the tunnel. I almost fall, but she yanks me back up just as I hear the first sounds of battle—ripping flesh, roars, and cries of pain.

“They can handle it.” Aria pants as she looks at me. “We have to find a way out.”

Nodding, I focus on my feet, knowing that’s what Sam needs right now, not to be distracted by me. I speed up until I’m keeping pace, and Aria releases my hand, only for us to skid to a stop as a monster climbs from a crack in a tunnel and leaps for us. Grabbing a pipe to the left, I ram it into his head and watch it pierce his skull as he falls.

“Badass,” Aria comments as she looks around for more. “Let’s go.”

We start running again, only to stop a little way down when the tunnel ends. There’s another one, but it’s almost in the ceiling, and before us is a huge, towering half-finished brick wall with buckets at the bottom and ropes hanging over the top.

“Fuck, we are going to have to climb.” Aria groans, propping her hands on her hips as she looks up. She peers around as if she’s looking for a way up. I know the guys need us to keep moving, so I step back and analyse the wall. There are small footholds and handholds, so I roll my shoulders as I hear the roars coming from behind us again.

“I’ve got this. I’ll get up there and toss that rope down.”

“Lyra ...” Aria frowns.

“I’ve got this,” I tell her as I step towards the wall and wipe my hands before jumping up and catching the first handhold. I start to climb, my body remembering the movements. There is no harness this time, but I don’t have

time to second-guess myself. I map the movements, my body moving in sync as I reach, pull, and repeat, ignoring the sounds of battle getting closer.

I can't worry about Sam. I have to focus on getting to the top, reaching that rope, and getting Aria up so we have a way out and we aren't trapped down here. They will catch up. I have to believe that.

When I nearly get to the top, I realise there are no more handholds or footholds. It's smooth from here all the way to the top and bigger than I've ever jumped before.

Shit, shit, shit. I look down to see Aria with her back to the wall, holding a knife out. Just as one leaps at her, she slashes and stabs, blood coating her as she grins.

"Keep going!" she calls up to me, spinning the knife. "I've got this."

Pressed to the wall, I try to focus. My entire world narrows to that ledge above me. It reminds me of the one I kept missing back at the wall, but there is no missing here. I have to hit it, so I push off with my legs and reach up, stretching for it.

For a moment, I hang in the air, my heart dropping as I realise I'm not going to make it, and then my fingers graze the edge. I grip it, feeling my nails break. I hang from my fingertips, my other hand dangling below, as my legs swing. I look down to see Aria fighting alongside Akuji and Samael now. Gritting my teeth, I yank my other arm up and drag myself up and over. Rolling to my knees, I quickly grab the rope and toss it over.

"Let's go!" I yell.

"Go!" Akuji roars to Aria. She hesitates but races to the wall and the rope, beginning to climb it. I see Sam struggling against at least five eaters, so I search the area frantically before finding the broken bricks. With a whistle, I stand up.

"Hey, cannibal assholes, get your own snack. He's mine!" I yell and toss it, hitting one in the head and seeing him drop. I quickly grab another and hit one coming for Akuji.

Aria starts climbing faster as I toss brick after brick until I run out. Covered in blood, Akuji and Sam roar before turning to us in sync. They look every inch the monsters they are as they take one step back and then leap up and over to the top. Show-offs. I fall back as Sam pins me, his eyes hungry as he watches me.

“Nope, no time!” I warn him, and he flashes fang as his tail sneaks down my top, so I push him off. “Sammy,” I warn.

“Fine,” he mutters as he helps me up and looks me over. “Quick thinking, pet. You did amazing.”

I blush under his praise, and he grins. Looking to the side, I see Aria pinned to the wall with Akuji ripping at her clothes, so I clear my throat, and they break apart with matching grins. “Shall we keep going or wait for more cannibals to come eat you while you fuck?” I tease.

“Later.” Aria pats Akuji’s chest and pushes off as she winks at me. “You did amazing, Lyra.”

“Thanks, you too.”

“You should have seen her with the pip—” She starts to tell them what happened as I peer into the tunnel. It’s much smaller than the others, but Akuji seems confident when he steps inside, having to crouch to walk.

“It opens up here,” he offers when his mate finishes, and I feel Sam watching me hungrily again, so I sway my ass as I follow them. His tail lashes across it, making me yelp, and his laughter fills the darkness.

Asshole.

Just like Akuji said, the tunnel opens up into one with newer tracks. It’s clear they were finishing this up when the war started. We don’t run into any more cannibals, but we are still on guard as we wind through them. We take a few breaks, and a few hours later, we finally head down a side tunnel and come up to a huge grate.

“I don’t know where this leads. I scouted the other way, but we have to be in the city,” Akuji murmurs.

“Only one way to find out,” I remark and step past them. “Let me go first. That way if anyone is there, they won’t shoot straight away.” Akuji and Samael nod and open the grate, and I slip out and through.

I hesitate at the edge, peering around. It’s still dark, and the moon is half full, lighting as much as it can. I squint as I stare, and that’s when I realise where we are.

Grinning, I lean down. “Come on.” I step out and around the corner, crossing my arms at the chill coming from the open fields.

“What is this place?” Aria asks.

“It’s the farming district, and it’s totally abandoned at night. Luckily for you, I broke in once to do an exposé on how they treated their livestock, so I know exactly where to go.” I grin back at them. “Follow me.”

I walk down a row of corn. They stretch as far as the eye can see with the hydro plant at the back and the livestock area closer to the city, which is filled with imitation pigs, chickens, cows, and much more. There are no houses here, only some work areas, and apart from a guard or two at the gate where people come to work, this place is totally empty. I would have thought they would have learned their lessons after the last time, but no.

I speed walk down the aisle to the dirt road that splits the entire area. Ignoring the signs, I head past the feeding and supply barns, noticing the cameras and drones inside, waiting to be used tomorrow. The fence comes up quickly, and I veer from the main gate, counting my steps until I reach the area I cut to get in, hoping they never found it. It’s hidden in the shadows, and when I feel the fence, I grin when I lift up the edges.

“After you.” I gesture them through, and they duck past. I go last and put it back into place.

“Where to now?” Aria asks.

“Keep straight. These roads turn into the entertainment district that has all the TV stations, radios, and gaming areas.

The only issue is, it's usually awake at this time of night, so we will have to be silent and quick. Follow exactly where I say, okay?"

They nod, and we rush down the roads, racing to get there before the sun rises. We need to broadcast midday to make sure everyone sees it. I have an idea where we can hide once we're in the building, but we need to get there before the sun rises.

It only takes us an hour to reach the entertainment district, and from the hill we stand upon, we can see the blazing lights fill the night. The bright neon colours spread across the sky.

Sam groans. "That's a lot of light."

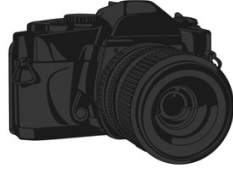
"Yep, but only the nocturnal animals and workaholics are out at this time. We can do this, trust me," I say as I start to walk backward.

I'm acting more confident than I feel because I honestly don't know how we will get through this area. The streets are brightly lit and usually busy, so we are going to need one hell of a miracle, like a power outage or—

A power outage.

I'm a fucking genius.

FORTY-THREE



LYRA

At the outskirts of the entertainment district, we race through the night towards the power station. There is one for each area so if something fails, the whole city won't go dark. This one controls the entertainment district, and despite Sam's worry, it isn't guarded. There is just one snoring engineer sitting in a chair before the desk. Sam slams his head into him, knocking him out cold, and drags him off to tie him up so he can't turn the power back on before we are finished. No doubt the emergency systems will kick in after a while, but we just need them off long enough to get to the building before sunup.

"Which one do we hit?" I wonder as I look over the elaborate control panel. Why can't it just have a big giant button easily labelled to cause a power outage?

"Maybe all? I could destroy it," Aria offers, hoisting up a chair, but I stop her.

"If we do that, there will be no power to broadcast. We just need it to stop for just a little while," I mutter.

She steps to the panel and eyes it before slamming her fist into a few buttons. I hurry to the door and peer out, seeing the entertainment district lights flick off one by one until there is only darkness.

"How did you know?" I ask her as she wanders past with a grin.

"I didn't. I guessed. Now let's get moving." Aria and Akuji walk away, hand in hand, as I shake my head and wait for Sam.

"She's crazy," I mutter.

"And we aren't, pet?" Laughing, he takes my hand and tugs me after them as we start to run, heading towards the now dark district. The turnstiles between sectors are dead and

abandoned since the guards are trying to fix the issue and maintain order. We hop over them and hurry behind a skyscraper for the VR centre. “Okay, stay close. I’ll get us in and find us somewhere to hide, then we’ll wait for the middle of the day.”

“Got it, let’s go,” Aria urges.

Nodding, I hurry around the dump shoots and peer around the building. There are some people hiding at the bottom of the street with their phones in the air, their small torches barely touching the dark. I can hear them panicking, but I know they won’t see us, so I rush across the road and around the TV station for films. We stay silent and low, sticking to the shadows as people call out and hurry home since it’s now dead around here.

We skirt around the activities area, the climbing gym, the driving department, and the simulation building. The news outlet is the building in the middle, and the closer we get, the busier it becomes. Those who were working or simply enjoying the night on the street are outside, shivering from the cold and complaining. They block the road that leads to the building, and I have to think of another plan.

“Follow me,” I call as I duck around the cafe I used to get my dinner at. The crowd is mostly facing away, but we are going to have to be fast.

Turning, I steady my racing heart. “See that ramp that leads down?” I point to the news building. Samael nods. “You are going to need to carry me there, sprinting as fast as you can so they don’t see us. Akuji, you need to do the same with Aria too.”

“You got it, mate,” Sam responds, and Akuji picks up Aria. We burst into motion. I hear someone comment that they saw something moving, but they thought it was a shadow.

As Sam puts me down on the ramp, I look behind me and see a guard heading our way with a torch up. “Anyone there? We are gathering here until the lights come on.”

Shit, I grab Sam's hand and run, racing down the ramp and around the back of the building where they take deliveries. I used to sneak out back here so I wasn't caught when I smoked, but now it serves us well. The roller doors are half up, no doubt stuck since the power went out, and I crouch and roll under. Sam grunts, having to wedge himself through, and then Aria shoves Akuji under.

"Where now?" Aria whispers, looking around.

The loading bays are empty, and the office door where they check IDs is open, so I move past it to the only non-automated door in the entire building. It opens easily, and the corridor outside is empty.

"Okay, this leads us to the belly of the building. There is an office on the broadcasting floor that everyone thinks is bad luck and is basically a storage room. That's what we are aiming for before the lights come back on. It means we won't have to fight our way through when it's time. I don't know how long we have left, so let's move."

We race down the hallway, and my feet slip on the tile as I slide around corners and reach the stairs. I yank open the door. Usually, the alarm would go off, but since there's no power, we are fine. I take two steps at a time.

"What floor?" Aria asks as she pants, rushing to keep up.

Grinning, I hold the rail to look back at her. "All the way up, baby."

"Of fucking course," she grumbles, making me laugh. Akuji throws her over his shoulder, and after fifteen flights, Sam does the same to me—a good job, really, since I can hear the tell-tale signs of the electricity fighting to come back on.

"We are running out of time," he mutters.

Putting on a burst of strength, he carries us up the last fifteen floors and rips open the door. The floor beyond is one massive open-plan system, with desks and cubbies in the middle, the broadcast area at the back, and stairs to the right which lead to the bosses' offices. The one we want is to the right of the broadcast area. The door's window is sealed up,

and I know no one goes in there. Sam puts me down, and we stride across the room confidently, only for him to yank me down behind a cubicle. I turn to frown at him, but then voices reach me a moment later.

“I told you no one would care that we stayed. Fuck, they will come back on in a minute, and we can get back to editing. Let’s just stay up here and drink that whisky you keep in your desk.” A familiar male voice laughs, and I look around the edge to see Toby and Tim, the two Ts of editing, perched on his desk, sharing a bottle of whisky.

Shit, those two are talented fucking editors, but they are also massive idiots. I mentally beg them to move on, to go smoke weed on the roof like usual, but no, the one time I don’t need them at their desks, they are there to stay.

They stand between us and the office, and the lights are turning on one by one outside the window. This building will be next, and we will get caught. We have to move now.

Clearly, they have no intention of going anywhere, no doubt on one of their late-night edits since the deadlines here are always so fucking quick. The drunker they get, the more worried I become until a reckless, stupid plan pops into my head.

“See that office there? That’s where you’re going. I’ll meet you,” I hiss as I step out.

They peer at me before grinning. “Lyra?”

“Hey, guys.” I wave. “Sorry I haven’t been around. Undercover, you know.”

Tim gapes. “Fuck, we thought you were dead.”

“Dead?” I repeat with a forced laugh, moving to the left so they track me, turning their backs to the others.

“Your father said you were burned up in the fire at his house,” Tim says, scrubbing at his head nervously.

“Ah, I asked him to say that to keep my cover.” I shrug.

“You sure are dedicated.” Toby grins. “But then again, you always were.”

My eyes flick to Sam, Aria, and Akuji as they run to the office.

“Remember that time when she cut off all her hair to blend in with that gang?” Tim says, making Toby laugh.

I looked like an egg. I kind of dug the shaved sides when it grew back though. “I remember when you two idiots shaved yours when you lost the bet that I wouldn’t get the story.”

They laugh as I cross my arms.

“So undercover, eh?” Toby asks, offering me the bottle. I shake my head, and he shrugs as he tosses some back. “Is it a good story?”

“The story of our lifetime,” I admit honestly. They share a look, and I know that sparkle in their eyes. It’s greed. Everyone in our industry is trying to make a name for themselves so they can make big bucks.

Just like I used to.

I meet Sam’s eyes at the open doorway to the office. He’s clearly thinking of coming to save me, but I shake my head, and he ducks inside.

“Well, I better get back to it. Don’t tell anyone though, okay? It will blow my cover.”

“Yeah? And what do we get for it?” Toby grins.

“The edit of course. Your names will be on the biggest story of the year.” They laugh and start teasing as I begin to back away. When the lights come on and they look up, I run straight to the office. The door closes just as they glance back at the spot where I just stood.

Sliding down the door, I blow the hair out of my face and peer into the darkened room. All I can make out are the lumpy shapes of boxes and discarded desks. Sam appears before me, almost making me scream.

His hand covers my mouth as he grins. “Follow me,” he whispers.

Nodding, I let him lead me around the desk where Aria peers out of the windows, Akuji standing behind her. “I’ve never seen it from high up before,” she admits as I sit next to her, and then she points at the slums in the distance. “I spent my whole life there. How the other half live.”

“If it makes you feel better, no one up here looks out of the windows either. They are blind to what is right in front of them, too lost in their own drive for greatness and used to the splendour.” I see her looking at me out of the corner of my eye and smile sadly. “In some ways, the slums were better. You could see the blades coming, but up here? They were in your back.”

“I guess we couldn’t be more different, huh?” she remarks as she takes my hand. “But now look at us—a thief from the slums and the mayor’s daughter from the mansions saving the world.”

“Don’t forget the scientist and the monsters.” I laugh, and she joins in as we look out at the city as the lights come on completely.

“Let’s hope it’s all worth it. We are putting a lot of hope in the humanity of the people in this city.”

“It will be. It has to. We have to believe that there are good people still left in the world. Otherwise, what are we fighting for?”

The smile we give each other is sad. She doesn’t believe in the goodness of people, not anymore, but she wants to save her mate and her friends, so she’s trusting Talia and me. I hope we aren’t wrong.

I hope when they see the truth, they care.

I hope they don’t turn away and pretend like it’s not happening.

I hope for once, people choose what’s right.

Sam and Akuji moved the desks to block the door and give us a warning in case anyone tries to come in. Aria found some cards, and between us, we teach both monsters how to play to pass the time.

“Go fish.” I grin, making Akuji snarl.

“I do not like this fishing game,” he grumbles as he tries to delicately pick up a card with his claws, only to drop it, and we all watch as he curses and grouses as he tries for a solid minute to pick it up again. Laughing, Aria picks it up for him, and he smiles at her in thanks.

“We could play Snap?” I offer. “But I’m seeing a theme. Monsters are not good at card games.”

“Yes, we are. We are the best.” Sam sits up taller, daring me to beat him, so I do, and he gawks.

“See? You guys suck at them. That’s my fifth win in a row.”

“You cheat,” Akuji mutters.

“I do not!” I cover my heart as if I’m offended. “I didn’t complain when you cheated and picked up four cards.”

“I couldn’t pick up just one,” he grumbles, and I fall back, laughing.

“Okay, you two are sore losers. Let’s do something else.” Aria tries to keep the peace as I sit up, and Sam hands over a bottle of water we scrounged up from the forgotten mini fridge in here. There were some pretzels and crackers too, but the guys ate them in one bite, complaining about them being crunchy and not meaty enough. Aria and I had just given each other a look.

“I need to pee,” she says as she stands, and Akuji leaps to his feet. “Babe, the bathroom is right there. You do not need to follow me.” She points at the door at the back of the office, which stands partially open. “Now play nice while I’m gone.”

“Another game,” Sam demands. “I’m going to beat you,” he tells Akuji.

“Not if I beat you first.”

Rolling my eyes, I leave the two monsters squabbling about who will beat whom and look out of the window. I hear a flush, and then Aria appears at my side. She gives the guys an exasperated look and leans in next to me as they descend into wrestling each other over a card. “So your dad is mayor, huh?”

I tense, and she notices—she notices everything. Despite being human, Aria is more monster than anyone I’ve ever met. I might say it’s from being around them for so long, but I think there must have always been something feral about her. I like it though. It’s refreshing and honest.

“He is,” I admit, my voice clearly telling her to drop it, but in true Aria style, she doesn’t.

“He’s an asshole, huh?” She knocks her shoulder into mine with a grin, and I can’t help but smile back. She’s just too much.

“The biggest,” I agree, and then I look back out towards the mansions where I spent most of my life. “My childhood was ... not happy, to say the least. He liked to abuse his power over everyone, but especially me. They got the perfect politician, and I got the monster. A true one.”

I feel her eyes on me, and I know what I will see in them—pity. I hate it, but I force myself to meet her gaze, only I don’t see pity. I see anger. “Then when this is over, we’ll kill the bastard.”

“Why are you angry?” I ask.

“Men who abuse their power tend to have that effect on me,” she mutters as she watches me. “I don’t pity you. You are a strong woman, Lyra. I’m amazed you made it out and you did so, well, good, but I’m angry he’s walking around, smiling and shaking babies and all that shit.”

“Shaking babies?” I laugh, and she grins.

“You know what I mean. He should pay for what he did to you.”

Turning back to the window, I lay my head on her shoulder as she wraps her arm around me. “He will one day. I believe

that.”

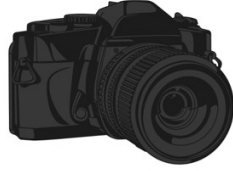
“If he doesn’t, I’ll hunt him down and kill him myself,” she promises me, and I can’t help but grin again.

“I believe that too.”

Yes, Aria is more monster than human, but she’s one hell of a friend.

If there is anyone I want to be next to when this war begins, it’s her—her and my mate.

FORTY-FOUR



LYRA

The sun blazes down, and the streets are packed with people. Glancing at the clock on the wall only confirms what the scene outside is telling me.

“It’s time,” I announce.

Aria nods and leaps to her feet. Unlike me, she doesn’t seem nervous. She smiles when she catches me staring. “We believe in you, Lyra. This is all you. We are just here to get you there.”

“Wait, what? We go in there together.”

“They will try to stop us. Sam, Akuji, and I already planned this. Sam will follow you in while you broadcast, and Akuji and I will fend them off for as long as we can.”

“No!” I snap, moving closer. “We do this together.”

Taking my hands in hers, she smiles at me. “I’m a warrior, Lyra. This is what we do. Let us do this. Not just for you, but for everyone on either side of the wall. It’s time for the truth to come out, and it has to come from you. This was always going to be our mission, our destiny, just like this is yours. Trust us to keep you safe, Lyra, and we will trust you to send the message.”

“I can’t let you sacrifice yourself, not for me,” I protest, tears filling my eyes. In the short time I’ve known them, we’ve grown close, but the idea of someone risking their life for me? No.

“It’s not just for you.” Akuji lays a hand on Aria’s shoulder. “It’s for Cato. It’s for Talia and Talia’s baby. It’s for every single person over that wall who deserves a better life. This is the plan, Lyra. It always has been.”

“Sammy.” I turn, begging him to help, but he just inclines his head. “No, there’s another way—”

“Pet,” he murmurs, tugging me into his arms and forcing me to meet his gaze. “Do not dishonour them. They will be okay. They are the best warriors I have ever had the honour of fighting alongside.”

“I knew I liked them,” Aria whispers.

“We have our jobs. Now let’s do this, okay?” he says. “We came all this way, so we have to do this, Lyra.”

I breathe deeply and meet each of their gazes. “You do not fucking die, do you hear me? Or I will drag your asses back from the afterlife. Fend them off for as long as you can then join us.”

“She scares me,” Akuji whispers to Aria.

“Me too,” Aria replies, making me snort. “We’ve got this. Focus on the door, only that door, and nothing else.”

I spent the last few hours explaining the layout, and I guess they were listening. Nodding, I move to the door, and with my hand on the handle, I look back at them. “We are going to change the world, but you better be around to see it,” I tell them before I rip it open and surge out. There are some confused looks, and then Samael steps out. That’s when the screaming starts and people begin running, trying to get away. The alarm is triggered, but I ignore it all and head straight for the broadcasting doors.

“Go!” Aria yells as the elevator opens and a confused guard steps out, seeing Akuji and Aria who spread out in the rapidly emptying desk area.

I slam through the doors, and Sam shuts them behind me, barring them as I look around quickly. They are on air, with two reporters sitting at the desk, smiling at the camera, which is automated now. In the control room to the right are four people, and when they see us, they yell. One of them rushes us, and I duck under him, hearing Sam knock him out.

I pull out the gun I stole and aim it at the people in the control room. “You know me. I’m Lyra. I’m not here to kill you, but I need you to listen. You are going to broadcast what I’m going to air live, and you are going to put it across every

station, radio, TV, everything. You put it on repeat, you hear me?”

The director, a nice woman named Vanessa, watches me carefully. “If I don’t?”

“Then I’ll kill you,” I admit without shame. “I have to.” I hand the drive over to her then step back. “Play it when I say so. Sam, watch them.” He takes my place as I put my gun away. The reporters are hiding behind their desk, their perfectly coiffed hair and sun-kissed skin easily visible. Brushing my hair back, I step into the camera’s view.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, folks, but this is important, and you are going to want to stick around. My name is Lyra. I’m the daughter of your mayor, and up until a few months ago, I was a reporter, but I stumbled into a story that put my life at risk. They chased me beyond the wall and faked my death, and it is there where I learned the truth—the truth that I will share with you all now. So listen closely, and Dad, if you are watching, fuck you. Fuck you for what you have done to us. Play it.” I step back and turn to watch the screen that shows the journalist what is playing, and the video I edited begins.

There’s banging and yelling outside, and I wince but keep on watching. I need to see this happen.

The broadcast plays, showing the experiments and the truth of what we are. I wonder how many will believe. They have to, don’t they? I almost cry when I watch my interview with Sam and the others spliced together, and when it’s done, I look back into the camera, needing them to understand, needing them to see what they have been blind to.

“That is the truth. One we should have known all along. Those soldiers, those guards and scientists are not here to protect us, but to use us and stop anyone who gets in their way. The slums are nothing but a testing ground for them, and the wall is a prison. We have all been lied to and abused, but no longer. Choose to do with this what you will, but it’s time for change. The monsters are not our enemies.” I hold out my hand, and Sam comes into view. “This is Samael. He is my husband. He was tortured and experimented on for most of his

life, and he still bears the scars. Aria ... ,” I trail off. “I don’t know her last name, but she’s a girl from the slums, and she is also married to what you call monsters. He saved her life. Talia, a scientist, a leading researcher at Nano, is also with us over the wall. After she found out the truth, our people tried to use her and place her into the breeding program. You’ve seen what they are capable of. A war is brewing, and we are right at the heart. We probably won’t make it out of here alive.” I look up at Sam, and he squeezes my hand. “Do not let our deaths be in vain. The time for change is now. Look to those who are supposed to be protecting you and ask yourself if you trust them. Ask yourselves where you stand—with those like me or with those who are willing to kill us? Thank you and goodbye.”

I turn to Sam, and he embraces me. I hear the recording repeat, and when I look up, Vanessa is watching me. “I—” She shakes her head. “I guess, deep down, I always knew something was wrong here, but I never would have—” She looks at the door as it rattles with gunfire. “I will stand with you. Let them come for us. I’ve spent my entire life broadcasting what they tell me to, but not anymore. It doesn’t matter what we are, but I refuse to be a coward any longer.” Picking up a stick they use for lights, she holds it tight as she turns to the door. I watch as the others pick up their own weapons and wait.

The door rips open, and Aria and Akuji fling themselves inside before shutting it. They press their backs to the door to hold it as something slams against the other side. “There are too many,” Aria calls. “Is there any other way out?”

I shake my head and sit down. “No, but the broadcast is out. It’s on repeat. They can’t stop it now. We did it.”

Aria’s shoulders slump. “Good, that’s good, then I guess it won’t be for nothing.”

“Get behind the door,” Vanessa orders. “When they come in to shut us down, we will hold them off long enough for you to escape.”

“They will kill you,” I tell her.

“They have been trying to for years.” She grins. “Do it.”

“Thank you,” I tell her as I hurry past.

“J, get in that booth and lock the door. Keep that broadcast on for as long as you can, you hear me?”

“Yes, Van.” He hurries inside, locking and blocking the door.

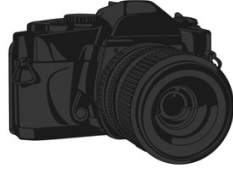
Getting into position behind the doors, we wait. It bursts open a minute later. Soldiers and guards pour in, their guns raised. With a yell worthy of a monster, Vanessa rushes them as I dive through the door. Sam and Akuji grab as many as they can on their way, while Aria and I run for the stairs. Once there, we are hoisted up, and then Sam and Akuji jump over the railing, making me scream. We hit the bottom floor and take off into the madness of the lobby. People are yelling and screaming, while soldiers try to control the chaos. When they see us, they attempt to wade through the masses to get to me, the TVs behind them playing the broadcast until it suddenly shuts off, and I know Vanessa, J, and the others are dead.

Sam hauls me outside, and we stop in the street as we gape at the scene before us.

It’s pure carnage, and I realise that although they shut the broadcast down, the truth is out now, like a wave of chaos rolling through the city—one they have no hope of stopping.

They say the truth will set you free, and I guess they are right. We are finally free ... and in the middle of a war zone.

FORTY-FIVE



LYRA

“To the wall!” Akuji roars, pulling his hood up. We covered them in the cream Cato made to protect them from the sun, and it seems to be working, but we need to get somewhere safe for them.

Sam does the same. “We get back over and fight on our terms.”

I don’t know if we will make it, but he’s right. We need to get somewhere familiar, somewhere safe. I duck as a car explodes. People are filling the streets, raging and protesting, while soldiers and guards try to maintain order, but it’s not happening.

Sam’s face fills the screens with the word *justice* printed across it.

There’s no point in hiding anymore, but when shots ring out, Sam grabs me and we start to run. I glance back to see Aria and Akuji right behind us. We run as fast as we can, straight through the entertainment district, and aim for the closest section of the wall. We will find a way through; we have to. We get lucky because the soldiers are more focused on the protests.

It doesn’t mean it’s easy though. We have to duck and weave, taking different roads at newly erected blockades. We end up hiding under a small footbridge for hours as soldiers stream past, coming from the wall. The sun starts to set when we leap out and continue with our mission. When we finally reach the home stretch of the wall, we get cocky and run straight at it, only to skid to a stop when we hear shouting.

Turning, we stand in line as we face down at least twenty soldiers, all in riot gear, aiming their guns at us. If we move, we are dead.

“Stop or we will shoot!” one calls. “Under order of the ruling government and the mayor, you are under arrest.”

“Fuck that, kill us!” I yell. “We will never let you take us.”

I take Sam’s hand and then Aria’s as we wait, staring down their guns, when more humans suddenly pour from the side streets. They are not soldiers. No, these are humans dressed in suits, jeans, and rags. They hold weapons in their hands, and a man in a pair of holey jeans and a stolen army jacket nods at us as he steps before us and turns his back to us.

“Don’t you dare!” the man yells.

We were facing certain death, but now I watch as a crowd of rebels, of normal citizens, steps between us and the soldiers, their own weapons held high.

“You will not kill any more of them,” he calls. “You’ll have to kill us first.”

A line forms before us, a line of humans, protecting two monsters and two rebels.

The man who spoke turns to us. “Go, get out of here. We will handle this. You have done enough.” Turning forward, he begins to charge the soldiers. Sam hauls me away, but as we run, I look back to see the innocents falling.

They don’t have shields and helmets, but there are so many of them that they overpower the soldiers, who fall under their determination. Many are going to die today. I realise that I started this, I did this, and I will have to live with their deaths on my conscience.

Change is often won through bloodshed, but the toll must be paid, and I worry the price will be my soul. I never wanted war. I never wanted people to die. I just wanted freedom. I wanted change.

“It is their choice,” Aria tells me, taking my other hand and dragging me with her. “We chose our path, and now they will do the same. Let them fight for what they believe in, Lyra. They finally have a cause, and they have hope. You gave them that.”

“I gave them war and death.”

“You gave them a chance,” she snaps. “You have no idea what it’s like living in the slums. You gave them a chance at a better future, so do not second-guess yourself now!”

She’s right, and now is not the time nor place. The wall approaches, and Akuji lets out a roar. A moment later, a door I didn’t even know was there pops open, and a monster sticks his head and hand out. Sam throws me at him, and he yanks me through. Turning, I pull Sam and then Aria and Akuji through, and it slams shut behind us.

Stepping back, we all stare at the wall as the sounds of war reach us.

Gunfire, screams, and the stampede of feet ring out loudly, but over that are the sounds of trucks moving this way.

When I turn around, I spot Cato on Midnight, surrounded by monsters all covered in the same cream and hoods Sam and Akuji wear. The sun is setting now, giving way to the darkness and letting the monsters out.

“We figured they might be angry,” Cato calls. “We are ready just in case. All the children are with Talia, hidden in the prison with some warriors. I hope that’s okay.”

Sam nods, but whatever he was going to say is interrupted as the trucks grow closer. There’s shouting just over the wall, and we quickly step back to the crowd of monsters. We all stare, wondering what the humans are going to do, when an explosion rocks the earth.

I’m knocked down, and when I lift my head, I see a hole forming in the wall, and through that hole, soldiers pour in.

“Stay at my side!” Samael roars as he wades through the monsters who are roaring and racing towards the oncoming wave of human soldiers. Hoisting me up, he places me on Midnight’s back as Cato slips down. “Stay here,” he orders, pointing in my face.

“No, not without you!” I yell, gripping him as terror races through me. My eyes lift to the smoking wall and the mounds of soldiers flooding in. There are so many of them. The roars and sound of gunshots make me want to cover my ears, but I force myself to look, knowing I did this.

I started this.

“Sammy,” I demand, and he pulls his gaze away from the battle before he kisses me hard.

“I have to help my people. Stay here, and if the tide starts to turn, you leave, okay? You ride her as fast as you can back to the prison, and you fortify it. I’m trusting you to protect Talia and the kids, Lyra, please.”

“Okay.” I nod, clutching the reins as he and Cato turn and wade into the clashing, warring bodies.

I hesitate there, on the edge of a full-out war. I catch a glimpse of the city beyond the hole as more soldiers in full riot gear pour in. I’m guessing they have given up on all pretence and are just going to take our city by force and then kill anyone who gets in their way. It’s clear, however, that they were not expecting so many monsters to still be here or to fight back, and for a moment, I watch our surge of monsters push them back, but more keep coming through.

Explosions rock the ground, splintering monsters into pieces. Their dying howls make me want to cry. I have to do something. I know they are trusting me to warn Talia, but I can’t just sit here while the man I love fights a war and watch his people, the people who protected me, die.

I started this war, and I unleashed the truth, so I will die for it. Leaping down, I grab a discarded knife and rush the first soldier I see. I take him by surprise and watch him fall, coughing and choking on his own blood, before I extract the gun from his hands. It’s a brand-new model, something they were only trying before I came over the wall. Luckily for me, I attended the presentation of the new weapon, so I hit charge and turn to take aim.

“Lyra!” Samael roars in warning, but I simply wave and fire at a soldier sneaking up on him. Snarling, he turns back to the masses, but I see him fighting his way towards me, barking orders for his people to get to me.

There’s a neigh, and I turn to see Midnight rearing.

“It’s me!” I say as I duck, but I shouldn’t have worried because I watch as her hooves come down on a soldier coming up on my side before she kicks out at another. Grinning, I stand and put my back to her. “You watch that side,” I tell Sam’s horse as I keep firing.

I work my way to a half-broken wall and crouch behind it, placing the gun on top to steady the recoil. Sam is still fighting his way over to me, but I don’t stop. I take down as many as I can, pausing a few extra seconds to make sure I don’t hit one of ours. I don’t have time to think about what I’m doing or the lives I’m taking. It’s us or them, and I refuse to let these people be enslaved again.

I fight and kill, and I will die alongside them.

Some of the soldiers near the wall turn to me. I see them calling orders, and then a squadron of shielded soldiers begins to work their way around the outskirts, heading towards me.

Shit.

Blowing out a breath, I take aim and fire, but the energy gun simply hits the shell and is absorbed. Fuck. I wait and try again, even as they draw closer. I won’t run or hide. Not anymore. This is my war too, and if I have to die to protect the people I love, then I will.

With a roar, Sam bowls into them, their shots not even touching him because he’s too fast. He rips through their masses, slamming their bodies into each other and tearing them apart. “She’s mine!” he roars. I watch as he rips the squadron to pieces and then leaps over to me, lifting me into his arms. “Are you hurt?” he roars.

“No.” I pat his chest and kiss him quickly. “Now get back in there.”

With a warning look at me, he puts me on my feet, turns to the closest warrior, and drags him over. “Protect her at all costs. If anyone comes near her who isn’t Cato or me, you kill them, do you understand? If you don’t, I will find you, and I will feed you your intestines.”

He balks but nods, and when Sam dives back into the war, the warrior eyes me nervously before standing at my side, ready to defend me as I get back into position and pick off as many soldiers as I can.

After a bit, my gun needs to recharge, but there are still so many of them. Their bodies litter the ground, but so do the bodies of our own people. So many are dead or hurt. I leave the gun to charge and rush to the outskirts, where I start to drag the wounded as far down the street as I can. I blink in shock when I see the doc there. He nods at me, rushing to the injured monster’s side.

“Where’s Sascha?” I bark, panting from dragging the huge monster.

“Here,” she responds, and my head jerks around. She has a rifle in her hands and is lying on top of a car, picking off soldiers who come to finish off the wounded. She looks over at me and nods. “I’m getting my revenge. You hear that, you fuckers? This is for my mate!”

I share a look with the doc. “Look after her.”

“Nope, she’s looking after me.” He gives her a wondrous look, and I have no choice but to leave them.

I drag the wounded, one by one, to the doc and his rapidly growing team of healers. When I go back for the next one, a soldier’s fist slams into my face, but the monster Sam ordered to protect me rips him to pieces and hauls another wounded with me, both protecting and helping me.

“We are losing,” he grits out when we rush back.

The soldiers drive us back, killing monsters with sick glee as their commanders shout orders. We are losing.

He’s right.

“We have to keep trying, keep fighting,” I demand.

“You should fall back and stay safe.”

“Not a chance, my mate is out there, as are my friends, so get your ass in gear and help me. We do not stop until we are dead. Do you hear me?” He watches me for a moment, so I grab his horns and yank him down. “I said, do you hear me, warrior?”

“Yes, my queen,” he responds, and we grab more wounded. I have to stop every now and again to fire at oncoming soldiers, but they seem to realise it’s pointless to come near us, so they focus on the warriors fighting their masses near the wall.

I hear a whistle, and the monster at my side throws me behind a car. Peeking over, I look up to the rooftops to see snipers there, settling down to pick off as many as they can. Our people don’t stand a chance if they are attacked from both the air and the ground.

“You get the wounded to safety, do you hear me? That’s an order!” Leaping over the car, I rush to the closest building, zigzagging to avoid their shots. All I can think about is Sam being down there, defenceless against their attack. The idea of him being one of the wounded I’m helping or worse has me speeding up. I run faster than I ever thought I could, the power in my body shocking me.

I hit the roof at a sprint, and I don’t stop, heading for the sniper poised over the edge. He must hear me because he turns and fires rapidly, but I dodge the bullets—I actually see them coming and dodge them—and before I can even process what I’m doing, I’ve grabbed the gun and ripped out his throat with my bare hands.

A scream rips from my throat as red-hot fire slices through my shoulder, the force knocking me back to the roof. Looking down, I realise it’s a bullet and it tore through my shoulder. It’s bleeding, but I’m alive, so I crawl to the edge to see the soldier on the next roof taking aim at me again. Fuck.

“Hey, asshole!” comes a yell, and I peer over the edge and watch in awe.

Aria leaps from the ground and onto the roof, ripping the head clear off the soldier’s body with a gleeful laugh. “Mate perks.” She winks before throwing herself onto the next roof, helping me clear the snipers. Looking down at my bloody hands, I wonder if that’s how I was able to carry the wounded, run so fast, and dodge bullets.

But that’s something to think about later.

Stepping back, I take a running jump onto the next roof and follow her. We work as a team to clear the snipers until we are standing on the last roof, and a radio crackles at my feet. “Team four, do you copy?”

I glance at a panting, blood-soaked Aria, and she shrugs, so I crouch and grab the radio.

“Team four, do you copy? Do we need reinforcements?”

Pressing the button, I grin. “Team four is dead, assholes. Send all the reinforcements you want. We will kill them too.”

There’s silence, and then suddenly, the radio crackles to life. “Lyra, you stop this right now.”

“Dad?” I ask in shock. This must go to the command post, so of course he would be there. This is all his fault, after all, and these soldiers are his, as is Nano. It all leads back to my evil, bastard of a father.

“Hand yourself over now and they will not kill you,” he snaps. “Stop this foolishness. I’m angry about the broadcast, but you can make it up to me.”

He can’t be for real.

“How about no?” I respond. “How about you stop this? Haven’t you hurt this city enough? Haven’t your people given enough? You have lost, so give it up. They know the truth now.”

“They will not care.” He chuckles. “Not if it keeps them safe. Anyone can be bought, but I have to thank you because

now we have an excuse to invade the city and take back our test subjects.”

Aria snarls, and I tighten my hold on the radio, glaring down at it with the force of my hatred. “You will never get them back. I won’t let you.”

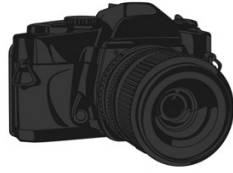
“You would choose the monsters over your own father? Your own family?” he retorts, trying another tactic.

I laugh bitterly. “These monsters are my family. If you want me, then come fucking get me, you coward.” I drop the radio and smash it under my foot just as his voice comes through again.

“Badass,” Aria comments.

I guess she isn’t wrong.

FORTY-SIX



LYRA

I move to the edge of the roof and look down. The soldiers are still coming, albeit more hesitantly, and they are driving the monsters farther back into the city.

“He’s right though. We are losing. We aren’t going to win this,” Aria whispers as she looks to me. “Do me a favour, okay? They won’t kill you straight away, so kill Akuji and me. Don’t let us get taken.”

“We will survive this,” I snap. “We will win this; we have to.”

Smiling, she takes my hand. “We’ll fight until the end, but don’t look so sad, Lyra. I always knew I would die young. At least this way, I will be surrounded by people I love, and I’ve had a chance at happiness.”

She steps to the edge, and without an ounce of fear, she steps off. I gasp and lean over, watching as she lands in a monster’s arms below. Monsters and humans are working together to protect their city and their people.

Humans ...

They protected us once, so maybe they can again. This is their war too, after all. Grabbing a rifle, I clamber to the edge of the roof and peer over the wall, seeing similar battles happening in the city beyond. Plumes of smoke billow into the air, and people are on the streets, fighting their own kind. Maybe, just maybe ... It’s a risk, but we have to take it. We cannot lose, so either we all stand together or we die alone.

We have no other choice. It’s time for monsters and humans to forgive the past and the tragedies we have all suffered at each other’s hands. It’s time to stand together.

Or fall alone.

However, I need a way to get them. I lean over the side and look around before spotting what I need through the hole

in the wall. Whistling, I step off the ledge and close my eyes, grinning when arms catch me. I see Samael searching for me, but there is no time to waste. I run at the wall. The soldiers let me by, thinking I'm running away, and I duck through before climbing. I find the soldier I was looking for, who holds a megaphone to his mouth as he barks orders.

“I need this.” I grin, smashing my fist into his face and knocking him out cold. “Thanks.”

Ignoring the shouts, I run at the trucks, climb onto the tallest one to see down the streets, and then put the megaphone to my mouth.

“Stop this!” I yell, watching as some soldiers turn to me. “You don't want this war. Look at what happened last time. The monsters do not want to fight. They just want to be left alone. You are fighting for people who hide behind walls and let you die for them. Stop giving your lives for their cause. Stop letting them get away with murder. We can be better. I know you saw the video. Is this really what you want?” I watch as they hesitate. “Is your job really worth giving your life for? Are you really okay with killing innocent people who are just fighting for their freedom? You are not on the right side of history, you are on the wrong side, so do you want to be remembered like that?”

I watch some of the soldiers falter, one or two even drop their weapons, and with determined looks, they turn and head away, abandoning their mission. Others still do as they are told, marching to death for a cause they probably don't believe in.

They won't stop, so I go to my next plan and turn to the city. “Anyone who can hear me, come through the wall. We need your help! They are trying to kill the monsters! They will kill them and come for you. None of you are safe—not your family, not your kids. They will use them all for experiments. It's time to stand up. It's time to say enough is enough. It's time to fight for the future you want. We can be better this time. Do not let history repeat itself. Help me stop the bloodshed,” I yell as loud as I can. “Fight them with us or all that will be left in the cinders of this city will be our pointless

deaths as they rebuild around our bones. It's time for change now!"

I wait, but I see nothing. I give up, my shoulders slumping.

Dropping the megaphone, I hurry back through the wall, ducking and weaving back to Sam who's shouting my name. I take his hand, and he relaxes, fighting one-handed as we are pushed back farther and farther. I tried my best.

I tried, and now we will die together.

We will go down fighting, though, so I grab the knife once more and I start to roar with them as I hold them back for as long as I can.

Suddenly, a yell goes up.

"Wow," Samael whispers, lifting me so I can see over the soldiers' heads. I watch as a horde of humans surge through the wall, holding weapons in their hands as they rush into the fight.

They surround the soldiers from behind as we push forward, and it's not long before they realise they are outnumbered and finally give up. The gunfire all but stops as they are herded with stark fear on their faces. A few monsters fall, but others take their places until we overrun them.

In the aftermath, we all hold our ground as if we're waiting for them to attack again, but they slowly put down their weapons and orders are shouted to surrender. Samael gives the command to step back, and I look up at him.

"We did it," I murmur.

"We did." He takes my hand as he looks at me. "What do we do with them?"

"Give them the honour they never gave us. Tie them up so they cannot attack, but we do not kill them."

Nodding, he starts to shout orders. "Get the wounded to the healers. All of the humans who were not helping us will be rounded up, searched, and stripped of their weapons before being held."

Aria comes to my side with a grinning, blood-covered Akuji. “You did good.” She nudges my shoulder. “Real good.”

“I did what anyone else would have.”

Spotting a human giving orders, I head over, only to realise it’s the man who saved us outside on the streets. “Good to see you again.” I grin.

“And you.” He laughs.

“Thanks for the assistance,” I tell him. “You saved us.”

“Nah, we just finally did the right thing.” He shrugs. “We’ll help round them up, but what’s next?”

He looks to me for answers, and the truth is, I don’t know. “I guess we’ll figure that out together. There are still people out there in charge who are in hiding, so this isn’t over yet. This was just the first battle, but if we do this together, we might just stand a chance.”

Holding out his hand, he grins at me. “Names Op, short for Optimus.”

“Lyra.” I shake his hand.

“Well then, Lyra, let’s work together.” Turning, he gives the order, and we start to clear up the mess from the battle.

“Let’s,” I reply, almost choking on my hope.

A few days ago, I was worried we would die over the wall, but now here we are, standing side by side with a militia of humans fighting beside us, wanting change as much as we do. Hope is a dangerous thing. Too much makes you reckless, but sometimes, too much might just change the world.

The militia works with us to round up the soldiers and subdue them, tying them up as they sit near the buildings, their faces streaked with blood and dirt.

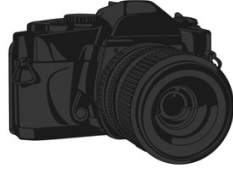
I can’t help but grin as I look around, noticing the mixing of our races.

Hope fills me.

We won, and now we have to fight for our future, but as I watch a human man who fought with us laugh at something a monster said, I know we are going to be okay.

I know we are going to be better than okay.

FORTY-SEVEN



LYRA

There is much to grieve and much to celebrate. We bury our dead as the soldiers are led back through the wall, the militia saying they will lock them up until a new government can be established and order is restored. After all, it is chaos over the wall. Word came that those who were from the slums that were drafted or locked up were found and have joined the fight. In fact, most of them came to our rescue. We still have enemies out there, so we keep patrols at the wall with the militia pitching in, but for the first time in over thirty years, we have humans here with us. They walk among us, help us with our dead, and aid us with our wounded. When the fires are lit and the booze is passed around, they partake too.

There is still so much to be done, and none of it seems real. It happened so quickly, yet I realise we have time for the first time ever—time to make things right, time to stop those still within the city, and time to heal.

This city survived a war once before, and now it has survived it again, but this time, alliances have been made, and the truth has been freed, so I hope that we never have to fight again.

I sip my drink as I look around. Sam is at my side, where he belongs, and I smile.

SAMAEL

My mate introduced me to their leader, Op, who used to be a police officer. He's a good man, and it's clear they respect him. Holding Lyra close, I watch the humans and my people intermingle, laughing, joking, and telling stories.

It's all thanks to her.

I look down at the miracle in my arms and know we wouldn't have survived this without her. We would have been hunted and captured by the humans no matter how long we hid behind the wall, and the truth never would have come out. Yet here we are, and our sacrifices finally mean something. The humans welcome us instead of shunning and fearing us, and those responsible for all the torture and bloodshed are no doubt hiding right about now.

So much has changed in such a short time, and it's clear we will be picking up the pieces for a long time, but with her at my side, I know we can do it.

"Here." Akuji hands me a goblet. "You deserve it. You were incredible today, brother." He watches me carefully before smiling. "Never before have our people seen a better warrior or a leader."

"No, that's a job for you, not me."

"We'll see." He grins as Aria ducks under his arm.

"You should have seen her, Talia!" She's talking to the pregnant woman waddling at her side as Cato carefully holds her. "She dived right through the wall—"

I listen carefully, and Lyra winces at me as I growl. "Oh, don't worry. I'll get you back later for risking your life," I promise darkly.

When I heard her voice coming from over the wall, my heart stopped, but I'm beginning to understand I can no more

control and shield Lyra than one could contain a monster. After all, that's why I love her.

It doesn't mean I won't spank her ass raw later though.

"I can't wait." She giggles, leaning into me.

"So what do we do now?" Talia begins, and Cato grins at her.

"Mate, just enjoy tonight. That is tomorrow's issue. Tonight, we just enjoy living another day." He lifts her into his arms, and she sighs, burrowing closer.

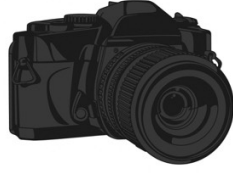
"Okay," she agrees, and in comfortable silence, we watch our people grieve their losses and celebrate our new future.

Cato is right. Tonight's a night of celebration, and tomorrow, the plans will begin. We have all spent so long fighting the humans that we never actually thought about what we would do if we won.

I know one thing I want, though, and that's Lyra, my pet, my mate.

Wherever this new future takes us, it will be at her side.

FORTY-EIGHT



LYRA

We have buried our dead, and we have cleansed the street of bloodshed, so with a promise in the air and a new hope for tomorrow, we drown ourselves in booze, feeling safe and happy.

Tomorrow, we'll meet with Op and a few other humans to come up with a plan. We still have my father and the scientists to deal with, but for now, we allow ourselves to enjoy a moment of peace.

The celebration is in full swing, and the booze I'm drinking has a real kick to it. I find myself hanging from Samael's neck, laughing my ass off at Aria's antics as she dances with her tiger.

"I think that's enough." Sam grins, plucking the drink from my hand and downing the goblet.

Laughing, I drag him forward to dance with me under the sparkling night sky.

His eyes are focused fully on me, as he feels safe for once, and they are filled with love. I'm about to say just that when something over his shoulder catches my attention. It's a human in a hood, but not one of the militia because he's too well dressed. When the hood slips back, I see my father's furious face splattered with blood and with a black eye, as he raises a gun, aiming it at Samael's back.

"This is for everything!" he yells. "You ruined it all!"

The sounds of laughter and talking cut off as I push Sam out of the way. His shot goes wide as I bring my own gun up and fire. It all happens within seconds, and I watch as it hits my father. Shock blooms on his face as he stumbles back.

Aria quickly disarms him, and monsters and humans rush over. Holding my gun tight, I walk closer, pressing my foot to his chest when he tries to stand.

I look into the eyes of the man who spent my entire childhood torturing me. “You just couldn’t give up, could you? Honestly, I expected you to be hiding somewhere and throwing money at the problem.”

I guess since he had no one left to do his dirty work, he had no choice but to do it himself.

“My own guards turned on me,” he snaps. “I had no choice. They were trying to drag me here to you. I figured why not take that monster down with me.”

“You failed,” I retort as I raise my gun. “Evil always does.”

“I was doing my duty!” he yells.

“No!” I shout back. “You were enjoying the spoils of hurting others, just like you always have. You were never ordered to beat your daughter. You were never ordered to torture and abuse her. You were never commanded to torment those you helped create. You are the monster here, Father, and there is no room in our new world for you.”

“You won’t kill me. You don’t have the balls—” His words cut off as his head explodes, my gun smoking as I drop it to the ground.

“That’s for my mate,” I spit before I turn to see Samael right behind me. “It’s done; it’s finished.”

“I’m proud of you, pet.” He takes my hand, searching my gaze. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve never been better.” It’s true. For so long, I was afraid of the man behind me, but now I’m finally free of him and his reach. He can never hurt me or those I love again. I didn’t want to start this new world with bloodshed and death, but sometimes the price for their crimes must be paid. My father deserved to suffer for what he did, so what I gave him was a mercy.

He got a quick death, something he never afforded to anyone else.

“Let’s celebrate!” I call, and cheers go up.

FORTY-NINE



SAMAEEL

“You’re so pretty.” She giggles.

“You’ve said that.” I grin down at her. I was worried about her reaction when she killed her father. No matter why or how, it is still a big thing, not to mention everything that has happened today, but my Lyra is taking it all in stride. I know it will catch up to her eventually, but she’s drunk and happy, so I allow her to enjoy herself for now as I carry her into our nest. The sun is high in the sky, lighting up the destruction of last night’s war.

A new day, a new city, and a new future.

My girl called it hope, and she’s right, I am hopeful. I am hopeful for our future, but most of all, I’m glad we get one together. I’ll be around to help her heal from her past, and we will be together until we grow old. There are still many unanswered questions and a lot to do, but it will all come in time.

All that matters right now is my mate and how much I love her.

Placing her on her feet, I quickly undress her and then tuck her into the furs before wrapping myself around her. I hold her as she giggles and strokes my crooked, broken horn, loving every ruined inch of me without reservation or disgust. Sighing, she meets my eyes. Hers are clear, and I realise she is just happy and not drunk.

“I could have lost you today,” she finally mutters.

“Never.” I kiss her head. “But, Lyra, you have to promise me you will never put yourself at risk like that again.” I shudder in horror at what could have happened to her. “I could have lost you,” I croak, closing my eyes. “I can’t live without you, mate. I cannot live in a world where you are not. You would survive and go on, but I could never do that.”

“You think I could live without you?” she asks, pushing me down and straddling me, suddenly angry. I take it, just as I will always take everything she offers me, desperate for every crumb of her affection.

“Yes,” I admit without shame, “because you are stronger than me, and I would want you to.”

“You’re wrong,” she snaps as she leans down. “I could never live without you, so do not ever speak like that. We are both alive, and I need you to remind me of that. Remind me, Sammy,” she whispers, dragging her lips over mine. “Remind me how much you love me.”

I do. Tugging off her bloodstained clothes, I let my claws linger on her perfect skin, washing away the months we have had. She lies back with a small smile just for me, and then I crawl down her body and kiss her pretty pussy as she gasps. Gripping her thighs, I throw them over my shoulders. This is my favourite place in the entire world. Swirling my tongue over her clit, I torture her and make her pay for her actions.

She claws at my head, crying out as I drag her kicking and screaming towards a release only to stop and let her calm down before I do it again. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry!” she sobs. “Sammy, please.”

“Since you asked nicely.” I smirk, dragging my tail across her ass and plunging it into her channel as I suck her clit into my mouth and growl. She comes apart so prettily as she clenches those thick thighs around my head. Her pussy gushes her release around my tail as she clamps down on it. She shakes and moans as I pull my tail free and flip her. Dragging her onto all fours, I line up my cock and slam into her.

I force her to take me, even as I lean down and kiss over my mating mark. Whimpering, she pushes back to take more of me, making me growl. The feel of her wet heat gripping my cock pushes me to the edge of the haze, driving me to madness.

“Sammy,” she begs.

Digging my teeth into the other side of her neck, I pin her as I rut her. Our hips slap together as I take her, and I feel her come again, but I fuck her through it, watching my love claw at the floor as I continue to breed her.

My tail comes down on her legs in a slap, then again on her side, and then on her breasts. It's a punishment, yet it only makes her scream as she meets my hard thrusts, fucking me as I fuck her.

"Lyra," I snarl, releasing her flesh and lapping at her blood as I power into her. "My pretty, perfect Lyra." Sitting back, I look at the red marks across her body and can't resist. I slap my tail over her ass again and again, watching as she falls apart for me once more, but I still don't stop. I don't stop until her skin is raw and red, and then I slam her back onto my cock and find my own release. I fill her with it, keeping my cock stuffed inside her so none escapes.

Her breathing is ragged as she slumps forward. Mine matches hers, and I grin happily at the marks across her skin as I lay us down still joined, refusing to leave her tight cunt when I'm going to be fucking her all night anyway.

However, my mate has other plans. With a groan, she slips off my cock and turns to face me. Snarling, I yank her closer once more and hold her tight.

Monster and human.

Experiment and experiment.

Mates.

"The world is ours now, Lyra. What do you want?" I ask, needing to know so I can give her everything she wants, everything she deserves.

"This, just this. Just us. I want to be like this forever. I need nothing else," she whispers. "Whatever is to come, promise me that it's you and me."

"Always, my queen," I vow. "Until the very end."

Not long ago, I was half dead and nothing more than a furious man living in anger and hatred. She saved me, and now

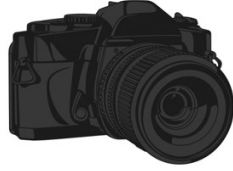
I will save her every day for the rest of our lives. I will love her unconditionally, provide for her, and give her myself at every moment.

I am hers.

She is mine.

Our future is an open, unwritten book I cannot wait to read with her.

FIFTY



LYRA

We sit around the table, monsters and humans. As soon as night fell, we rode into the human city, unafraid for the first time. There were barriers up, some places were still smoking, and bodies were still being removed from the street. Humans stopped to watch us, some still with fear, but no one tried to impede us as we headed for the building Op told us to meet him at.

It's a school, and we sit around the table in the meeting room as one. Cato and Talia are on the way, and Akuji and Aria are already here. Op is with a few other humans. One is a woman named Lisa. Apparently, she used to be a mayoral candidate and has slowly been destroying my father, so she is all too happy to work with us. Another is a judge from the punishment system. They have all agreed to work with us, and Op trusts them, so that's good enough for us. We also have two representatives from what used to be the slums.

"Once everything has settled and is in order, we will have a vote so the people, including you, can select who is in charge," Lisa states. "For now, we will try to keep order and get us to that point. There is a lot to deal with." She shares a look with the others. "We also thought you might wish to pick a representative to lead your people and set up your own systems so that we can work together."

"Not apart," I tell her, knowing that's important.

"Not at all. We would also like to bring down the wall. We think the symbolism of that will help everyone else who is struggling with the change. It will be a fresh start for everyone."

I nod.

"Some of our people will still be angry," Samael hedges. "I will keep them in line." The fact that he volunteers makes me take his hand in mine.

“I will help,” I assure him.

“We thought you might wish to be the face of change and report on everything,” Lisa offers. “You are a familiar face, and both humans and monsters trust you. We are going to need that stability.”

“It’s a good idea,” Aria adds. “Akuji and I will aid Samael with our people and help them fit into this new world.”

“And those who have committed crimes or were on the other side?” I challenge. “What happens to them?” It’s a hard question, but one that must be asked.

“We were thinking—”

Just then, the door opens, and Cato drags a man inside. Talia comes in behind him and shuts the door. The man Cato has is in a wrinkled suit, but I would know him anywhere.

“Sorry we are late. We were hunting this piece of shit down,” Talia says with a grin. “This is Dr. Hayes, my old boss and the head of Nano. He was hiding in his lab, trying to protect his research.”

“We were just discussing what to do with those involved,” I reply as I glare at the doctor who blanches when he looks around, seeing he has no friends here.

“Talia,” he starts, but she punches him in the face then shakes out her hand as she sits, placing her hand on her rounded belly.

“They should pay for their crimes,” the judge begins.

“I agree. We cannot trust them not to spread their rot if they are allowed back into society,” Lisa agrees. “Do we kill them?”

“There has been too much killing, too much bloodshed,” Talia remarks. “If we kill them, then we are no better than them. After all, that’s how they started. No, we must be better. We have to be. You want a democracy, I’m guessing? Then give the people exactly that, all of the people, monsters included. They should stand trial and be judged and sentenced.”

“Are you sure?” Lisa asks.

“We have to be better.” I nod. “She’s right. We cannot be like them.”

“And if they get away with it?” Op asks. “People with power always do.”

“Not anymore, but we have to let them decide that. We cannot start this with more death. There has already been too much. We have to start this with purpose and intent and prove the type of future we want, even if it’s not easy. We have trust in our people. I know I do.”

“Then that is what we will do,” Lisa decides. “Lock him up with others who will await trial once we are more settled.” The doctor is taken out, kicking and screaming. “I also suggest we meet every few days while we sort everything out so we can keep each other informed.”

“Good idea.” I nod. “I will keep communication open and report like you asked. Bringing down the wall is a good idea. It’s time to rebuild.” I look around. “This might have started out as an experiment, but this is real now. This is our lives, and it is time Athesa was one. It’s time Athesa became a place of happiness and prosperity.”

“I couldn’t have said it better.” Lisa smiles. “Together we will change the world.”

This time, I know it will not come at the expense of others.

The stone under my feet trembles from the engines heading our way. The cranes and bulldozers are driving towards the wall I stand on as the sun rises, lighting the way. Samael is hidden in the shadows below, never letting me get too far out of his sight, but he’s giving me the moment I need.

It’s been almost a week since what they are dubbing the Battle for Athesa has taken place. The last week has been spent cleaning up on both sides of the wall. A tense sort of peace has settled between monsters and humans, both sides

waiting for the other to slip up or to break the truce, but it will never happen. Lisa, Op, and I will make sure of it. The slums are no more, thanks to Aria, and the inhabitants have been moved into the mansions and other parts of the city, going wherever they feel safe or want to be, including our side of the wall.

This forgotten part of Athesa is filling with life, and although the dwellings need to be cleaned and fixed to be made habitable, it's a start.

It's going to take a long time for everything to heal, and we will always wear the scars of our past, but I'm learning scars can be beautiful. Today, the last division between our worlds is coming down—the wall.

Aria, Talia, and I stand on it, watching them come. Our shoulders almost touch as we stare out at the horizon, just three humans whose lives changed forever brought here by destiny and the shitty hands we were dealt.

The warrior.

The scientist.

The journalist.

Here, though, we are so much more. We are the three humans who started this, who suffered so much and are now getting their chance at a better life. Our mates, our futures, wait below for us to return home with them.

"I can't believe we did it," Talia murmurs, her hand placed protectively over her belly. Her child is our future, a combination of races made out of love. We all promised her that we would create a better future for her child.

One filled with hope, happiness, and choices.

"Me either. I still remember when I used to sneak through this wall as a kid, and now I'm going to watch it be destroyed," Aria replies, smiling at us. "I'm a little sad actually. Change is scary."

"It is, but in a good way. You don't need to sneak around anymore. None of us do," I say as I take Aria's and Talia's

hands in mine, an unrestrained smile curling up my lips as I look out at the city.

“Is anyone else a little scared?” I laugh.

“Terrified,” Talia admits.

“Shitless,” Aria agrees.

“I wonder what this place will be like thirty years from now.” I grin at them and look out. “Do you think we are doomed to repeat the same cycle, or will we learn from our mistakes and make our world better?”

“I like to think we will learn,” Talia answers insightfully. “And if not, we will not let them forget this time. We will teach our history, even the hard bits so they don’t. It’s up to us now to ensure a good future. Together.”

“Together.” I nod as the destroyers stop at the base of the wall. “Anyone else hungry?”

“Starving for something other than bread.” Aria groans.

“I’m craving ice cream and pickles,” Talia admits and then grins. “I also need to pee something fierce.”

Laughing, we climb down the wall to our waiting mates.

FIFTY-ONE



FIVE MONTHS LATER ...

SAMAEL

Coming out of the new tunnel that leads to Cato's education centre, I can't help but grin at the humans who live here now. After the wall was torn down, many of those from the slums chose to move over into our part of the city. The houses here were better than what they were used to and, well, let's face it, they have been living alongside monsters for so long, they didn't even care anymore.

It was a huge change, and there were a few incidents we had to sort out, but I think we've finally found a routine. Humans work and build alongside the monsters. This part of the city is rebuilding into something beautiful, and we are working alongside the human leaders on the other half—namely Lisa, who, as it turns out, did so much good, we all elected her, and she deserves it. One of her first actions was to ensure everyone had enough to eat. There are no more rich and poor people. Everyone now is equal, something she told me she learned from the monsters.

Underground tunnels with shops, entertainment areas, and so much more were built under the whole city so that monsters can be out during the day if they wish. One such tunnel is the one I just left, and I stop before the old bronze statue Cato chose to keep so we would always remember where we came from.

Professor Athesa was the creator of Athesa and the experiments, and although he was not an evil man, he wasn't a good man either. We owe him our lives and creation, but it's time we did better than he did. I don't think he could have foreseen what we have become, and that's okay.

I turn away, facing the future, not the past. The university was one of the first buildings to be modernised by the monsters in Cato's tribe—although the city is no longer classed as that, since the divide no longer exists. Now, it is filled with monsters and humans alike, who are all there to

learn. Cato is the head of the school, and we often find him hiding in his lab with his wife.

Hands in my pockets, I wander through the city. There are still markers where the tribe lands once stood. After much argument and a little bloodshed, Sammy, Akuji, and Cato agreed their system was no longer needed. We aren't divided anymore, and we need to be one. Some old habits die hard, though, and we all stick to our territories as much as we try not to.

The prison still houses some of our monsters who are struggling to fit into this new norm. Sammy helps them as much as he can and, surprisingly, so does Talia. After taking their blood, she helps them find ways to control their instincts and their haze. Their fear of scientists and doctors disappears when confronted with the sweet blonde who is still very much pregnant. She's due any day now, although none of us truly know how long a human-monster baby will take, but she's about ready to pull it out herself.

I find myself turning to Akuji and Aria's land, grinning when I hear the roar of her tiger. They help Sammy keep the monsters in line, almost like police, if you will. I, on the other hand, work between humans and monsters to keep open communication and show the truth. After much debate, Akuji decided that he would be happy to lead our people, but only with his brothers at his side.

Cato, Sammy, and Akuji are the rulers of the monsters, and it will remain that way.

Aria is still as crazy as always, and it seems her finder abilities are coming in handy. Not only does she help with the monsters, but she helps humans too. She tracks down those who would threaten our future.

The world is rebuilding, and so are we. The hard lessons of the past are not easy to let go of, which Samael can tell you, but we are trying. It took Sammy and me two months to move out of the prison where he felt safe, but we finally have our home, a true nest, up on the cliff where I fell in love with him.

It's his sanctuary when everything becomes too hard, and it's also a place for me that is never dark.

Wandering over into Athesa where the wall used to be, I press my hand to the remaining bricks that act as reminders. On the other side is a memorial for all the monsters and humans lost in the war. Their names are carved into the remaining bricks so our children and our children's children never forget.

I scan the familiar names until my gaze lands on Vanessa, and I smile. It turns out the shot we heard during the broadcast was, in fact, her death blow. She died protecting the truth and keeping the show on for as long as she could. She's a hero. They all are in their own way, and now their sacrifices will never be forgotten. Flowers stand eternally at the bottom, where other monsters and humans come to grieve, and I leave them to their peace as I hop on the sky tram—another new invention, thanks to Cato—and head to the very last stop.

To my left are the mansions where I grew up. The place on the hill where my home burned down is still empty, replaced by a tree we planted—not in my father's memory, but in mine.

The other mansions have been converted into children's homes, schools, sanctuaries, and libraries, the gates and fences long gone.

Don't get me wrong, not everything is perfect, no world ever is, but we are trying. Whistling to myself, I keep going, waving at the guards at the barrier. It seems they were always here, but no one looked up long enough to care.

Now I climb the steps to the top of the wall.

This section is between two cliffs, with a giant locked gate that leads out into the wilderness beyond.

It was a world that was dying when we were locked away in here.

There is debate over whether we should explore outside, but I've had enough adventure for one lifetime, so I'll leave that to others. I don't know what's beyond this or if there is

even anyone out there, but there is one thing I know for sure—we can handle it.

Only time will tell what lies beyond, and until then, I'll be here with my mate and my friends, enjoying the life I fought hard for.

One day, they will tell the story of the rise of Athesa, and I hope when that day comes, it's a happy ending.

EPILOGUE

ARIA

“No, drop Daddy’s pants.” I cross my arms and glare, while he huffs and finally drops the mauled jeans. “Good boy,” I praise, tossing him a treat, which he hurriedly takes to his nest with him.

“You spoil him,” Akuji comments as I glance over to see him watching me, a hungry smirk on his lips. He still looks every bit like the king I thought he was when I was thrown before his throne. Like he knows my thoughts, his eyes darken, and he crooks his finger. Grinning, I head over, and he yanks me closer until I’m straddling his lap.

My mate, the monster who loved and protected me since I was a child.

The man I will spend the rest of my life with.

Our life will never be boring or safe, since we hunt those responsible for crimes in both species, and I love it. I love how I spend every day with the man I love, and every day, he proves how much he loves me. We chose to stay underground while a lot of others moved to new places, and we turned his people’s place into ours. I love it. It is always warm and filled with food, and I have the best memories here.

Like meeting him, kissing him, and loving him.

“You know we still haven’t broken in the new bathroom,” he teases, making me laugh even as I lean into him and rub my breasts across his chest.

“No time, we have to leave soon for our mission.”

His head falls back and his eyes close as if he’s in pain, so I lean down and whisper, “Maybe just a quickie.”

I’m in the air before I know it, and my laughter fills our nest, our home.

“I love you,” I tell him as he carries me effortlessly.

“I love you too, little warrior.”

AKUJI

Watching my mate in action never gets old. She is still every bit a warrior, and with every passing day, she takes on more of my strength. “You know the laws. No hunting humans,” she snaps at the male monster she has pinned to the floor as she puts cuffs—Cato’s new invention—on his wrists.

Blowing back her hair, she tilts her head to me and snarls, “A little help?”

“Nope, you’re doing an amazing job. You’re so sexy when you fight,” I tell her, leaning against the streetlight in the farming district. Nearly every monster has found their way in this new life, but some have not, and we make sure they don’t hurt anyone. It’s our job, and I enjoy it. I still lead my people and look after them, but now that includes humans and other monsters too.

With my mate at my side, it’s a perfect life.

Who knew that when I took the hand of that little girl all those years ago, she would be the catalyst for all this change?

She truly is incredible, and I couldn’t love her more if I tried.

“How about we drop him off at the prison and then I take you home so I can remind you why I love you?” I wiggle my brows, making her snort.

“Nice try, buddy. You’re on my shit list.” She grunts as she tosses the monster inside the truck with the waiting police officers and turns to me. “For at least three days.”

“Nope, I can make you forget.” I smirk as she starts to back away. “Better run, little one.”

“Shit,” she hisses as she turns and laughs, plunging into the dark city with me right on her heels.

I will hunt her for the rest of our lives.

TALIA

As I look down at my daughter in my arms, with my mate standing behind me, tears fall from my eyes.

“What shall we name her?” he whispers, already in love with her.

“Asha, it means hope,” I reply. I have been researching names for so long, but this one seems perfect as I look down at her.

“I like that. Welcome to the world, little Asha. Your daddy and mummy are going to spoil you rotten, and you will be so loved. You have Aria and Akuji as your godparents, not to mention crazy Samael and Lyra. You will never be alone, I promise you that, and you will have everything you could ever want.”

Smiling softly, I tug her closer, never knowing I could love someone this much. “And one day, you’ll find your own adventures and mate—”

“Nope, I’ll kill him,” Cato interrupts, making me chuckle, but the sound fades as I look down at the perfect being we created together.

Her little horns are adorable, and her skin is a mix of Cato’s red and my pink. She doesn’t have a tail, but she’s definitely bigger than a human baby. She’s perfect, and despite the long gestation period, I wouldn’t have it any other way.

The others will find out about her birth soon, but for now, I keep her just for us.

Our perfect little family.

CATO

“Shh, my girl. Mummy is sleeping, and you tired her out last night,” I coo at my daughter, the little girl who stole my heart as quickly as her mother did. I rock the crib I built with one hand to keep her from crying, and I hold my mate closer with the other.

I am so happy I could cry, though I leave that to Talia and Asha these days.

Apart from that one night when they were both ... well, it was a very emotional time.

Being a father is so fulfilling, and I cannot wait to show Asha my lab and see if she enjoys science as much as her mother and I do. I cannot wait to teach her our history and all about her mother’s incredible victory over those who were willing to hurt us—the stories I tell every day in the classroom.

When my Tally wakes, my brother will take over for an hour so I can take my mate for some peace and quiet to our place under the stars, surrounded by paintings. Much has changed in the city and in our lives, but that remains the same, as does the love I have for my mate.

And her for me.

We have a family now, a reason to look to the future.

For a lonely monster, that in itself is a miracle.

Just like my Tally.

Just like my baby, Asha.

Surrounded by humans and monsters alike, I fall asleep holding the two most important people in my life, wearing a smile on my lips for what is to come tomorrow and feeling hope in my heart for the future we are walking towards.

LYRA

I once thought I needed adventure, so I always sought the next fix of adrenaline to be happy. How wrong I was. Don't get me wrong, I'm still the same woman who willingly jumps off buildings and seeks out danger, but now I have a partner to do it with, and I always make sure I come home.

I have responsibilities now, a future, and I want to keep that.

I enjoy our days spent relaxing in our nest as much as those exploring our new world.

That's what love is, after all, compromise. I have my dream job, and I finally get to help people and make a difference. Samael gets his peace and time to heal, which he always wanted. The others don't let us get far away and often yank him back when he goes to a dark place. He has friends now, brothers.

Those who willingly followed him before still do now.

He's still a king, and I'm still his queen, just with a bigger world to rule over.

I was once terrified of the dark and the monsters it held.

I'm never alone in the dark anymore, and I'm finding it's not so scary after all.

He's always at my side, and together, we will live out our days finding the happiness we deserve.

SAMAEL

My arms wind around my mate as I sit upon my horse, and I finally let myself relax.

I do not have to fight any longer. I still have nightmares every now and again, but she is always there to wake me. She's still my little human, and I'm still her asshole, as she calls me, but if it be a day, a month, a year, or a thousand, I will eternally be grateful for every single one spent at her side.

She tips her head back, and her eyes close as the moon bathes her face like a lover, stealing my breath all over again. When she opens her eyes, and her gaze locks on mine, my heart swells. Laughter and music can be heard from our city below, but up here, it's quiet. It's perfect and just for us.

Two lost souls who found each other in the dark.

We had a mating ceremony a few days ago, and I used it as an excuse to get some time alone with her, since everyone wants to meet the woman behind the broadcast. She is something of a celebrity now, and it turns out, so am I, though I prefer my solitude and my nest.

"You're watching me again, creeper." She grins.

"I can't help it. You're so beautiful."

"Aww! Just for that, I'll suck your dick later," she teases, making me bark out a laugh as I hold her tighter.

"I'll hold you to that," I murmur, nipping her ear and feeling her shiver against me. "How about for now, we just enjoy the quiet until either Aria or Cato come barging over here looking for you?"

"Sounds good to me." She leans back into me, letting me hold her.

She is the woman who was once my enemy, my prisoner, who became my everything.

I never believed in love or even happiness, and now I have both in spades. Sometimes my joy is so overwhelming, it's hard to breathe, but she's always there to put the oxygen back into my lungs, and now my scarred body represents something more than pain—love, sacrifice, and honour.

It hasn't been an easy road, with so many lies stretched between us before the truth was unleashed, but now we finally get our happy ending.

BONUS CHAPTER

THREE YEARS LATER ...

“Again, Sammy, again!” Asha cries, clinging to his back.

He shoots me a feral snarl but holds on tightly to the little monster who loves her godfather and has him wrapped around her little finger.

Just like we all knew he would, he crawls along the floor, pretending to be a horse for her to ride. She wants to be exactly like him when she grows up.

“He’s really good with kids,” Aria remarks. “He can be the babysitter when Tally pops the next one out.”

“I heard that.” Talia giggles from her seat on Cato’s lap, her rounded belly ready to burst at any moment now.

“You were meant to. If you two didn’t fuck like, well, monsters, you wouldn’t be pregnant again, so don’t blame me!” she calls with a laugh.

Akuji chuckles and tugs Aria back into his lap.

We are all seated outside at my and my mate’s house. It took us a long time to get it perfect, but now it’s our escape, our nest. It’s away from the hustle and bustle of Athesa, and almost in the clouds due to a contraption Cato designed to allow the others to get here easier. They invade our peace and quiet more than Sammy would like, or so he complains, but I think he really likes it.

I know I do.

Our little family is my favourite part about my new life, that and my delicious mate whom I wake up to every night and go to sleep with every morning.

Our jobs over the last few years haven't been easy, and blending human and monster life together had its ups and downs, but everything is finally starting to settle down. Cato is still teaching, Akuji is training warriors, both human and monster, Talia still spends way too much time in a lab, and Aria, well, who knows what that crazy lady does. Usually, it's with a tiger at her side.

Sammy and me?

We found our peace, our escape from our nightmares.

We help both sides. Sammy helps those who struggle with their past, as well as those with relationship issues between the species. I help report and am the face of it all, but I get to share the good stuff this time, not just the bad.

The world is healing as well. We don't let anyone forget the lives it took to get here. The pretty pavements and parks are lined with the memories of those who died and suffered so we could all be free. They, like me, think the key to a better future is to remember our past so we never make the same mistakes again.

The gate between us and the world remains untouched, but one of these days, a team will venture out in search of those who locked us in here to see why they left us alone all these years. Me? I think something went wrong and we are better off not looking, but that's not up to me, so I'm not worried. I'll focus on my future.

My forever strides back to me, hand in hand with a little red hybrid girl who smiles up at him like he hung the moon, and he did, for her, for me, and for all of us. The scarred, mismatched-eyed monster who suffered so greatly was the one to save us, and I remind him of that every night when the memories get to be too much.

Lifting Asha with a grin, he plops her on her father's shoulders and crouches before me. "Hey, pet," he murmurs.

“Hey, baby,” I respond, kissing him softly. He groans into the kiss, tugging my legs wider so he can fit between them, and then he lays his head on my lap.

If someone once told me the mad king would kneel before me, I would have laughed, but life has a funny way of giving you exactly what you need, if not in the way you expect it.

As a little girl, I longed for a family, to be loved, and to be safe, and now I am, and the monster between my legs reminds me of that every single minute of every single day.

“I love you,” I tell him, and he glances up with a wide grin.

“I love you too, my Lyra.”

A noise has us all turning to see the door opening to reveal the doc and Sascha.

“Hey, doc!” I wave him and Sascha over. I still don’t know if she’s ready to move on from her mate, but Doc is patient with her, and he never leaves her side or asks for anything more. I hope that, one day, they get their happy ending. Henrik would want that for her, and when she smiles brightly at me, I know she’s finally starting to see that.

They join us, and I cannot help but look around at the laughter and love between us all, and then my eyes turn to Athesa. Once, it was a city torn apart by pain and death, but now it thrives with life and possibilities.

We did this.

We saved our world, and now we get to enjoy the peace we brought.

Together.

Forever.

ABOUT K.A. KNIGHT



K.A Knight is an international bestselling indie author trying to get all of the stories and characters out of her head, writing the monsters that you love to hate. She loves reading and devours every book she can get her hands on, and she also has a worrying caffeine addiction.

She leads her double life in a sleepy English town, where she spends her days writing like a crazy person.

Read more at K.A Knight's website or join her Facebook Reader Group.

Sign up for exclusive content and my newsletter here <http://eepurl.com/drLLoj>

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