



ONE

i.s.s.

SOOTHING
NIGHTMARES

M SINCLAIR

SOOTHING NIGHTMARES

INSTITUTUM SEQUUNTUR SOMNIA

M. SINCLAIR

LOST & BOUND PUBLISHING

Soothing Nightmares: I.S.S. Series (#1)

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The Union of Love & Madness

For my absolutely amazing alpha readers that inspired this exciting new series filled with sexy monsters and a brilliant pink-haired woman. Your input, ideas, and opinions help shape my finished work and provide me with the confidence to share it with the rest of the world. Thank you for your hard work.

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Stalk me... really, I'm into it.

DESCRIPTION

I didn't fear my nightmares. I loved them... and they loved me.

I had never been afraid of the dark. Abandoned on the front step of ISS, I'd spent my entire life thriving in the realm of darkness that most humans avoided.

I was a woman living among monsters.

Arabella was abandoned at the front steps of INSTITUTUM SEQUUNTUR SOMNIA (ISS) one stormy night, only to be found and brought in by the monsters that lived there. An institute of nightmares that housed the most dangerous creatures that walked the plane of humanity. A place that trained and harnessed those abilities for their own use, while defending against the humans that were constantly attacking them.

But what happens when a young human woman grows up among the nightmares? Feeling no fear but instead taking comfort in her team that she surrounded herself by? By all regards, Arabella shouldn't have fit in at the institute. Nothing like the warrior-like creatures around her, the 5'1" young woman with pink hair and a vision impairment was absolutely fundamental to her team. Not just for her strategic brilliance but her soothing lack of fear that seemed to tame the nightmares around her. Arabella is bound and determined to keep her monstrous men safe while they are on their missions.

What happens when their most recent mission attracts the wrong type of attention? What happens when ISS comes under

attack and everything that she values is destroyed?

Join Arabella and her possessive nightmares as one human woman finds the monster within herself to protect those that she loves. The ISS series is promised to feature terrifying monsters that include everything from the literal monster under the bed to Lucifer's overbearing son, the prince of Hell. If you love large harems, brilliant, sassy, but slightly naive female main characters with no fear, and a thrilling adventure filled with steam, vengeance, and a happily ever after, then you are absolutely going to love this.

Warning: This medium/fast burn RH contains several dark themes from swearing, violence, and sexual themes suitable for +18.

PROLOGUE

ARABELLA

THIS HAD BEEN A HORRENDOUSLY long night, and absolutely nothing was going to plan.

I slid off my wire-framed glasses, the clink of them sounding against my desk causing me to jump slightly. I let out a low, tired sigh, rolling my shoulders as pain pulsed through my lower back. Crap. How long had I been up now? It had to be at least four in the morning. This was ridiculous. Maybe I needed more coffee. Looking through my fingers that covered my eyes, I scowled at the three empty coffee cups that were laying on top of my scattered paperwork. I could literally feel frustration mounting inside of my chest as my brain pulsed, nearly convincing me to put down my head and go the hell to sleep.

I couldn't though. That wasn't an option right now.

Maybe I was incorrect about my assumption of the time? I mean, it was purely based off the small streaks of pale sunlight attempting to break through the dark clouds outside my bedroom window. Something told me I was right on the mark, though. Unfortunately.

Taking a deep breath, the calm night air settled me, my eyes tracing the horizon with interest. Sometimes in the very early morning I would catch glimpses of flight training. Not that I should be focused on that right now, but you couldn't blame me completely. It would be absolutely wicked to be able to fly.

Rationally, I knew I needed to sleep so that I could examine this with a fresh perspective. Still, I didn't move from my desk, knowing that if I didn't figure this out, my team would be at a disadvantage on their upcoming mission. That was simply something I wasn't willing to risk. Ever.

It was even more frustrating since normally I never had an issue with locating and planning access points. As in, that was my literal job, and I was damn good at it. My team was usually in and out before the target could even blink. Frowning, I ran a hand over my neck, not enjoying the weird pulse of anxiety that ran through me about this mission. Something about this felt different. Granted, it literally was very different, but this felt larger than that. Something in my center told me that this mission would change something. Something fundamental.

We had never attempted to infiltrate such a massive MAM base, and the target that we were attempting to rescue was far more 'important' than usual.

Pressure? Yeah. You could say that. If we screwed this up, it would leave one of the most powerful nightmares on Earth in the hands of dangerous, vile humans.

Rolling my neck, I shook myself and recentered, feeling more motivated at that thought. At the thought of failure being absolutely not an option. I tugged my hair back tighter and slid on my glasses, beginning to reexamine the map in front of me with semi-fresh eyes.

Come on, Arabella.

This was a puzzle. That was all this was. Narrowing my eyes, I started at the top left and began to extensively trace the blueprints of what used to be Luke Air Force Base. In some ways, the alien-like terrain of Arizona was easier to navigate than our base in northern Michigan. In other ways, I felt like it'd leave my team far too exposed for my liking. Sliding my manicured fingers along the freshly printed plans, I narrowed in on a small element that I hadn't noticed before. Pulling my desk lamp closer to relieve the rendering from the shadows, my smile began to grow.

Bingo.

The small entrance, tiny and hidden, appeared to be an access door right behind a water heater. There's no telling why that door was originally placed there, but it would absolutely work. It would get my boys in without a problem... and that was where my job ended. Once they were inside a building, there was absolutely no hope of stopping them. No hope of stopping your own untimely death. Unfortunate for those who had no idea what was coming for them.

I began to type out the coordinates and directions for my team on a skinny tablet, the bright blue light from the screen making me frown. I entered the information as quickly as possible so I could shut the thing off again. I wasn't exactly a huge fan of technology, if we were being honest. I preferred books to tablets. I liked maps instead of directions from my phone. It was partly due to my vision, but mostly because it left me with a more grounded feeling of satisfaction when I used paper. I already spent so much of my life disconnected from this cosmic plane that it was very needed. As I went to turn it off, a news banner popped up, the headline regarding a recent attack by a MAM group based out of Kentucky.

Fury pulsed in my chest as I shook my head, hating that nightmares weren't more protected in this country. That they had to hide in small, walled suburbs, never venturing out because of the attacks that humans threw at them. This one appeared to be particularly vile, but I walked away before I could scan through all of the details, not trusting my temper not to get the best of me.

What would life be like if it wasn't for Man Against Monster? If this country wasn't constantly in a state of civil war? If we didn't have to fight for every small ounce of a real, normal life? Or you know, just to not worry about being shot on the goddamn spot?

My fist pressed against my desk as I muttered out a curse, knowing I was much too tired to get into this mental tangent. Even on my best days, it had the potential to fuck up my day.

I was suddenly pulled from my thoughts when a soft scraping sound echoed through my large bedroom. A smile grew on my face as I adjusted my glasses, turning in my chair

to face the darkness of the room. A familiar icy sensation worked its way through the space, draining any warmth from the room as the window creaked shut and the desk light flickered in a fashion that would be terrifying to most. I wasn't concerned though. No, I welcomed the darkness and every single nightmare within it.

Darkness only scared those who couldn't accept the world outside of what they considered to be 'normal.' Darkness only terrified those that weren't brave enough to look into the void of light and meet the nightmares that existed within head on. The nightmares appeared to be horrifying... but only because you didn't understand them. The nightmares existed in the dark and therefore had to be untrustworthy because they were the unknown, right?

Wrong. The nightmares were far more trustworthy than any human I'd ever come across.

I had never been afraid of the dark.

The center of my being craved it. I went crawling towards the darkness willingly. I wanted to meld into the shadows; I wanted the nightmares to bring me home. I only felt safe away from the eyes of those that didn't understand me. In the arms of those that worked every day to. I may have looked normal, but I was a nightmare, soul-deep. A monster. A title that I celebrated, despite being viewed as an abomination. A human living amongst nightmares, willingly.

The darkness in my room shifted as I lifted my gaze to meet a pair of void-like eyes that flashed in the upper corner of my bedroom ceiling, directly diagonal from me. You would have thought at some point he would have scared me. It would have been a rational reaction to finding out that the monster under the bed was very, very much real. Yet as I stood and began walking across the room, fear was absent from me completely, even as I neared the corner where the phantom face looked down on me in a seemingly emotionless fashion. We all knew that wasn't the case, though.

Coming to a stop, I watched as icy tendrils of black began to make their way down the wall, crawling and creeping until

they eventually brushed across my skin. I sighed at the familiar touch, surrendering to the predatory vines that began to slowly wrap around me. As his face moved closer, attached to the shifting mass, I found myself reaching out as I always did. I needed his touch.

I knew it was no doubt a terrifying scene, and most would be horrified to find a young woman willingly reaching out to touch a monster. I mean, this wasn't just any monster, either. His form was spread out along my entire two-story ceiling corner as he made his way closer and closer. His magic became almost overwhelming and suffocating as he neared, the possessive urge to wrap around me and absorb me into his shadow almost palpable.

The scariest part? I would willingly allow him to do that.

Blinking, I realized I'd gotten so caught up in how beautiful he was that I hadn't noticed that he was now right in front of me. A dangerous expression formed on his face as his power tried to pull fear from me, making me nearly smile. I knew he couldn't control that urge, and honestly, the pull felt good against my skin. Familiar.

"You know that won't work," I mumbled, pulling off my glasses and tossing them onto the bed, forgotten. It left me even more helpless than before, but I didn't need to worry about being physically capable in the presence of my nightmare. I knew he would take care of me. Kill for me.

I stepped forward as the black tendrils of magic swarmed me, becoming solid in mass as they wrapped up my arms and ankles. I relaxed, a soft, amused sound falling from my lips as the creature under my hands turned solid to the touch. The once wavy exoskeleton morphed from a nightmare into a man within seconds. I knew he tried to separate the two sides of the coin, breaking up who he was as a man and nightmare, but both were equally as important and valid to me.

"You work too hard." His large hand wrapped around the back of my neck as I examined his crimson eyes. His voice was so deep that it vibrated through my entire frame, making

me press myself further against him, needing every inch of him on me.

You understand why I could never be afraid of him, right? How could I be afraid of someone that loved me as much as I loved them?

“So that I don’t worry,” I admitted and then smirked. “It’s actually very selfish.”

“Arabella.” He rumbled my name as his forehead pressed against my own. “You are the most selfless woman I know.”

Instead of answering, I rested my head against his chest, taking his compliment but not confirming it... because he didn’t know how truly selfish I was. How selfish I wanted to be. He was my monster. My nightmare. He just didn’t know that he had become so much more than that to me. Not just him, though.

Without another word, his tendrils wrapped around me tight as I felt my feet leave the ground, his skin turning back to exoskeleton as I smoothed my fingers over it. His chest vibrated with a low growl, but he didn’t ask me to stop. I knew he was scared I would find him disgusting in non-flesh form, but that wasn’t possible. He was absolutely beautiful, and I very much did want to see him in the light of day. I needed to assure him of my reaction, but I worried there was no way to do that.

We finally reached the corner of the two-story ceiling as I felt his magic completely wrap me up in a cocoon so that I was like a fly caught in a spider’s web, waiting to be devoured. Or that was my fantasy, at least. My eyes closed when his sharp teeth grazed my neck as he buried his head there, inhaling my scent. *This was my favorite place to sleep.*

That was the last thought I had before everything went dark.

ARABELLA

I WOULDN'T CHANGE a single element about my life.

I knew without a doubt that others would find that shocking. I mean, what human woman, besides myself, wanted to live inside of an institute that created and trained nightmarish teams that haunted the subconscious of most sane creatures? Unfortunately, no amount of explanation could convince most humans that these 'nightmares' and 'monsters' had just as much right to exist as they did, that they had lives as valid as any human's. Was I biased? Absolutely. But that didn't discount my opinion. I not only considered this place my home, I also counted the nightmares that lived here as an extension of my family. Especially *my* monsters, the team my father had placed me with. I had no right to call them mine, but it was the truth. That was how I felt, down to my very core.

At least while it was my job to keep them safe.

I could have laughed at that alone. Tiny me, keeping them safe? Hilarious, right? It was true though. I made sure that things didn't go sideways on missions, and therefore, in part, kept them safe, even if it was from a distance.

Honestly, I was a bit envious of them. I dreamed of being out in the field with them, being part of the action. Of course it was dangerous... but also exciting. It took a lot for me to feel something, but I had an inkling that would make me feel something for sure.

Unfortunately, I also knew the plan was a no-go. I was a lot of things—smart (like really fucking smart), excellent at research, and adept at creating connections with creatures of all sorts. But physicality-wise? I wasn't a top-tier performer by any stretch of the imagination.

Tilting my head, I traced my reflection in the perfectly shined bathroom mirror, adjusting the clothes that I planned to wear for the day. It wasn't that I wasn't physically fit—I was lean with tight muscles that mostly came naturally—but I couldn't pack a punch of any means. My build was delicate and almost ballerina-like in nature, making a lot of nightmares assume that I could be bullied into doing what they wanted. That was by far their first—and usually only—mistake.

Physical dominance had always been considered highly important in nightmare culture, and that was clearly something I didn't have, so I couldn't blame them for their analysis. At 5'1", I was short, with bright rose-colored hair that brushed my shoulders in a wavy, almost messy texture. It was the only aspect of myself that was unexplainable.

I had pink hair. It was odd, but there was no magical signature associated with me, so we just assumed it was somehow natural. Not that I had spent a lot of time around humans, but the color didn't seem to be one of their natural shades, so it was, in fact, confusing.

Leaning forward, I brushed on some light lip gloss, my one smoky-colored eye following the pattern of my action. My other eye was a different story. The entire thing was a silvery white, and while I could see out of it, my vision wasn't nearly as strong due to the injury I'd suffered. I wasn't exactly positive how I felt about the... difference, even to this day. I had called it so many things across the years, but I had settled on 'difference' instead of 'flaw,' hoping that would make me feel better. My long, pale fingers came up to my face, running over the harsh scar that started above my dark brow and down onto my eyelid, breaking briefly at the lashes until it continued down my cheek, nearly to my lip. The mark, while a silver color from the healers' attempts, had still stayed very prominent.

A sigh escaped my lips. Who was I kidding? I knew how I felt about it. I hated it.

I shouldn't have hated it, though, because it had occurred while trying to calm a small, feline-like nightmare that wasn't even fully matured. I had been doing a good thing. Still, I had never completely gotten used to it, and each day I added a small black eyeliner heart underneath the end of the scar, somehow hoping to brighten it up a bit. I wasn't sure if the tactic worked, but I had grown used to the process each morning. I mean, if we were being honest, odd looks weren't unusual here. Maybe it was something I could celebrate instead. But I wasn't there yet. Maybe one day.

Luckily, what I lacked in physical prowess was made up for in my communication and persuasive action skills. Outside of research, it was the one thing that I focused on.

Oftentimes when someone arrived here, it was because they were interested in joining ISS. For others, though, they were brought here forcibly because of their threat to society as a whole, to be held until they could be trusted. That's where I came in. Apparently, I had a very calm and soothing demeanor, so when a new nightmare was brought into the facility unwillingly, I helped.

It was usually right around explaining what we did here that most decided to join us. Nightmares weren't very different than most beings. Everyone craved community, family, a group of people to call their own. It was my job to show them that they had options. That there were individuals who would welcome them instead of those that would try to kill them. That they had a home here, if they wanted it.

Time and time again, I'd sat with creatures five times my size as they snarled and threatened me, but I possessed my own brand of 'magic' when it came to soothing those around me. Usually within minutes, I had calmed them down to the point that we could talk. It wasn't really magic, of course, but it was an ability I was proud of, and I tried to use it when I could.

On the other hand, it most likely meant there was something off with me. The fact that I didn't feel fear.

I had to admit that not everyone on my team was happy with this second part of my job. But they weren't happy with a lot of decisions that I made.

A sound from my room had me slipping on my thin silver-framed glasses before taking one last look at the pair of cropped black pants, sweater, and heels I'd chosen to wear today. The heels had these little black spikes on them, and the sweater was purposefully cut in places to appear worn, allowing me to push off the subtle chill of the air-conditioning without feeling too stuffy. Still, as I stepped into my room, a shiver ran over my skin, and not due to the temperature. No, this was due to who was outside my door.

Why he didn't just let himself in, I had no idea. It seemed only at night did he decide it was a good time to randomly appear. I think it was his attempt to scare me. What he didn't understand? It just turned me on. Terribly.

Problems? Who had problems?

Tugging open the door, my smile grew.

Razar leaned against the frame, his eyes immediately scanning over me as if searching for something, before he relaxed. I never understood what exactly he was looking for, but whatever he saw brought a small twitch to his lips before he stepped into my space, meeting my gaze once again. My breathing caught slightly at how much his closeness affected me, making my skin feel flushed as I resisted the urge to reach out and touch him.

He was my best friend. My protector. Something I would normally never admit to, but when I had told him once that I knew he would always protect me, his entire face lit up. Since then, I had never shied away from assigning him that role. If he wanted it, then it was one hundred percent his.

Along with pretty much whatever else he wanted... although I'm not positive he knew that part yet. A memory

cascaded over me about one particular night about five years ago when I had nearly gotten myself killed.

THE RATTLING from the windows had me slowly looking over to where a massive, fur-covered nightmare terrorized our holding room. I cringed as the table I normally sat at went crashing into the door, bouncing off of it with literally zero effect. My father offered me a look, but I shook my head, walked towards the door, and pressed my palm down onto the electronic pad. In retrospect, this was a dangerous move, but up until this point, I'd yet to get hurt, and I didn't think that would happen today either. I looked down at the cute dress I'd gotten for my nineteenth birthday as a treat to myself and sighed, realizing that I hadn't even dressed properly for this job. I really was off my game today.

"We should wait until at least Razar gets here," my father commented as I stepped into the chamber. The beep sounded as the door sealed off, and I stepped out into the secondary door that opened. Almost immediately I was hit with the scent of wet fur and blood. A low growl broke from the nightmare that I could feel watching me, having paused in his destruction, obviously trying to gauge my threat level. I turned and began walking towards where the table normally sat as I examined our new nightmare.

There were several classes of nightmares, and this one wasn't particularly dangerous... except for the wild temperament and brute strength.

"Hey there," I offered softly as the creature stopped, its enlarged fangs dripping with blood as it sniffed the air.

"Any chance that you are interested in shifting back?" I added. The nightmare growled and lunged for me. I let out a small groan as my back hit the wall, a massive hand wrapping around my neck, almost immediately cutting off my air supply. Even in this moment, fear escaped me as I stared into the wild eyes of a terrified creature.

"Who are you?" the nightmare demanded, putrid-smelling breath like raw meat surrounding me.

“Arabella,” I gasped out, my vision going spotty.

“They lock me in here for days, and then send you in for food? It’s insulting,” the nightmare hissed, pressing harder on my neck. I nearly smiled at his rationale.

“Not food, just here to talk. Although if you don’t let go soon, I may pass out—”

A savage growl sounded as the large hand around my neck was removed and the nightmare was thrown all the way across the room, a wounded whimper making me frown as I clutched my throat, trying to breathe in and out slowly.

Christ. I may have been closer to passing out than I realized.

“Arabella.” Razar was there, picking me up, in human form despite his black wisps of magic that brushed my skin. I offered him a tired smile as he muttered a curse and set me down, walking over to right the table and chair, knowing I planned on staying till we figured this out.

“I will be sitting right here when you are ready to talk!” I called out, my voice raspy as Razar stood behind me, running a hand over my shoulder as if making sure I was okay. I tilted my head up at him as the nightmare across the way stood, licking his wounds before he slowly crawled over.

“Thanks for that,” I whispered as Razar’s eyes heated.

“Don’t go in here without backup,” he murmured. “Please. You almost gave me a goddamn heart attack.”

Impressive, considering he biologically didn’t really have a heart.

DESPITE NOT ALWAYS NEEDING IT, I had taken more precautions following that incident. I made sure to always have backup nearby, and we kept sedatives on hand in case of a particularly angry or destructive nightmare. We didn’t like to make a habit of drugging nightmares, but sometimes it was necessary.

Either way, I would continue to do my thing, and it made me feel all that much more special to know that I had Razar at my back.

He had always been protective over me, though; this wasn't something that had developed gradually. Rather, it began the night I was found outside of the institute by my adopted father.

Well, maybe saying I was found by my father was inaccurate—he was led by Razar to me.

Apparently, it had been a super stormy night, and my father had been in the nursery, working with Razar on some of his basic elementary magic so that he didn't accidentally hurt himself while shifting. When he had started acting up and refusing to do stuff, my father had assumed it was normal behavior, especially for a toddler.

What wasn't normal? Using his dark magic to blow off the door of the nursery and sending my father sprinting after him towards the front door of the institute.

That was where they had found me, abandoned and soaked to the bone, sitting on the stone steps in a stained, dirty dress. I hadn't been crying, though. My father said it was the oddest thing, almost as if I'd been waiting patiently for them.

Of course, I didn't remember any of that.

But because of his action of taking me in, my life had been changed. The man didn't usually take an active role in the nightmare babies that were left with us, yet that night he had chosen to take both me and Razar under his wing, and from that moment on, Razar and I had been attached at the hip. His darkness had protected me, and I'd, in turn, somehow managed to balance out his rather delicate emotional state by surrounding him with affection. You would never know it, but the man was actually quite vulnerable at times. I knew I was the only one to see that side, though, because our connection had always contained this other element I couldn't fully explain. Razar was just mine. It was that simple.

“You left this morning,” I accused softly.

Razar's face contorted slightly, frowning at my expression.

His red eyes warmed to a deep burgundy as he pressed a kiss to the top of my head and spoke quietly. "Your father needed help with a new arrival."

"Oh?" I arched a brow curiously, letting my head fall back so that I could look all the way up to where he stood at nearly 6'7". My head barely came up to his pectoral. I found his large muscular build way too fucking attractive, and I couldn't help but run my fingers over his chest.

I could have stared into his stunning face all day, examining the bronze shade of his skin and the faint red sparkles that almost seemed like embedded diamonds throughout. His crimson eyes, which should have been off-putting, were surrounded by thick lashes that matched his midnight-colored hair, shaved short to show off his dark earrings and tattoos that crawled up his neck to the back of his skull. The man was honestly absolutely delicious. He didn't even realize how handsome he was, and any time I tried to tell him, he got all... growly? Sure. Let's go with that.

It was obvious that Razar had been produced and abandoned by a night terror. He was classified as a Class Alpha night terror here at ISS, which translated into him being a scary bastard. While most people had only encountered night terrors as the 'monster under the bed,' they were so much more than that. I think that was why he still tried to scare me sometimes—his magic was unable to accept the fact that it was never going to happen, no matter what he did. I almost smiled thinking of all the times he had tried, though.

One time in particular always stood out to me. When we were around five, both of us had fallen asleep after lunch for a midday nap. I had woken and found that his human form was gone, and instead, in the dark shadows of the room, a pair of void-like eyes watched me from the darkness. His magic had tried to terrify me, but instead I'd stood up and walked over to him, curling up against him until he turned back into his human form. Even at that age, I'd known he wouldn't hurt me. Then, around fifteen, he'd shown up in my bedroom one night and kidnapped me up into the corner of the ceiling, dangling

me menacingly as if he was going to drop me. Or at least, it was *supposed* to be menacing. I could partly blame what happened next on being exhausted that night, but I'd simply let out a small yawn and fell asleep, suspended like that, knowing he would never drop me. It was right around that time when he'd stopped trying to scare me as much.

Personally, I didn't mind it. It was in his nature because his magic fed off terror. I actually felt bad I couldn't give that to him, but honestly, the man had me feeling a lot of different ways, and absolutely none of them had anything to do with fear.

"They brought him to the holding cell hoping you would be able to talk some sense into him," he grumbled, almost hoping I wouldn't hear it. Then he suddenly changed topics. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No," I admitted. His dark tattooed fingers almost immediately intertwined with mine while leading me from my room.

My personal quarters, along with my father's and Razar's, were located on the top floor of the massive building that housed the *Institutum Sequuntur Somnia*—the Institute of Nightmares—and its many teams. There were dorms located throughout the bottom floors of the institution, and the larger teams had entire floors to themselves. Technically, Razar should have been on the floor with the rest of the team we were part of... but he had demanded to stay on the same floor as my father and I. He was fiercely protective, and I honestly don't think my father had given it a second thought, because he viewed Razar as his son and never seemed to notice the odd connection between the two of us. The one I didn't even have a name for, frankly. If I had decided to move floors, I knew he would come with, but while the idea of living with the rest of my team sounded tempting, I knew I would also be giving up that last shred of privacy I had managed to hang onto.

To say the others were overbearing was an understatement.

"What time did he arrive?" I asked, mentally preparing myself for the day and the upcoming confrontation. Honestly, I

was very curious to see who my father had brought in last night, considering it hadn't been planned. Usually if we were bringing someone in who didn't want to be here, it was because we had retrieved them after extensive brainstorming and strategy sessions.

My father, James McCroy, was the only human I knew. Well, I assumed he was human. Although... he was rather robotic and analytical sometimes. No fault of his own—it was just his personality, and I knew he loved me as much as someone like him could. Plus, he did a damn good job at running ISS.

He'd inherited this institute and run it successfully for years, long before the fall of the veil even occurred. *'The fall of the veil'* being the phrase used to describe the day nearly forty years ago when humans realized the nightmares and monsters they feared the most were, in fact, real. Apparently, long before I was born, the nightmares of the world had stayed hidden and out of sight from the humans that dominated the planet; the humans that thought they still dominated the planet but who had no idea how severely outnumbered they were.

One would almost question why the nightmares hadn't taken over, except without humans, a majority of nightmares would die. You see, they fed off terror and fear, and there was a lot of that in the world. So much so that they were stronger than ever. But if the humans went away? No fear. So instead, we were left in this odd state of not being able to kill the humans as they attempted to kill us.

“What would you like?” he asked softly as we reached a small room down the hall that served breakfast. Outside of the living and dorm areas, the decor of the institute was modern and very minimalist. The common areas were warmly lit to make the nightmares here comfortable but lacked any ornate furnishings that might create shadows to hide in, making it easier to know if anyone was watching you from the darkness—a ‘threat’ that always existed here.

What I wouldn't give to have Razar watch me from the shadows... well, not just him, if we were being honest.

I grabbed a granola bar and a banana from the long counter of different foods, then turned to leave, only to run straight into Razar's chest. I muttered a curse as he led me towards the table nearby and pulled a chair out. My scowl grew as I watched him start to gather an assortment of food I didn't need, but honestly, there was no point in fighting this. He had always been weird about food when it came to me, so if it made him happy to make sure I ate more, far be it from me to stop that.

I loved food. I just sometimes forgot to eat because I was so damn busy.

When he slid oatmeal to me, I began eating, slowing down so that I didn't rush myself. Tilting my head curiously, I asked a question that had been plaguing my mind. "What class level is he?"

Razar let out a low rumble. "Class Alpha."

I paused, taking a bite of the bagel to my left and arching a brow. "Where the hell did he come from? You're telling me we just happened to find a Class A wandering around?"

He chuckled. "Not exactly. Your father sent a team to Egypt to extract him. It was an emergency mission."

"Oh." I nodded and then shook my head. "How bad is he?"

"You'll see," Razar mused as I finally finished my breakfast, standing up and taking some of the stuff to a stacking area for used plates. Of course, it currently only contained mine, because I was almost positive this room had been installed to remind me to eat on the way to work. It was one of those things my father did that made me know how much he loved me. Turning, I intertwined my fingers with Razar's again before standing on tip-toes to brush my lips against his hard jaw in a silent thank you for breakfast. A low rumble broke from his chest as he walked with me down the hall, towards where I knew we would find my father.

"Are you cold?" my nightmare asked, looking over my sweater with a small frown.

I know. He was adorable and ridiculous. Honestly, I think it was just his natural protective urge to be like this. Overall, nightmares tended to be a bit more primal in the way they viewed things. Sometimes, though, they had a depth of perspective that far exceeded any other creature's, including mine. They saw things in ways I never would have thought of or considered. That was why it infuriated me when humans tried to degrade them to beasts. The true vile beasts were humans.

Nearly two minutes later, we reached a securely locked door that led to a long familiar hallway. I flashed my badge as the security guard nodded, his eyes immediately moving away from me and onto Razar as he opened the doors for us. Razar gently ushered me through the door, his rough hand on the small of my back. I paused momentarily when his touch disappeared, turning to watch him say something to the guard. The man paled as he nodded sharply, and Razar turned from him, catching up to me and wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

I always forgot to ask him what he said to the guards each morning, but whatever it was scared them enough that there was a new one nearly every day.

Honestly, it was pretty sexy. I flashed him a small smile as his eyes darkened with what I really felt like was heat, before leading me towards a door. I wondered if my other team members would be here already. Razar let out a low rumble, making me assume that at least some of them were. Honestly, if it wasn't for the relationship and the mutual respect he had for the others, he probably would have killed them.

"Morning!" I used a sing-songy voice as my father looked up from his desk. Wearing his trademark lab coat, he offered me a small smile and adjusted his glasses before motioning us into the suite. I took a bite of the granola bar that I still had as the large door we walked through locked shut and the light above the door momentarily bathed the clinical room in green, signifying that the room was in fact safe and secure.

However, before my father could respond, my gaze fell on the two other figures in the room.

Christ.

I hadn't had enough coffee to deal with them yet.

ARABELLA

WELL... let me rephrase that. I could deal with them, but there was a chance I would end up bopping each of the over-controlling bastards on the head for being nut jobs.

My gaze moved towards the massive wall of glass windows to remind myself why I was here. I almost smiled, noticing a large form shifting in and out of the darkness of the shadows. My curiosity had me stepping forward in interest.

Honestly, if there was one thing that would probably end up killing me, it was my curiosity. At least I would die learning something though, right?

“Is that all you’re eating for breakfast?” A rough voice had me rolling my eyes.

Do you see what I mean? Sure, it was adorable when Razar did it, but I could literally hear the accusation in this man’s voice. As if I was committing some horrible sin for having a freakin’ granola bar for breakfast.

My father offered a small, barely-there chuckle as he began checking off his normal morning list in a manila folder, something I probably needed to look over as well. Sometimes I liked to walk in there and be surprised, but if this was a Class Alpha nightmare, it would probably be a good idea to know what I was dealing with.

Slowly moving my gaze towards the two princes scowling and brooding in the back of the control room, I looked to Damian, who had spoken to me. Yes, Damian, as in Lucifer’s son. Oh! Let’s not forget his best friend, Hades’ son. As you

can imagine, humans were rather upset to find out that their arguments of which ‘Hell’ existed had been useless this entire time, because *surprise!*—there were plenty of sexy villains for them to hate and me to love.

“I didn’t realize that my eating schedule was your business,” I mused, knowing I had to push back with the two of them, because if I didn’t... well, let’s just say the ‘give an inch and they will take a mile’ analogy was perfect for them.

Razar chuckled softly at his teammate’s expense, making Damian narrow his eyes.

“Here.” My father offered me a fresh mug of coffee. I couldn’t help but smile, realizing that he had chosen to hand me a bright blue mug with glittery gold wording on it, despite his natural preference for dark colors. My father wasn’t good at showcasing emotions, but it was small actions like this that made me know how much our relationship meant to him. I took a sip of the warm drink, nearly moaning at how good it tasted.

“What are we dealing with?” I asked him, not waiting for Damian’s response but knowing that he would have one for sure.

“Brief her quickly, if you can!” my father called out as he walked towards an attached room that served as his office. I couldn’t help but smile, knowing the man couldn’t focus on communication if his life depended on it. Razar sat down in a large chair near the door, the plastic creaking under his large frame as I looked away from the window and focused on the other two.

Damian stepped fully out of the darkness as his eyes moved over me slowly. I really tried to not get turned on by the man, but it was a bit difficult considering how sexy he was. He totally did not deserve my attention, considering what an insane, overbearing nut job he was, but I couldn’t deny his effect on me.

Leaner than Razar but slightly taller, the man was dressed in a dark suit today, highlighting his large shoulders and what I knew to be a muscular build underneath. How did I know that?

Well, in the past six years since he'd arrived at eighteen, I'd seen just about everything when it came to these men, him included. As in, I'd seen him naked. Not on purpose, but trust me, I had not been able to forget it. Probably never would. Still hoped to see him up close and personal one day, but there wasn't much chance of that happening, considering our relationship dynamic. He drove me crazy. At least most of the time. Sometimes he was really sweet.

MY EYES CLOSED as I placed my forehead down on the metal table underneath me. I knew I had only a few things left to do, but I was drawing on an empty reserve right now. Letting out a small yawn, I pushed back out of my chair and walked towards the large leather chair in the back of the room. I could hear quiet conversation going on between Damian and my father in his office, something about an upcoming mission, so I figured one of them would wake me up.

I thought I'd only closed my eyes for a moment when I felt my head hit a soft pillow that I knew wasn't my own, the sheets smelling like Damian. Blinking my eyes open, I felt a hand slip around my waist as surprise filtered through me. At first I considered that maybe I was used to being around Damian after the night before and that's why I was inhaling his scent, but then I realized what I was feeling was real. He was really here.

"Go back to sleep," Damian mumbled softly, his words sounding less like a demand and more like a small plea. Turning into him, I pressed my head against his chest and let my eyes close again, completely surrendering to sleep despite not usually being this physically close with the man. It just felt right.

WHEN I HAD WOKEN up the following morning, I hadn't been all that surprised to find Damian gone. I had stumbled my way towards the dorm living room, where Razar was waiting for me. He'd been pretty worked up, but after seeing me and

making sure I was well rested, we had gone to work like any other day.

I'd never brought it up to Damian despite wanting to. I wanted to hear that slight vulnerability in his voice and see the look in his eyes so that I knew he was feeling the same uncontrollable pull towards me that I felt towards him. Then again, it was completely possible that wasn't what I would get at all. That I was hyping up this entire connection.

Damian walked towards me, running a hand through his hot pink hair as his gold eyes lingered over my frame once again, making my entire body break out into shivers. I tried to not focus on the massive onyx horns that came out of the top of his head or the barbed tail that flickered back and forth across the floor, because both aspects always had me thinking of stuff that wouldn't do me any good, considering our current situation. You know, the one where I was attracted to all of my nightmares and not just one.

Had I had sex dreams of gripping his horns while he bounced me up and down on his impressively large cock, his tail wrapped around my waist? Yes. Yes, I had. Would I ever tell him? Absolutely not.

The man was a cocky, ridiculous bastard on his best day. Plus, he had this *laissez faire*, devil-may-care attitude that was actually pretty damn intoxicating to be around. And of course, he had to be hilarious, because life wasn't unfair enough. He was always complaining about people getting him mixed up with the antichrist and that he was Lucifer's legit son. It was pretty funny.

Although, despite having known him for six years, there was one question I'd never had answered—*Why had he come here in the first place?* I mean, he was a legitimate prince, yet he'd chosen to come here rather than stay with his father. He'd never admitted to it, but I was almost positive that his relationship with Lucifer was strained. I just wish I knew why.

“They extracted him from Cairo two nights ago,” he explained with a relaxed tone that had the hair on my arm sticking up with chills because of the hidden intensity

underneath it. My butt hit the desk behind me as I attempted to subtly distance myself from him, knowing that getting too close to the man was exactly what he wanted. If his tail wrapped around me, I honestly wasn't positive what I would do. There had been a few times when it had wrapped around me protectively, pulling me flush against him. Each and every time I'd forgotten the 'danger' at hand and had turned bright pink at how much his touch affected me. My eyes flicked down to where said tail danced across the floor as he continued forward.

“He was drawing life out of people,” he added softly.

“What type of nightmare is he?” I turned towards the window as I inhaled his warm cigar scent tinged with mint. I froze as he pressed his hands on either side of me and spoke in a voice that had me nearly melting.

You see how bad this attraction was? Nearly volatile!

“He comes from a lineage of pharaohs' death magic, so he would be considered a Class A legend terror.”

My brows raised, knowing how rare that was. Similar to night terrors, legend terrors had been the inspiration for myths within the modern world. It was why both of my princes were included within that class as well. Although even I had to admit it seemed like our new guest was specifically very unique.

“Are you telling me he's a mummy?” I turned sharply as realization hit me. Death magic users came in many different forms, but when they came from a line of Ancient Egyptian pharaohs, they usually took the form of mummies. It was why the Egyptians mummified themselves, wanting to live forever in immortality like the terrors that ruled their lands.

“Correct,” a deep voice confirmed, making my toes curl. Damian didn't move from my space as he continued to look down at me, his intensity causing my ears to heat. I tried to focus on movement over his shoulder that I knew to be Blackwell.

Blackwell, the son of the Greek deity Hades, looked very much the part of an underworld god. His dangerous muscular frame was somehow even larger than the other two, making me feel almost overwhelmed by the size of these men compared to me. No, seriously, this man—sorry, nightmare—had to be easily 6’9”... not taller than that though, right? That would be absurd. I honestly couldn’t even estimate after some point because it was ridiculous.

Yea, I had a thing for tall, muscular guys. Sue me.

I couldn’t help but greedily look over his darkly suited frame that almost had a classic old-fashioned look to it, with pin stripes and a handkerchief folded perfectly in the pocket. His olive skin tone complemented his slicked-back, oil-colored hair and brought attention to the angry scar that interrupted his left brow. When his black eyes met mine, they flashed gold momentarily before his face went back to a neutral emotional state. One I knew was bullshit, because his eyes only turned gold when he was turned on or furious. The rest of the time, his eyes seared into you like voids that were inspecting every inch of your soul with disdain. Something that should have bothered me, but considering I knew what he was really thinking... it didn’t. In fact, Blackwell had made it absolutely no secret how he felt about me, and I could see the desire in his gaze as he neared me, his burnt wood and ash scent creating a smoky environment that was echoed by the black, oily magic that followed after him.

Honestly, out of all my nightmares, Blackwell and I had the most complicated dynamic.

As in, a few months ago when I had a little bit too much wine to drink, I’d crawled on top of him and kissed the ever-living heck out of him, making him almost lose his shit. Seriously. Apparently, I had way more of an effect on him than I realized, because he had to be restrained and kept away from me for five days following the incident. I got the impression there was only one reason he wanted to find me, and I had been one hundred percent there for it. Both Damian and Razar had been concerned, though, so I had been kept away until he’d calmed down.

Still, I felt like the man was one word away from attacking me. Where Damian had lazy sensuality, Blackwell had formality... until he lost it. I mean, not even just sexual, either. When he was angry, the form his magic took was absolutely terrifying. Well, that was at least how most described it—I found it sexy. Terrifyingly hot.

“Alright.” I nodded and looked behind me once again, taking another sip of my coffee, knowing I would probably need it. “Anything I need to worry about, or is his magic neutralized?”

“He’s safe enough.” My father’s appearance had Damian pushing away from me as I placed down my mug. I already missed the warmth of his frame, but even I had to admit I was speculative of how my father would react if he realized the situation at hand. You know, the one where it was impossible for me to choose who I wanted to actually be with, let alone work up the nerve to ask them if they were into me.

Yeah. That.

“I don’t like this.” Razar’s rumbling voice had me smiling just slightly. Every time I did this, he said those exact words. I think it was so that later he could say he’d never approved of it. I knew the other two felt the same, but they didn’t bother voicing it, knowing I would do it whether they were okay with it or not. That was just how I rolled.

Walking to the far left side of the room, opposite the entrance, I made my way down a small set of four stairs before pressing my hand flat against a cool screen. It lit up almost immediately, the door sliding open with a poof of air, allowing me to step into the containment hallway. As the door shut behind me with a solid seal, I grabbed the clip I always kept in here and tugged up my hair before kicking off my heels, just in case I needed to move out of the way fast.

Although, despite my curiosity, I wasn’t very nervous about this nightmare. I mean, I had no doubt he could kill me, but that wouldn’t be allowed to happen.

A bell rang, signaling my entrance as the door in front of me opened. I stepped out into the massive warehouse-sized

room that was covered completely in shadows except for the lights that lined the wall where the others were watching. I made my way towards the center of the front, pressing a hand to the table light as I searched the mass of darkness in front of me. My head tilted with curiosity as a shiver rolled across my skin due to the air-conditioning as well as a small bout of excitement.

The smell of death trickled across my senses, something that shouldn't have been appealing to me but for sure was. That smell was followed by the scent of parchment and oils as mist began to emit from the darkness, curiously coming forward to meet me. I restrained my grin, happy that we seemed to be already making progress. The mass in front of me seemed to shift, as if something large was adjusting itself. His magic hit me hard, like a sonic wave, as I blinked in surprise, realizing just how powerful this nightmare was.

Interesting.

“You can come out, you know,” I called into the darkness. “I promise I’m just here to talk.”

After a few seconds of prolonged silence, massive corpse-like fingers, ones that spanned a quarter of the width of the room on either side, moved forward from the shadows. They were wrapped in torn bandages, decaying skin and bone visible underneath, making a pang in my chest sound. It was obvious he was feeling defensive, and he almost appeared wounded... at least I had to assume that, because his magic wasn't holding his bandages to him nearly as well as it should have been.

This room was spelled to expand or contract with the nightmare's size, and since this man had the ability to take a mummified or humanoid form, it was clear he had gone with the first option. He had to have been massive, though, for his hands to take up so much space alone.

Instead of waiting, I walked towards his left hand, each finger easily the size of myself in both height and width. I looked up into the darkness, hoping to portray comfort instead of harm, before pressing my hand to a finger. A rumble broke

out, shaking the room as I continued to smooth it in a soothing way.

“Please talk to me?” I asked softly, taking the chance of crawling up his finger to sit on top of his large hand. Almost immediately, the hand lifted, and I began to soar higher and higher into space until the scent of oils grew thicker. Assuming I was far closer to his face than before, I continued, “I promise you, I’m not here to hurt you. I just want to talk. I want to make sure you’re okay. Are you injured at all?”

After a prolonged moment, we were dropping.

I landed in the light as he placed me there delicately, my feet grazing the ground as his face fully came into view. My heart skipped a beat at the thrill of seeing him fully, because not only was he massive, but he had these huge, flesh-tearing teeth that were visible between the wrappings against his skin.

“There you are,” I breathed out, meeting his hollow eyes that were still partly shadowed. “That wasn’t terrible.”

Suddenly, a shiver wracked his form as he pulled back into the dark, the mist thickening so much that all I could do was wait and watch. I had to admit, the first thing that crossed my mind as he walked out in his human form was how attractive he was. Like really, really attractive.

The man was dressed in just a pair of dark linen pants, no shoes, nothing covering his torso except for the extensive dark tattoos that covered his body. He approached me, and I couldn’t help but appreciate how unique he was. I mean, truly, I was surrounded by unique-looking people every single day, but he stood out.

His Egyptian heritage was obvious, his skin tone a dark umber that contrasted vivid, almost fluorescent-green eyes that were intensely drilling into me as he drew closer. I found myself licking my lips just slightly as his muscular but slightly shorter frame, possibly around 6’4”, came to stand over me. Up close, there were so many details I’d missed, from the gold earrings in his ears to the eyebrow piercing that glinted off the clinical lights behind me. He was rough, and his dark shoulder-length hair was messy and almost wild. What I noted

the most? The scars that littered his body, covered up by tattoos. There was nothing traditionally beautiful about this man, but that was part of the allure.

His large hand cupped my jaw, forcing me to look away from his body and up to him. I couldn't even be embarrassed. Who wouldn't want to look at him?

"Why the fuck am I here?" he snarled, his grip tight and painful. My ears rang with his accent. I held in a soft sound as his mist-like magic ran over me, desire pooling in my center as my face began to heat. Sometimes I wished that instead of lacking fear, I lacked the ability to blush. It would make this 'hiding how I feel' bullshit better.

"You tell me." I placed a hand on his chest, his eyes widening at the gesture as he broke away from me and began pacing, speaking under his breath in Coptic. I didn't fight my small smile, because what he was saying was actually rather flattering.

Apparently, I was an enchantress. Who knew? Honestly, it was really very handy having such an extensive backlog of information in my head when it came to dealing with these nightmares; it definitely helped with the job. Or that was my way of excusing what a total dork I was. One of those.

"Let me leave," he demanded sharply, his eyes momentarily flashing dark. Call me crazy, but I had a feeling this man was used to getting his way. Was it wrong that I found his grumpiness a bit adorable?

"I would love to." I nodded. "But I am worried that you will continue to mass-drain humans. I'm guessing you woke up fairly recently?"

Oftentimes, legend terrors from his line would take extensive 'naps,' which humans assumed was death, so that they could get a break from immortality. I was going to assume that this guy had recently woken up.

"They exist to feed us!" His voice was soft and venomous, his hatred for humanity sort of unsurprising. I didn't blame him.

“I would like to think I am more than a meal.” I smirked slightly.

Almost immediately he stilled, seemingly confused by my words, as his eyes turned legitimately black with... anger? No. I didn't feel like it was that, exactly.

“You're human?” he whispered roughly.

“Last time I checked.”

Fury rippled across his face. “Why the fuck would they send someone so vulnerable in here? I could snap you in half, little girl.”

“I do prefer my spine intact.” I didn't move as he suddenly crowded my space, gripping my neck in a hard hold. He watched my expression so intently that I think he expected me to be scared, but if anything, I found myself leaning into him a bit more. I had to admit, this was a bit different than my normal work day, and I absolutely loved it.

“I should kill you,” he growled, looking as though he was considering it.

My hand came up to his jaw as I decided to ask him a question instead. “What's your name?”

“Amun.” I smiled at his immediate answer. He growled under his breath, probably realizing how fast he'd given into my question.

See? Adorable! The man growls.

“Amun.” I said his name lightly as it rolled off my tongue.

“Don't say my name,” he demanded softly, his hand gripping me tighter.

I leaned in closer and spoke softly. “I have an offer for you, Amun.”

His shudder was clear, his breathing turning a bit rough as I continued. “You can stay here, serving a punishment for draining vulnerable stupid humans, or you can join a team and hurt the humans that actually deserve it while saving other nightmares. At least channel that hate where it should go.”

Surprise ran across his face as he frowned in a speculative manner. “You are on one of these teams?”

“I do research for one of them, yes,” I confirmed, wondering where he was going with this.

“Ridiculous,” he grunted. “Women should be honored, not forced to work.”

Oh man, we had a bit of ground to cover, didn't we?

He looked at me once again and nodded. “I will join one of these teams—the one you are on. Someone has to make sure you don't go running into a monster's den, precious.”

Precious? Oh, well that was a new one. Also, how much did we want to bet the guys were both in agreement with him and furious that he was gripping my neck?

Instead of telling him I'd be doing it anyway, I introduced myself. “My name is Arabella, by the way. Let me see what I can do about the team thing.”

His hand relaxed slightly as I stepped back, only for him to frown and tug me back to him, smashing me to his chest. “Where are you going?”

“I need to let them know the plan.”

I had said that, right? Honestly, everything was a bit fuzzy around him.

“No,” he growled.

“I just need to tell them—”

His form suddenly exploded up into full size as I let out a surprised squeak, gripping onto him hard as I was lifted several stories into the air. I curled into the space between his neck and shoulder and closed my eyes, knowing what came next. Lights flooded the space as the room shook with Amun's savage growl. The door opened with the sound of the bell as I finally brought myself to open my eyes, curious.

Holy crap. We were at least six stories high right now, and the man was kneeling. My hands gripped his bandages as his large hand closed around me protectively. That was cute.

My father's face was amused as the bright lights glinted off his messy gray hair, stepping into the room followed by Damian, Blackwell, and Razar, none of whom looked happy about Amun. To be fair, we were fairly select about who joined our team, but this felt like the right choice. I really felt strongly that our team would be a good place for him, even if it took some adjustment.

And no, it had nothing to do with my insane attraction to him, thank you very much.

"Amun." My father's voice rang out from the microphone on his jacket. "I would feel much more comfortable negotiating your stay here if my daughter was in a safer position."

The word 'safer' had my mummy freezing as he suddenly shifted back again, the whiplash of up and down making me let out a small cry of excitement as I gripped onto him. I let out a laugh as he caught me easily in his arms, cradling me to his chest as his eyes narrowed cautiously on the other men in the room.

"Now she is safe," he rumbled defensively, clutching me tighter as I relaxed into his grip, making him look down at me for a moment.

"If you could just place her down—"

"No. She's mine."

Ah, fuck.

Those words had me wincing, because out of everything he could have said, *that* was the wrong choice. Razar let out a vicious sound as everything broke into action at once.

This wasn't good.

DAMIAN

THE ROOM EXPLODED AROUND ME, not distracting me from the fact that Arabella was *still* not completely safe, and Amun's grip was tightening on her to the point that it was possibly leaving bruises. That wasn't fucking okay in the least. I didn't bother taking such aggressive action as my teammate, stepping to the side and letting Blackwell attempt to grab a hold of Razar when he lost it, surging forward. Normally, Blackwell would have easily been able to stop him because they truly were evenly matched in physicality, for the most part.

I say *normally*, because Arabella's well-being and our reaction to her being in danger didn't really ever fall into the realm of 'normal' or 'rational.' Not that we had a lot of that to begin with around here. No, everything around here was completely twisted, and the only reason I recognized the absurdity of our daily lives was because I'd lived amongst humans before, camouflaged as one of their kind.

Humans and their dull lives.

Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't trade my life, but the fact that Razar was literally a half a second away from killing Amun was a bit of a contrast to how humans would react to shit. I watched as Blackwell missed Razar by the smallest fraction of an inch, making me sigh at the possible chaos that was about to break out. Before he could collide with Amun, a streak of white and silver darted across the space, making me smile.

Or not.

A large frame intercepted Razar, the sound of the impact rattling the space and distracting everyone enough for me to make my move. I snapped in front of Amun while offering him a dangerous smile, surprise filling his gaze. By then, it was much too late for him to react.

My tail wrapped around Arabella's tiny waist as I tugged her from Amun's arms and against my chest, actual amusement filling me at the vicious growl Amun produced at losing her. By then, I was already at least ten feet away, holding my little cherry blossom against me in a bridal hold. Her sweet-smelling hair briefly distracted me as it brushed across my face, but not enough that I moved my gaze away from Amun. The bastard took a threatening step forward, making my smile grow, knowing that he wanted to rip her from my arms.

I would fucking love to see him try that shit.

Blackwell, who had given up on helping with Razar far too easily, stepped closer to Amun, in between us and him. He offered him a low warning that I couldn't completely hear, because right at that moment, Arabella leaned into my chest, her small little yawn making something in my chest relax. I knew it was odd, her reactions to most of this shit, but I absolutely loved it. I loved it that nothing fucking fazed her.

The same couldn't be said about our Director, though.

James McCroy let out a tired groan, seemingly not nearly as entertained as myself or as unworried as Arabella. Then again, violence as a whole was a general source of entertainment for me. I just preferred it not to include Arabella at all. I liked her to watch us slaughter from a distance.

"Fucking shit," Razar snarled as my gaze moved over towards where Cy had knocked him on his ass. I then looked down to Arabella, who was still tucked against me possessively, to watch her reaction. Except I found her looking right back at me, her cheeks a light pink and eyes wide as her fingers hesitantly slid over my tail that was still wrapped around her waist tightly.

Fuck.

My cock jumped to attention at the slight touch on my dark tail, her lips parting as if she could tell the effect she had on me, her breathing hitched. *This*. This was the exact reason why I kept my distance from physicality with Arabella.

Blackwell grunted as my lips pulled into a smirk, knowing he could sense her desire, which momentarily saturated the air before she seemed to snap out of it, shuttering it. It didn't stop a surge of pride from going through me that she found me attractive, and I was thankful she couldn't get as good of a read on how much I wanted her because it would rightfully scare the living hell out of her. Having one monstrous creature following after you needily was one thing, especially considering my heritage, but several would be enough to make any woman nervous... and trust me, it was very much 'several' of us. Arabella had absolutely no idea the extent of what I wanted to do to her, and I needed it to stay that way.

Unless she wanted the same thing...

No. That was ridiculous, and I wouldn't allow myself to go there. Not right now, while she was in my arms and on the edge of being turned on. That was asking for fucking problems. As in Blackwell, someone I considered a brother, would probably actually kill me in order to protect Arabella from my not so innocent intentions.

Scratch that—I absolutely knew he would kill me because I would do the same, especially if it put her at risk. It wasn't personal... well, it was, but we both understood the priority that Arabella played in our lives.

"I'm fine," Razar hissed as Cy offered him a hand to stand, his eyes going completely dark to the point where the whites were absent. His temperament seemed to cool slightly, but it was very obvious how close he was to his night terror taking over. It wasn't like the bastard was known for control, but he usually was better than this, at least around Arabella.

I had never been one to deny the desire and lust I had for blood and violence, which was why chaos tended to entertain me rather than upset me or get me worked up. Unfortunately, Razar was very much not the same, and I knew he would beat

himself up over this for fucking weeks if he had somehow hurt Arabella in the process of extracting her from Amun. Hell, even if she seemed slightly upset about it, he would be a mess. If there was anyone attempting to deny their nature on our team, it was Razar, and the funny part was that I couldn't even blame him. I knew he was doing it out of fear of what Arabella would think. I just happened to be more confident in my knowledge that this type of situation would barely faze our little cherry blossom.

Arabella, the stunning woman that was watching all of this with a bit of concern, but mostly interest, probably not understanding why exactly her being in another nightmare's arms was so fucking upsetting in the first place. You would think after all this time she would have realized how goddamn possessive we were over her. She may not be allowed to be ours completely, but she sure as fuck wasn't anyone else's.

I narrowed my gaze at her hand that had stopped running over my tail, making me want to ask her to do it again but not wanting to sound needy. The ending barb rubbed against her arm—without my permission, for the record—and she began to smooth her fingers over the sensitive skin again, making me almost produce a purring noise that was completely unacceptable for a public setting. Luckily, there were enough distractions going on that she wasn't focused on my odd behavior or how I was nearly fucking panting over her.

Cy made an amused sound at Razar's behavior as the latter offered a snarl, his anger clearly dampened. His gaze darted to Arabella safely in my arms as he stood upright.

If it wasn't for Arabella being around or a stranger like Amun, Razar and Cy may have gotten into it, but I had a feeling that he wouldn't risk that right now. Hell, I wouldn't start shit with Cy most of the time, just on pure survival instincts. He had been on our team for two years now, and all of us, outside of Saint, had gotten our asses handed to us at one time or another by the terrifying bastard.

The problem was that Cy didn't appear extremely powerful, despite being a Class A creature terror. He was tall with lanky muscles and rarely said anything, especially

nothing that could be considered intimidating. His voice was a near whisper when talking, and he usually only focused on responding to Arabella. With that being said, Cy was probably one of the most dangerous members of our team, and not just because of his nature and what he transformed into. No, he was terrifying because there wasn't anything he wouldn't do, especially for Arabella. It didn't surprise me exactly, but I was cautious around him, knowing that the nightmare had no lines that he wouldn't cross. Even in our culture, that was unusual.

"I think Razar's getting faster," Blackwell determined, looking annoyed with Cy, before sliding his hands into his suit pants pockets and turning his attention down at Arabella. I knew he was only a moment away from snapping Amun's neck if the man moved towards us, but it was somehow more amusing and insulting that he'd turned his back on him. Something that I was positive the legend terror noticed.

Still, I offered Blackwell a knowing expression and nearly an eye roll at his words. I think everyone was well aware that Blackwell had hardly been giving it his all to stop Razar from ripping Arabella out of Amun's arms.

He should have been, considering the circumstance, though. She could have been hurt. I trusted Razar to protect Arabella, but not Amun—if the two of them had started fighting, she could have easily ended up between them and injured. My throat produced a low growl as I tightened my grip on her.

My eyes narrowed on her throat, where Amun's hand had been, and I breathed out in relief, not noticing any bruising yet. If there ended up being any, he was going to find himself absent of several important appendages. I didn't feel like a warning was necessary for that.

Mind you, it wouldn't be the first time Arabella had gotten hurt during work, but I still fucking hated any marks on her beautiful skin.

Well, actually, that wasn't completely true, and that was far more of a problem than someone like Amun posed, unfortunately. There had been once or twice when I'd

accidentally left light bruising on her waist from how I'd been holding her during a tense or dangerous situation... and that had left me with a feeling that I tried to not analyze too much.

Nightmares weren't romantic or soft in the least. The way we handled everything, even affection, was dangerous and rough. So instead of seeing it as a bad thing, my subconscious had been immediately pleased by it, viewing it as a 'love bite' of sorts. The closest I would probably ever get to marking her in general.

If I actually bit into her skin and tasted her sweet blood, I would have to be inside of her. There was no doubt about that. I wouldn't be able to control myself, so this was a far better option. I needed to keep my mouth away from every part of her. I had only so much trust in my control, and without knowing, Arabella tested it daily by putting herself in danger.

My frown deepened as the core of our true problem once again vibrated through every cell of my being, refusing to be ignored.

It wasn't that I didn't want Arabella. No, very much the opposite. The problem was that I wanted to savagely mark her, railing into her soft body while leaving an imprint of my cock inside of her tight cunt, until all she knew was my name and how it sounded coming off her lips in a scream. The problem was that what I wanted with her was completely unattainable and impossible.

Not just because of my possessive and protective tendencies that came alive around her, contradicting the dark need I had for her. Or the fact that I had a not so small obsession and fascination with Arabella that I *knew* wasn't just my own affliction. No, my entire team suffered with a sick need for her. Hell, I even knew she was attracted to me as well as the others.

So what was the true problem? What made this goddamn happily-ever-after so impossible?

There was absolutely no way Arabella could survive something like that.

Fucking a nightmare wasn't *anything* like what humans partook in. It was a very valid concern that anything we would want to do to her, that what our creatures would demand of her body while mating, would absolutely shatter her. That wasn't even taking into account if we lost actual control or shifted into nightmare form. There were far too many dangerous factors that could easily end her life, and no one was willing to risk that. I may have wanted the woman like my next breath, but I wanted her to take hers more than that.

With that being said, I could practically feel the tension growing in my body at the feeling of her lithe, sexy frame pressed against mine. I was going to suffer for this later when I was laying in bed by myself, thinking about how fucking fantastic she would look bent over as I pounded into her like the little fuck toy that she could so easily be.

A growl broke from my throat at that as Blackwell shot me a look, clearly knowing where my thoughts were going. Not that Arabella noticed—she was still looking over at Cy and Razar, only moments having passed while I'd been consumed by my thoughts, diving into a deep, dangerous place.

As if Blackwell could talk, for the record. She had kissed him once, and he had practically torn down the institute to find her because his nightmare instincts were riding him so hard to mate with her. I didn't blame him, but he had no fucking right to act like he wasn't ten times worst than myself.

“If we are done with this,” Director McCroy began with a wave of his hand, his eyes moving from the two of them towards Amun, who was still staring at my cherry blossom.

I growled and pulled her closer to me, her delicate hand rubbing against my chest in a comforting motion. It wasn't just that Amun wanted her. It was that he didn't realize how careful he had to be with her.

I didn't just call her 'cherry blossom' because of her stunning hair. No, she was so incredibly, beautifully breakable, and I don't think he fucking realized that, which was going to be a problem to his own health. If he put her in danger, I didn't

care if Arabella wanted him on our team, he wouldn't see another day in his supposedly 'immortal' existence.

McCroy continued, interrupting my growl. "We have things to talk about, Amun, and I won't be able to do that if I am constantly worried about you accidentally hurting my daughter in a tug-of-war."

Arabella offered her father an affectionate smile that made me once again realize how important that type of thing was to Arabella. I wouldn't know, considering my lack of a relationship with my own parents. If you could even call them that. Amun offered the man a sharp look before moving his gaze back to Arabella, seeming to not know what to do. I had a feeling he would still try to get his hands on her if I let my guard down.

"Cy!" Arabella chirped, breaking the tension while casting him a bright smile. "Good morning, handsome."

Cy looked over her expression before offering her a warm look that was probably the closest the man ever got to smiling. I mean, unless he was killing. Then he had absolutely no problem smiling, usually while using his fangs to rip out his victims' throats.

But Arabella didn't see most of that part. Not that I think she would give a shit. I mean, Saint was still in the picture, so we had to do something pretty fucking bad for her to decide we were too 'monstrous' in comparison.

No, I was well aware that Arabella accepted us exactly as we were, and I never questioned her being technically human, because it didn't change anything between us... well, except when it came to fucking her. *Then* I was cursing her humanity.

Amun let out a low, frustrated sound at her words towards Cy, which had me shaking my head. How the hell did she think this guy was going to fit on our team? Not only was this motherfucker thousands of years old, but he didn't get *it*.

It being the one rule that absolutely controlled our team. The only aspect that kept the group of us in any semblance of order and small construct of humanity.

Arabella made the rules.

It didn't matter if my little cherry blossom was quite literally barely five feet tall or had rose-colored hair. It didn't matter that she appeared to pose literally zero physical dominance or threat. The woman was indisputably the one in charge here. She made the rules, and we followed them. I didn't think she fully realized that was how it worked around here, but that was fine. As long as she was happy, that was all that mattered.

Still, if Amun wanted to actually stay with this team, he was going to need to understand how all of this worked, and fast. He also would probably need to learn to avoid using the word 'mine' in reference to Arabella around Razar. It was a trigger, to say the least. I mean, it pissed me the fuck off as well because if she was anyone's, it wasn't his. She was *ours*. She was on *our* team, and while it was a small win on our end, a small claim, it still fucking counted. With Razar, I knew it hit differently, because he truly did consider Arabella 'his' in the truest sense of the word. He had 'found her' and he was 'keeping her.'

It would have been funny if I didn't feel a very similar pull of possession towards the woman.

"Can you put me down, please?" Arabella looked up at me, her voice a soothing melody that had my cock pulsing. Something that was wholly not unusual in her presence because everything about the woman turned me on. Hell, even the way she seemed to not react to very obvious threats did it for me. Nightmares fed off fear, so I should find it frustrating and possibly even annoying, but instead I found it attractive.

Arabella had magic, it just wasn't the type that nightmares or humans recognized. Yet it was impossible to explain the reaction she caused in others—she was like the world's strongest sedative. She made you both want to close your eyes, falling into a lulled sense of security, and devour every inch of her sweetness.

I don't think she recognized it, but her lack of fear made her more dominant than half of the creatures here. A notion

that had me wanting to impose my own dominance on her, and you guessed it... fuck her. Everything came back to fucking Arabella.

Well, I suppose not everything, because there were aspects to Arabella I loved that had nothing to do with her physically, but the draw was an indisputable force in my life. I could spend all day with her—something I loved doing, for the record—and the uncontrollable attraction never lessened. Everything told me this woman was made for me, made to be completely mine both physically and emotionally, yet I wasn't allowed to have her without threatening her very life. It was fucking awful.

For nightmares, there wasn't as much of a separation between the emotional connection they felt towards their potential mates and the physical. It was why it was so difficult to not claim her, because every instinct told me that it would complete this bond between us. That without doing so, there would be a distance between us forever. The way to fix that was very obvious... it just wasn't possible.

A noise sounded behind me, but I didn't bother turning to look because I was very aware who else had shown up. It'd be a cold day in hell that our entire team didn't come to work, especially when Arabella was helping out.

“Damian?” she asked again. I realized everyone was staring at me, and I'd yet to put her down. With a look towards Amun, I gently placed her down on the ground but kept my tail wrapped around her, wanting to put her behind me. Not that Blackwell would let Amun get close to her, but I still didn't like the possibility.

“Should we move to the conference room? I want to brief them on the mission tonight, and you need to talk to Amun before we show him the dorms.” Arabella was now talking directly to her father, so she didn't see Saint until he was standing right next to me, his fingers brushing through her hair and bringing it to his nose. Our Director offered him a dry look over his daughter's head, but the nightmare looked unrepentant. He was respectful of Director McCroy, but if Saint wanted to do something or act a certain way, there

wasn't much that could stop him. To be fair, the immortal bastard had somewhat earned that right, even if it was just in a seniority sense.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Director McCroy offered, back to his analytical self as his slight disapproval at Saint's actions disappeared. “Amun, how about you come this way and we will meet them—”

“Not without her,” Amun snarled as I muttered a grievance under my breath.

Saint froze, looking over at the legend terror, his smile growing in a way that even made me uncomfortable. Anything that Saint had interest in was already dead, or soon to be... well, besides Arabella.

“Saint, not now, man.” Zain sighed, walking around my other side, offering a small yawn. I didn't buy it, but I appreciated his non-combative attitude and effort to get Saint to chill out. Violence was fun, but violence with Saint wasn't violence, it was just death, and I knew Arabella could actually end up upset because of that. For whatever reason, she wanted this mummy bastard around. Presumably intact.

Saint paid him no mind, crossing towards Amun as the nightmare offered him a speculative and dismissive glance. A mistake for sure. Razar, on the other hand, crossed the room towards Arabella. He stood in front of us, checking her over as she went up on her toes to peek around him. I knew she was trying to keep an eye on Saint and his interaction with Amun, a tinge of concern shading her calculating gaze, which was absolutely the correct reaction here.

“The Director said you need to go with him. I suggest you do that.” Saint's voice was amused and almost somewhat friendly. I could feel his energy surrounding the two of them, and as if recognizing the possible danger he was in, Amun stiffened his resolve and offered a low snarl.

“I go where she goes,” Amun repeated. Arabella let out a soft hum and a sigh before tapping on my tail. I grunted, unwrapping it from her delicate frame despite my instincts, and she crossed towards the two of them.

Saint flashed a dangerous smile, offering a laugh that even had me on edge. “No, you fucking don’t. If you touch her again—”

Arabella smoothed a hand over his chest, causing his words to cut off as his gaze snapped down to hers. She offered him a warm smile that I was jealous of before looking back at Amun, as if Saint hadn’t been about to threaten his life.

“We are going to be within feet of one another, actually. You will be able to see me through my father’s office window, but he does need to talk to you. Is that okay? I want you to be part of the team, Amun, but in order for that to happen, you have to promise to play nice.”

Saint was holding her hand and watching her almost reverently instead of looking at Amun, who examined her expression before offering a sharp nod. Arabella gave a bright smile and broke through both of them, walking back towards the exit of the containment room without another word. My eyes followed the sway of her hips and ass as she flashed Zain a smile in passing. I shook my head, wondering how the woman did it. Everything she did was with such ease and confidence, I found myself nearly envious.

She also had left us to our destructive tendencies, trusting us to listen to her and not keep fighting, which we would, of course, do. Cy and Razar began following her immediately as McCroy shook his head, looking amused as he and Zain followed the group out of the room. I stayed with Blackwell as Amun and Saint continued to stare at one another, the tension lightened but not gone, making me know it was possible for a fight to still break out. No one wanted that—their magic was far more similar than different, and it would spell trouble for all of us. Anyone else and I would be fucking thrilled, especially with Arabella out of harm’s way, but not Saint.

“Come on, Saint.” I tucked my hands into my pants pockets. “I want to see what Arabella came up with last night.”

He seemed to relax slightly at her name, not saying another word as he turned his back to Amun in a show of disrespect. I offered Amun a speculative glance as Blackwell motioned for

him to follow with a head nod. I considered not saying anything, but as we made our way towards the exit chamber, I figured I might as well offer him some warning.

“You don’t want to start anything with him,” I explained lazily.

Amun looked over my expression, a knowing glint to his gaze making me realize he was smarter than he was currently acting. “The reaper?”

My lips pulled up into an amused smile. Saint wasn’t really a reaper. I mean, he was... he was *the* reaper, but that didn’t really fucking matter. I nodded as he seemed to mull that over, his temper seeming to sink underneath the surface a bit.

“Why?”

I let out a sigh. “Because he won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“I can’t die,” he mused.

“Saint can kill you.”

Saint could kill anyone.

Amun frowned as I shrugged. “Take my advice or don’t, but remember what I said. Saint has killed people for far less regarding Arabella.”

After all, that was what Death did—*killed*.

ARABELLA

POURING myself another cup of coffee, I examined the collection of mugs that we kept here in the office for exactly this type of day. The coffee bar consisted of an expensive machine and two large rows of mugs that were notably different from one another. My father's mugs, usually also borrowed by the boys if they wanted coffee, consisted of white and black porcelain patterns. Mine, on the other hand, that only Zain and Saint usually could be convinced to use, were in an array of bright colors and patterns, including everything from a unicorn one covered in bright pink glitter to several with sassy sayings, like the one my father had handed me earlier.

And *yes*, Saint holding a unicorn mug was as amazing as you would imagine.

This morning I'd chosen one of my personal favorites. It featured an adorable monster on it with bright green fur, large claws, and a big goofy smile. Above it, in black glitter, it said *I love monsters*. You can understand why it was one of my favorites, right? I felt like it was fairly fitting.

Although, with how they were acting this morning, I was wondering if I needed two mugs to deal with these monsters that I supposedly loved. They were being so difficult, and I was having issues understanding why. I thought Amun was acting rather calm compared to the nightmares we usually had come to us unwillingly, especially considering he was a Class A. I could tell he was putting the rest of the team on edge, and I didn't like that in the least.

Muttering a sigh under my breath, I walked across the main control room towards the conference room that was next to my father's office, separated by the window wall. I hummed under my breath, my body still lit up from Damian's touch, as I tried to refocus on what we needed to go over today with them. I know it seemed fairly obvious, but working with six nightmares that you found extremely attractive could be rather... distracting.

Cupping my mug and taking another sip, I lowered myself down into a comfortable leather chair that sat at the head of the oval conference table. I reached behind me to grab my tablet that I kept down here, knowing it had duplicate information on it as the one up in my bedroom. I squinted slightly, as the light from it had me wincing. As a general rule, we kept the lights lower in the institute unless it was in the hallways or main living spaces. Nightmares tended to enjoy the dark rather than the light, and our goal was to make those part of the institute comfortable.

Here, in the conference room, it was muted and warm light, so the bright LED screen had me wanting to rub my eyes because of the uncomfortable glare. I turned it down and switched it to the 'warm' setting before crossing my ankles and leaning back in the chair. I only looked up when Razar walked into the room, followed by Cy. I couldn't help but smile at both of them.

Razar slid into the seat next to me, letting out a long exhale before deflating slightly, clearly still trying to calm himself down from his interaction with Amun. I reached out to rest my hand on top of his massive tattooed one, a low, frustrated noise breaking from his throat that had me frowning. His stunning crimson gaze met mine as I tried to offer him a small reassuring smile. Razar did *not* do well with change, at freakin' all. So I had a feeling this Amun thing was getting to him for several reasons.

"I promise you, it will be fine." I squeezed his hand, wanting to ease his discomfort. I didn't blame him, knowing him as I did, but I also couldn't deny my instinct that was telling me that this was the right fit. *Amun belonged with us.* I

had met a lot of nightmares, but the ones that I felt a connection to tended to fit our team perfectly, so I wasn't about to deny that gut feeling now.

Especially when we could have that extremely powerful someone to better our team. Our missions were getting more and more dangerous with each passing year as the tension between humans and nightmares grew. I would get along with anyone that could help bring my guys home in one piece. Not that it had been a problem before, but while I seemed to not feel a lot of fear, I did have a constant drumbeat of anxiety in my chest when it came to them on missions.

Razar offered me a long look before kissing the top of my hand, my gaze turning to Cy, who was watching me with his normal reserved intensity. My lips pressed into a smile, always thrilled to see him, as his gaze dipped down to my lips before flickering back up. Chills broke across my skin as I swallowed down the small noise that threatened to come from my throat. *Damn him.* There was something about the nightmare that made my body react before I could even stop it. It was possible that it had to do with his dangerous natural magic, but I honestly didn't believe it was just that. No. The man was so much more than the massive basilisk that he could shift into.

This morning, he was wearing a dark shirt with ripped and worn patches that were no doubt purposeful, with black jeans and dark combat boots. All of it fit to his lean but extremely cut frame perfectly, making my cheeks flush the longer I looked at him. It was so dangerous, my reaction to him, and it didn't help that the man had an imposing air about him that made me want to crawl up onto his lap and rub against him. He was somewhere around Razar's height, but sometimes he felt even larger than Blackwell, which was saying something. It probably didn't help that when they shifted into their nightmare forms, even the most 'human' looking of them turned larger than life.

No, I didn't find that sexy—why do you ask?

Cy's pale, almost silver gaze, streaked with mint-green and black, seemed to be constantly moving and fluid. They were nearly as distracting as the silver piercings that he had

covering his ears and the snake bite piercings under his lip. Yes, I understood the irony there, considering he turned into a massive fucking snake. The nightmare was legitimately gorgeous, his features chiseled in nature, paired with white hair with ends that were dipped in dark green, mint shades highlighting throughout.

Cy could have *easily* been a model or something like that. His entire look was dangerous and unique. Hell, that wasn't even including the tattooed serpentine figures that decorated his skin from his neck down to his fingertips. It was intoxicating to be around, especially since I was a sucker for unique and beautiful things, or in this case, monsters. I hadn't hesitated to tell him my opinion, either. In fact, I wasn't positive how he hadn't caught onto the fact that I thought he was a total hottie, because I was pretty damn direct.

Mind you, it was usually when I was half asleep or maybe a bit tipsy, but there had also been times when I had just been laying out on the couch with him after a long week of work and told him how handsome he was. I don't think he believed me, but it did manage to pull some smiles from him. Plus, it meant I was in close enough proximity to run my fingers through his silky hair while inhaling his comfortable, cool scent. Unlike myself, the man seemed to have no issue just holding me without wanting to rip off my clothes. Sometimes I wish he knew what was going on in my head just so he could appreciate the restraint it took to not act like a total weirdo when I was pressed up against him.

Those smiles were worth it though. I adored his smile, and while his canine teeth were in fact sharp venomous fangs, I found that even sexier. They caused the slightest lisp, barely even noticeable, but that paired with his deep voice caused my ears to perk up and my body to melt like an ice cube on a hot summer day. The nightmare literally turned me into a puddle of need. It made me see red when I thought about how many women got to spend time with him in his two hundred something years of existence.

I should just be thankful that he ended up here and stop complaining.

Unlike Amun, Cy had come to us willingly around two years ago. I'd been thrilled to hear that a Class A creature terror had come to us wanting to help out, so much so that I hadn't even bothered fully getting dressed for the day, sprinting down towards the office while ignoring Razar's calls for me to slow down, no doubt worried I would slip considering I was in just socks. I couldn't help but smile, remembering the exact moment I realized how powerful and amazing Cy truly was as a nightmare. I'd also nearly given my team a heart attack.

"FUCK, ARABELLA, SLOW DOWN!" Damian shot up from his seat as I slid into the office and jolted both Blackwell and him from a conversation in the conference room. I waved them off, not bothering to ask anything, as I pressed my hand down onto the electronic entrance panel.

A giggle—that I would deny completely, for the record—escaped my lips as Blackwell appeared on the other side of the door as they sealed shut and I locked them. I could hear him cursing in Greek as I offered a wink, a glint of future retribution and concern flashing in his eyes. I confidently turned towards the secondary door and walked into the massive containment room. Almost immediately, I drew the attention of my father, who was holding a clipboard and looking into the shadows, his eyes covered in a pair of specialty glasses.

"You need glasses," my father stated.

"Is it true?" I ignored him, excitement tinting my tone. I knew the glasses were probably just a precaution, and while I appreciated it, I wasn't very worried at all.

My father looked at me with a skeptical glance, but instead of pushing it, he nodded. "Yes. Cy, this is my daughter. Arabella, this is Cy."

Stepping up next to my father, my eyes widened as I realized why exactly he had been wearing special glasses. My mouth popped open at the truly massive basilisk that was

barely visible in the shadows, a glint of large eyes and fangs causing my entire body to break out into shivers.

Instead of being fearful of the venomous fangs or ability to petrify its victims, I stepped forward, honestly not completely in charge of my actions because of the awe running through me. His coiled pale and dark green body was truly enormous, so much so that I couldn't even fully see it because he was taking up most of the darkened room. His head suddenly appeared, dropping down to be level enough that he was meeting my gaze, a pair of fangs dripping with venom that sizzled on the floor. Oddly, it smelled very appealing, and I walked forward further, reaching my hand out in need to touch his scales.

I could hear my father making a concerned muttering from behind me as the door buzzed open, letting me know Razar and the others were soon to interrupt. I mean, I didn't blame them fully—I probably looked like I was about to get annihilated by this amazing nightmare.

"I'm fine, guys, seriously!" I called out, keeping my eyes on the basilisk. My fingers brushed his large face, his head dipping to rest on the ground. See? I had no idea why they were so worried. His hot, dry scales felt good under my skin, and I let out a soft happy sound as his eyes closed, looking relaxed. I had absolutely no idea why I felt so much fascination with this nightmare, except for the fact that a part of my chest warmed at the concept of him being near.

"Let her," my father encouraged. "He came here willingly; she's fine."

Fine? I was better than fine. I mean, sure, Cy could probably slaughter me with a poke of his massive fang, but I knew he wouldn't. I was proven right when after a few seconds, he pulled away from me, a green mist filling the room as the scent of mint filled the space.

The mist glinted off his frame as I saw just how large he was, and my breath caught, wondering what he was going to do. I should have been bothered that I not only found all of this amazing but also somewhat impressive and attractive. I know,

who knew I would find a man's snake size so attractive... *nevermind, there was totally a sex joke to be made there.*

"Hi." My voice came out as a whisper, the mist clearing to reveal a stunning man in an expensive dark shirt and jeans. There was a weariness to his expression, matched with exhaustion and caution. Still, he approached me, and I found myself reaching out a hand once again, this time to cup his cheek. I smiled as he leaned into the touch, his hands hesitating to touch me as I stepped closer. I knew the others would be upset about the change I was about to suggest, but there was something here. He felt it as well, and I knew without a doubt that this man needed to be on our team. A part of our life. My life.

AND HE STILL WAS. While Cy was a bit quiet and reserved, I never doubted our connection. I would call it a friendship, but somehow I knew it was more than that between us. I mean, I often just held his hand or touched the side of his face whenever I felt like he was tense or upset, and he always let me, always leaning into the physical connection. We had gotten to a point that I didn't even need him to say a word to know how he was feeling. Although I did love hearing his voice, so when we were alone and he started talking more, I would ask him as many questions as possible, not wanting it to stop.

My gaze moved from my coffee to his lips as I considered what I would need to do to convince him that I wanted him to bite me. I mean, sure, there was a possibility it could kill me, but it also really turned me on... so there was that. I mean, that couldn't surprise him, that I was attracted to him. I felt like it was even possibly reciprocated. Physically, I had felt that I turned him on, his hard length pressed against me while holding me, yet he never did anything.

So maybe it was just a natural response? I mean, I had to assume that he didn't want to start anything since nothing had ever happened before between us. Maybe it was because of work? Maybe he knew that I wasn't just attracted to him but

the others as well, let alone the emotional spectrum I felt for all of them? I mean, the bastard was extremely perceptive.

I didn't really understand what was holding them back. I had my reasons, but what were theirs? I could have asked. I didn't know a lot about nightmares' dating... or mating habits, at least not the extent that I should. In fact, I purposefully avoided that information because it led to a spiraling thought process that left me feeling both needy and a bit depressed at our lack of a relationship. Plus, I didn't really see a lot of 'relationships' here at the institute, so there was no way to gauge it through experience.

Inhaling sharply, I frowned. Maybe after this mission I would lay my cards out on the table. I felt like I'd made my feelings for them pretty obvious, but considering their lack of comment on it and the fact that we hadn't made much progress, I would probably need to take more direct action. I just needed to decide when.

Taking another sip of my coffee, I moved my gaze towards the door as Zain sauntered into the room before returning it to my father's office, who was now waiting for Amun. I really hoped Damian and Blackwell wouldn't encourage Saint's violent streak. That was the last thing we needed right now, considering the mission they had tonight.

"Don't worry, Bella, they are heading this way. Saint hasn't killed Amun... yet." Zain flashed me a sexy smile that had me attempting a scowl.

It was difficult, because the bastard knew that I melted somewhat when it came to him using that nickname. The one only he was allowed to call me. I wasn't even a huge fan of it, but off of his lips, it sounded different, and so after a few times of trying to get him to stop, I'd given up. The charming nightmare got away with far too much, in my opinion, and even worse, I was the one who let him get away with most of it!

"Don't make jokes, you know he would." I shook my head at the very real concern of Saint's actions. The nightmare was absolutely bloodthirsty, something I greatly appreciated and...

well, found sexy. *I know, surprising*—but I wanted Amun around. “Trust me guys, he will be good for our team.”

“I have no doubt in your instincts,” Zain said, leaning back in his chair while stretching his arms above his head and yawning. His messy blood-red hair fell in waves and curls over his handsome face as he clearly tried to wake himself up. In some ways, I truly felt Zain was the most ‘human’ out of all my nightmares. Well... when he wasn’t shifted into his apocalyptic terror form. There was nothing human about that in the least.

My memory flashed briefly to earlier this week when I had woken up from a late afternoon nap in the dorms to find him floating above me, watching me with an almost curious, affectionate expression that seemed at odds with his intense form. By all regards, apocalyptic terrors should have been terrifying because of their intense appearance. Not only that, but because they literally *caused* chaos. It was why he was such a fantastic addition to the team, because he could use minimum magic to rain down absolute insanity and cause a distraction. On a major scale, the man could easily bring down an entire city, and that was just with *his* magic. There were more nightmares like him floating around out there, so if you brought them together, the apocalypse concept was truly possible.

Unlike legend terrors, where there were multiple individuals and everyone had specific magic or natural abilities, apocalyptic terrors were all very similar in their nature and just changed in form. All of them, though, were descendants of the titans that could have been called legend terrors but far exceeded that.

I found his form beautiful, personally. The man moved so easily through spaces, sometimes taking on a more humanoid shape, but other times he seemed to just move in a cloud of black smoke that radiated with red pulsing energy. Everything about him seemed almost untouchable, ghostly and not solid, except for the razor-sharp teeth and glowing ruby-red eyes that would make an appearance through the inky darkness.

When I had found him hanging over me, I had simply reached out into the darkness that cocooned me in warmth and the black magic had swarmed my hand, leaving me feeling almost out of breath. There was a source of radiating ruby energy that seemed to feed him, and whenever I touched him, it grew stronger, making me wonder if that existed within Zain even in his 'human' form. I would bet so.

Everything about the man caused my pulse to quicken, and when he was in that form, he seemed so intertwined with this primal energy that it surprised me that most days he came off as so relaxed and playful. Even as he sat here now, red smoke and shadows twirled around his fingers as he tapped them on the tabletop, making me want to reach out to play with them myself. I knew that would probably distract him, though, or bring out his nightmare side, something that would have to wait until after we had talked about their mission.

My heart warmed, thinking about how I had touched him the other day and the reaction it had caused in that form. He had let out a low growl before almost wrapping me completely up in his darkness, leaving a ruby-red glow on my skin in his wake. I liked the idea of bearing his mark on me, if we were being honest. I just wish that it didn't fade so quickly. I also hadn't thought twice about falling back to sleep around him following that, because I honestly think he just wanted to watch me sleep.

Zain didn't feed off of fear like Razar. No, I think his nightmare was just more curious about me. Considering Zain and his nightmare side seemed to have a bit more of a separated existence than the others, it wasn't all that surprising. It was almost as if they were two different people. I wasn't positive how 'normal' that was for apocalyptic terrors, but I was thrilled to see him like that, so I would never complain.

I shifted in my seat as he offered me a smirk, as if he knew where my thoughts had gone. I looked down at my tablet, finding it a bit unfair that they could no doubt notice my body's reaction to them far easier than I could theirs. I mean, putting aside the blush, which was a dead giveaway, there was

the ability for them to hear my pulse and scent the fact that I was turned on. Something I very much did not want to consider because it made me want to turn even more red in the face. As I looked up from my tablet, I found him still watching me with a bright, fascinated expression. Bastard. I muttered under my breath, glad that Razar was suddenly asking him something so I didn't have to explain why I was acting like a crazy person.

"I literally trained all last night, I'm not doing it again. I am goddamn exhausted," Zain groaned in reference to Razar's suggestion of sparring before the mission tonight. I had a feeling that despite his protest, it wouldn't take much convincing to get him into the training arena. The nightmare was a bit of a workout junky, and it made me wonder what else he could do with all of that excess energy. As in, I wanted to know how far that endurance extended into fucking me. I really was very much into the idea of testing that out, personally, but hey! That was just me. No one else seemed to be on board that train, so...

I did have to admit, the man's current outfit really did show off how muscular he was, his massive boulder-like shoulders and golden arms on display in the black cutoff workout shirt he wore with gray sweatpants and sneakers.

Damn him. He shouldn't be allowed to wear sweatpants like that. My eyes darted down his muscular frame before trying to focus on Razar instead. I knew if Zain caught me, he would just flirt with me more and while, trust me, I absolutely loved it, I also didn't think it meant anything to him. I would instead just have to suffer in silence and enjoy how gorgeous he was without touching.

His dark beard, trimmed and matching the short, shaved hair on the sides that contrasted the red up top, made him look even more striking. I had imagined running my fingers over his jawline as he kissed me several times now, and honestly, I was pretty damn sure that if I ever actually got close enough to kiss him, I would get distracted. Either by his neon icy-blue eyes or the tiny dark runes that ran against his temple to either side. I had asked him once what they meant, but he had never

directly answered me, so I would have to renew my efforts. Even after all this time, I felt like there was so much more to the nightmare than he let on. I wanted to know everything about him.

Honestly, I think I was a bit of a masochist. I mean, seriously—I knew I was building a team and all, but I kept just bringing on amazing, fascinating men to torture myself with. Amun was a fantastic example of this. I suppose, at least with Zain, there hadn't been a choice.

He had been with us since we were sixteen when he had shown up on the doorstep of the institute, seemingly homeless and beat to shit because of some humans that had tried to cage him up. I hadn't questioned bringing him into our little group because there weren't many 'teenagers' at the institute to begin with, and oddly enough, he hadn't shied away from the offer.

It made me wonder how he was so relaxed and charming, because there had to be some residual anger there, right? Hell, I was just glad that he didn't absolutely hate me for being human because of his past experiences. Then again, Zain didn't really hate others, and almost no one hated him. Razar had even easily accepted him into our lives because his calming temperament really was needed on this team. I mean, shit—even Saint sometimes listened to him, and that was something to be grateful for.

Speak of the devil and the devil shall appear.

My pulse picked up as the nightmare in question entered the room with a commanding stride, his gaze immediately focusing on me. He flashed a stunning, dangerous smile that had me swallowing as he slid into a seat next to me, across from Razar, before tugging on my chair so that I was yanked closer to him. I let out a curse as Razar took my coffee from me, because honestly, none of us ever knew what Saint was going to do, so it was better safe than sorry when holding a hot liquid. The man's actions usually made little sense to anyone but him.

I couldn't lie—it was one of the things I loved about him. He was always surprising me, and it was exciting to be around him, even if he was a bit of a nutcase.

“We need to talk, flower,” he insisted, pulling my hands between his while leaning forward so that we were inches apart.

“And what do we need to talk about, Saint?” I tilted my head, examining his dark, almost charcoal eyes that were surrounded by a metallic silver ring that seemed to expand and shrink depending on how worked up he was at the time. Or psychotic. Whichever you wanted to view it as. The man was absolutely lethal, and his stunning smile and bright, playful attitude didn't dissuade me from that analysis.

Although, I would admit that he probably got away with a lot in his life because of how fucking beautiful he was. It was unfair that someone like Saint could have eyelashes like he did, for the record. It looked like he was wearing eyeliner! Who did he think he was?! I felt like he didn't appreciate the good fortune he so clearly had.

“I don't like Amun,” he explained simply, his eyes glinting with a familiar darkness. “In fact, I have the extremely present and compulsive urge to rip out his throat. I need you, my perfect little flower, to tell me that's okay and that you won't be mad at me for doing so and then disposing of his body out back. I know you love the garden out there, but I promise it's good for the flowers. I mean, clearly it is—think how beautiful it is out there! That is thanks to several, *okay*—maybe more than several—very well-placed decaying bodies. So really this would be a very advantageous thing.”

Oh man. I blinked and then shook my head, leaning forward. “Saint, you are being ridiculous. Amun is perfectly fine, and I have no doubt a great addition to our team—”

“Arabella,” he groaned, his eyes flashing silver. “We can find someone else. I don't like the way he looks at you.”

I now had the compelling urge to ask him how exactly he looked at me.

“No,” I simply responded with a smile, sitting back slightly as he pulled me even closer. His warm brown sugar scent wrapped around me possessively as his handsome face transformed into a near pout.

And no, for the record, I would not address his claim about burying bodies in my favorite garden out back. That would give him far too much freedom to run through the literal list of who was actually buried out there, because I absolutely did not believe he was joking.

If the nightmare said he killed someone, or multiple ‘someones,’ then he most definitely did. I had made the mistake once of teasing him about not actually killing over one hundred guards on a mission, and... he had gone through each and every slaughter with me, despite Razar attempting to stop him. Saint was the type of person that gave you *exactly* what you asked for. His blunt nature was sexy, but man, you really, really had to be precise.

The nightmare was persistent as hell, and I had a feeling he would be attempting to convince me of Amun’s lack of usefulness for some time coming up, so I couldn’t give him any leeway. Luckily, I also knew that Saint wouldn’t do anything without me truly being okay with it. The psycho was a complete sweetheart at his core... well, when it came to me.

Sure, he was a bit different and a possible—read as ‘for sure’—psychopath, but I couldn’t lie, I had a complete soft spot for him. Maybe it was because I did see a slightly different side of him, one that was filled with small romantic notions that even the coldest of hearts couldn’t reject.

After each and every mission, he left me gifts outside of my bedroom door. No, that wasn’t a joke. Only two weeks ago I had found a severed head outside of my bedroom in a large box wrapped with a black silk bow. I mean... who does that? It was very sweet! The man wasn’t winning any awards for ‘traditional romantic,’ but I couldn’t help but love the gesture.

That wasn’t even counting what he did last Valentine’s day!

“I HAVE no idea what he’s up to,” I noted to Zain, shaking my head as we walked towards my bedroom. It was mid-day, and we were attempting to find Saint so that we could finish our work and be done for the weekend. The others were training a Class B team that was just put together, so it was just the three of us today, and predictably... Saint was being difficult.

Zain chuckled. “I would try to guess, but it’s Saint.”

“Accurate,” I mumbled. We reached my bedroom and I pressed on the door, the handprint scanner opening it for me easily. Despite never really using it, I had given my entire team access. I never knew if they were going to need to wake me up for some reason, and frankly... well, I wouldn’t be opposed to them showing up in my room. Except as I entered the room, I came to a quick stop, my brows shooting up as Zain let out a chuckle.

Wow. Just an absolutely ‘wow’ moment. I stepped further into the room, taking in the white roses filling my room. Hundreds of them. Some were in vases, others not. But they were everywhere and shifting slightly in the breeze of the open window, no Saint in sight despite knowing he was the one who had put them here.

How did I know that?

All the petals were stained in blood. Just a light sprinkling, like a signature.

“Why?” I asked authentically.

Zain wrapped an arm around me and kissed my temple. “Pretty sure this is because of that human holiday that was on our calendar.”

Human holiday... Valentine’s day? I looked up at him and offered arched brows. “He got me a Valentine’s day gift?”

“Yep.” Zain flashed a smile and then tilted his head. “Sort of wish I had thought of that.”

A giggle slipped from my lips as I shook my head. I couldn’t help but find the entire action... romantic. Despite—or maybe because of—the blood.

WE HAD FOUND him back down in the office with a proud smile on his face. When I had thanked him, he just shrugged as if it was no big deal. I didn't ask whose blood had been on the roses, but I figured it wasn't necessary because they were so very clearly dead. I think that had been all the permission he had needed, though, to continue to give me gifts.

I couldn't lie—I loved it.

So why I couldn't get the nightmare to kiss me was once again beyond me. Saint was even more outright about his attraction to me than Blackwell! I mean, it wasn't from a lack of trying on my end, either. I flirted with him, often, yet every single time he stopped me and threatened to 'turn my ass pink' if I kept teasing him. Something that very much just wanted to make me kiss him more, for the record.

I did wonder if maybe, just maybe, his rejection had to do with him being a reaper. God terrors were extremely powerful by nature, so he would have a right to be concerned since I was human and probably had a soul that his magic would want to take, something that didn't scare me as much as it should. If there was anyone that I knew would keep my soul safe, it was Saint. Still, it felt more than that, and I couldn't lie, it hurt my pride just a teeny tiny amount.

I really should be terrified of kissing a god terror. I mean, there were several elements to them—not even including that he was a reaper—that were absolutely horrifying for humans. First, they were immortal. As in never died and truly were never born. I had no confirmation on this, but that was the rumor. Additionally, unlike legend terrors, which were associated with different cultures, god terrors were more associated with different concepts that you saw throughout the world no matter what. Reapers obviously worked with death, but you had god terrors that worked with life, love, war, and a myriad of other different topics. I personally hadn't met any besides Saint, but that was the notion behind them.

So yeah, I sort of got why he was hesitant to get involved with me, since he was immortal and I was going to probably

unfortunately lead a very mortal life. Something I didn't like to think about, because my own mortality was in such stark contrast to the nearly or completely immortal nightmares around me. Plus, he had been around for a very long time, presumably, so maybe he had sworn off romance long ago.

But then why the Valentine's roses? It just didn't make sense to me, and I had been too much of a wimp to outright ask because every time I hedged at the topic, he, and they as a group, skillfully avoided it. It was impressive. Annoying, but impressive.

Zain asked Saint something, but I was distracted enough that I didn't hear it, instead looking over his black wavy hair that was streaked with silver throughout, the ends almost completely dipped. The silver sparkled under the dim lighting like the almost embedded diamond glint his skin seemed to have in certain lighting. The man was like a hard, cold diamond, always dressed in black and decorated in tattooed artwork that consisted of death-related images from skulls to more human religious-themed depictions, like crosses. He looked as dangerous as he was, and as he tapped his fingers against the table, I noticed a dark shadow that seemed to grow under his hand.

Before I could stop myself, my hand snuck out, and I brushed the small wisp that curled out to meet me, causing Saint's gaze to snap towards me, cutting off whatever he was saying. I offered him a wide-eyed innocent expression, even as the black shadow circled up my finger, kissing my skin and making me smile. He let out a low sound in his throat before scowling down at the shadow, as if it somehow had wronged him.

"Saint," Razar offered in a dry tone.

"She did it, not me," he pointed out as the shadow left my hand, making me frown. I smiled as they went back to talking, and the mini-shadow, which took the form of a cute little humanoid, walked back out from under his hand and leaned against my coffee. My lips pulled up into a smile as I watched him with delight.

What? Little creepy shadow thing was cute! Plus, I was pretty sure Saint knew I was enjoying it because he seemed to not be paying it any mind now, distracting Razar with something or the other as we waited for our last two teammates.

Honestly, Saint's magic really impressed me. I mean, he could kill in a bunch of different ways, and normally he avoided his nightmare form, which I found unusual, but I think he enjoyed 'feeling' the kill, as he referred to it once. Maybe something about being a reaper stopped that? Or, it was possible he liked the feeling of being covered in blood, because I had caught him a few times licking it off his fingers after killing someone here, so I couldn't imagine what he did post-mission. I wouldn't admit to it openly, but I'd gotten more than turned on watching him do that. I didn't want to examine what that said about me... well, I knew it said I was absolutely insane, *but oh well*.

At least I wasn't alone!

Yet his magic wasn't anything compared to the actual glory of seeing Saint in his reaper form—that was something entirely different. You honestly think you know what a reaper looks like until you are really in the presence of one. Then you experience firsthand what that type of death magic feels like... tastes likes. Saint in that form was over nine feet tall, and his entire body was clothed completely in black, his robes almost having an ethereal edge to them, where you didn't know if they were solid or made of smoke. His tattooed hands would turn skeletal, and his hidden face would turn into a legitimate skull, his coal eyes turning into burning silver gems. I found it absolutely intoxicating to see him looking like death itself. I also had been shocked by how comfortable his robe had been against my cheek.

Yeah, you better believe I had still gone up to him and wrapped my arms around him when I saw him post-mission like that. It helped that he had literally picked me up, and while the other men had been upset about his closeness in that form, I hadn't been worried in the least. Saint wouldn't hurt me. No, he would kill anyone, even his own team, before

hurting me. Plus, it had been totally worth it, because that was literally the best hug to date.

Not that I would ever admit that to the others... that was the type of comment that started fights.

Saint's hand slid onto my thigh, drawing my attention from the little shadow figure, before a noise had me snapping my head back over to the window wall next to us. Amun sat down with my father, the first's eyes moving over towards me as I offered him a small, hesitant smile. Razar let out a dangerous sound, looking towards the nightmare as Amun met his gaze, his eyes narrowing slightly. I shook my head, running a hand over my face before taking another sip of my coffee, sad to see my shadow friend gone. I couldn't even be upset with my team, either, because I knew they were territorial. It was just who they were. Hell, it was how I was... but shit, sometimes it made stuff difficult.

Then again, nightmare culture was different, so maybe this was normal and Amun wouldn't be offended. I mean, they had even been hesitant around Saint at first, and he'd been legitimately rather friendly. Well, as friendly as someone like him could be.

Although, you know, showing up in the middle of the night in my bedroom probably didn't earn him any points with Razar. I hadn't even realized he had arrived until Razar's growl had woken me up from where I'd been caught up in his arms in the corner of the ceiling. I'd proceeded to squint, offering the stunning stranger, highlighted in silver moonlight, an odd but semi-curious look as he stared at both of us with equal interest. After a few prolonged seconds, Razar had brought us down to floor level, and I'd tossed on my glasses, trying to process what the strange man was doing in my bedroom. He claimed, apparently, that he'd been called to me. Nope. Still no idea what he meant by that, *but* I was thrilled to have him here.

Luckily, he didn't seem to have received any other calls because he'd not only stayed, but his psychotic, amusing self had been part of our team since then. Blackwell and Damian had been less than thrilled to see him at first, but I think that

had to do with the little competition that existed between the god and legend terror culture. The first making themselves more distinct while the latter thinking the god terrors should be categorized under the same as them. Honestly, it seemed pretty petty, but nightmares could be difficult like that. I found their arguments pretty adorable when they didn't turn into full out brawls.

"I'm going to close the door," Damian said as Blackwell strode in, taking the seat across from Zain near the end of the table to my right. Damian joined that side, sitting between him and Saint. I smiled happily that all of them were sitting here together and that I had the amazing team that I did. Despite my frustration, there were very few things I would change about my life... except maybe having more than Razar in my bedroom at night. But I needed to keep my head clear for the day, because tonight's mission wasn't normal by any stretch.

"You look tired," Zain pointed out as I turned to grab the tablets that were charging in a large cabinet behind me. I put them on the table and began passing them out and letting out a yawn while nodding, proving his point. It also made me realize that we probably needed a larger conference table, and not just because of Amun. No, these men were absolutely massive, and I couldn't imagine these little leather table chairs were comfortable for them.

"I am," I agreed, feeling the others' assessing eyes on me. "I was up all night working—it was driving me up the wall that I couldn't find an entrance like normal. *Luckily*, that is no longer a problem." I couldn't help the bit of pride I infused in my voice at the end.

What? I was proud of what a kickass job I did on this team. It wasn't a lot, but it was something.

"You know we can help you, right?" he offered, his lips pulling up in amusement, already knowing my answer.

"Oh *right*, I'm sure I would manage to stay focused while hanging out. That seems to always work out so well." I smirked as he chuckled. It was a well-known fact that I was absolutely horrible at focusing on real work and research

around them. They always distracted me with interesting facts and stories. Or even worse, they tried to sit next to me, and their closeness distracted me. Still, if they really wanted to, I would never actually tell them no.

Once everyone had their tablets, I took off my glasses and cleaned them on my shirt before waking up my own. I winced at the bright light despite it being dimmed and managed to focus on the information I needed to impart.

“So tonight you are leaving around 16:00,” I explained, looking over their travel itineraries. “The pilots will drop you about ten miles outside of base, where there will be transport vehicles waiting for you. You should get to the outside perimeter of the base around 21:00, give or take fifteen minutes.”

“Do we have anyone on the inside?” Damian asked curiously.

“Not this time, unfortunately.” I frowned, hating that concept and knowing that this was truly going to be completely dependent on getting through the first few defensive measures the base had without setting off any warnings. Usually we had someone on the inside that could at least shut half of those off. I didn’t think it was going to stop my guys or even make them miss a step, but it did worry me.

I continued. “I managed to find an entry point behind a water heater in the main building, so once you gain access onto the base, try to stick along the western boundary line. You are going to one of the large squadron buildings that is near the center of the base. It houses most of their shit, so the rest of the base should be fairly empty, but keep an eye out for anything unusual. The humans are getting better about setting traps.”

“Yet we are still *just* as good at killing them,” Saint mused under his breath, making Blackwell, of all people, chuckle. I rolled my eyes at that, letting out a small huff of amusement as Razar smoothed his large fingers over my wrist, seemingly in a self-soothing action. I knew he didn’t like missions, and not because of him going somewhere dangerous. Nope, my perfect

nightmare didn't like leaving me for the entire night—*his words, not mine!*

Despite having morning coffee and spending every day with them, I never forgot how dangerous my nightmares were. I mean, I watched their missions, I knew what they were capable of. So while this seemed normal, there was a darkness to all of these men that I absolutely loved and knew would always exist, no matter how many of my unicorn mugs Saint borrowed.

“Which brings me to where you enter.” I highlighted the point in question, and it popped up as a marker on all of their tablet maps. “It looks like our target is located in the fourth sector of the building. Once you find them, make sure they are secure and stable, and after that... well, frankly I could give a shit what happens to those human assholes.”

Had I mentioned before that I hated MAM?

Cy flashed a small smirk as Damian's gaze snapped up, his eyes flaring in surprise. I shrugged, feeling like it was an honest statement. I wasn't sure if all humans were bad, but this organization? Man Against Monster? It was created to hurt the people I loved. So excuse the bias, but in my mind, they deserved what was coming their way.

“What does our target look like again? Do we have any information on them?” Razar asked, his frown dipping as he pulled up the essentially empty file on the object of our rescue mission. This was one of the problems with this mission.

“I don't know what they look like,” I admitted. “Our intel says they're considerably young, but that could mean mid-twenties or thirties, for all we know. We do know that they are a Class A, according to the trials the humans have put them through. The results are far different from anything we've seen before.”

I wasn't positive where my father had gotten this intel, but it was far less than usual.

Saint stiffened slightly, casting me a glance. “Trials?”

I nodded and sighed. “Like I said, make sure they are stable before going on a massacre. We have absolutely no idea what condition they could be in.”

“Sounds pretty easy,” Blackwell murmured, his eyes sliding over the tablet before he closed it and put it down, probably having already memorized everything.

My brow dipped, feeling a bit off about all of this, but not exactly positive why. “Just please be careful. I hate the idea of you guys going on any of these missions, let alone one where we don’t have a lot of insider information.”

My words seemed to sober the mood. The door suddenly opened, drawing all our attention. My father walked in, followed by Amun, causing the already present tension from my words to grow.

“Are we all set for tonight?” I could tell my father was eager for this mission, and I think it was in part due to curiosity. He loved filling in the blanks, and the fact that he knew so little about this nightmare only encouraged him more. If it wasn’t for my gut feeling that something was off, I probably would have been excited as well.

“For the most part.” I nodded, closing my tablet and finding myself wanting to take a nap. Something that was actually an option today. And no, it didn’t matter that I’d already had several cups of coffee. If I was sleepy, I could fall asleep any time, caffeine or no caffeine.

I think it also may have been the nature of the day. Brief days before missions were usually pretty easygoing, mostly because we liked to just relax in the guys’ dorm and not do much of anything until they left. Honestly, it was in part because I couldn’t focus while knowing they would be so shortly in danger.

I know. *I know*. What are some measly humans going to do to these terrifying monsters? Well, unfortunately, while killing them would be a feat, as they were pretty durable, they could still be injured. Or worse, captured. So I would still worry until I heard them say the words ‘on our way back’ each and

every time. It made me want to go on their missions just so I could make sure everything went according to plan.

“Amun is going to have a trial period with the team, starting with training tomorrow,” my father announced, then looked down at his folder. “For now, let’s get him to the dorms. Considering you have two extra bedrooms, he can just take one of those.”

“One of those is reserved for Razar,” Damian leveled.

“And the other?” My father’s brow lifted as if daring him to argue. I had to give my father this—despite being human, the man was very rarely intimidated. In fact, I often wondered if my reaction towards nightmares and my lack of fear was because of being raised by him. Or maybe it was natural to me. I hadn’t really given much thought to the nature versus nurture argument when it came to why I would much rather do everything *but* scream in terror at their presence.

“It’s Arabella’s room,” Cy explained evenly, his eyes flicking to my surprised gaze before moving back to my father. I honestly hadn’t expected him to say anything. The others, sure, but Cy usually didn’t engage in their bullshit.

My dad offered me a tired look as he walked from the room, not bothering to argue with the nightmare. I smiled at Cy before looking at Amun, deciding to say something that was fairly risky.

“He can have my extra room,” I said, ignoring the growl that came from Blackwell’s throat. I pinned him with a look momentarily and continued looking around at all of them. “Any time I stay over, I end up crashing in one of your beds. So as long as you’re okay with that—”

His low, frustrated growl cut off, looking suddenly far more interested in what I was saying and not upset in the least. *See?* Now how was I supposed to take that? Did Blackwell want me in his bed? Maybe I needed to just sneak in there and see what happened.

“Solid plan to me.” Zain flashed a charming smile before standing. “Come on, Amun, let’s show you your new room.”

Friendly bastard. Always.

Amun looked at me, his eyes flashing darkly with something that was pretty damn sexy, and I knew what he wanted to say before the words left his mouth. I decided to make it easy on him. “I’m following you guys up. Nothing else to do today as it is.”

He nodded sharply and turned toward the door as Zain walked out, my eyes darting to the massive dark marking that was visible on my apocalyptic terror’s shoulders and the back of his neck. I knew it expanded across his entire back, and there had been a few times when he had sat in front of me shirtless and allowed me to trace it. Honestly, I was always a fan of him walking around shirtless. You would absolutely never hear a complaint from me.

Damian flashed me a smile and stood as well. “Just remember, cherry blossom, he gets one chance. If he fucks up, he’s going to pay for that hand he had on your throat earlier.”

Christ on a cracker, he just had to do it. He couldn’t help himself.

“What?” Saint hissed as I offered Damian a narrow-eyed look. He shrugged, looking thrilled at upsetting Saint, before Blackwell offered me a heated look and followed after his friend. I grumbled under my breath, finishing up my coffee as I ignored Saint staring at me, waiting for some type of explanation.

“I don’t like him,” Razar admitted after a moment, his voice low and almost pained.

Crap.

I stood, swaying slightly in my heels as I shook out my foot that had gone numb, Cy appearing behind me to steady me. I looked up, offering him a small smile, and he brushed his lips against the top of my head before striding from the room, seemingly on a mission. Where to, I had no idea.

“Give him a chance,” I bargained as Razar’s gaze moved over my shoulder to where Saint was now standing in my space, inspecting my neck without permission.

Not that he would have asked in the first place.

“Did he really grab your throat?” Saint growled, looking at Razar.

I offered both men an exhausted look. What if I told them I hadn't minded? What if I told them I liked when sexy nightmares grabbed my throat? Would that somehow shock them enough to stop the blatant murderous intent I could see growing in Saint's eyes? Probably not.

Razar, not one to usually start trouble, stood as well so that I was between them. His voice was a low rumble. “He thought she was food at first, when he found out she was a human.”

“Damn it, Razar,” I groaned.

Saint was gone then, striding towards the door. I growled as Razar chuckled, my steps taking me towards the reaper as I did the one thing I knew would stop him. I kicked off my heels and launched myself onto his back, my small frame clinging to him like a koala. Considering how large he was—around Blackwell's height—it was an impressive feat, and I had to wrap my legs around him for fear of sliding off his back.

The nightmare jolted in surprise as I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck. Razar said something from behind us, probably picking up my heels. I was tempted to turn around because I could feel his eyes on my body and possibly my butt, but instead I kept my focus on the man I was wrapped around, trying to figure out a solid way to convince him to not kill Amun.

“I can still slaughter him with you on my back. Quite successfully, for the record,” Saint said, looking somewhat more amused than angry now. He flashed a smile, almost to himself. “In fact, you may even enjoy that. Didn't you mention wanting to go on missions? I can show you what it's like, a personal demonstration on how to kill that motherfucker.”

I shook my head, resting my chin on his shoulder as he gripped my thighs and left the room. My father shouted something and Razar responded, the three of us leaving him to his work.

“You won’t kill him,” I said with surety. “I would be upset if you did that.”

A small frown dipped his brow, as if he hadn’t considered that.

“He won’t.” Razar sighed as if disappointed, the three of us making our way towards the set of elevators that would take us to the dorms. The others were ahead of us but within hearing distance. They could probably even hear our murderous conversation.

“I have justification.” Saint’s jaw tightened.

“Please don’t kill him, for me?” I pressed my lips to his shoulder as he muttered something under his breath but tightened his hold on my legs, his thumbs rubbing against my leg in a soothing pattern. His stride slowed slightly, and while I didn’t get confirmation, I knew he wouldn’t kill Amun right now.

In the future? Well, I could never predict Saint’s actions in the moment, let alone in the future.

Plus, we had bigger things to worry about. I was praying my gut feeling about tonight was just my paranoid sense of concern for my guys. Anything else was unacceptable.

CY

THE ELEVATOR WAS ABSOLUTELY FAR TOO small for all of us, yet I knew no one was willing to wait for another one because that would mean not being with Arabella in a closed space. I leaned against the metal wall of the box we were in, my eyes darting down her small form as she explained to Amun the setup of ISS.

I tilted my head, noticing the dark circles under her eyes and the tension riding her body. I knew it was about the mission tonight—she always felt an absurd amount of anxiety for us whenever we went on missions. Something that was pretty ironic, considering most of us spent the entire mission half distracted by her delicate voice over the radio.

It would take a lot to get any of us to *not* return to Arabella.

I had spent my entire life wandering from place to place, the world changing drastically in the past two hundred and forty-three years, and not always in the best of ways. So the fact that I had yet to leave the institute after over two years was a pure testament, in my mind, to Arabella's draw. It was painful to leave for missions, so the idea of never seeing her again seemed almost impossible to imagine. I spent most of my nights wishing it was morning so that I could go to work and watch her flit around the office without a care in the world.

It was mesmerizing, the way she moved around the space, and even more so that she seemed completely oblivious to the

danger she was in most of the time. Or maybe not oblivious, but just blissfully unaware? Unafraid of being the most delicate and vulnerable prey in the room?

It was intoxicating, being around a woman that felt absolutely no fear in a situation where she most definitely should. I could kill Arabella easily. Snap her in half, and that wasn't even in my shifted form. Yet, instead of reflecting on that possibility or worrying about it, she floated around the office like some ethereal pixie. Maybe I should have been offended by her clearly not viewing us as threats, but instead it just made me want her more.

Her cupid's bow lips pressed into an amused smile, her adorable nose twitching slightly as she adjusted her glasses and responded to something Amun grunted out. The woman was by far the most alluring, nearly mouthwatering individual I had ever had the pleasure of being around, and I wasn't being metaphorical when I said that I wanted to devour her. I mean, I didn't want her dead, but I very much wanted to plant myself between her long legs and taste how hot and wet she got whenever I saw that blush invade her cheeks.

Maybe that was the solution to my problem. I couldn't fuck her without possibly hurting her, but *maybe* instead I could just eat her tight little pussy out every hour or so until she came so much that her blush was permanent? I think I could live off of that.

Hell, I knew I could.

If the touch of her hand against my chest soothed the normal bloodlust that raged through my veins, then I couldn't imagine what the taste of her cum on my lips would do. Probably send me into a goddamn euphoric high. My lips kicked up at how pink she would turn if I told her just how good she smelled whenever she got wet, or how I imagined sinking my fangs into her soft skin as she came around my fingers or cock. I bet that would elicit one of those soft, almost surprised, sexy sounds that she made whenever one of us did something that she found attractive.

Was it obvious that I paid way too much attention to this woman?

Then again, having that level of perception was sometimes very rewarding. Almost as much as my ability to move quietly throughout a space and catch her at perfect fucking moments, when she thought no one was looking. Although I'm sure she would disagree about the 'perfect' element of it.

At some point this past year, after one of our many missions, our Director had wanted Arabella down in the containment room. Despite it being the middle of the night, there had been a new nightmare that he had attempted to subdue and failed at, so he needed her help. I had offered to go retrieve her from her room, and my hearing had picked up, from down the hall, her accelerated heart rate and fast breathing.

I wouldn't lie, at first I had assumed that she was having a bad dream, but the closer I'd gotten to her room, the more I had realized that I was extremely off base. Her desire had saturated the air to such an extent that a long-buried surge of primal possessiveness had rolled over me, not wanting anyone else to be able to scent her and how fucking wet she clearly was.

When I'd heard her moan softly, I had broken and slipped into her room silently, keeping to the shadows and finding her lit up only by the moonlight shining through the window. It was enough, though, that I could see that her oversized shirt was pushed above her breasts, her nipples hard and making my mouth fucking water as her fingers slid between her legs. I'd watched from the darkness of her room as she continued to slide her fingers against her hot center, circling her clit, as her other hand gripped the bedding next to her, a semi-frustrated expression on her flushed face. I didn't want to interrupt the clear relief that she needed, but I also wanted to make sure that she came, because seeing her suffering wasn't okay with me.

When her eyes closed, I let my magic slip out in a pale silver mist that wouldn't be visible to her. When it began to crawl across her skin, I watched with pleasure as her skin broke out into shivers and her fingers slipped inside of her, a

soft whimper coming from her throat. I smirked as my magic brushed over her clit and nipples, causing her to tremble. I nearly fucking came myself as she finally climaxed with my help, her entire body sagging in relief and making me wish I could be buried between her legs, tasting how sweet her honey was.

Oddly, the most pleasure I took from the moment was the sated smile that filled her face as she curled up against her pillow, nearly convincing me that she didn't need to go downstairs.

Fuck. I wanted to wake up next to her every morning with that exact look on her face. That would one hundred percent be enough for me.

No, I knew nothing with Arabella would ever be enough. I would always be craving more from her. Needing more. Demanding more.

Deciding that I needed to get her to still come downstairs, I had slipped back out and knocked on her door, knowing the others would show up and one hundred percent be able to tell what she'd been doing. I couldn't help but smirk as I heard her squeak at the sound of my knock and how she nearly fell off her bed in surprise. When she'd come to the door, her eyes had widened as she offered me an embarrassed and slightly suspicious look, but I didn't call her on the moment, just telling her that we needed her. Which was true—*I did need Arabella.*

Not just physically, either. No, I just needed her in my life. I had spent so much of it in the dark, sentenced to enslavement or hiding because of what I was. I'd been used in wars and for a lot worse positions than that. Through all of it, I'd been able to bury that sense of 'humanity' or whatever the hell you wanted to call it, embracing my true nature.

It didn't surprise me that nightmares had a 'human' form, because it was simply an evolutionary way of providing us a way of protecting ourselves from humans and being allowed to hunt them easier. The more we looked like them, the less fearful they were of us. Although, I think most could tell we

were different, even when we were fully shifted. There was just an edge that would cause their fight or flight instincts to kick in, and that fear was absolutely intoxicating. It also made it harder to hold onto this human form because, I knew for me, it was far less natural than my other. But I was able to touch Arabella far more in this form, so the chances of me giving it up were absolutely zero.

Plus, it was a nice change after so many years of being in the other form.

Honestly, I wasn't positive why I had decided to come to ISS originally. I'd been wandering for years at that point, but when Arabella practically sprinted into the room, it became extremely obvious why I would stay.

Before talking to her for the first time, I hadn't talked in years, surviving practically mute because exposing my fangs would result in far more problems than not. I still didn't like talking, but I could tell it made her happy.

"So, each floor has a ton of dorms." Her voice brought me out of my memories as the elevator opened and revealed a fairly standard dark tile and white walled hallway that she led us down, her heels, which Razar had given back to her moments ago, echoing through the space as the rest of us moved silently. The lights along the wall flickered in response to Razar's night terror magic, but Arabella barely noticed.

"Each 'dorm' is really a suite of several bedrooms. So we have various sizes, but this one is specifically made for seven, which is absolutely perfect," she continued to explain as I watched her tuck a piece of hair behind her ear.

"Where do you sleep?" Amun asked, his voice tinted with what I could tell was actual curiosity. Despite getting off to a bad start, I couldn't blame him for his reaction to Arabella, and even more so, I think he was quickly grasping the dynamic here. You didn't live for that long—even with having near immortality—by being reactive. I was positive that his reaction to our pixie was both startling and upsetting to him. So, unlike the others, I didn't have much problem with him,

and I trusted Arabella's instincts. If she thought he was good for our team, I wasn't going to deny her that.

It would be difficult for me to deny her anything, unless it threatened her health. But wasn't that the biggest issue here? It wasn't the lack of attraction or what I would or wouldn't do for Arabella. I mean, shit—we hadn't stated it directly, but I felt like it was pretty obvious that any one of us would give our left fucking arm to be even next to her, let alone be *with* her.

No, the issue was that she was human, and that was the *only* thing stopping any of us from attacking her sweet ass, pinning her against a wall and taking her like a legitimate animal. But I couldn't. We couldn't. She was delicate. Breakable. Vulnerable. So instead we kept her insulated like an exotic flower surrounded by thorns and hoped that no one would try to take her from us. It wasn't fair. I knew it even confused her, because she felt the draw. But the idea of her being with anyone but our team was infuriating. I mean, shit—the idea of her being with a human made me see red, but the worst threat?

Her possibly falling for a nightmare that was a Class B or C. One that wasn't as powerful and had far more humanity. Had a far less chance of hurting her. That very real chance of her not being ours, even if it wasn't in the way we fully wanted, was like a shock to the system each and every time. So this middle ground we had come to was just an unknown, a draw. It was temporary.

We had to figure out something, because it wasn't fair for Arabella to live her entire life without that. Without physical affection. I knew that, and so did the others, even if they refused to admit it. Nightmares weren't used to softness or affection—it wasn't part of our culture—but I knew she craved it, and not giving her something... that wasn't an option.

Then again, it wasn't like we didn't touch her all the time. Sleep next to her. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe we could figure out ways around it.

I let out a frustrated sound as Arabella looked back at me, confused, my emotions blanking as she slid her badge to open up the dorm. She continued to explain to Amun how to get into the room as I stepped into the familiar space that I called home.

“Everything okay?” Razar asked, walking next to me, his gaze sharpening on my expression as if sensing my internal dilemma. He was good at that, being able to sense when I or someone else was on the edge of saying something to her or fucking shit up. It was one of the reasons I still kept most of my thoughts to myself after all this time. The shit that I did want to say to her? It would only complicate everything.

I had willpower, but when she was laid out against me on the couch, running her fingers through my hair and telling me how handsome she found me? What the fuck was I supposed to say to that? I literally just soaked it in, taking every ounce of softness she offered, knowing it may be all I ever get from her.

It was also possible that Razar was poking at me because he had a bruised ego from when I knocked him on his ass earlier. Something I had done in part to make sure she didn't get hurt in a potential fight between him and Amun... and because seeing her in a stranger's arms had forced my temper, so the physical reaction had made me feel better. I didn't feel bad about that.

I shrugged, offering a noncommittal response, before crossing the room and sitting down on the large, comfortable sectional that was centered in the sunken living room. The entire space was dimmed in lighting and warmly decorated, the hardwood floors matching the masculine furniture, fireplace, and wall of bookshelves. There were no windows in the dorm because it was in the center of the building, but the space still managed to feel warm instead of cold and dark.

Probably because Arabella had personally designed the space. Unlike the group of us, she was welcoming and warm enough to make up for all of our bullshit, so it was unsurprising that it was reflected in here.

My eyes ran over her frame as she stood in the middle of the room, pointing towards a massive table and a kitchen featuring an island large enough to seat several people. It was a luxurious space, and after everything I'd gone through within the past one hundred something years, it had taken weeks for me to get used to it. Get used to having a space to call my own, even. You didn't get that while traveling or imprisoned.

Now I had a bedroom and a dorm I could legitimately call home. I just wished that it included my pixie in it. That I could wake up every morning to a wave of bright pink hair on my dark sheets and her naked frame wrapped up in my arms. It was probably smart that she didn't live with us, because my control was already fairly weak, and I knew that if mine was bad, the others were far worse. Especially those who were younger and had less control.

Specifically, Blackwell. Everyone had seen exactly how thrilled he'd been at the concept of her having no choice but to sleep in our beds if Amun took her room, and I think that Razar would probably go out of his way to make sure she didn't sleep in his bedroom now.

Not that he had a right to talk at fucking all—we all knew that he went to her room at night. The woman came into work with red sparkles all over her most mornings. If it wasn't for his fear of hurting her, I think they would have been sleeping together for some time now. Somehow, though, he managed to keep control, something that impressed even me. I didn't really trust anyone else to be able to do so... especially not myself.

But couldn't I just have her in my bed once? Sleep with her once? I wasn't even talking about fucking. Although, I would probably give my goddamn soul for the chance to slide into her tight warmth. I could go slow enough and keep controlled enough so that I wouldn't risk hurting her... probably.

Fuck, one time would never be enough, though. I knew that.

I frowned as Arabella led Amun towards the hallway that featured all seven doorways, not liking that she was going into a room alone with him. I smiled as Saint followed after, clearly determined to not allow that to happen either.

Good. I may not mind Amun, but I didn't want him alone with Arabella until he realized the risk any of us posed to her.

What would she say if she knew? If she knew that I wanted her more than I'd wanted anything in my life, but that I could never give into that need because it could kill her? *I could kill her. Shit.*

Letting out a tired sigh, the couch shifted as Zain threw himself down next to me, offering a knowing smile. I had no doubt he knew exactly where my head was right now, mostly because it was rarely anywhere else but on her.

"We could kill him during training and make it look like an accident." He was attempting to act like he was joking, but I knew he was serious. Unfortunately, a choice like that began playing with the chance that Arabella would be mad at us, and that was something we avoided. Then again, on the rare occasion that she did get worked up, it was fucking glorious, the way her stormy, mismatched eyes changed and her cheeks flushed with color. It would be hard for me to find a state of being that Arabella inhabited that I didn't find attractive.

"I'm a fan of that," Razar stated, his eyes on the open bedroom door as Arabella pointed some stuff out to Amun. I knew Razar was doing his best to give her space and not make her feel like he was upset about the Amun thing, but I could see how much it frustrated him. Then again, anything that threatened Razar's spot in Arabella's life even slightly made him furious. I think sometimes he didn't see how clearly she loved him. How clearly she felt for all of us.

I never doubted Arabella's feelings for us, unlike some of the others. As I said, none of that was the problem. The problem was the risk we posed to her.

But not everyone believed that was the case. Some of our younger teammates were not only a possible risk due to a lack

of control, but suffered from uncertainty when it came to the obvious affection Arabella had for us.

Zain was a good example of that. Despite his lighthearted attitude, I knew the nightmare pined over Arabella and was constantly watching her, trying to figure out ways to get closer to her without possibly hurting her. I had heard him tell Saint several times that he wasn't convinced she had feelings for him, and despite Saint's assurances, I knew he wasn't swayed. I honestly had no idea how the two of them were friends to begin with, because they were so drastically opposite of one another. It didn't help that I knew Saint encouraged him to toe that line, and while it was frustrating, it was completely unsurprising. The reaper had said several times that we were worrying about nothing, but that was obviously not true. Frankly, I had no idea how we hadn't fucked up yet, because we were always on the verge of it.

Blackwell almost had. My gaze moved to where he and Damian stood talking quietly to one another in the kitchen. I considered everyone on this team a friend, or whatever nightmares like us could have that was close to a friend, but they were actually like brothers. I think part of it came from being legend terrors, but more so because of their fathers and their important place within human culture.

At least they had a built-in check for one another, which was why when Arabella had kissed Blackwell and he had lost his shit, Damian hadn't hesitated to lock him up. It was the most considerate thing to do, because outside of killing him, it was probably the only way to stop him. I enjoyed slaughtering someone as much as the next monster, but I was actually a fan of both of them, so I preferred to not have to.

"Bella," Zain called out, grabbing her attention. "What are you going to do while we are gone tonight?"

Her eyes widened, as if she hadn't fully considered her plans. I loved her two different shades of eyes, one a smoky, velvet gray and the other a silver that reflected her emotions perfectly. It was for sure a positive that she was easy to read, because without it, I had absolutely no doubt that we would fuck shit up way more than we already did. As it was, I often

felt like she was keeping back her opinions and thoughts about stuff just to provide a measured response.

Her gaze moved to Amun. “I’m going to be on the radio like normal. I mean, Amun should see how everything works from this end, so when he joins you guys next time, it’ll be easier.”

“I can’t focus with your voice on the radio,” Saint groaned as I nearly chuckled at the blush that lit up her cheeks. He wasn’t lying, despite her acting as if he was teasing her. Saint didn’t joke around—everything he said was exactly what he meant, even if his mannerisms suggested otherwise.

“Too bad.” She poked his chest, his eyes snapping to her finger as he caught her hand. Her attention was already back on Amun. “You should get settled, though. We don’t really have anything else to do today but hang out until they leave.”

“Are you staying here?” he demanded, looking worried, suddenly, as if she was going to leave. I knew he probably wanted to haul her to his side, but the man had some level of self-preservation, clearly, since she was in Saint’s arms. If he tried to remove her, he would probably get his soul forcibly ripped out.

“Of course.” She flashed a smile and slipped off her shoes before crossing the room towards me, causing Saint to scowl at her absence. Zain had already turned on the television, and despite everyone trying to look busy, most of us were just staring at her. Well, except Saint, who was once again having a stare-off with Amun. It was enough having one nightmare with death magic; having two was a fucking cluster, and it was causing my own magic to buzz in annoyance.

The minute Arabella squeezed between Zain and I, though, it didn’t matter. None of the tension, the shit with Amun, or even my magic mattered. Just her.

Razar slid down on the floor in front of her as she tucked her legs underneath her frame and began to run her fingers through his short hair, my own finding their way to her back. She rolled her shoulders and let out a happy hum as I began to draw patterns there, my eyes on her instead of the television

and the bullshit human news program that was flashing headlines in bright colors.

The actions of humans had become predictable. *Attack after attack*. It just proved that humans didn't change over time. They hated one another, but they hated anything different than them even more. Nothing could unite them like hatred for something alien or 'scary.' I suppose I should be grateful for their fear since it fed our power, but instead I found myself annoyed that they were the reason we had missions in the first place. Missions that caused my pixie to stress and took us away from her.

Her nose twitched once again in clear frustration over the headlines as she melted against my side after a few minutes of watching. Everyone else was settled throughout the large room, Zain draping a blanket over her lap as Arabella offered me a concerned look after another moment focused on the television.

"Promise me you guys will be careful."

"You know we will." I kept my voice so low that only she could hear it. Her eyes warmed as she nuzzled further into my side, her sweet perfume surrounding me.

"You will come back to me?" she murmured.

That wasn't a true question.

My fingers ran over her cheek lightly, like she often did to me. "Always."

Either that or die trying.

ARABELLA

BEFORE I COULD WAKE up enough to control my reaction, a small moan broke from my throat, instinctively reacting to the feeling of a hard, muscular body behind me. It wasn't just that, though. *No*, it was Cy's minty scent, the feel of his muscular arms wrapped around me possessively, his lips pressed against my neck, and more than all of that... how hard he was.

Shit, he was huge... like, I wasn't positive I could handle that type of 'massive.' I mean, would I give it a shot? Absolutely. But *shit*. I couldn't help but instinctively arch my body, pushing my ass back against him as a low vibration emitted from his chest, making me wonder if he was up already or still napping as well.

Attempting to keep another needy noise from breaking from my throat, I tried to not squirm against him too much, already feeling like I was more wet than moments ago. This was a wonderfully dangerous place to be.

When had we even fallen asleep in the first place? Were we still in the living room? I squinted open one eye, the room slightly blurry in front of me, as I recognized a dark comforter and accents of silver that decorated Cy's room. I didn't even care where my glasses were right now, because I didn't want to move. I didn't care if I couldn't see as well as usual, because all I needed was to feel, and let me tell you, I could do so absolutely perfectly.

"Arabella." Cy's voice was suddenly low and warm against my ear. "You've only been sleeping about an hour or

so. You should go back to sleep.”

I stretched against him, my small frame nearly completely overtaken by him as he tightened his arm around me. I turned into his muscular chest, looking up at him as he propped himself up on an elbow, looking down at me with interest as well as a slight darkness that seemed to shift behind his unique eyes, like hidden shadows. Cy’s body was rigid, but his gaze was slightly hooded, making me wonder how he managed to look relaxed but feel so hard and tense at the same time.

“I don’t want to sleep all day, especially with you guys being gone tonight,” I murmured, wanting to push past the fatigue I felt from last night. I knew they always came back, but there was an instinctual, panicked part of me that always clung to them in the hours before they went on missions. The concern that they may not come home or that I could lose them in some way was very real, very overwhelming. Probably the closest I ever got to legitimate fear.

“Humans sleep when they are tired, so if you need it, you should,” he rationalized, my eyes darting to his mouth as he spoke. His fangs flashed, making my skin prickle as I wiggled closer to him, wishing they were back near my neck.

I knew what I wanted was dangerous, but that just turned me on. Cy wouldn’t hurt me, but I did want to know how his teeth and other parts of him felt buried inside of me, desperately. I even wanted to know how his venom felt running through my veins, because everything told me it would feel good, even if it wasn’t supposed to. Even if it was on the line of pleasure and pain.

You know, I was starting to think I may have some odd kinks...

My tongue darted out to wet my lips, wishing that I could taste him. That I could run my tongue along the markings that littered his skin.

Inhaling sharply, I tried to shake myself, feeling as though I was growing more impossibly frustrated and flushed by the moment. My nipples tightened painfully against the lace of my bra as I pressed my thighs together, trying to control my

reaction, knowing that he was watching every inch of my expression. He could probably tell how much he affected me, and instead of feeling ashamed by that, I wanted to know how he felt about it. I wanted to press even closer to him and see just how hard he still was... or maybe to even make him harder. I had the ridiculous urge to tease the man until his willpower broke.

Instinctively, I knew it would yield dangerously delightful results.

“But if you aren’t sleeping, why would I?” I teased, running my fingers up his chest to brush them against his tattooed neck. A low growl broke from his throat, despite his face staying void of the need I could feel in his body, making me know he hadn’t meant to release the noise. Unfortunately for him, being half-exhausted and turned on, the noise encouraged me, and I continued to run my fingers along his neck, letting my nails trail his skin as he tried to restrain a near shudder rolling through his frame.

Honestly, it boosted my confidence way too much.

“Pixie, if you aren’t sleeping in my bed, we shouldn’t be in here,” Cy murmured, his eyes melting into a silver as his pupils shifted into a slightly narrower shape. A stream of excitement soared through me as my nails dug against his throat, the action causing his hand on my waist to tighten enough that it was nearly bruising. I loved it. I couldn’t look away from his gaze though, feeling absolutely mesmerized and caught up in it. Caught up in the need I saw there.

“Why?” I questioned, knowing I was pushing him. His eyes ran down from my gaze to where my frame was laid out practically underneath him before moving back up to my lips. He hesitated momentarily before inhaling sharply and sitting up, leaving me laying on his abandoned pillow, feeling far colder than before. I fought the urge to reach out to him, my fingers twitching as he ran a hand through his hair, his eyes closing as if he was trying to gather himself.

Honestly, my confidence moments ago was retreating, and I tried my best to hang onto it. I felt emboldened today, and

while I didn't know if that had to do with my concern over the mission tonight or something else, I wasn't fully ready to give it up.

“Cy.” I swallowed a bit nervously, letting my fingers lightly brush his back as a shudder actually rolled over him this time, his eyes flashing open. I wasn't positive what exactly I wanted from him besides to feel his body pressed against mine and his lips on my skin like before, so I offered a small and weak protest against his attempt to distance. “Please? I like your lips on me, even if it's only like when we woke up.”

I wanted so much more than that, but I would take anything, and I was hoping I wouldn't regret my boldness when I woke up more.

A squeak left my throat as I found myself pressed into his bed, his hard body caged above me so I could feel every part of it against mine, my hands trapped over my head by his. Cy's eyes were now completely silver, and his pupils had narrowed into full slits as he examined my expression in a way that I could only describe as predatory. A shiver wracked through me as a moan caught in my throat at how hard I could feel he was, the length of him pressed against my stomach causing me to shift against him. My entire body felt like it was being licked by icy flames that managed to heat and cool me at the same time, causing a heady reaction that had me feeling dizzy.

I couldn't even tell you how many times I had imagined us just like this but with my legs wrapped around his hips as he drilled into me, his teeth buried in my neck. It was a dangerous thing, loving nightmares, because you instinctively knew that anything physical was an extreme danger to you... but it literally didn't matter to me. In fact, if anything, the fact that the danger was so natural to them, a part of them, only turned me on more. I had been in a lot of different situations with Cy over the two years he'd been here, but even I had to admit I had never felt this strong of a tension between us.

It made me wonder where his mind had been while I slept.

“Arabella. We should really go into the other room.” His voice was soft, caressing my ears, but edged in a frustration that wasn’t normal for him. My toes curled as his nose brushed along my cheekbone and caused my entire body to jolt. I don’t think he wanted to leave this position at all, and I had to admit, I was very much a fan of the ‘stay in the sexy monster’s bed’ concept.

“I like being under you,” I admitted breathlessly as his lips paused at my jawline, his cock jumping against my frame and causing heat to once again explode throughout my body. He had to know just how much this was affecting me, right? I mean, holy hell.

A surprised moan left my mouth as his tongue darted out, tasting my skin, as my eyes fluttered shut. A weird, hazy sense of satisfaction surrounded me as my body turned pliant, and I wrapped a leg around his waist, wanting him further against me, scared he would pull away. His energy tightened, crackling in the room, as I began to feel almost euphoric. I had absolutely no idea what was going on, but I was a huge fan of it.

“Fuck.” He pulled away, something seeming to jolt him from his lips and tongue on my skin. The skin there still felt electrified, though, and I bet his mouth would feel absolutely amazing on other parts of me. When his large hands clasped my face, my eyes fluttered open and I offered him a lazily smile, not realizing I’d closed them. Honestly, I had no idea why he suddenly looked so worked up and concerned.

I could stay like this all day with him. Despite feeling more needy than ever for him, this was amazing. Just feeling him against me.

“Pixie, I need you to snap out of it.” Cy’s voice was soft and edged with concern as his eyes swirled between green and silver, distracting me from whatever I was supposed to be focusing on.

“Snap out of what?” My now free hands looped around his neck as I continued to try to nuzzle against him, absolutely loving how he felt against me.

“Cy.” A familiar rough voice had the nightmare on top of me freezing as his head snapped towards the door. I didn’t bother doing the same. In fact, I was rather frustrated that anyone was interrupting us to begin with.

“I know. I fucking know.” His voice was dark and frustrated. More so than I had ever heard it, in fact.

Razar appeared next to the bed, looking down at me with concern as I offered him a sleepy smile.

“Get out.” Razar’s voice was firm and commanding as he looked at Cy. “You have to. Now.”

I tightened my grip on Cy and scowled. “No.”

“Sorry, pixie,” Cy murmured, his forehead dipping to mine and making me let out a pleased hum. Why was he apologizing if he was staying?

Then he was gone. My eyes immediately began to water, and my chest hurt at the acute sense of loss I felt. What the hell was going on with me? The door slammed shut as my breathing went rapid, making me feel panicked and filled with anxiety.

Razar’s scent should have calmed me as he easily pulled me from bed and nuzzled against my neck, but instead I just felt so... sad. I felt almost withdrawn and distant. Depressed. My eyes watered, tears dripping down my lashes as my neck sparked from where Cy’s tongue had left a hot, shiver-inducing trail. I felt like I was coming down from an awful high, and I began to push against Razar.

“Where is he?” I whimpered, my entire body wracked with shivers.

“Shit,” Razar groaned, his fingers brushing at my neck and making me jump at the feeling of his magic against Cy’s mark. Hot tears continued to pour down as I worked myself up enough that I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“Arabella.” Razar grasped my shoulders as I felt his magic filter through me, making my body slump against him. Everything seemed to grow heavy and dark, the electrifying

feeling against my skin disappearing as darkness seemed to flood in around me, violently taking me under.

I had no idea how long I was out for, but time seemed to be moving at fast and slow intervals, familiar voices breaking up the moments but not making a lot of sense.

“It was his venom. He didn’t realize it would have that effect on her. Unless he’s attempting to kill someone, it shouldn’t have done anything, let alone that.”

His venom? Cy’s venom? A whimper tried to break from my lips as I realized that was who I was missing. Cy. Why wasn’t he here?

“He’s out at the training grounds with Saint, fucking furious at himself—”

Who was furious at himself? I struggled with unconsciousness, but the more I fought it, the more it seemed to tighten its hold on me.

“We are going to have to leave soon, should we wake her up?”

Those words had my eyes opening, the haziness dropping away as energy flushed through me, causing me to fling up in bed. I began coughing as a spinning sensation rode me hard, making me groan as I pat around the soft surface I was on, searching for something to stabilize myself. A familiar pair of muscular arms wrapped around me.

“Bella.” Zain’s smooth, relaxing voice had me melting. “I need you to just breathe. Open your eyes and look at me.”

“How the hell did she break out of that?” a voice demanded. My brows dipped in realization that it was Blackwell, and he sounded concerned.

Break out of *what*?

“No idea,” Damian murmured.

When I finally stopped coughing, I found myself looking into a pair of electric blue eyes whose magnetic power caused me to let out a shaky breath. After a few moments of trying to even out my pulse and breathing, a pair of silver-framed

glasses were slid onto my nose, and I refocused on the world around me. I could feel Razar behind me as Blackwell and Damian stood next to the bed, making me wonder where the others were. Where were Saint, Amun, and... Cy?

Oh. Oh, crap.

“Shit,” I muttered in realization, putting the pieces together of what had happened exactly. That was when the guilt hit me. Hard.

I knew that every time I teased Blackwell, Saint, or Cy, that I was courting possible danger. Even if they didn't have similar emotional feelings to me, the three of them, I could confirm, were attracted to me... and that could be potentially dangerous for a human. It didn't scare me, though, and I knew my reactions to their magic didn't always make sense, let alone the fact that none of it ever caused me to worry about my actual safety. What had happened with Cy today had not only been more unusual than normal *but* also something he would no doubt blame himself for. Which was ridiculous.

How would either of us have known how I would react to his venom? I mean, the man didn't exactly walk around licking or kissing my neck all the time. *Although I was very much okay with that concept, just saying.* I hadn't minded the euphoric, almost high-like reaction at all. Hell, despite Razar trying to remove it, I could still feel it against my skin, almost like a marker.

“Where is he?” I stood up, swaying slightly as all of them offered me concerned looks. I jolted as my hand came to my neck again, feeling a slightly smoother texture than normal on my skin. I walked across the room towards the mirror, now immensely curious what reaction my skin had to his touch.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, tilting my neck as I examined the almost iridescent silver and green scales that marked my skin. I would have said it was random, but this was a legitimate mark that was perfectly circular, so obviously it was created by magic. I arched a brow, wondering if I was going to end up with a bunch of marks on me if he continued to do that... I

mean, I wouldn't be opposed, but that still felt like something we needed to talk about.

"He shouldn't have marked you," Razar rumbled.

"I don't think he meant to," I pointed out.

"Bullshit," Blackwell immediately shot back, making me almost smile. I didn't want them to realize just how pleased him marking me made me, so I tried to control my reaction.

"Where is he?" I asked again.

"Training grounds," Damian admitted, and Zain nodded in confirmation. Blackwell shot both of them a look as I walked out of Cy's bedroom, across the dorm suite, and towards my heels. I slipped them on, feeling Razar very close behind me, before grabbing my badge and exiting towards the elevators.

My guys didn't feel guilty about a lot of shit. It wasn't in their nature. However, I had to admit that when it came to me, that guilt seemed far more present. Like the time that Zain had pulled me out of the way of some nightmares who were fighting and had nearly crashed into me, which probably would've killed me on impact. He had accidentally left a bruise on my wrist, which, to be fair, was pretty easy to do with how pale I was. I hadn't cared at all, but he had panicked and apologized a ton, worried that he had somehow permanently damaged me. It had been somewhat adorable, and I had spent the rest of the afternoon watching movies with him just so he was positive that I was perfectly fine. I mean, they were nightmares, and insanely strong... What did they expect? I wasn't exactly playing in the minor leagues here. Plus, he'd been saving me!

I don't know, maybe I was a bit messed up, because the idea of them leaving any mark on my skin was extremely attractive. This Cy thing was a perfect example. My little dark heart was thrilled that he'd marked us.

Which was why I needed to make sure that he didn't feel guilty at all.

"Arabella," Razar rumbled, "this is probably not a good idea."

“This is Cy we are talking about,” I reminded him as I pressed the elevator button and turned to offer all of them a knowing look. “He’s fine, I’m fine. This is all fine. I just don’t need him distracted and feeling guilty about any of this, especially with a mission to focus on.”

I knew they all wanted to talk about what had happened, and more specifically ask how it had gone down, but I had no idea how to explain it to them without turning ten shades of red. I knew they were concerned, but I wasn’t going to be able to comfort them until I knew how Cy was feeling. *Then* we could talk about the trippy reaction my body had to his touch. More specifically, his tongue.

Damn. Or maybe we could test it out again. This time with his teeth, though.

Letting out a slow exhale to shake myself of the surge of desire, I stepped into the elevator, and all four of them joined me. I hit the button to take us down to the main floor and looked down at my shoes, practically smiling because I knew that one of them was going to break. There was no way they were going to be patient enough—

“He shouldn’t have put you at risk like that, not without knowing how you would react,” Blackwell stated, his voice softer than in the bedroom but still very firm.

I frowned at him. “*Don’t*. There was no way he could have known without it happening, so that is impossible.”

“Then he shouldn’t have done it at all,” he grit out, a low rumble breaking from his throat as he ran a hand over his face, seemingly very tense.

I felt bad for how worried he was, but blaming Cy was not the solution. Not only had he put his lips on me in small ways before and we’d never had a problem, like a kiss to the forehead and stuff, but there was no way we could have known his venom would have done that to me.

I winced slightly, remembering very clearly how needy I had been acting in bed and the word ‘please’ that I’d used in reference to wanting that and more from him. A sleepy

Arabella really made risky decisions sometimes. Wonderfully dangerous, risky decisions.

“What?” Razar demanded, obviously noticing my wince.

I considered how to phrase what I was going to say and then tilted my head, pretending I wasn't embarrassed while staring ahead at the silver doors. “It wasn't *exactly* his fault, anyway. I sort of asked him to do it...”

“You asked him to *lick* you?” Zain mused, causing me to look up at the ceiling, willing myself to not be embarrassed.

“Something like that,” I muttered, remembering I wasn't positive what I wanted besides his lips on me. “I even used the word ‘please,’ so we can't really blame him.”

“Holy shit.” Zain chuckled authentically as Blackwell froze next to me. Razar let out a rumble as he muttered something under his breath that sounded almost tortured.

“You said ‘please Cy, lick me?’” Damian rounded me as his smile grew, an excitement dancing in his gaze.

“I didn't specify, but I very much wanted his mouth on me,” I bit out, feeling ten shades of red. Impressive, I know, and it probably looked great with my hair. “I also said I liked being under him.” I muttered that last part as the doors opened, Damian looking thrilled beyond measure.

“Holy fuck.” He turned, striding out of the elevator. “You're right, cherry blossom—I can't blame the man either. If you said ‘Damian, I want to be underneath you with your tongue on me, pretty please,’ I wouldn't even bother to fucking fight that shit—”

“Damian,” Razar snarled, his voice turning rough.

The heir of Hell put his hands out, walking backwards down the hall. “What?! I'm not going to lie. I mean, fuck, Razar, imagine that.”

No seriously, please imagine it, because I was now.

“Ignore him,” Blackwell demanded softly, his eyes on my expression as I looked up and shrugged, secretly loving Damian's words.

“It doesn’t matter.” I waved it off for now, but I tucked that away, hoping that meant Damian found me as attractive as I found him. “I need to find Cy so I can apologize.”

“Bella, you don’t ever need to apologize to someone, let alone a nightmare who had the pleasure of being on top—*Fuck!*” Zain groaned as Blackwell hit him on the back of the head, Razar chucking next to me and making me grin.

“Wait, where is Amun?” I asked, frowning.

“Went with Saint to catch up with Cy,” Damian hedged. *Crap.*

“You let Saint and Amun go somewhere alone?” I shot all of them a look, and Zain had the decency to at least wince. I muttered a curse, hurrying down the hallway faster, until I came to the large archway of the stunning main foyer. This day was just turning into a bit of a hot mess, wasn’t it?

The institute’s main foyer was empty with the exception of a large modern chandelier that reflected light on the landscape of dark marble and iron. I quickly made my way across the large room, my heels clicking along as I ignored the guards that stood at the front, their bodies tensing at the men behind me. All nightmares had the potential to be dangerous... but then there was my team. I found a bit of pride in how terrifying they were perceived, I couldn’t lie. I knew how important that was in nightmare culture.

As I walked out the front door of the institute, my eyes darted across the manicured front lawn and gray skies. Was it about to storm? I hoped not. I began cursing my shorter human legs as I walked down a path towards a large training yard located on the side of the impressive gothic structure. Luckily, before long, I was rounding the massive building’s corner as my eyes narrowed on the scene in front of me.

The institute grounds as a whole consisted of a several-mile-wide perimeter, with the main building at the very center of it. The beautiful manicured grounds towards the center consisted of my garden, housing for some families that worked here, and training grounds, but the further out you traveled every which way, a thick, dark forest grew, acting as a natural

protective barrier. It made it almost appear as if you could just walk right out of the forest and find yourself here. But you couldn't. Security was tight, and military-like walls, equipped with nightmare security teams, surrounded the entire fortress to keep humans away and prevent them from causing chaos. To say this place was safe and well guarded was the understatement of the century. It also allowed for privacy so that nightmares could train in their true forms without fear of humans exploiting them through pictures or the media.

If you think I'm being dramatic, then just look to the human news van that tried to drive through our gate just the other month or when some rogue humans attempted to bomb the back wall of our home. No, this security was very much needed. Plus, in order to train as nightmares did, you needed massive amounts of space, similar to the current training yard I was making my way towards. It was one of our main ones, a fenced sandy area surrounded by bleachers for other nightmares to watch if they weren't busy throughout the day. Sometimes new recruits were brought here to watch the more experienced teams practice. It also usually showed them that they didn't have to be afraid of training to their full extent. Most nightmares were used to holding back, and that wasn't something we encouraged here.

Right now, though? I found myself scowling at all the bastards sitting in the stands, gawking at a shifted Cy, who appeared to be listening to a fairly frustrated Saint. My gaze moved over towards Amun, who was slouched against the fence, watching the two of them with a fairly curious and content expression. His lip was bleeding, and I could see bruising on his jaw, making me wonder how he wasn't more pissed. Maybe he was even crazier than the men on this team... because that was all we needed right now. *Christ*. I honestly was just glad to see Saint had kept his word and not killed him.

"Don't." I slammed my badge up against the gate, offering Razar a semi-sympathetic look as I darted away from his attempt to pull me back. I drew attention from everyone, including Saint and the massive basilisk in the center of the training ground, feeling far better now that I had eyes on Cy.

“Flower.” Saint flashed a smile. I saw Amun straighten up fully, suddenly looking more tense as I walked across the sand of the training grounds, kicking off my heels so I could walk easier.

“Can we get the others out of here?” As I looked around, eyes averted from me in the stands, making me a bit annoyed, frankly. What had I ever done to them? I knew it wasn’t because they were scared of me, either. I considered myself a very friendly person! So why were they acting like I wasn’t?

Man. Today was *not* my day.

Saint examined my expression and disappeared suddenly in a cloud of black smoke as I moved forward, needing to be as close as possible to Cy. The massive snake was now coiled with his head down, watching me with familiar silver eyes that were easily the size of my actual body, if not larger. My skin tingled, but instead of feeling uneasy at his possibly dangerous gaze, I felt worried about the darkness I could see there. I could tell he was upset.

“Precious.” Amun’s voice rang out, his concern palpable. Cute. I couldn’t lie, it made me smile a bit and feel warm inside.

I know, I was such a softie for my monsters.

Cy let out a low hiss as I ignored my mummy for now, knowing that my attention could start a dominance battle between Cy and him. Also, had I said *my* mummy? Whoa man, I clearly was feeling territorial today. What was going on with me?

I stepped closer and didn’t hesitate to immediately run a hand over the hot, dry scales of his face, not caring about his massive fangs or the hiss in his throat that rumbled the ground underneath us. Seeing him in the light of day really just emphasized how large he was, and it was hard to keep focused on what I needed to get out once that sense of awe invaded my chest

“Cy, what happened earlier was not on you,” I promised in a gentle tone. “You don’t need to be out here beating yourself

up about it.”

A soft, low hiss broke from his mouth as I leaned against him and continued to soothe him gently. “Please, please, *please* don’t feel bad about this. Neither of us could have known that was how I would have reacted to your tongue on me.”

Despite my blush, it was far easier to have this conversation with him in this form than in his human one. I wasn’t even embarrassed because of what this conversation was about, but more about how I had literally asked him to do so. Admitting that was both essential and making me feel like a needy bitch, frankly.

After a moment, his entire frame seemed to shudder, and I jumped back as pale green smoke filled the space around us, coating his large frame.. I waited anxiously until the wind brushed through the space, clearing it to reveal Cy in his more human form. I didn’t bother stopping my reaction at seeing him, launching myself at him. Instantly, he caught me, and I buried my head against his neck.

I started to apologize, unable to stop myself but thrilled to see him back and looking far more calm.

“Pixie, why are you apologizing?” Cy demanded, pulling back, his eyes flashing with confusion and frustration. Okay, so maybe he wasn’t calm, because there was something underneath the surface that seemed to be boiling up.

“I shouldn’t have pushed, you said we should leave the room and I didn’t want to, I put you in a bad position,” I rambled. “I never want you to feel like that, feel like I forced you into a situation—”

Cy kissed me. A moan broke from my throat in surprise as his lips seared with mine in a hard, firm kiss that had my knees breaking. Holy crap. I let out a soft whimper as I tried to pull him closer. He grunted, suddenly pulling back and breaking our connection. He let out a rough exhale and kissed my forehead gently before putting me down. My mouth popped open as he strode past me towards the gate, not bothering to talk to any of our teammates.

All of whom were watching him with an equal amount of surprise and heat. Or was that disapproval and anger? I blinked, trying to clear my head as a warm scent filled the space around me, making me almost more relaxed and hazy, not less.

“Did he just kiss you?” Saint asked curiously, authentically surprised.

My fingers pressed to my lips as my gaze moved up to look at the massive man before nodding mutely. *Yeah, yeah he freakin' had.*

ARABELLA

“ARE YOU OKAY?” I asked Amun, his frame appearing in front of me.

I stood frozen next to Saint in the middle of the training arena. Amun’s gaze jumped to Saint and then back down to me, concern filling his face. I literally had absolutely no idea how to handle what had just happened. I mean, besides the absolute joy and excitement I felt... which made it all too clear how much of a freakin’ crush I had on Cy. *Yeah, a crush.*

“I’m good.” His tongue darted out to lick the blood from his split lip, the red tinted with gold sparkles distracting me momentarily. Saint let out a disapproving noise as I looked up at the lethal man, his overall composure far more relaxed despite the scowl he aimed at Amun.

So were they ‘okay’ now? Had Saint done some weird ‘nightmare’ dominance thing? Or had he beat the hell out of him? One of these had clearly occurred, because he didn’t seem like he wanted to kill Amun nearly as much as before.

“Saint.” I gave him a knowing look as he attempted to offer me a supposedly innocent, relaxed smile. It didn’t work to make me forget about Amun’s injury, but it was pretty stunning anyway.

“It’s all good, flower. We handled it the way monsters do.” He winked at me as Amun sighed, shaking his head and saying something under his breath in Coptic. I noticed he had moved closer to me, and the warmth from his body had me relaxing between the two of them.

“Okay.” I sighed, patting Saint’s chest before refocusing on Amun. “Are you excited to see how everything goes tonight?”

His eyes darkened as he nodded. “I’m excited to be spending it with you, precious.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that, nearly forgetting the impending sense of paranoid concern I felt towards tonight, or you know... the thing where Cy had absolutely just kissed me.

“You should come with instead, get some first-hand experience,” Saint growled, his eyes narrowing while pulling me against him, clearly not liking the idea of us alone. I looked up at him and went up on my toes, pressing a kiss to his jawline. He flashed me a heated look and loosened his grip, giving me a chance to escape. I walked towards the gate, hoping they would follow.

“Come on guys!” I called back to them, turning to find Amun scowling at Saint, who was offering him a somewhat amused, smug smile. Probably because his fingers were pressed against his jaw where I had kissed him. I couldn’t lie, that made me happy.

“Let’s go inside. You guys are going to be leaving in like an hour or so, so we need to make sure you’re ready. We can’t afford distractions right now.” That trickle of apprehension went down my spine once again.

The others were now outside of the gate, Damian and Zain talking quietly as Razar stared at me with an indecipherable expression, which was unusual, considering I knew him so well. Blackwell was offering me a heated look, and I couldn’t lie, that boosted my confidence a bit. I picked up my heels off the sand and walked through the gate, keeping my eyes ahead and not bothering to address the massive elephant... well, snake, in the room.

What did I even say to the others?

‘Yeah, you know, it was a bit weird that he decided to kiss me. Hot. But definitely not his usual thing... Not sure why he did that.’

I nearly rolled my eyes at my internal monologue. This was why I avoided relationships—not because I wasn't willing, but because I was so clearly awkward.

Keeping my arms crossed underneath my chest after sliding on my heels, I walked along the side pathway to enter back into the institute. Once again, we had nightmares getting out of our path, paling at the men behind me and making me almost smile. Didn't they realize what softies they were? Apparently not.

Then again, I really did feel like that behavior was reserved for me.

Overall, I liked to think that most nightmares here liked me, or at least respected me. Maybe it was the fact that I didn't really bother them all that much, or maybe it was because they understood that I legitimately wanted them here. There was only one group of nightmares that I knew didn't like me, and those were the ones that were currently in solitary. I frowned, really hating that concept but knowing it was unavoidable since they were individuals that were extremely dangerous but refused to work with us, instead wanting to wreak havoc in the real world.

Everyone else though? I liked to think we were on good terms. Not that I ever had a chance to talk to them, because any time one of them attempted it, Razar or one of the others lost their shit.

“Bella.” Zain pulled me from zoning out. I stood in front of the elevator, staring at the foggy silver doors. When it rang open, I walked into the space and leaned against the back wall, moving my gaze down to the floor as anxiety began to invade my chest.

How was I going to handle this situation with Cy? I needed to talk to him. It didn't help that Cy's minty scent was filling the space from when he had no doubt taken the elevator up moments ago, making me want to wrap my arms around him. Did I go find him once I got to the dorm? Give him space?

Oddly enough, I didn't have to figure that out, because as I made my way into the dorm, I found his door closed. *Okay,*

then.

Muttering under my breath, I kicked off my heels and walked towards the kitchen, not knowing what to think and frankly deciding to probably put it off until after the mission. See? That was a solid plan.

I knew the guys had to get ready soon, but Razar still followed me into the kitchen as I opened the fridge and stared at the large stock of options. I could feel him staring at me, waiting for me to say something. Grabbing a small container of fresh fruit, I put it on the counter as Razar made a low, frustrated noise that had me looking up from my snack to his crimson gaze.

“What?” I asked curiously, popping a piece of watermelon in my mouth. Razar was examining my fruit bowl with a scowl, as if it personally offended him.

“I don’t feel like that has enough substance in it to count as a meal,” he pointed out, his critical eye making me smile.

I pressed a hand to his chest in a comforting movement. “I promise you I’ll eat a better dinner. You know it’s hard for me to eat the day you guys go on missions.”

Not to mention all the other shit on my mind.

“What shit?” Razar asked. I blinked and felt my chest tightening, realizing that I had just said that out loud. I shrugged and ate another piece of fruit so I wouldn’t have to talk. I turned towards the fridge to avoid his probing gaze, only to have him tug me back... but not with his hand.

I smiled in slight excitement as a familiar black icy tendril of magic wrapped around my waist and spun me back. His skin seemed to shift, the hint of the exoskeleton that he sometimes donned coming alive in flashes before his eyes turned completely black. My breathing went fast as I realized that we were essentially alone, everyone having wandered off to get ready, as I stood pinned between the counter and a fairly worked-up Razar. I guess today had upset him a bit more than he had let on.

A thrill of adrenaline had my skin breaking out in shivers as my center tightened, his gaze running over my face as if searching for any level of fear. I had no idea how to make it clear that was literally the opposite of how I felt. I think he figured it out, though, because his gaze dipped to my lips as I felt more icy, vine-like tendrils wrapped around my skin. My ankles, my waist, my arms were enveloped as I was pulled more squarely against him, my eyes widening at just how much I seemed to physically affect Razar. Heat surged through me like a wildfire, loving being held hostage as he let out a low growl in the back of his throat, dipping his head down as he spread his hands out on either side of me on the counter.

“Tell me,” he demanded, his patience clearly having run out. It didn’t help that he was no doubt on edge because of the mission tonight.

I tilted my chin up. “What shit is on my mind? I think that’s fairly obvious, Razar. It hasn’t exactly been a normal day.”

A low rumble broke from his throat as he seemed to attempt to retain his form, his hands gripping the counter behind me as my tongue darted out, watching his muscles strain. I inhaled sharply as he pressed further against me, his hardness causing my skin to break out in icy shivers, loving the feel of his magic against me.

“Because Cy kissed you?”

I pressed my lips together. “Amongst other things, but yes.”

“You are... upset he kissed you?” he asked, seemingly confused and angry at the notion.

“No.” I felt a small blush hit my cheeks.

“You wanted him to kiss you?”

“Well, yeah.” I caught my bottom lip between my teeth as his gaze heated, something seeming to occur to him as he tilted his head thoughtfully.

“Is he the only one you want to kiss you?” His voice was slightly cautious as I tried to keep up with the whiplash of him

being worked-up to being more emotionally open and vulnerable. I mulled over his question as I saw curiosity but also something else in his gaze that had me answering truthfully.

“No.”

Razar inhaled sharply, but before he could say anything, his power snapped against him, a door opening up and leaving me feeling somewhat cold. I leaned back against the counter and grabbed another piece of watermelon, not bothering to look up at Damian, who was walking over. Razar’s struggle for control was far more interesting. I just didn’t understand why he wouldn’t give into this connection. It had been an ongoing conflict, and I had officially decided I was no longer imagining shit. I just needed to figure out what exactly was holding him back.

“Are we good here?” Damian mused, suddenly behind me on top of the counter, his hands sliding onto my shoulders as I adjusted myself so I was leaning between his long legs. Razar met my gaze again, seeming to decide something before pressing a kiss to my forehead and striding towards one of the spare rooms. I knew he kept some of his clothes down here for missions. Usually we were down here before they left anyway, so keeping spare uniforms here made sense.

I missed the feel of his magic against my skin.

“You good?” Damian asked as I tilted my head up, finding him looking down at me as his long fingers wrapped around my throat lightly. My eyes grew slightly heavy, and I made a noncommittal noise before nodding and pulling away, putting back the container in the fridge. Now was not the time to talk about all the issues I had with today. When I turned to face him, I remembered the other reason why mission day was hard.

When I helped redesign the uniforms, I had no idea they would look so good on them. I had been focused on the ability for it to withstand their power and to maintain its form while shifting back and forth, but I hadn’t purposefully made them

so badass that it was painful to see them in it. *Mission obviously failed.*

Damian's dark combat boots were laced up, the tough black material matching the rough combat pants he wore and dark long-sleeve shirt. The material of the latter fit to his muscular chest and was tucked in against his perfect abs, the matte metal belt the only glint on the uniform besides the bulletproof vest he wore with the ISS logo. It was pretty standard military-grade styling, but it was weaved with a fabric that would be able to shift back with them, one that had taken some time to perfect and a lot of experimentation. To say I had free time in my late teens was an understatement. My lips pulled up, almost remembering when I had tried to use Damian as a model and he had ended up practically naked when shifting back. Honestly, it wasn't the worst use of free time... just saying.

“Like what you see?” he mused with a charming smile.

I blushed slightly. “You know I love those uniforms on you guys.”

As he jumped off the counter, I didn't walk towards him, letting him approach me as I inhaled his familiar cigar and mint scent. I smiled as he reached behind me to open up the fridge and pull out another container. I rolled my eyes as he put it in my hand and walked away with a wink, making me shake my head. Honestly, all of them had such a weird obsession with my health. I was convinced it was a nightmare ‘thing.’ Then again, could I blame them?

I was constantly fussing over them.

He went to go sit down as Zain came out of his room and walked over to stand across the island from me, shrugging on his vest. I walked around the counter and stood next to him, reaching up to adjust one of the pockets on it, his expression thoughtful. More so than usual. I resisted the urge to fix his hair, because I probably wouldn't stop touching him then.

“You don't need to worry about every mission. We always come back.” His voice was soft and filled with understanding. I exhaled softly and looked up at him, feeling a wave of

pleasure roll through me as his fingers brushed across my cheek and wrapped around the back of my neck in a comforting yet somewhat possessive way.

“It’s the worry you won’t come back because of a reason you can’t control,” I murmured and then gave a strained smile. “Plus, asking me to not worry is absolutely impossible.”

“I wish I could show you how easy it is for us.” His eyes darkened slightly at something that occurred to him. I smirked.

“I have seen it. We record a lot of it or hack into those cameras at the facilities,” I explained as his eyes flashed with a bright electric spark.

“You see what we do normally? How did I not know this?” He frowned but looked relieved, his fingers brushing through my hair. Had he been worried about what I would see? Did he not understand how much I knew about them? I guess I just assumed they knew how obsessed I was with them... maybe I should have kept that a secret.

I let out a small laugh. “Zain, you’re part of my team. I am very well aware of just how dangerous you guys are.”

His hand tightened further as he dipped his head so our noses were practically brushing. “And it doesn’t bother you?”

“Why would something that’s natural to you ever bother me?” I asked.

Emotion flashed in his gaze as he looked away momentarily, seeming to process something before I decided to change topics and ease the obvious surprise he felt at my words.

“But I can always come with if you really want to show me,” I teased as he chuckled softly.

“Absolutely not,” Blackwell growled, making my lips pull up into a smile. I looked at the massive bastard who’d suddenly appeared next to me, blinking at him innocently.

“You don’t want me to come with you?” I asked, offering a sad pout.

His eyes flashed. “No. I don’t ever want you in that much danger.”

“Zain just said it wasn’t dangerous,” I pointed out in slight amusement. “He said ‘*no need to worry.*’ Can’t be both.”

“Damn it,” Zain muttered as Blackwell snarled and pinned him with a look.

“If you ever come with us, love, it will be on something more than just safe. I don’t even feel like a vacation is fucking safe enough for you,” he growled, making my stomach tighten at the use of the nickname. He rarely used it, and it made me thrilled beyond measure.

“What type of vacation?” I pushed. “Like a beach vacation? I do have some swimsuits I could pull out—”

“I can’t handle that imagery right now,” Zain bit out, suddenly striding away towards Damian as my smile grew. Blackwell drew my chin back as I felt his dark, oil-like power wrap around me, making me know that he was itching to cause some violence tonight. Usually he kept it far more tucked away. I absolutely loved feeling like the man was right on the edge. Made me want to kiss him again and see what he would do.

“Don’t look at me like that, Arabella,” he warned softly. I really felt like something about Cy’s actions had triggered Blackwell a bit, although he was usually like this when we were alone, so it could just be the intensity of having all his focus on me.

“Like what?” I grabbed a piece of pineapple and popped it in my mouth. His gaze tracked the movement as I saw heat flash through his gaze. Grabbing a piece of fruit, I offered it to him. He looked at it speculatively before leaning forward, and my stomach tightened as he took a small bite and swallowed. My hand stayed suspended momentarily as he grabbed the fingers that had held the fruit and sucked on them, causing my breathing to hitch as my eyes grew hooded. Holy shit.

“Be good while we’re gone,” he warned.

“Or what?” I pulled my hand back as he offered me a challenging look.

“You don’t want the answer to that question, love.”

I was positive that I did.

I followed as he made his way back towards the couch, leaving the fruit on the counter. Well, I attempted to follow... but suddenly Cy was in my space. I nearly hit into him as my eyes darted up across his uniform, finding him watching me with his normal, controlled expression. His hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer as I leaned into him, the tension that he had in his frame draining. I honestly had no idea what he was thinking, but I wanted us to be okay.

“Are we okay?” he asked, his voice a hesitant whisper once again.

“Are we?” I questioned, my head tilting so that I could look all the way up into his pale green gaze that truly appeared more silver than anything else right now. His eyes changed so much—it was absolutely hypnotizing.

His expression filled with soft affection that surprised me as he nodded, his grip tightening on me. I buried my nose in his vest and let out a sigh of relief.

We would figure this out. Just as soon as they got back to me. Safely. That would also be a pretty good time to ask him about the marking he had left on my neck since he hadn’t seemed to notice it yet.

Suddenly, the intercom switched on, and my father’s voice rang out. “Five minutes until departure.”

A worried noise left my throat as I stepped away from Cy, suddenly feeling almost hyper with anxiety. Razar appeared behind me and wrapped an arm around my center, pressing a calming kiss to my cheek. I knew I needed to be strong for them. I looked over to the bedroom doors to find Amun relaxing in his room, seeming to just absorb everything that was going on. I offered him a head nod as the guys got up and started walking towards the door of the dorm suite. I slipped on my heels as I frowned, looking back.

“Where is Saint?” I questioned, the man’s presence noticeably absent.

“Here.” His voice wrapped around me as he appeared in a flash of dark smoke, his sexy smile causing me to squeak as his eyes flashed with a dangerous silver glint. I shook my head as he pulled me against his chest, nuzzling my neck and making me laugh as he lifted me off the ground.

“Saint!” I patted his chest, laughing as I tried to get down.

“I need you to relax, my little flower. This is like every other fucking mission. We arrive, we kill the stupid humans that try to fight us, and we pick up our target,” he promised, ushering me into the hallway.

“I know,” I murmured, offering a small smile.

His words were reassuring... but something still felt off.

AMUN

I WAS TORN on the prospect of being left alone with my precious human and her father figure. Part of me was absolutely thrilled, but there was an equal part of me that was concerned about the expression of worry on her stunning face and tension that she was now carrying through her delicate frame. I may not have liked the others, especially with how they seemed to surround her in such a territorial and possessive way, *but* I didn't like that expression even more.

The mere concept of her being uneasy made me feel... something.

My chest tightened and I ignored the urge to rub the pain away, knowing instinctively that it wasn't caused by anything physical. Was it even possible for me to feel that strong of emotions anymore? So strong that it caused physical pain? Maybe at one time, but it had been thousands of years since I'd felt anything similar. Then again, I also hadn't thought it was possible for me to feel anything but disdain or hatred for humans until today.

My eyes ran over Arabella, her hands clasped together nervously as she watched a helicopter lift off, carrying the six nightmares that were apparently my new 'team' to where they would be flying off for their mission. A team that I had only agreed to being a part of because, frankly, I had a feeling there was no way she would let her guard down around me unless I did. I mean, the chances of me even getting around her would be legitimately cut short if I didn't. It was obvious how well-insulated they kept her, and I was thanking my instinctual

reaction to agree to her little plan, because if I had rejected it, I may have lost my chance at being around Arabella.

My Arabella. My human.

I didn't fully understand my obsession with my precious human. There was no reason for it. Well, actually there were a million, but I still couldn't grasp how they were having such an effect on me. It made no sense the way she pulled such a physical and emotional reaction from me. It made no sense the way I felt everything soothe and calm the moment her hand was on me. I'd always been somewhat of a temperamental individual, but when she touched me, I felt more human than I did when I was attempting to be a human ruler in the time of the pharaohs.

I let out a small exhale, wondering how to go about any of this. I had experienced a lot in the thousands of years of my existence, but this was absolutely a new one, even for me.

I'd been reactionary upon seeing her, but I realized now that it wasn't going to get me anywhere except threatened by Saint. I narrowed my eyes at the annoyance I felt with the concept of any nightmare having dominance over me, but felt moderately better considering he was not only far older than me, but contained death magic that was literally impossible to supersede. I would have probably been somewhat in awe of the bastard if he hadn't threatened to cut my dick off and shove it down my throat if I ever put my hand around her throat again.

It was possible that I'd been somewhat rough in my action towards her, but I had truly been shocked that she was human, and I honestly hadn't fully believed her. Well, until I had her pinned by the throat and felt her faint, delicate pulse under my fingers and how breakable she truly was. It seemed almost impossible that someone with the confidence that she had wasn't a nightmare.

Once I had accepted her words, I'd found myself reeling from a protective urge that was long buried but came to life under her touch and voice. I should have felt disgust or annoyance towards her, but instead all I felt was concern that I

would break her. Or that someone would try to take her away from me, a possessive ripple of awareness rolling over my skin at the precious treasure I'd found.

One that I fully intended on making mine... somehow.

While it had taken a few hours, the complicated dynamic between Arabella and her team was becoming far too clear. It was obvious they reacted the same way towards her as I did, and I could see a sense of devotion—more obsession, honestly—coming off of them in reference to her. However, it was also clear that they were not only worried but avoiding dealing with the obvious obstacle.

Arabella was human.

Humans were not built to mate with nightmares successfully. I winced, thinking about when I'd been a fairly young nightmare and pharaoh and the few lovers that I'd taken carelessly. They had died, each one ending up a drained corpse. I think it was about six months and three lovers before I gave up on the notion of mating with anyone that wasn't a nightmare of my own kind.

Unfortunately, that hadn't been much of an option either, considering I was related to most that lived within Egypt, so to say that I hadn't felt physical affection of any kind for a long period of time was an understatement.

It was frustrating as hell that my body was so goddamn responsive to a delicate creature like Arabella. I wasn't even positive how to handle her, and I was a bit concerned that my need for her would overrule those newer protective instincts. If it was bad for me and I'd been around her for only hours, I couldn't imagine what it was like for the others.

My thoughts went to Cy and how tortured he had looked over the concept of almost hurting her. Something Saint, of all people, had tried to reassure him of, seemingly oddly confident that Arabella was just fine. I wasn't positive how confident I felt in his analysis on anything that wasn't a judgement on whether it was someone's time to die or not, though.

Not that I should talk—I killed often, usually without remorse.

I had been asleep for nearly four hundred years, and when I'd woken to find that humans were more annoying than ever, I had killed a fair amount. I had not expected, though, to be bombarded by other nightmares. Hell, I hadn't expected them in the first place, since usually we kept to ourselves. They had successfully caught me off guard, and when I woke to find myself in a large warehouse room, I'd been furious, almost instantly shifting and using up most of my reserved energy. As much as I liked sleeping away my immortal existence, playing catch-up could be absolutely exhausting, especially with so much development having occurred.

From what I gathered, humans were aware of us and predictably hated us. How this group, MAM or something, played into it, I was still putting together. Unfortunately, one aspect that hadn't changed was our need for their fear and our reliance on them to survive. It was absolutely bullshit, considering if we really wanted to, we could completely exterminate them. I craved to see that.

Well, not Arabella. I would never allow anyone to kill her. She would end up the only human left on all of Earth, if I had it my way.

That was another thing I didn't understand about Arabella. She had a disastrous excuse for self-preservation and absolutely no fear, something that was unusual for a human. I'd been somewhat offended at first, only to realize that it wasn't that she was hiding it, it was just simply... absent.

That alone shouldn't have been sexy, but I found myself wanting to push her limits, seeing if there was a way to inspire terror. At the same time, the idea of her being scared of me struck an uncomfortable chord, so I was truly at a crossroads. One that didn't seem to matter, because I was pretty sure the only thing that could inspire even a slight inkling of fear was concern over those other nightmares. *Her* nightmares. I scowled, wanting to be 'hers' also; I just didn't know how exactly to go about becoming so.

I wanted her to feel for me that same level of possessiveness and protectiveness she clearly had for the others. I craved that. My body tensed, thinking about how easily she had been ripped away from me... not that I could blame them, frankly, because if I had any claim over Arabella, I would fight tooth and bone to keep it.

I knew now was my chance, since she was away from those other nightmares, to establish some claim over her, mark her... do *something*. But instead I found myself worried about how upset she looked. I would do my best to attempt to be comforting, at least until I could find a way to kidnap my precious Arabella and keep her all to myself.

As if they would allow that. I would probably end up slaughtered.

I shook away that thought process, my eyes running down her frame as she turned towards the Director McCroy. The man seemed unemotional and focused, something I could appreciate in a leader, and despite his lack of magical power, he seemed to have control over everything here. Although the person who seemed to hold the most control was Arabella. Even in the way he seemed to watch out for her, putting her at the top of everyone's priority list. I was at least thankful for the others for that reason. I wanted her to be mine, but someone had been keeping her safe all these years, and that garnered a small amount of gratitude from me.

Fighting the urge to go to her, I stayed where I was, not wanting to interrupt a moment where the Director seemed to be acting in a somewhat comforting manner or reassuring her of something. Instead, my gaze moved down her curvy body that was dressed in clothes far tighter than I'd seen. Even the shoes she wore elongated her legs and made her seem a bit less small than she actually was.

Although there was no denying how delicate she was, despite the power she indisputably held. Arabella had magic. I didn't understand it, but I did know that the way she held herself and acted had my body hardening in ways it hadn't in hundreds of years, if not more.

I had the desperate urge to know what it would feel like to peel those dark clothes off her skin. Or to kiss the small drawn-on heart underneath the scar that crossed through her eye. Who had done that to her? I found myself both furious and curious, wanting to trace my fingers along it. In some ways, the slight imperfection made me feel better about my own. I mean, this woman was like a precious gemstone, and I was an ancient bastard that kept trying to get closer to her. There was no way I would ever measure up enough to keep her attention.

Which was why it would make sense to take her away and hide her.

She would probably hate me for a bit... but I could make her see reason. I may not have had a lot of recent experience, but I was betting that I could make her feel enough pleasure that she forgot about the others, even if only momentarily. Her innocence rolled off her, and I didn't want to say I viewed that as a good thing, but considering I was probably a bit rusty, I wasn't going to complain. Mostly because I knew if I ever slid my cock into her tight warmth, I would probably come in minutes.

I know. *Absolutely pathetic.*

Maybe I could find other ways to bind her to me.

“Are we good to go inside?” the Director asked. My eyes flickered from Arabella to him, my nod sharp and short as she offered a small happy noise at something. I only tensed slightly in surprise when she hooked arms with me, leaning into my side with a small sigh, her thoughts seemingly elsewhere. I knew she was probably only comfortable touching me like this because she did so with her nightmare team. She probably wasn't considering how easy it would be for me to kill her. Completely drain her of life. Then again, she very much touched Death on a daily basis, so the ‘lack of self-preservation’ theory seemed a bit more accurate.

I did have the urge to also warn her.

Warn her that if she acted this familiar with anyone else besides me, I would bend her over my knee for putting herself

at risk. My cock twitched at that thought, not making any of this easier. I may have trusted myself—and possibly the others—to an extent, but anyone else and I would probably lose it. Something that was actually fairly amusing, because the nightmares that she did surround herself with were dangerous, even by my standards.

As we walked through the impressive modern establishment, a comfortable silence between the two of us as she clearly got lost in thought, I found myself surprised by all the things that had changed in the time I'd slept. Even the materials to build had been altered, and this institute was actually quite impressive, even by modern standards.

Whenever we woke from our long sleeps, we fed our magic by draining humans and with it gained their cultural current knowledge, language ability, and mannerisms. It was an ability that allowed us to fit in, and in this case, act a bit more 'normal' than how I would have fresh off of sleeping for four hundred years. The ability to speak English was also rather helpful, and I was praising my good fortune to come across an American tourist before being captured.

It was a bit odd to understand the world around you in context and through their eyes, so still, seeing it for the very first time on your own was very different. Which was why, despite knowing what Arabella wore, for example, was actually rather conservative, it was a shock to my system. So much so that the longer I focused on it and the way it clung to her body, the more turned on I got.

“What do we do now?” I tried to clear my thoughts and focus on her voice, despite it also having a strong pull on me. Honestly, I just wanted her attention back on me.

“Now we wait until they land.” She let out a small huff as if the concept frustrated her and looked at her father, who was scrolling through his tablet. “Do you care if I run up to my room for a bit? You know how I get sitting around and waiting for them to start.”

“I understand.” Her father nodded and looked at me. “Amun, are you going to accompany her or come with me?”

Was this a trick question? I feel like most fathers would not be okay with any man, let alone a nightmare like myself, being alone with their daughter in her personal quarters. The mere concept turned me the fuck on. Luckily, I didn't have to answer.

"I would like some company," Arabella admitted quietly.

"I'll have dinner ordered from the kitchen." Her father offered me another speculative glance before parting ways. The man was smart to not fully trust me with his stunning daughter... alone in her bedroom...

Maybe this was a bad idea.

Arabella led me towards the end of the hallway as we entered back into the small metal contraption from before. Honestly, I thought these elevators were horrible, but when she explained them to me earlier, I had eaten up every word, loving her voice against my ears. The delicate nature infused with strength was absolutely amazing and rather addictive to listen to.

When the metal doors closed, Arabella let out a shaky breath, and I jerked slightly in surprise as she wrapped her small arms around my waist, burying her head against my chest. Despite my initial shock, my arms immediately wrapped around her, confused but loving the way she was letting me hold her, my fingers playing with the ends of her pink hair.

Once I got my emotions under control, I managed to get out a rough question. "Are you alright?"

I mean, clearly she fucking wasn't, but I didn't know how else to be comforting in a moment like this.

"Yeah." She nodded and then sighed. "Actually, no. I'm not alright. I don't usually lose my cool when they go on missions, but something feels off about tonight. I don't like it."

I settled on something that I hoped would provide a level of comfort. "They will come back."

Unfortunately. No matter what.

After a small head nod, she continued to cling to me for a few more seconds before seeming to think of something. A small laugh broke from her lips as she pulled back, seeming to shake herself. “I’m sorry, you must think I’m crazy. I didn’t even ask if you’re okay with me touching you. After what happened with Cy earlier, I need to be better about that.”

I caught her chin. “I am very much okay with you touching me, precious.”

Her cheeks turned a bright pink, taking her from being the leader I could clearly see that she was, to something a bit softer and more innocent. I found both attractive, and I couldn’t lie, there was a part of me that got really fucking hard at how flustered she got. The pink blush only highlighted her unusual eyes and bright hair that I didn’t think was normal for humans. It was perfect for her, but it did add to the mystery that was Arabella.

“This is the floor you live on?” I asked curiously as the elevator opened and she turned, hiding her face a bit and leading me down a luxuriously designed hallway. The dim lighting and relaxed atmosphere was far different than that of the rest of the institute, and the entire space smelled like her, the Director, and... was that Razar? So he really did live on the same floor as her? Jealousy filled my chest at the idea of being able to sleep so close to her every night.

“My father and Razar each have a suite on this floor,” she explained, leading me towards a massive dark door. I inhaled her delicate scent, which saturated the space, as she opened it and led me into a two-story bedroom that was not only modern but filled with luxurious furniture in shades of purple, pink, and black that seemed to fit the unique woman perfectly. In one corner were large windows and an office setup, while the rest of the space seemed aligned with comfort.

My eyes darted up to the far corner of the ceiling, sensing the strong power signature and trail of red magic that was left by a night terror. A rumble broke from my throat before I could stop it.

“What?” She looked around, slipping off her tall, dangerous-looking heels and becoming that much shorter than me once again.

“A night terror has been in here,” I growled, looking up at the corner of her room. I didn’t understand the small smile that pressed onto her lips until she cleared her throat and explained.

“Razar sometimes sleeps in here.” Her delicate hand ran over the back of her neck, which may have been a nervous habit. Or embarrassment.

I frowned slightly. “He sleeps in here, but you are not with him? Romantically?”

I didn’t think that was common even in this day and age, to sleep in the same bedroom as someone you weren’t fucking. Then again, it was possible I had missed something.

A sad look flashed across her face, and I felt instant regret for putting it there. I could see longing on her expression, and her words were far more clinical and calm than I knew she actually felt.

“I don’t really know how to explain the dynamic going on. If I say no, that won’t make a lot of sense since he sleeps in here, and well, you saw Cy kiss me today. But technically, no, I am not involved with any of them romantically.”

Her body slumped at the end of her bed, and I found myself crouching down in front of her, examining her expression as she took off her glasses and ran her fingers over her face.

When she put her hands down, I asked a question I’d been curious about, hoping it wouldn’t make me pissed or send me into a violent streak. “Who put that scar on your face?” My thumb ran over the smudged heart on her cheek as her eyes filled with emotion, leaning into my hand.

“A creature terror. Feline, actually.” Her lips twisted. “I was trying to help them and they weren’t mature enough to control their shifting. I know, it looks far worse than the actual reasoning behind it.”

I couldn't help but smile at her story, because it was somewhat adorable.

"I actually find it beautiful," I admitted, surprised a bit by my own words. She flashed a smile, sliding her glasses back on.

"You can be really sweet," she murmured, her hands cupping my face before she frowned again, something seeming to occur to her.

"What?" I asked, suddenly worried I had done something wrong.

"I feel bad. You wake up from however long you've been sleeping, go about your life like normal, get knocked out and bought somewhere with strangers, and somehow you are taking it all in stride? I didn't even ask if there was family you left or if you could see yourself being happy here. Sometimes I wonder if we don't just make shit worse, despite trying to help ___"

"I didn't have any family I was leaving. You don't really keep long relationships, at least not ones like you are imagining, when you're like me," I admitted. Plus, I had been killing humans rather actively, so they had probably done the right thing. Not in my eyes, but if the institute was trying to preserve the reputation of nightmares and keep them safe from the 'bad' humans, then creatures like me that killed indiscriminately no doubt hurt their cause.

She nodded, seeming to understand the lack of connection I had to the outside world. "I only have my father and my team. I was abandoned on the front steps of the institute, and it honestly has been the best thing for me. I can't imagine not knowing all of these amazing individuals. I have seen how humans live, and I truly want nothing to do with it."

Nor would they want her.

I didn't mean that in a bad way; I actually viewed it as a good thing. Despite being human, Arabella had an air about her that was anything but 'normal.' If she ever tried to live

amongst humans, it would absolutely not be a successful endeavor.

“Humans have and always will be...” Vile. Horrible. Angry. “Difficult.”

Her laugh was a bit sad. “Is that what we are calling it? They suck. I don’t blame you for reacting poorly to me at first.”

“I actually thought you were a nightmare.”

Her eyes widened. “Me? Because of the hair?”

I chuckled. “No, precious, because of the confidence and lack of fear.”

She shrugged and then tilted her head with a thoughtful expression. “I suppose that is one thing that makes me different, my lack of fear.”

“Do you actually not feel any?” I was not only curious but fascinated by this woman. I had never even met a nightmare completely absent of fear, let alone a human. Everyone had something they were afraid of. I mean, hell, Arabella scared me, and I was a man enough to admit that. Everything she inspired was new and foreign to me.

“I feel concern, anxiety, worry, but objective fear? Never.”

I attempted to lighten the mood so that I could see her smile again. “I can try to scare you sometime.”

I just wanted an excuse to sneak up on her.

Arabella’s eyes danced with laughter. “I would love that. Razar tried that again and again growing up, but I know he won’t hurt me. I don’t think you will either.”

That same sadness suddenly filled her gaze as she continued. “Sorry, Amun. I’m probably not the best company right now, between the worrying over them and the Cy thing. Whatever that was.”

“He has never kissed you before?”

“No,” she whispered, her eyes darting down to her intertwined fingers in her lap. “I don’t know what to make of

it. I know he feels guilty for my reaction to his magic, but they are nightmares! What did they expect? Plus, it has never bothered me before, so why would it now? Still, I feel like he is more distant after all of that, even with the kiss thing.”

“You think your reaction to their magic bothers them?”

I could guarantee that was far from the case.

Her eyes darted between mine before her voice turned almost clinical, as if explaining an observation she made. “I know they are attracted to me... well, at least some of them. I don’t know how they feel emotionally, but physically, the connection exists. I can tell they are holding back, and I just don’t understand why. I mean, it can only be the obvious, that they know how I feel is more than physical, and they don’t feel the same, and therefore don’t want to complicate the team dynamic.”

That was what she thought was happening here?

I inhaled sharply, wishing I could tell her just how off base she was, despite not wanting to give them an in or opportunity at all.

“Nightmares work a bit differently than that,” I explained. “It’s not a separation like it is with humans... physical and emotional connections, it’s all the same for us.”

Nightmares didn’t have relationships normally. They didn’t date. They fucked and mated, and their mate was everything to them. It was far simpler than humans, who made an absolute mess out of their mating process.

Maybe that’s why it was a bit more difficult for her to recognize the truth that was right in front of her. That the only thing holding them back was the safety threat they posed—hell, even I posed—as a potential mate.

“So why?” she demanded, clearly wanting an answer.

I examined her gaze and ran a hand over her thigh, loving how my large hand seemed to wrap around it easily. There was something far too appealing about knowing I could exert dominance over my precious human so easily if I wanted to,

but still not giving into the urge. “Have you ever considered what mating with a nightmare would be like, precious?”

Her eyes widened as she barely whispered, “Yes, you could say that.”

I chuckled at her reaction and continued. “It’s not the same as how humans fuck. Everything is... more intense, rough, and dangerous. Especially to you.”

A shudder went through her as her desire saturated the air, making me swallow hard as I tried to not think about what was running through her head.

“So?” Her voice was a whisper.

“I would assume that they are concerned over the same thing most nightmares would be regarding a human lover.”

“Which is?” I could see a slight, knowing light slide into her gaze.

“Breaking them. Killing them.”

Her eyes went wide, and instead of fear, I felt something far more surprising tint the air. *Anger*. I don’t think my words surprised her, but rather confirmed something that made her upset.

She leaned forward, her voice soft. “Are you telling me they are holding back because they are worried about fucking me too hard, Amun?”

I loved this woman. It was official. No rhyme or reason. I was really hoping I could find a way to keep her in my life, because holy fuck, this blunt nature mixed with slight innocence, intelligence, and a natural sexiness was *everything*. I was so fucked.

“Essentially,” I confirmed and added, “It is far more likely than not.”

“But that is *my* decision.” She reared back and looked towards the window, seeming livid. “That is my fucking decision. I know the danger I put myself in, but if I want to do that, then I should be able to. It would be different if they

didn't want me, but not pursuing something under some misguided attempt to keep me unharmed? Fucking bullshit.”

“Not misguided, it very much happens,” I hedged, not knowing why I was trying to excuse their situation. I should have taken the opportunity instead. This was some absolute bullshit.

She examined my expression, and a growl broke from my throat as she practically flung her curvy little frame at me. Her lips pressed firmly to mine, surprising the living hell out of me. Instantly, my magic wrapped around Arabella like tightly wound bandages, my hands gripping her soft waist hard enough that she moaned against my mouth. I tried to slow the kiss down, but the minute her tongue traced my lips, I had her on the floor underneath me.

Fuck.

Her kiss was damn near intoxicating, and I could feel my magic pulling on her life force possessively, wanting every single ounce of it.

I didn't even need more than this, her taste and small moans against my mouth enough to do me in almost completely. Fuck, she was so perfect. When her hand rubbed over my chest, I pulled back, nipping at her bottom lip slightly as I met her gaze.

Shit. This was why.

Arabella's face was pale and eyes black, clearly having been affected by my magic, as she offered me a slightly dazed look. She seemed out of breath, and as my eyes darted down to her pulse, I cursed, noticing that it was extremely irregular.

I pulled myself off of her, kneeling above her while running a hand through my hair in frustration. I felt stronger, and I fucking hated that. I hated that I'd fed off her energy without meaning to and that I wanted to do it again. Especially with her laying underneath me like that.

“Amun,” she whispered, sitting up while placing a hand on my chest. “I feel totally fine.”

I wish I could have believed that.

“I could kill you,” I admitted and looked at her with a grimace. “The others may be worried, but I have seen it. I have caused it. True, I was younger with less control, but Arabella, I am not going to risk your life... as fucking perfect as that was.” The last part was tinged with almost desperation and regret. I stood, not knowing what the hell to do with myself.

“You don’t know it would do that.” She stood, wavering slightly and making me worry even more.

“Your pulse is slowed and you look as white as parchment,” I explained softly as I reached out to steady her. She deflated, sitting on the bed, a bit of desperation and true grieving entering her expression. As I knelt in front of her and cupped her jaw, she met my gaze, tears crowding her lashes.

“So that’s it then? I can never be with—”

“Any of them,” I finished for her, not wanting her to feel like she had to include me. I wanted a place in Arabella’s life, but I think it was becoming very clear that wasn’t a possibility.

Tears dripped down her face as she leaned into my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and held her for long enough that when a knock came to the door, I was jolted from my thoughts.

I wasn’t positive about what I’d expected when she pulled away, but the resolve there had me feeling a bit of surprise and curiosity. There was determination as well, and that gave me far too much hope. I had no idea what I thought could come from this except either heartbreak or killing the first woman I’d ever felt this way towards.

It was possible I had just majorly fucked up, and I had no idea how to fix it.

ARABELLA

I USUALLY CAMPED out in my father's office during missions, but since he seemed deeply invested in whatever he was working on, I'd set up in the conference room. Half because Amun was so large and the three of us wouldn't have fit in that office all together, but also because this room reminded me of my nightmares.

My nightmares. I'd always thought of them as such, but were they?

I honestly think I was a bit more angry than sad. No, I felt pretty dejected as well. Hopeless? I had no idea how to feel. Especially since from what I had gathered from Amun... the most likely scenario wasn't that they didn't want me, it was that they were worried they would hurt me in the process of expressing how much they wanted me. A decision and risk that a twenty-four year old woman was perfectly capable of making for herself, for the record.

Yeah, this was going to require a conversation for sure.

Although, would a conversation actually change anything? I mean, all I could say was *'Hey, I'm not worried about you killing me, so if you wanted to, you know... get down and dirty, I'm game.'* I nearly face-palmed at that thought. What was wrong with me? Seriously, *down and dirty*? Maybe, just maybe, *this* was why I couldn't get laid. Just a fucking thought there.

It was just frustrating, because of course they had an affect on me, but the very center of my chest, my instinct, was telling

me that they wouldn't hurt me. Even Amun. That being with them was the right thing.

I really didn't think this was just my body doing the thinking for my brain, either. Although, I had to admit, there was a lot of pent-up sexual tension there, so I could hardly blame myself.

A shiver ran up my spine as I considered the kiss Amun and I had shared, leaving me light-headed and dizzy. Honestly, it had been absolutely amazing, and the only time I started to feel sick at all was when he'd pulled away. It was as if I was already addicted to his touch. As if he had stopped something that was supposed to be natural. A frustrated sound broke from my throat as my skin pulsed, wanting his touch once again.

"You haven't finished your dinner," Amun observed as he walked in the room. My eyes darted up to him, and I tried to hide my blush behind taking a sip of my tea in my familiar unicorn mug. I felt like I'd been caught thinking about him... because I literally had been.

My eyes ran over his handsome self, who had clearly not only showered but changed while stopping by the dorms. His once muscular, uncovered chest was now clothed in a dark ISS training shirt and athletic pants that made him look a bit more modern. Although I had to admit, I missed his bare chest and my hands running over it...

I tried to refocus, looking at the large serving of pasta that my father had ordered from the kitchen for me. It was barely half eaten.

When the kitchen delivered the food to my room, I had convinced Amun to bring our food back down here, knowing that it wouldn't do any good to spend time alone together in my bedroom. I was feeling a bit rejected by even him at this point, so this was a better option.

Plus, I didn't know what I even wanted to do about the situation... Did I keep my resolve? Did I force a conversation to make it clear that I was very much okay with taking a risk? How did I confirm that Amun was even correct?

Crap. This... this was going to be difficult.

So, as I said, I wasn't going to focus on it too much right now. I had other things to turn my attention to now that we were both down here, waiting the next few minutes for the team to land so that we could start the mission officially.

I considered his words and eating more of my pasta, but the closer my guys got to danger, the less hungry I became. At least I'd changed into comfortable clothes, somewhat a small pleasure, before Amun had gone to the dorms to shower. I drew my legs comfortably up against my chest as he sat down near me, my fingers brushing over my silk pajama pants that were decorated in light pink and black pinstripe that I paired with pink fuzzy slippers and an oversized black sweater. It wasn't professional by any means, but was it comfortable? Yes. Absolutely. Plus, Amun kept running his fingers along the soft cashmere sweater sleeve, like now, as he watched my expression with interest. I think he was interested in the two different textures, and I couldn't lie, I liked his hands on me.

"My appetite is a bit weird right now," I murmured and then met his gaze. "What about you?"

His eyes moved to the untouched package my father had ordered for him. "I haven't eaten human food in a very long time. Usually I can go hundreds of years without even feeding off of—" He paused suddenly, offering me a semi-hesitant look as a knowing laugh broke from my lips.

"The death of others? Feeding off humans?" I mused. "You don't need to hide yourself from me, Amun. I know you aren't human. I can't ever fault you for what's natural to you, just like I'm not offended by Razar's continuing want to terrify me despite not being able to."

My thoughts strayed to the nightmare in question, thinking about how he still tried to keep his terror form hidden from me in the shadows. Did he really ever think I would find him unattractive? I suppose that was just another space between us. My fingers twitched, trying to avoid the urge to hop onto the radio and demand an answer to whether Amun was correct or not on why they were holding back.

Patience, Arabella. Everything required it, and I was so fucking over it.

“They are landing,” my father called out. I picked up my small headset and slid it into my ear, then pulled up the program on my tablet that would connect me to the team. While only one of them would actually communicate back with me for ease of understanding, they would all be able to hear me.

I offered an extra headset to Amun, but he took it and stared at it, seemingly confused before putting it up to his ear like I had. The ‘beep’ to signal a call coming in made me smile as I signed into the call. My father’s voice echoed through the line, Amun seeming to freeze in surprise as we listened to him talk to one of the pilots before transferring us over to the rest of the team. Amun seemed to have a fairly impressive grasp on everything, but I could tell some stuff still surprised him.

“Hey guys, how was the flight?” I asked curiously, my voice light and hopefully not portraying my concern... or sadness... or frustration.

Later. We would handle all of that later.

“Long.” Razar’s low rumble had me smiling slightly. He sounded annoyed, and I knew that it had no doubt been a long four hours. The guys got along well, but they still got into arguments, and—let’s be honest—they all had very strong personalities.

“He’s in a fucking mood,” Zain quipped as his voice popped up on the radio. It surprised me a bit, but I was thrilled to hear from him.

“It has been a long day,” I offered quietly.

“What’s wrong?” Blackwell asked immediately, making me wince, because of course he would hear the change in my tone of voice.

“Nothing—”

“Was it Amun? Did he fucking do anything?” Saint growled, his voice filled with anger but also excitement, no

doubt at the idea of hurting him. Psycho.

Amun shook his head as I smiled. “Nah, just miss you guys.”

“Miss you too, pixie.” Cy’s voice had me blinking away possible emotions as I swallowed, attempting to refocus.

“You guys stay safe,” I demanded quietly before moving on. “Who is staying on the line with me?”

“I am,” Damian voiced. “I seem to be the only one who is capable of more than only grunting out responses right now.”

Good. I was thankful for Damian being the one, frankly. I knew he wouldn’t push anything right now, even if he thought something was off. The nightmare was an overbearing ass most of the time, but he was also pretty good at knowing when the time was to demand an answer, unlike some of my other teammates.

“All of you get focused and keep me updated. I am feeling extra anxious tonight, so the more information the better.”

“You know we will be fine, cherry blossom. We’ve done this a million times,” he responded easily.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled, waving a dismissive hand they couldn’t see.

The following fifteen minutes felt like the longest in my life in some ways, filled only with the occasional commentary from Damian as they made their way towards the base. I knew they were still in their human forms because I could hear them occasionally talking, and I was eager for them to get into range of the base so that I could get a visual on them. It was another reason, for the record, that Damian was a good choice for contact purposes, because even in his terror form, he was able to speak normally.

My eyes flickered up as I found Amun once again rubbing his fingers on my pants, specifically over the knee, frowning at the material. I wanted to ask him why it was so interesting to him but figured that would just get the guys on the line worked up about why he was touching me.

Which would, of course, make me want to give them crap about *why* it bothered them. So probably not the best idea right now.

“It looks deserted,” Damian commented as I watched the tracker on my screen slow, showing that they had neared the outside perimeter.

“I wish,” I muttered. “Trust me, it’s unfortunately not.”

“Always.” His voice was more serious, making me almost blush at how he seemed to take my comment.

On the other end of the line, I heard something snap, and a slight groan echoed as I assumed they broke into the base. I held my breath, waiting for the sirens to go off, and when they didn’t, I exhaled happily. I began to connect—or attempt to connect—with the camera systems the humans had on base, which also allowed for me to watch for any potential threats coming their way.

When I pulled up one of the feeds on the tablet, my smile grew at how serious they all looked, making their way past the building I was looking through. I knew my father had already blocked any of the video feed being transferred back to humans, instead just looping back what they had already seen for the past hour or so. It would take some time for them to catch on, and by then this would all be over.

My father’s voice came on the line. “Remember to get in and out of there tonight. It’s a massive base, and we don’t need anyone trying to follow you back or stop you from leaving.”

Both were concerns for sure. Not that we couldn’t handle a threat, but it would make things more difficult.

I switched cameras as I watched them near the point of entry along the back of the building, praying that I had secured a good enough entry point. Damian’s eyes glinted as he found the camera I was looking through, offering me a sexy smile as they approached the door. Amun’s hand slid over my back as I let out a small sound, trying to keep the anxiety in my chest to a minimum.

They could do this.

They had done this a thousand times.

My father walked into the room, holding his large laptop and setting it on the table, as I waited with bated breath for Damian's confirmation on accessing the building. My smile grew as I heard him say, "We're in."

"Be careful."

"See you soon, flower."

He cut the line as I looked towards my father's laptop, where he had several views of internal cameras pulled up. I watched the screen with interest as my eyes narrowed in on the small entrance point and adjacent hallway. After what felt like minutes but was barely seconds, my chest flared as dark shadows began to dart past the cameras faster than I could track them.

I tilted my head, the room filling with a tense silence as we waited for shit to hit the fan. Then it did.

Out of nowhere, several guards seemingly dropped to the floor for no reason, blood flowing out onto the tile floors from their cut throats and guts. If I hadn't been paying attention, I would have missed the familiar darkness that had moved across the screen briefly before disappearing and leaving them to bleed out. The quality of the cameras was shitty, so while I couldn't tell for sure, I had a feeling it was Razar. Saint tended to like to make them suffer more.

Then the true chaos began to reign as my father switched through the cameras, showing scene after scene of guards on the ground, their screams silent because of our lack of volume. It was clear they were in a lot of pain though. I didn't feel nearly as bad as I should have, probably.

Amun chuckled slightly under his breath as I leaned closer to him, glad that I wasn't the only one who found this somewhat amusing. You know, especially since these people desperately wanted to kill everyone I loved. Yeah, like I said... no sympathy.

I sat up straighter as my earpiece crackled on, eager to hear their voices.

“Damian?” I asked, the camera my father was controlling zooming in on a screen where a familiar muscular figure stood. His massive frame seemed to glint in the black and white feed, and my fingers twitched, wishing I could touch him as I waited eagerly for him to respond. Especially since he was standing right in front of the correct cell, according to our intel.

“You are positive this is the correct cell?” he got out gruffly.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

Damian crouched down, a worried noise coming across the line as he seemed to examine the small entrance to the cell with concern. I was now becoming far more stressed by the moment. I knew he wasn't in danger right now, according to the other cameras, but something was very clearly causing him to get upset.

“Damian, what is going on?” I demanded.

His voice was rough. “It's a little girl.”

What?

“What?” My father's voice echoed my thoughts.

“It's a fucking little girl, she's goddamn unconscious and bleeding.”

Holy shit.

“Get her out of there, now,” I hissed, fury running under my skin as I tried to keep focused. I could be mad when they got the hell out of there. But shit. Is that what fucking humans were coming to? Nightmares were prisoners, even if they were children? That was a low that even I hadn't expected.

I watched as he lifted a tiny frame into his arms, my heart hurting as his voice came out pained. “Heading out. Her pulse is still going, but it's weak. I can tell she has several broken bones... hell, she looks like she has been through the works here, but she is alive. At least right now.”

“I will expedite your removal from there, I'll send in transport—I don't give a fuck if they notice us.” My father

was furious as he strode from the room. Damian muttered something before muting the line, and my gaze snapped to Amun's eyes, which were focused on me.

“Fucking humans,” he grunted.

Fucking humans. Inhaling sharply, I wondered how the hell *we* were the monsters when they were the ones torturing children.

ARABELLA

MY THOUGHTS GREW MORE tumultuous as I walked back and forth along the empty space in front of my bed. The soft carpet under my feet felt comforting as the cool late-night breeze came through my open window over my desk.

I knew they would be back soon and I needed to go downstairs. I just... I couldn't bring myself to do so yet. I moved toward the lamp I had on next to my bed and dimmed it slightly, creating a soft, warm and sleepy atmosphere that had me feeling a bit more relaxed. Unfortunately, 'a bit more' was far from where I usually was. There had just been far too many things that had happened today. Too many confusing factors that had my thoughts reeling.

I needed to go back downstairs. Why was I suddenly a bit nervous to see the others? Maybe not nervous but restless, trying to figure out what I would say to them. With a long exhale, I put my hands behind my head as I wondered how long I could pull off being up here before Amun and my father came to find me. I had said I'd only come up here to grab a heavier sweater, but in truth I had needed a moment to deal with the anger I was feeling. The absolute fury associated with what had occurred tonight.

A little girl. *A child!*

I'd been angry before, but now that our medics onboard the jet had informed us that she was five? Fucking five?! Now there was no stopping the absolute rage I felt. A nightmare

child was still a child, and she had been tortured by those pieces of garbage.

A snarl built in my throat, making me sound a lot more like Razar than I would care to admit, as my tears began to sting. How many others were there just like her? I had known MAM had become more extreme, but torturing children? That was something else.

After another moment, I tried to let go of the anger riding me, falling back on my bed and letting out a tense exhale. My eyes closed as I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to breathe and stretch through the tension I could feel in my frame.

I *knew* I needed to relax. Not only would it stress out my team, but I didn't want our new little guest to sense how worked up I was. Nightmares were amazing at being perceptive, and she was going to be scared enough. The last thing I needed to do was freak her out more. I couldn't soothe someone when I could barely soothe myself.

This was new for me, *being this worked up*.

When the room cooled, my skin prickled and my body flashed with a familiar heat, making me know that Razar had gotten back. Well, all of them had, but he was in my room. My eyes flickered open, and I was unsurprised to find a pair of void-like eyes staring at me from the corner of my room, the entire space seemingly alive with power as a faint red sparkle filled the space.

Normally I would have thrown myself at him in excitement or waited for him to come pick me up, but instead I just continued to look at him, feeling a mix of emotions that I didn't know how to handle.

There was relief and affection that he'd returned safe. Betrayal and frustration at what Amun told me. True anger at humans that had me feeling like I was going to lose it for the first time in my life.

So instead of reacting to any of those, I continued to look at him, feeling an overwhelming sense of thankfulness that

they had made it back. Well, until a smell of copper hit my nose that had me flinging up.

“Are you bleeding?”

Was he injured? Crap. That would make far more sense on why he hadn't attempted to scare me like normal with the flickering lights and creaking window. I knelt on the bed and looked up at him, trying to see him better and frowning at not seeing any direct injuries, but still smelling blood thick in the air. I would have normally assumed it was the blood of those he killed, but Razar had come back after killing on missions before, usually without anything on him.

A low rumble filled the space as I stood up fully, the bed dipping as I maintained my balance. I put my hands on my hips as I offered him a bit of a frustrated expression, half because I didn't know how to react, but also because he could be particularly stubborn when he was in his terror form. I knew why he was avoiding coming down here.

“Please come down here?” I asked softly. “Are you hurt? I can turn off the light if it's that big of a deal, but you know I don't— *Oh shit.*”

I let out a squeak as my legs were pulled out from underneath me, causing me to fall back on the bed, as he highlighted how truly fast and lethal he could be. I suppose I had always known that he was this fast, but somehow it was far more impressive when he was using his lethal abilities on me.

I focused on his dark form over me, his icy tendrils of magic wrapping around my body as he shifted into his human form. The wavy, dark exoskeleton still covered most of him, but his form was all man, and his face was authentically his, the wavy tendrils pulling away from his face revealing a familiar pair of red eyes. My fingers immediately brushed his face as I nearly squirmed against his hard body, feeling flush at his touch. I found myself lost for words.

Then I saw the pain in his eyes.

“Razar.” I gripped his jaw lightly as he nuzzled against my hand. “Are you injured?”

“Yes.” His voice was a low, soft hiss that seemed to vibrate through the space and had me feeling an authentic twinge of exhilaration and... fear? I swallowed back surprise as he let out a low growl, his grip tightening on me. Could he feel that? Feel how concerned I was for him? The fact that it was bordering on fear? I wasn’t scared *of* him, but *for* him, though I wasn’t positive that mattered to his nightmare.

“Where?” I ran my fingers along his chest as he refused to answer, his lips brushing across my neck, my breath shuddering as he squeezed me in a possessive, nearly suffocating manner.

“Damn it, Razar,” I huffed as my eyes grew heavy at how hard he was against me. I tried to not get overwhelmingly turned on by thinking about how large he would be in this half-shifted form. I’d felt him hard against me before, but this... this would be something else, I could just tell. I was extremely interested in seeing that, but *not* right now. I needed to keep focused on the all-important factor that the bastard was injured. I could daydream about him screwing me six ways to Sunday up in the corner of the room when I went to bed tonight. No different than most nights.

“You almost smell afraid.” He frowned, his voice rough as I ran my fingers along his tan face and shaved hair. “Is that because of me?”

“I am extremely worried about why you smell like blood,” I admitted.

“Not because of how I look?” He leaned further against my hand, a near purr breaking from his chest. I let out a small sound, holding back a moan as he rocked against me, showing me just how affected he was by our closeness.

Goddamnit.

“Never,” I barely got out.

I let out a small surprised sound as he rolled us so that I was on top, his form shifting to almost completely human

underneath me, though some of his icy tendrils still lingered against my skin from where they seemed to come off his frame like vines. My desire was anything but dampened; however, I was instantly focused on his injury.

I winced as I ran my fingers over where he was bleeding. I pushed away his vest and found a hole in his shirt, evidence of a bullet that had managed to hit him right on the shoulder. I tore at the shirt, the hole making it easy, to reveal the skin before I looked up at him, his eyes hooded and almost relaxed. Almost, because there was a burning heat that was building and causing his eyes to fill with an intensity that he usually restrained.

“Is the bullet—”

“I pulled it out.” He shrugged, pain flashing in his eyes. “It will heal itself.”

“Fuck,” I mumbled and looked around for something to wrap it in. When I went to stand, Razar growled and locked me further against him. My entire body broke into shivers as I tried to not let his effect on me be fully known. He could no doubt tell how turned on I was; no need to add to my embarrassment by moaning or rubbing against him. *I had to have some level of control, right?* I mean, the man was bleeding. What was wrong with me?

“We need to wrap it.”

“I need you here,” he growled.

“I’m here,” I promised. “How the hell did this happen?”

“I wasn’t in the right headspace.” He shrugged. “You sounded upset, so I was worried.”

“I’m fine,” I assured, wondering if I would ever even have the balls to bring up what I’d been upset about in the first place. It was a bit more difficult to consider it important with him bleeding underneath me.

“No, you aren’t. What’s going on?” he demanded as I ran my fingers over his injury in distraction. I leaned forward and rested my head against his neck, clinging onto him possessively, thrilled just to have him back and safe.

“Arabella.” His tone was firm and demanding.

“Nothing,” I murmured. “We should go see our new nightmare. Is she in the emergency center?”

“Unconscious and in critical care, but she’s going to live,” he got out gruffly before rolling us so that I was forced to look up at him, my legs wrapped around his waist. I could feel his blood dripping down on my sweater from the open wound, but that barely fazed me as the man examined my expression. I honestly sometimes felt he could see right into the very center of me.

“Did Amun do something?” he demanded and then looked around my room. “And why the fuck does it smell like him in here?”

Damn, they had good noses.

“He ran up here with me momentarily, but it has nothing to do with him,” I whispered, not bothering to bullshit about ‘nothing being wrong.’ He knew me far too well, and if he really wanted to push it, then I would tell him.

His eyes darkened. “Is this about the humans?”

For the record, I knew he would bring up Amun being in here later, but he seemed determined to get me to reveal my cards.

“I am angry about that.”

“Arabella, damn it, what is going on?” he growled, his eyes going dark as I felt his terror form shift against his skin. My hands gripped his jaw, and I figured that it was better just to test my theory.

Leaning up, I cautiously pressed my lips against Razar’s in a soft, almost testing touch. My stomach tightened and heat ran over my skin as I tried to deepen it, my tongue darting out to trace his lips. *That’s about what did it.*

I honestly wasn’t positive what reaction I had expected from him, but this? *Shit.* This was far more extreme than I could have ever hoped for.

I moaned against Razar's mouth as his hands suddenly gripped my hair, seeming to recover from his momentary shock as his power wrapped around me, icy tendrils pulling me further against him. His breath was minty and cool against mine as a low growl broke from his throat, his kiss demanding and hard. I squirmed against him as my heart began galloping a million miles an hour, so fast I was worried it would give out.

I gasped as I was suddenly pressed on a different surface, my frame wedged against Razar's as I gave into him completely, loving the control he seemed to like having over my body. The grip he had on me was bruising, and I found myself craving that. I wanted his mark on me, just like I wanted Cy's teeth on me. I rolled my hips against his hard length as a low snarl left his throat and vibrated against my entire body.

My eyes fluttered shut as he pulled away and began to kiss down my throat, my body trembling with need, loving the way his magic seemed to be touching me everywhere all at once. I could feel his hands on my waist, but his magic had my thighs in a tight, almost harness hold, my arms being drawn above my head as his black, vine-like energy caught me up like in a spider's web.

When he pulled back and looked over me, his breathing was harsh, and I realized I was somewhat tied up for him. We were also a story off the floor, but I wasn't going to overthink that one.

"Fuck," he growled. "You look so beautiful. I wish I could keep you up here, like this, forever."

He could.

"Razar." A small whine broke from my throat as his gaze flashed from my thighs spread on either side of his large body up to my neck, where my pulse beat fast and out of control.

"I can smell how wet you are." He groaned as if in pain, his head pressing against my collarbone as he inhaled against my neck. "I can't though. I can't, Arabella, because I know if I get more than a taste of you, it won't be enough."

“You can have more than that,” I promised, feeling a surge of hopefulness.

My eyes fluttered shut again as his fingers brushed beneath my sweater, exposing my lace bra to the cool air, a snap telling me that my bra was torn down the middle. My center tightened as I felt cool, hard tendrils wrap up and around my ribs before brushing over my sensitive, hard nipples, causing me to let out a moan of his name.

When his hot mouth closed over one of them, my body jerked with pleasure, and I nearly came right there and then. A whine of frustration, embarrassingly coming from me, filled the space as his fingers slid down my waist and into the silk band of my pants, his touch brushing over my heated, covered center. He snarled, feeling how wet I was as my legs trembled slightly, needing a more firm touch. Needing him to be rough with me.

I felt a surge of victory as he began to tease my other nipple with his mouth, leaving the painfully tortured peak of the other to the cool air as he pushed aside the lace panties I was wearing.

“Shit,” I whimpered as his hot, rough fingers slid against my wet heat, a dangerous sound from his throat echoing through the room.

“I can’t take this any further, but I won’t leave you in pain,” he growled against my neck, my hormonal haze making me nod, because frankly, I was so on edge that all it would take was a kiss on my neck to make me come. I felt an almost untamable lust surge through me, and when he circled my clit, dragging my slick across it, I felt my climax build to almost a tipping point.

Then the sexy bastard slid a finger inside of me while biting down on my neck, light enough that it wouldn’t mark but hard enough that it caused an electric surge to jump through me.

I came almost instantly on a moan of his name, molten heat and an explosion at my center causing everything to melt around me in relief. *Thank god.*

My body slumped forward as I let out a small pathetic sound, his touch softer but still possessive as I felt the air shift, the hard wall being replaced by my familiar bed. When I felt him start to pull away, I gripped him closer, a sated smile invading my face at the chuckle that broke from his lips. It wasn't his full laugh, but it made me feel a tiny bit better.

I knew he was in complete human form now, his vine-like tendrils receding completely. A stinging on my body told me there would be bruises on my wrists and thighs, and I didn't mind one damn bit.

But I should have realized that Razar would.

A pained noise broke from his throat, and my eyes snapped open to find him examining my wrists, a tortured look covering his face before he could shutter it. I went to go tell him that I felt amazing and that we could do that any time... you know, since I had finally gotten to feel Razar against me like I'd always wanted to.

But before I could, he was up and pacing by the side of the bed. I tried to adjust myself, sitting up and feeling suddenly embarrassed, my fingers sliding against the light bruising on my wrists. I mean, sure, there was a mark... but I liked that. A lot. Nightmares loved roughly, clearly, and I was finding that I found that far more attractive than I could have ever expected.

"I like them," I blurted out. "I don't mind the bruises, at all."

I mean, that couldn't be all that odd right? There were humans that liked rough sex, so why did I feel almost embarrassed by what I was admitting? Or maybe not embarrassed, but just cautious, because I had a feeling Razar wouldn't see it the same way.

He froze and shook his head, continuing to pace as I jumped from bed, steadying myself and approaching him. He winced, his finger coming up to brush my lip as he looked down at me.

"I'm supposed to protect you, not hurt you," he growled.

“It doesn’t hurt, I feel amazing,” I promised, holding my breath as he examined my expression. Disappointment surged through me as he stepped back and grabbed my wrist, kissing it briefly before seeming to emotionally distance himself even more.

“I need to get out of here,” he responded in a choked tone. “I don’t trust what I’m going to do.”

“Razar, don’t,” I whispered, gripping his forearm. “If your fear of what you could do to me is what’s been holding you back, holding whatever this is back, then that is my decision also. I like how rough you are—”

He turned towards me, his eyes flaring. “Rough? That wasn’t fucking rough, Arabella. My version of rough would fucking kill you.”

I winced at his tone as regret flashed on his face. Tears welled my eyes as embarrassment and confusion filled the widening emotional abyss between us.

“So that’s it? It doesn’t matter what I want, it doesn’t matter that we could at least try—”

“I am not risking your safety.” His tone was firm.

“Don’t you want me?”

My voice was weak, and I knew I was fucking begging him to give me something. I mean, this nightmare was not only my best friend, but the first person I had ever admitted to loving. I just needed him to tell me something, anything to give me hope that we could figure this out.

Razar turned away before I could read his reaction to my words, his jaw hard as he shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what I fucking want, I would rather never touch you again if it meant you not having bruises all over your body.”

Okay then. Point made.

“Fine,” I whispered, feeling a surge of anger. “Fucking fine.”

I moved past him as I walked towards my closet, grabbing some clothes before going into the bathroom. I didn’t lock it,

but when I heard the main door to my bedroom close, a small, sad sound broke from my throat, realizing that he meant it. Amun had been right after all... which meant that I couldn't ignore the truth.

My nightmares would never fully be mine.

RAZAR

I WASN'T positive how I had managed it, but I was experiencing both self-hatred and lust simultaneously, both completely revolving around the one constant in my life—*Arabella*.

The only person who mattered to me. The only woman I would ever love. Hell, the only individual I would ever love, if you could call the emotions I felt love. I wasn't entirely possible how else to describe it that didn't sound intensely obsessive. Although that may have been closer to the truth.

Which was why I felt an immense amount of disgust with myself for the bruises that I could see on her exposed wrists, her choice to wear a short-sleeve shirt after changing very intentional. She was forcing me to see it and deal with the reality of what had occurred.

As if I could ever forget.

If there was one thing I knew about Arabella, it was how stubborn she could be when she felt like she was being wronged in some fashion. Or when she felt like someone was taking a decision away from her. I had absolutely never intended her to find out the reason I was keeping a physical distance, because I knew that this would be the reaction. She would want to prove me wrong, and believe me, my entire being was all too thrilled at the notion of giving her a chance.

Which was how I had ended up in the position we'd been in earlier, with her a story above the ground, pinned between myself and a wall as I practically fucking mauled her. All

because she had offered me her mouth in a hesitant, almost curious kiss.

I was a bastard. I hadn't been able to control myself. I'd given in to my urge and need for her and ended up leaving bruises on her stunning, soft skin, all because I had let out a fraction of my strength instead of exercising my normal control. I had made her come on my fingers, absorbing every moan of my name like a fucking addict, before licking her wet heat off my fingers.

I had done all of this and then hurt her goddamn feelings by practically forcing myself from her room when I should have instead been holding her close. Telling her how lucky I was and how beautiful she was.

I'd run. I had fucking run.

Now I was paying the price for being a coward, standing across from her in the emergency care center as she spoke to the medical team quietly, looking over the small girl we'd rescued. The entire situation made me furious, but instead of focusing on the wrongs that had been inflicted on one of our kind or comforting Arabella, who was so clearly upset... I was standing feet away from her, staring at her with what I'm positive was a pathetic expression. My eyes flickered over the marks on her wrists again before I forced myself to look away.

I hated myself for loving that I'd marked her. I hated myself for not being able to love her how someone like Arabella deserved to be loved. A woman like her didn't deserve bruises on her skin or to be roughly fucked like how I wanted to.

She did say she liked it. I frowned, wondering if maybe I was causing more damage by not trusting her words. Was it so impossible to believe that would be the case? I mean, it wasn't that unusual for humans to like rough sex... maybe she really meant that. Maybe she liked the marks I left on her.

Or she was just trying to make you feel better.

I closed my eyes, having no idea on how to handle the thoughts running through my head, because up until this point,

things had been rather simple. I had obsessed over her, and she had stayed safe and happy, never commenting on the obvious connection between us. Something had changed, though, because I could see the energy running under her skin, a determined and stubborn fire lit in her eyes, and I had a feeling my time for avoiding this conversation was quickly coming to an end.

So what had inspired it?

Also, if I was so tortured by the concept... why couldn't I stop imagining what she would look like wrapped up completely in my magic, my hand wrapped around her throat as I fucked her pinned up against that same wall? I was so screwed. I loved the imagery of her out of reach from anyone else and completely in my grasp so that I could possessively claim her again and again.

"You have her scent all over you," Cy commented quietly. He leaned against the wall next to me, looking both frustrated and smug, a combination I hadn't been positive was possible.

"I was just in her room," I leveled, knowing he wasn't talking about that.

"No, you smell like her cum," he mused unapologetically as my jaw clenched, not liking the idea of her being talked about like that.

Then again, whenever Arabella was even slightly turned on, it was the purest form of torture. It was like having the most delicious fucking food right in reach and never being able to sample it. It didn't make you desire it any less—in fact, you found yourself wanting it more. Obsessing over it...

"Those bruises from you?" His words brought me from my thoughts.

"Unfortunately," I grit out. "We didn't—"

"Oh, I'm aware," Cy leveled. "She's pissed right now. If Arabella was well-fucked, she would be sleeping."

I smirked at that, because he was right. His smile grew antagonistically, making me wonder where his thoughts were tonight, because usually he wasn't one to fuck around.

“I mean, there is a possibility you are just *that* bad—”

“Fuck you,” I growled out, glad to see him at least making jokes, considering earlier. How many kills had it taken to get there? A fair amount.

I let out an exhale. “Fuck, I don’t know what to do. She knows. She knows why I’m holding back.” I didn’t have to emphasize that she was smart enough to put together that my way of thinking wasn’t singular amongst our team.

How had we lived in this perfectly crafted shell for so long? It seemed almost impossible that only now was it all coming crashing down.

Cy inhaled sharply. “There is nothing to do. There isn’t a way to fix this.”

I didn’t believe that was true. I had no doubt the universe despised me, but to curse me to love a woman that I could never fully have? Without exception? No, that would just be so goddamn wrong.

I knew this bond between us wasn’t imagined, and each year I grew more possessive over the ownership I felt towards it. I wanted her completely at my mercy, in my bed, while feeling my magic running across her soft skin as I placed her exactly how I wanted. I needed her complete surrender. I needed everything from her, including any possible fear she had. I had literally fucking got off on the fact that she had felt a barely-there twinge of what nearly tasted like fear about my shoulder injury. I didn’t think it was possible to inspire true terror in her, but everything in my being craved it.

Who was fucked up enough that they craved their potential mate’s fear?

I frowned at the other oddity that had occurred, my fingers running up my shoulder to where my injury had healed almost immediately after my time with Arabella. It would have healed fast regardless, but it was as if it had completely disappeared. I could only assume it was because my magic had fed off the slight concern she had felt for us, thinking it was fear? That was the only thing that made sense.

“What’s going on with her?” Zain appeared next to me, any semblance of his normal cockiness gone as he looked at her with confusion and concern.

It didn’t surprise me that everyone could tell something was up, considering she was not only extremely tense but also because her scent was all over me. I was the only one who had yet to shower and change, because I didn’t want to lose out on being able to feel her all around me. Hell, I could even still smell her wet heat on my fingers, and my mouth practically watered, wishing that I could taste her again. Wishing that I could lay her out on one of these medical beds and fuck her hard and raw as she came around me...

My head pulsed with the exhaustion of trying to hold onto my control. I felt like the small break in my self-control was growing larger by the moment, the flood waters seeping through and foreshadowing the disaster of me giving into the intense need I had for Arabella.

“She’s pissed because Razar made it all too clear on why he had been holding back on expressing his...”—Saint tilted his head, looking bored— “affections.”

Is that what we were calling them now? I frowned at the bastard, his frame settled into the chair next to me and Cy, watching Arabella with interest.

I had no idea what his issue was tonight, but something about what happened at the MAM base really upset him. I wanted to claim it was the fact that we’d discovered they were torturing children, but I wasn’t positive it was that.

Honestly, I didn’t even bother asking with Saint—if he wanted his opinion known, he wouldn’t hesitate to share it. Just how he hadn’t hesitated to gift her a severed hand from one of the guards tonight. I narrowed my eyes at the display sitting on a table nearby, a dark rose held between the obviously very dead man’s fingers. How he had managed to do that and be rewarded with a smile and kiss on the cheek, while I was being completely ignored... actually made a lot of sense, considering the circumstances. I’d been such a fucking dick. I was regretting ever leaving her room.

“Which means she will probably put together our reasoning,” Zain murmured thoughtfully. It wasn’t like we had been exactly subtle about our attraction to her, so I had absolutely no doubt that she was going to figure that out if she hadn’t already.

“All of it is absolute bullshit, I’ve told you that from the start.”

“She can die. We could kill her easily,” I shot back at Saint.

“No you fucking can’t,” Saint growled, sitting forward and pinning the three of us with a look. “You cannot kill her. She will not die. Trust me.”

I shook my head at his bullshit. “Even if you could bring her back—”

“It’s not even about that.” He stood up and shook his head. “But what do *I* know about death? I mean, fuck, I clearly have no conception on how any of that works after a few thousand fucking millenniums of handling souls, so just fucking ignore me—”

“Already am.” Zain flashed a smile.

“Fuck you,” Saint offered, seeming amused at his sarcasm while walking towards where Blackwell and Damian stood, clearly over listening to our shit. I didn’t blame him, but I also didn’t agree with him. Even if he could bring her back, I could never forgive myself for hurting her like that. Maybe the solution was to tell her how I felt, fully, and just explain that nothing could happen physically.

Right, because if by some divine intervention she felt the same and said so, I wouldn’t want to fucking attack her and put my marks all over her, stamping ownership. The few times that she had told me she loved me, even in a way that I knew she meant fairly innocently, I had all but wanted to pin her against the closest surface and fuck her in just those sexy heels she wore constantly. I had absolutely no idea why I found them so attractive, just that the image of her in only them and bent over was constantly on display in my head, causing my

control to consistently weaken. Maybe it was because they were just so completely *her*, and I loved everything about Arabella, without a doubt.

Amun looked over, offering me an arched brow as a rumble broke through my throat.

I should have killed him that first day. Why the hell did he think it was okay to be in her bedroom while we were gone? He was already a threat in terms of being a dangerous nightmare, but then to also include his obvious desire for Arabella?

I had been so fucking annoyed that we'd had to leave tonight. He could have done anything while we were gone. I knew Arabella could hold her own in most situations, but when it came to physical dominance, the woman wasn't exactly prepared to go up against a nightmare.

The concept of any nightmare attacking her had me moving from the wall and crossing the space to go stand behind her. I didn't touch her at first, but I did exhale in relief as she leaned back into me, my hand brushing over her waist. At least she would still let me touch her. That was something.

"Five. She is fucking five. This is insane," Arabella seethed, my gaze following hers down to the small figure tucked into the white and blue medical bed. She really was very young, even younger looking than five. Her dark hair was matted with blood and dirt, and angry scars and cuts covered her body. The healers had been able to correct the broken bones, but it hadn't been without having to rebreak them since they had begun to heal in the wrong positions. A massive scar that probably wasn't ever going to disappear crossed along her neck and up to her jaw, thin and almost whip-like in nature, but angry enough that it was possible it had been done with a knife. It was clear she had been there for some time, maybe even longer than our intel suggested.

Apparently she had been in MAM captivity for nearly six months but had only been transferred to this base in the past six weeks. I wasn't positive I believed that, because many of the scars on her skin seemed older than that. Additionally, the

files that we had been able to find on her showed extensive experimentation that the humans conducted without any end result. None of them knew what type of terror she was, and while I could feel powerful magic coming off her, I wasn't able to recognize it either. It was one of the many reasons that she was currently wearing a small bracelet that would contain her magic if she woke up and freaked out defensively, attempting to destroy those around her. Something none of us would blame her for, considering her experience with others.

It was also why Arabella needed to be available, because despite hating that she took a risk every time she interacted with a nightmare, no one could deny how much influence she had.

"We are going to keep her under for a bit until she heals so she doesn't have to experience the pain," the healer explained, not able to offer anything more than that. I could tell James was upset, something about the entire situation clearly not sitting well with him, and I wasn't positive that it was just finding a child nightmare being tortured. Then again, the man was usually ten steps ahead of everyone, so he could already be far past this moment.

"Okay." Arabella nodded and smoothed a hand over the girl's hair. I found myself wishing her hand was on me, but I knew that was selfish. I didn't deserve her soothing touch right now. I'd had it many times in the past, and today I may have fucked up our relationship more than I knew even how to fix.

There had been only one other time that I remembered her being this directly upset with me.

"RAZAR." Arabella's voice was soft and filled with frustration.

I watched her, sitting with my elbows on my knees, as she paced her bedroom, ignoring the way I sat on her bed, wanting more than anything for her to join me.

I knew she wouldn't, though. She was not only upset, but not understanding my need to keep her safe.

I didn't know how to make myself any more clear to her. I understood why she was upset, but she didn't... she didn't get it. She didn't understand why this was such a fucking problem for me, and there was no way I could describe it without sounding insane.

"I can't do it, Arabella. Don't make me."

She looked at me with frustration. "So you want me to what? Just not help out?"

Didn't she understand how much danger it put her in? How easily she could be hurt? I mean, fuck, she had only been on this planet for seventeen years, and she wanted to risk it to help some nightmares that I could give a fuck about in comparison to her.

"Of course not! Especially if they pose a threat to you," I rumbled, feeling like I didn't know how to handle this. I was stumbling blind when it came to her.

"I am not just going to sit around and do nothing." She walked towards me, her eyes filling with understanding at my words. "I am sure there are ways we can convince my dad to make it safer, but I owe him and this place everything. I would have never even met you if it wasn't for being left here."

A sentiment we both shared.

My arms wrapped around her waist as I buried my head against her neck, loving how delicate and petite she felt against me. Unfortunately, my thoughts on what I wanted to do to her were far from innocent, as usual, and the more she touched me, the worse the thoughts became.

I wanted to give her everything. I wanted to protect her from everything. But I didn't know how to do so without fucking this up somehow.

I let out a low rumble, realizing this wasn't a fight I was going to win. I would just have to find a way to protect her better. I would have to be there with her every single day. She already trusted me; I would just have to do everything in my power to maintain that trust.

“Okay, but we talk to your dad about it,” I offered gruffly after a moment.

She let out a small squeal of excitement, pulling back before launching herself at me. I groaned as she rocked against me, her veil of pink hair covering us as she kissed my face and caused a growl to break out. She was gone though, up and walking towards her closet to grab a jacket.

I knew she was set on helping her father, and when she mentioned this plan a few weeks ago, I should have seen the writing on the wall.

Arabella had a talent at soothing those around her. It would be wrong for me to discourage her from doing something she enjoyed. I would just have to do whatever I could to make sure that she could do that safely and in peace.

I watched her with a bit of an obsessive fascination as she flitted around her room.

I don't know why I ever bothered trying to deny her anything.

IT DIDN'T HELP that I knew Arabella loved me back. I questioned a lot about my life. Questioned how that was even possible in the first place when the people who brought me into this world abandoned me so carelessly. But despite my questioning, she made it very clear that was the case. Hell, she even had said it before, and I fucking ate that shit up, terrified to actually say it back because I didn't just love Arabella. It was so much more than that, and I knew she would be able to hear it in my voice if I said so.

Part of the reason my control had been so lacking tonight was because of how easily she had accepted my terror form. Although that seemed like a shit excuse, but it was true. She had surprised me. Without a second thought, she'd run her fingers along my skin affectionately, despite being quite literally most people's worst fucking nightmare.

I had practically purred as she smoothed her soft fingers over my skin, and it had soothed a part of me that had been

authentically worried about her seeing me like that. Worried that she would view me differently. I knew she had seen glimpses and felt me every night, but it was different in the light. But she hadn't been afraid, and that had inspired a hunger inside of me, wanting her to understand just how much that meant.

"I need to get some air." Arabella let out an exhale and broke away from me, my urge to follow making me turn towards where she was taking her exit.

"We need to debrief about tonight." Her father, and someone I considered the closest thing I'd had to a parent, reminded her quietly.

I knew he didn't know what was going on with Arabella and me exactly, but I was positive he could tell she was upset. The woman was normally calm and collected, so when she did feel something, she didn't hesitate to express it.

Unfortunately, I also knew that he relied on me to help in debriefing and anything else with the team since he was horrible with communication, so I would have to wait to chase after Arabella.

Hopefully, by the time I found her, she wouldn't hate me even more.

"I'll go," Blackwell offered, turning to follow her before anyone could disagree. I let out a small grunt and refocused back on the rest of the team that looked somewhat uncomfortable with Arabella's obvious tense nature. Her father was now talking quietly to the medical team, so when Damian asked his question, James didn't hear it, thankfully.

I didn't mind explaining to her father what was going on here, but we probably needed to talk to Arabella to figure that out in the first place.

"How did she come to that conclusion?" Damian asked, his voice exhausted as he rubbed his neck, where he had a grazing wound that he had managed to hide so far. I wondered briefly who had mentioned the situation to him, but knowing

him, he had heard us clearly from across the room. Nosy fucker.

“That would be my fault,” Amun offered and winced. “I thought it was pretty obvious, but clearly I was wrong.”

Motherfucker.

Saint chuckled as I narrowed my eyes at the bastard. I think the only thing worse than Saint wanting to kill Amun was them getting along.

I let out a tired sigh and deflated slightly, trying to figure out a fucking way around this. Because everything told me that I was supposed to be with Arabella. I refused to accept that there were no goddamn options.

ARABELLA

IN TRUTH, what I needed was a drink, not some fresh air.

Looking up at a clock I passed, I realized that it was almost two in the morning, and I briefly wondered if there would be anyone at the institute's bar this time of night. Probably... but it would be worth it. The institute featured quite a few recreational facilities, and while it didn't just serve 'normal' drinks, nightmares usually preferring far stronger versions of alcohol you would find in the human world, I knew they would have at least some wine.

I nodded resolutely. A glass of wine sounded absolutely amazing right now. Then I could try to get some sleep.

Making a quick escape down the hall, crossing my arms under my chest, I found myself wishing I had changed into something a bit warmer than a short-sleeve shirt and yoga pants. Honestly, it had been a bit of a petty move on my part, but after everything that had happened with Razar, I just wanted to make it clear that I had absolutely no problem with the marks his magic had left on my wrists while pinning me to the wall and giving me one of the best orgasms I'd ever had.

You didn't see me trying to cover up Cy's mark on my neck!

I frowned, wondering if he had seen it yet. Mind you, we hadn't gotten to spend a lot of time together yet, but something told me he would find it... interesting.

Or he would have a reaction like Razar did. I wasn't positive my little heart could handle that right now.

My throat tightened as I refused to get caught up on what had happened. *I will handle it tomorrow.* It had been a long day, far more complicated than I could have ever expected, and my emotions were more of a mess than they'd ever been before. I would have a more level head tomorrow. Or at least, that was what I kept telling myself. It was a comforting notion.

“Arabella.” Blackwell’s voice echoed through the long corridor behind me, his familiar dark magic coasting against my skin as the feeling of oil seemed to swarm around me. I honestly considered ignoring him, but I instead came to a stop, turning to face him before putting my hands on my hips and offering him what I hoped was a blank expression.

“Yeah?” I asked, feeling like I was on the edge of losing it. If he tried to stop me, I honestly wasn’t positive how I would react. I usually liked him manhandling me a bit and being overbearing, despite my protests, but not tonight. Tonight I couldn’t do it.

“Where are you going?” His voice was firm, clearly breaking through my bullshit excuse of ‘getting air’ that he’d known was a lie. It didn’t surprise me. The man was far too perceptive, and he wasn’t one to let shit go.

“I’m going to get a drink,” I admitted, putting my hands out and offering him a tired sigh.

“A drink?” He tilted his head curiously, a confused but amused expression covering his face, as if surprised by my words. I offered a sharp nod before he continued to walk toward me, motioning me forward. I stepped into him, melting against his hard, firm chest. After a moment, he began to lead me down the hall as he walked next to me, wrapping his arm around me and letting me inhale his amazing burnt wood and ash scent.

As if knowing how comforting it was, he momentarily stopped, shrugging off his suit coat before slipping it onto my frame. Honestly, I would normally make fun of him for wearing a fresh suit after a mission, because we had comfortable clothes in this world for a reason... but I found the expensive material actually really soothing against my

skin. I made a noise of contentment that had Blackwell flashing me a small smile that I absolutely loved.

It surprised me sometimes how sweet he could be.

I didn't spend a lot of time alone with Blackwell—mostly because of him, for the record—and I didn't push it because I didn't want to make him uncomfortable. If he had control issues around me, I would wait for him to come to me. Or, at least, that *had* been my plan. Now, things felt different, and he had sought me out.

It didn't change that he was staying away from me clearly for the exact same reason as Razor, no doubt, but at least he had been clear about wanting me. With Razar it had always been a blurred line.

That glass of wine was sounding *very* appealing right now.

He wrapped an arm around my waist as we pushed open a large, dark door, leading us into a warm, fairly crowded space that quieted the moment we entered. I ignored it, offering a small smile as Blackwell let out a low growl, making the nightmares look away as we made our way through the crowded space. I knew people were terrified of Blackwell, but I liked to think that I balanced that out. I also didn't expect anyone to risk talking to us though, since my legend terror wasn't one to shy away from violence.

Blackwell led me towards a round booth, and I slid in as he walked towards the bar, not asking what I wanted. Then again, he seemed to always know what I wanted without asking. I watched as the bartender offered him a nod and he strode back towards me, sliding into the booth and putting an arm behind me on the dark leather couch, encouraging me to turn into him. I let out a small sigh and buried my head against his shoulder.

He didn't bother filling the silence, instead just running his fingers through my hair and resting his lips against the top of my head.

Why couldn't it always be this easy? It should be! So why were we over-complicating everything? I closed my eyes, feeling my headache mount.

“Blackwell?” I asked softly, my head rolling to look up at him.

He offered me a somewhat heated yet affectionate look. “Yes, love?”

“Why did you decide to not stay with your father? I mean, Damian and you both have entire kingdoms you could rule in Under, so why here? Especially when you are always putting yourself in danger?”

I figured tonight was the night for questions, if any, especially since we were alone.

Under was a realm where a lot of nightmares actually originated from, but unfortunately, they couldn't stay there for long without risking growing weak from a lack of exposure to fear or terror. Unless, of course, they were extremely powerful.

It also happened to be the place where humans gathered and formed myths of Hell and the underworld. Although, they had been rather unhappy to find out the two were directly next to one another in the damn realm. Not only that, but there were hundreds of small kingdoms, and hundreds of thousands of nightmares. It was a safe place for them, but as I said, it lacked proper... nutrition.

Unlike humans assumed, their souls didn't go there to be tortured following death. In fact, humans couldn't survive down there at all. It was one of the pieces of information that had disappointed me the most, because I very much was interested in visiting.

Blackwell tilted his head in thought as his fingers brushed along my jaw, examining my expression as his voice turned soft. “Damian doesn't have a good relationship with his father. He wouldn't go back even if he didn't have a reason to stay here.”

“Reason to stay?” I lifted my brows, wanting to know more.

His eyes darkened slightly as he nodded. “Yes, he has his reasons.”

And I very much wanted to know them.

“What about you?” I asked, wanting Damian to be the one to tell me about his father. I had a feeling Blackwell understood that.

I ignored the bartender as he sat down a large glass of red wine and a dark glass for Blackwell, the surface of it lit up with flames. I grabbed my glass of wine, the scent of berries surrounding me as I kept my gaze on him.

“Damian and I knew one another growing up. We even went to the same academy in Under,” he admitted. “When he said he wanted to leave, I figured it was time to make my exit as well. That was when we came here.”

“Your father didn’t want you to stay?” I asked, frowning. I knew that his father was Hades, Lord of the Underworld or whatever he called himself, but outside of Blackwell being the legend terror’s son, I didn’t know much else.

The sad flash in his eyes before his gaze turned indifferent had me suddenly wishing I hadn’t asked, but I also desperately wanted to know more about him. Maybe I should have asked this before now—maybe it was this simple with Blackwell—but I had been hesitant to pry. I could feel how tense and uncomfortable both he and Damian got when their heritage was brought up, making me really wonder how bad it was.

“My father has many children; one of his bastards is the least of his concerns. I am pretty sure my stepmother was perfectly fine with me fucking off,” he mused, taking a sip of his lit drink as I took a sip of my wine, absorbing what exactly he was saying. That was when the anger hit me, suddenly hating his stepmother.

“Is she a bitch?” I asked bluntly, wanting to know if she was the problem or if his father was. It was most likely both of them, if we were being honest.

Blackwell barked out a laugh. “Yes. She and my father both are individuals I would rather avoid. As for how we ended up here, I felt a pull and decided to follow it. We hadn’t exactly arrived Above with a plan. I was the one who suggested we come here.”

Interesting.

“Well fuck them, I’m glad you are here.” My body flushed as I took another large sip of wine, everything warming with the alcohol. Was it dangerous to drink with Blackwell? Yeah, probably. Would I still do it? Absolutely. I usually held my liquor fairly well, so I didn’t think anything bad would actually happen.

Now, fun stuff? Fun stuff may happen...

Blackwell examined my expression as I took another long sip and put down my drink with a determined *thunk*. “Let’s get drunk.”

“I haven’t been drunk in a very long time,” he chuckled.

“I need to forget today. Come on.” I nudged his side. “Get drunk with me.”

I, Arabella, was clearly a bad influence on the heir to the underworld throne or whatever.

“We could talk about—”

I shook my head at his words, and he stopped talking.

“Tomorrow,” I promised and downed the rest of my glass. You know, it took an expensive red wine to be able to drink it down so easily... that was this wine. I needed a bottle of it, probably. Especially so I didn’t have to keep getting up.

Blackwell stood up, and I arched a brow. “Where are you going?”

“If we are going to get drunk, we need something stronger.” My smile grew at his words. “I’ll order some food as well.”

This was exactly what I needed.



“I THINK I’M DRUNK,” I whispered, giggling as I stumbled against Blackwell, his smile infectious and far more prominent than usual.

For the record, *I* was not just drunk, *we* were drunk. After only two hours, we were stumbling back towards the dorm, ignoring that a very faint light was beginning to light up the sky in a soft hue of lavender. I let out a squeak as Blackwell suddenly lifted me up, wrapping my legs around him and clinging to his massive frame.

“Wow, so this is what it’s like to be this tall,” I quipped, looking around. “You must see a lot of interesting shit.”

“Mostly looking at you,” he admitted on a rumble that had me flushing as I examined his eyes that were swirling with a pretty gold.

“Why?” I tightened my arms around him, curious about his answer.

“How can I not, love?” He slid his hands from my thighs to my ass, making me squirm against him, my breath catching.

Before I could answer him, he let out a small growl as some nightmare ran past us on a morning jog. My smile grew. “So growly.”

“They were looking at your ass,” he snarled and then leaned forward, burying his nose against my neck. “Fuck, I may even have a hangover tomorrow. I clearly haven’t drunk enough recently.”

“Do I have a nice one?” I smirked, referring to my ass.

“You don’t want me to answer that.” He brushed his nose against mine as a ding sounded, making me realize through my somewhat blurry, tipsy vision that we were stepping into the elevator.

“I do— Wait, where are we going?” I frowned.

“The dorms?” he offered, his eyes examining my face. “You did say you would sleep in our bed if we let Amun have that room.”

Had I said that? A goofy smile brushed my face, loving the excitement in his gaze.

“My room.” I nodded towards the elevator buttons as he typed in the code to get to the private floor. “We can’t go back

to the dorms, they will get all pissy at us for being drunk.”

“That is entirely possible,” he murmured and then flashed a smile. “Your room it is, love.”

“Love,” I said in a sing-songy voice. “I *love* when you say that.”

The elevator began to go up as he sat me on the railing that lined the back. His dark power wrapped around me in a black, oily texture, like silk against my skin. The entire experience was a bit trippy, considering I was drunk.

“And I *love* you,” he mumbled, his lips skimming my forehead.

My breath caught at his words. *Had I heard that right? Did he mean that?* I pulled back slightly as he continued to run his nose against my skin as if scenting me.

Did he realize he had said that out loud? I didn’t know what to say. I had said ‘love you’ to Zain and Razar before... but Blackwell? I gripped his shoulders, wanting to know if he had, in fact, said those words.

“Blackwell?” I murmured.

“Yeah?” He looked up curiously, making me wonder if I had imagined it. Maybe I was drunk enough that I’d misheard him. It was possible I was imagining it. There was no way he had just said that.

“Did you just say—”

Before I could finish the question, my thoughts were interrupted by Blackwell’s lips against mine in a surprisingly soft kiss. My breathing hitched as I instinctively wrapped my legs tighter around him, loving the taste of whiskey on his lips, as he deepened the experimental brush of our lips. He let out a low groan after a moment, his chest rumbling and making my body heat on command. I rocked against him, his very hard cock pressed between us, as my skin began to heat like it was being set on fire. I whimpered in frustration as he pulled back, making me want to tackle him onto the elevator floor.

“I can’t. I cannot,” he mumbled to himself, putting his forehead against my collarbone despite his tightening grip on me.

I groaned. “Stop! Stop saying that. Just trust me, Blackwell. Nothing is going to happen.” I had absolutely no proof of that, but it was instinctual. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me like I knew my middle name... actually, that was a horrible example. I didn’t have a middle name. I nearly giggled at that, but the searing look he offered me when he looked up had my face turning pink.

“If I continue to kiss you, love, everything is going to fucking happen,” he hissed. His playful attitude was gone, replaced by something far more feral and almost desperate. I craved that side of him.

“I want *everything*,” I assured him.

I could feel how close he was to breaking. He let out a low, pained noise as I tightened my legs around him, his massive body cornering mine and making me feel delicate. Like he could just take me and do whatever the hell he wanted... The concept was extremely appealing.

What? As if someone could blame me for wanting to be manhandled by sexy monsters! Well, ‘monster-handled’ I suppose would be the right term...

I felt my heart sink as the elevator doors opened and he stepped back, placing me down gently, clearly attempting to distance himself.

That was right about when I hit my bullshit limit.

I threw up my hands and stalked past him towards my room. “That’s it! I give up. I fucking give up. A woman can only take so much goddamn rejection before she starts to take it personally. I am done throwing myself at you guys. You don’t want me? Fine. I will find someone—”

“Arabella,” Blackwell warned, his growl making me shoot him a scowl as I hurried towards my room, wanting to lock him out. Something my drunk mind thought would prove a point. I nearly fell backwards, a completely undignified yelp

coming from my mouth as he appeared in front of me, his eyes flashing with something very dark. And somewhat sober. Man, wish I had those abilities...

“Blackwell!” I growled as he scooped me up and over his shoulder, the space twisting as I heard him mess with my bedroom door before we entered into the familiar space, despite me viewing it from upside down. I wiggled against him, wanting to be upright.

“Put me down,” I demanded.

“You’re being a brat.” His hand tightened on my thigh.

“Screw you.” I tried to push off of him as we neared my bed.

A moan broke from my throat as his hand suddenly came across my ass in a hard slap that jolted my entire body in surprise. The slight sting of pain caused me to grow far more wet than I expected, heat surging through me like wildfire as my breathing turned into near pants.

Holy hell. He needed to fix this, and I knew he could.

“Fuck, I can tell you’re soaked,” he growled, flipping me down onto the bed before crawling over me. Instantly, my fingers were around the back of his neck, tugging on his silky hair, trying to tug his lips closer. He didn’t give me a chance to do so before he gripped my wrists and pulled them above me, looking over my frame that was laid out beneath him.

I hadn’t realized just how dangerous my attraction to Blackwell could be until this moment. I was pretty damn sure he could convince me to do or try anything... *anything*.

“Did you like that, little love?” he purred. “I’m trying to keep you safe, and instead you are rubbing this little pussy against me, trying to get fucked.”

I had no idea what I had done to deserve this amazing, dirty-talking man, but I absolutely was going to thank all the gods after this. Holy shit.

“Yes,” I whimpered. He suddenly flipped me over and his hand came across my ass again, causing me to push back

against him rather than away. I wanted to be mad at him, but instead my legs slid apart eagerly, wanting him between them.

“Fuck,” he groaned, pressing a large hand to my back while using his other to pull back my hips so that I was fully exposed to him. I moaned as he rocked against me, the massive outline of his cock pressed right against my covered center, where I was so wet I was probably soaking my yoga pants.

“I want to taste you so fucking bad.” His voice was almost edged in frustration and pain that was damn near close to desperation.

“Please, Blackwell. I want to feel you, any part of you,” I begged. I wasn’t picky at this point, but I needed something.

His fingers were suddenly on my hips as he tugged down the band of my yoga pants, exposing my ass and wet pussy to his gaze, considering I hadn’t worn any panties... A low growl broke from his chest as I felt magic surround me that I had always known existed but had never been completely subjected to. Everything felt hot and needy as my nails dug into the bed, needing his touch on my exposed body.

My eyes nearly rolled backwards as I felt him break, his mouth meeting my center. Everything tightened, my skin breaking into shivers. The rumble that came from his throat vibrated my body as his hands tightened on my hips, his flesh so hot that it almost felt searing. I cried out as he began to devour me, my hips locked into place by his firm grip, which only made me arch back into him further.

I don’t think the man would let me go at this point, even if I tried. I loved that.

A tremble took over as I felt him suck on my clit before sliding his tongue between my folds, pressing inside of me as the back of my neck broke out into a hot flush. *Holy hell*. A cry stole from my lips as he continued to explore every part of me, his mouth demanding and bringing me to the brink of climax several times but never actually letting it happen.

Frustration and need welled inside of me as I clawed at the bed underneath me, my whimpers and begging probably sounding ridiculous, but I *needed* to come more than I ever had in my entire life. His mouth was a goddamn experience, and I felt like I was going into heat.

I had never had anyone go down on me before, and everything he did was lighting up every nerve ending, making me wonder if this was normal. The control he had over my body was almost unnatural. I nearly shot off the bed, moaning his name, as his teeth skimmed my clit. My movement earned a slap across the ass, stinging and causing me to grow only more wet at the notion of him not treating me like glass.

“Arabella,” he snarled my name roughly, “you taste so goddamn perfect.”

My hand came back to thread through his hair, causing him to growl as he went back to working me up to what I knew was going to be an amazing pinnacle. When he sucked on my clit and slid two fingers into me, I was pretty damn sure I saw heaven, his rough words bringing me all the way.

“I need you to come on my face,” he demanded. “I want to taste how fucking sweet you are after you come—”

He completely got his wish as I tightened around his fingers and my entire body went nuclear. I cried out, exploding in a sensation of gasoline meeting fire, causing the world to darken on the edges slightly before I slumped against the bed. *Holy mother of god.*

A whimper broke through my lips as he slowly drew out his fingers, his large frame pinning mine from above as he pressed a light kiss to the edge of my ear. It was such a sweet gesture, and I couldn't help but murmur his name as he adjusted my yoga pants and pulled me against him on the bed. I was practically purring with contentment as my leg wrapped around him, my head buried against his firm chest.

“You are exquisite,” he admitted roughly, burying his nose in my hair.

“Promise you won’t leave once I fall asleep.” I gripped his chest, as if that would somehow stop him.

“I promise.” His voice was soft and vulnerable, more so than I had ever heard before. The tone of it made me look up, and he took the opportunity to brush a kiss against my lips, my taste between us.

As my eyes finally fell closed, I prayed that this would somehow fix or prove that not everything I did with these men would cost me my life.

Because I couldn’t escape the irrational concern that they were maybe using that as an excuse for not feeling the same way. Luckily, my brain seemed to decide the day was done for us, because before I could think anything more, I was falling into a dreamless sleep.

BLACKWELL

I HAD ACTUALLY FALLEN ASLEEP.

That was the first thought that crossed my fuzzy consciousness as I blinked my heavy eyes open, instantly being assaulted by different scents and sights. My system jolted as I tightened my heavy arm around the small frame pressed against me, the brush of a tiny nose and soft pair of lips against my neck reminding me of who I was in bed with.

Not that there was any chance of forgetting, with stands of bright pink hair crossing my vision and her intoxicating scent wrapped around me. There was not anyone else in Under or Above like Arabella, and for sure no one that I would ever want to touch or hold like this. She was intoxicatingly unique and, in this moment, absolutely mine. Even if I couldn't keep us in this bubble forever.

My gaze focused on the afternoon light that filtered across her messy desk and into her room. If I had to guess, it was somewhere around four, maybe five in the evening, and I was both praising my stars that it was the day after a mission because we weren't missing anything important... and cursing that we had slept in so late. There would be no way to hide what happened between us as it was, but if I thought her absence, or mine, wouldn't go without note, then I had lost it far more than I thought.

Oh well.

I wouldn't want to hide this, even if it was probably the smarter idea. I could never be ashamed of what had happened,

and I found myself wanting to spread the news rather than be silent about it. Let everyone fucking know that I'd gotten to touch and taste her.

Letting out a content sound from my throat, I realized no one had yet to wake us, and while I didn't think that changed anything, it meant a few more moments alone with her. I had never slept with Arabella before, and I was finding that last night had been one of the best nights of sleep I'd gotten in years. Falling asleep to her tiny, curvy frame pressed up against me like a sated kitten was absolute bliss, and if I had half a mind, I would put a ward around her room so that we could stay in bed for the rest of the day.

I would have to order food for her though. I always forgot how much humans needed to sleep and eat, and I felt Arabella needed more than most. It couldn't be easy trying to keep up with and handle nightmares all day, although I would be perfectly fine with her handling me however she wanted.

My chest swelled with pride, remembering how she had trusted me last night and how easily she'd given into my touch. I would have been perfectly fine with her taking charge in bed if she wanted, but the compelling urge for me to dominate her cute ass seemed to be one she was agreeable with. Thank fuck. It would be a difficult compulsion to ignore.

My nose brushed her ear as she let out a soft sound, rubbing her leg against mine as she squirmed further against me so that I could feel every part of her soft, perfect frame. My cock took notice, jumping to life, as my eyes dipped down to her breasts pressed tight against her shirt, straining slightly on the pulled material. Arabella may have been small and delicate, but the woman had mouthwatering curves, and it was impossible to not take notice.

My magic came to life, heating my skin, as flames seemed to light up every inch of me in accordance to the amount of lust I had for her. Goddamnit, this woman was a shot of heroin, an instant, reactive high. I don't think she even realized how appealing she was. How badly I wanted her.

“Blackwell,” she sighed, nuzzling against me. At least I didn’t have to worry about her regretting last night, it seemed, something that settled a part of me that I hadn’t even realized existed. I may have been a bit worried that she would wake up to regret letting me into her bed. I had never been anyone’s first choice in anything, so for her to willingly want me in her bed was something that was almost impossible to ignore. I wish I could say I was upset at my lack of willpower, but to hear the woman I loved tell me that she wanted me? I was willing to let my ‘pride’ over my control be absolutely destroyed.

“Morning, love.” My tongue darted out across my lips, still tasting her sweetness and wishing that I trusted myself to kiss down her hot body without ripping off her clothes and attacking her this morning. Without pinning her underneath me and taking exactly what both of us so clearly wanted, whether it was the ‘right’ thing to do or not. Whether it was safe or not.

Being in bed with Arabella was so dangerous, in part because it felt like the most perfect thing in the world. There were a million reasons that I should get up and distance myself, but the longer we stayed like this, the more I realized it was a pointless battle. That ship had sailed. Cy knew it. Razar even knew it. All of us fucking knew it. We just needed to figure something out.

Maybe... I could just make her come enough that she was exhausted and fell into bed each and every night satisfied. I could take care of myself, or I could suffer in silence. I just had to make the others see reason, because we were breaking down pretty quickly in our resolve. All it had taken was Arabella pushing the slightest amount, and we’d given in. If we didn’t make a plan, it was entirely possible that she would get hurt or we would lose her.

“I think I’m hung over,” Arabella mumbled, pulling back slightly as her unique gaze ran over my face with interest. I knew she would be asking for her glasses soon, and I was suddenly glad I had remembered to grab them off the floor from when I had thrown her cute ass over my shoulder for

being a brat. Although, I would happily carry her around everywhere so she didn't accidentally hurt herself, if necessary.

"I wish I could make you feel better." I cupped her jaw, rolling her over so that I was pinning her underneath me, looking over her sleepy expression. I would have loved to make her feel better in a lot of different ways, but I truly meant taking away her hangover right now. Her eyes kept closing, and she winced as the sun hit her bed at an angle, enough to make me want to hide her from it.

Although, that would have been a shame because it really was lighting her up. I sat back and looked over her, finding myself in awe of how gorgeous she was, her hair glinting in different shades of dark and light pink and her skin seeming to shimmer like a diamond-smooth surface. If she realized how intensely I studied her with my free time, she would think I was a nutcase... or obsessed. Both were accurate.

"And my hips hurt." She groaned, yawning before stretching underneath me as my eyes tracked the way her shirt rode up on her small waist. My frame froze as I caught sight of something that had me pushing up her shirt, my chest squeezing in realization of why exactly her hips were hurting.

"Fuck," I mumbled in shock. A wave of possessiveness rocked through me as I gently peeled down her yoga pants so that they were caught low on her hips. I was tempted to pull them down more, wanting access to her tight little pussy, but not trusting myself, considering what I was looking at right now was making me so goddamn hard it wasn't even funny.

"What?" She frowned as my fingers ran over where they had clearly been yesterday, gripping her hips and locking her tight little cunt against my mouth. Now, in the morning light, it was very clear that my grip on her had done so much more than I could have predicted. I had... I'd marked her.

Actually, more than marked her. There were literal dark rune-like symbols that matched the massive marking on my chest that had appeared when I'd come into my magic fully. Except hers covered her hips and were black markings

intertwined with vibrant gold flames of color that flickered in the sunlight and seemed to move as if they were alive. As if she really had fire dancing across her skin.

Holy hell, this was unreal. I would have called them almost medallion-like in shape, but they felt more like brands that showcased my claim on her. I'd done this. I'd marked her. Branded her. And I should have felt guilty about that because I clearly hadn't asked... but I felt absolutely zero remorse or regret. In fact, I hadn't realized just how much I wanted my mark on her until I was now seeing it. I hadn't even realized that was a possibility, but I fucking loved it. Arabella was mine, and nothing could change that. She was absolutely fucking mine.

"Blackwell?" Her voice was softly curious as she lifted herself up on elbows, her gaze moving towards mine. Her cheeks were flushed, making me thrilled, but it was a bit difficult to focus on that, if we were being honest. Her next words pulled me out of my rather unhealthy train of thought. One that could only lead me down a very dangerous path, as in exploring this newfound addiction to figuring out more ways of marking her. The high I felt looking over such clear ownership was like nothing else I had ever experienced.

"What is that?" Her voice was hesitant. She didn't seem upset, just surprised. Was she going to be upset when I explained?

I swallowed, not knowing what to say. Instead, I kept my gaze on her, reaching over to grab her glasses from her nightstand before slipping them on her delicate features. She offered me a soft smile before looking down at the marks.

Her sharp intake of breath and wide eyes had me feeling concerned, before a tremble worked its way across her body, making me growl in realization that she didn't mind in the fucking least. Arabella's eyes were dilated as she looked up at me, her pulsing jumping wildly, her desire very apparent.

"I don't understand," she hedged, examining my reaction.

"I must have let my magic out more than I realized," I admitted, a smile nearly forming on my face because I wasn't

positive if it had actually been an accident at the time. Hadn't I been thinking about how fucking perfect she was and how I wanted her to always be mine? Well, now, in at least one way, she would.

"You marked me." Her voice was soft and... pleased? Thank fuck.

"Yes." I swallowed and gave a sharp nod as her gaze met mine.

Something had sadness filtering through her gaze. "Is this the part where you get freaked out like Cy and Razar? Tell me how this was somehow a mistake and that you're bad for me?"

Fuck. I could literally hear the hurt radiating through her voice.

I let out a soft un-humored chuckle. "Sorry, love. I am not nearly as fucking selfless as they are, clearly. I very much want my mark on you." And so fucking much more.

"Oh." She laid back as I leaned back over her after rolling her yoga pants back up. "Well, good, because I'm pretty sure that is permanent."

Understatement of the century, little love.

Before I could explain that, there was a knock on the door that had me nearly groaning, knowing who it was by the magic signature alone. I wanted to keep her wrapped up underneath me for the rest of the night, but the bastard waiting outside seemed to have a goddamn sixth sense for when to interrupt. Hadn't I said someone would show up eventually?

Maybe we could ignore him.

"You know that won't work." She smirked as I realized I'd said that out loud. I rolled over to my side and wrapped myself around her, my head resting against her chest, my arms around her waist. I closed my eyes as she called for them to come in. I wasn't going to give him any mind yet. Razar was already going to flip the fuck out and try to kill me for possibly hurting her while marking her; I wasn't in the mood for Saint's bullshit.

“Well, this is something I wouldn’t have expected,” Saint mused, striding in.

Fucking liar. I could hear the amusement in his voice, and if I hadn’t been so comfortable, I would probably hurt him. As it stood, I very much didn’t want to move. Ever.

I nearly let out a rumble as Arabella’s fingers began to smooth through my hair in a motion that had me both turned on and feeling relaxed enough to close my eyes. A confusing and completely real combination when it came to my little love.

“Morning, Saint.” Arabella’s voice was slightly shy. As she sat up, I kept my arms around her waist, refusing to give her up fully.

“How’s the hangover, flower?” he asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed as if none of this was surprising or unusual.

“How do you know she’s hungover?” I asked. I knew how, but I liked to call Saint out on being such a goddamn stalker.

“I always know what Arabella is doing and how she is doing,” Saint explained easily before his tone turned more serious. “I even managed to keep the others away, and what do I get? Razar absolutely lost it, so much so that I had to lock him up—”

“You what?” My eyes snapped open as Arabella made a small worried noise.

Saint lounged back on the bed and tilted his head, assessing our reactions. “Well yeah, he wanted to kill you when he found out that you not only encouraged her getting drunk but that you went back to her room together.” He chuckled. “So young and dramatic, right? Nevermind, both of you are actually rather young as well. Still, you probably do need to ready yourself, Blackwell, because I informed the others of where he was being kept only minutes ago. I would say that you probably have less than a minute until—”

Fuck.

I groaned as my body was slammed back against the wall of Arabella's bedroom, the walls shaking at the impact as the lights next to her bed flickered. Razar's snarl filled the space as I offered him a distasteful look. I was really not in the mood for this bullshit right now.

"What the fuck did you do?" Razar demanded sharply, his black eyes filled with absolute fury. Goddamn psycho.

"Razar." Arabella's voice was soft and understanding as some of the others joined us, looking far more confused and less worked up. "Seriously, I am perfectly fine!"

"What the fuck did you do to her?" Razar's voice was sharp and dark. Unfortunately, Arabella's frustration paired with my own inner need for dominance won out, and instead of staying relaxed, my magic began to fill the space.

"Nothing she didn't want," I goaded, a sneer taking over my face as Saint chuckled from where he sat by my love.

"Black," Damian offered in a warning tone.

"If you fucking hurt her—" Razar's snarl was cut off by Arabella standing up on the bed to gain attention.

"I'm literally fine!" she exclaimed, but I knew he wasn't hearing shit except the rage rolling through him.

"I didn't hurt her," I leveled, my gaze meeting his and realizing that I was officially over him trying to control every element of her life. I didn't disagree about her safety being important, but she was a grown fucking woman. "I did mark her though."

That would probably do it.

"What?" Razar hissed, the room filling with voices at the information as I saw Saint attempt to tug Arabella towards him, no doubt wanting to see the brand.

"I said I fucking marked her." I stepped closer to him, my magic flaring out as my forearms lit up with black and gold flames, reaching the point where I knew this was about to turn into a very real fight. There was nothing he could do about this. It was what it was. She was marked.

Arabella was mine.

I wasn't surprised, though, when without any magic associated with it, he punched me hard enough in the face that my head snapped back. I let out a groan when it collided with the wall.

Bastard. Absolute bastard.

A laugh came out of me, unable to stop myself, as I swiped at the blood that was coming from my nose, the gold metallic substance glinting and making Arabella let out a soft worried noise.

“You aren't any goddamn better than any of us, Razar. We all know what the hell happened between you two after coming back yesterday. Plus, I'm not the only one that has marked her. Cy literally fucking marked her neck.”

Razar let out a low snarl, walking back across the room before I turned my attention to Cy, who had blinked across the room towards Arabella at a speed even I found impressive.

“I did what?” he asked curiously, his voice filled with something I didn't understand.

“Marked her.” Saint shook his head as Arabella pulled away her hair to reveal the silver snakeskin-like mark that had my teammate freezing.

I didn't pay attention to his reaction, though, because Saint was suddenly gently tugging down the edge of her yoga pants now that she was distracted with Cy. His brows shot up. He was careful to not touch my mark on her, my body going tense at the idea of anyone touching her. It would probably go away, but right now I felt extremely territorial. Razar's eyes narrowed on the markings.

“I didn't know that was possible,” Cy noted as she watched him with a slightly sad expression, but he didn't catch it. I knew she thought he was regretting it, but that was far from the truth. No, I could see exactly how happy Cy was, and I was impressed the bastard had the ability to keep his shit together, especially considering the tense nature of the current situation.

“Seriously?” Damian was scowling at me in reference to the markings. My smile grew, because I knew he was only upset that he hadn’t done the same. Nightmares all marked their mates in different ways... he was just jealous that I’d actually done it.

“Can we just take a moment and relax? I haven’t even had coffee,” Arabella pointed out.

Cy walked across the room towards her small coffee bar that she had with a mini-fridge containing food and some chilled drinks. The woman had enough of a setup that if she wanted to work here for several days straight, she could... not that we would let her, because we are needy motherfuckers, but it would be possible. I watched her smile at Cy’s action of starting the coffeemaker, making me jealous that I hadn’t thought of that.

“You are really just waking up?” Zain asked curiously. I suppose it was a bit odd since Arabella rarely slept in. I knew he was also trying to distract himself from the scent of her desire that still filled the space from when we were in bed moments ago, probably causing them to be uncomfortable and turned on.

Once again, not my problem.

“Yes, long night,” I explained.

My eyes flickered to Amun, who was leaning against the far wall, watching all of this with curiosity. His gaze moved across her two marks with an expression that wasn’t exactly anger, but he didn’t look pleased, either.

“We got drunk.” Arabella yawned, sitting back down on the bed. Saint was still splayed out on it, as if none of this was a surprise to him, and began to play with her hair.

“You marked her when she was fucking drunk?” Razar hissed in realization.

I narrowed my eyes. “One, I was drunk as well—”

“You still took advantage of her—”

My patience ran out, and I knocked his ass to the ground, hitting him right where he'd hit me, returning the favor. I barely heard Arabella's exasperated sigh as he snarled and managed to score a solid hit right to my abdomen, knocking the wind from me for a moment. I cursed, going to hit him again, but suddenly I was literally thrown across the room, hitting the wall again as I slid down it.

Motherfucker, today was not my day. Clearly, hangovers were not a good idea while trying to fight other nightmares.

"Fucking hell," I groaned.

"Stop," Amun growled as I realized he was the one that managed to throw us apart. Razar slumped on the other side of the room, looking pissed but tired as well. "You're upsetting precious."

"Precious?" I chuckled despite the tense nature of this situation as Arabella shot me an amused scowl. I put my hands up in mock defense.

This fighting between Razar and I wasn't exactly unusual, for the record. It wasn't usually because of something like this, but considering we were pretty evenly matched, it made training way easier. I also knew it was probably making him feel a bit better.

Plus, I wasn't about to sit around and let him accuse me of taking advantage of my mate. Asshole knew I would never pull that shit, let alone with Arabella.

"I'm not letting this go," Razar snarled, and I saw hurt flash in his eyes.

Realization hit me on why he was so upset. First, he knew Arabella and him were still on thin ice, and considering she didn't even have him in her room last night like normal, this had probably struck a nerve with him. Secondly, I had literally done the exact opposite of what he had yesterday. Where he was restrained, I'd given in. Finally, he was a possessive motherfucker and jealous that he wasn't the first to mark her. Yet despite knowing his reasons, I not only didn't regret it, but found myself pissed that he was clearly upsetting Arabella.

“Good.” Her voice was clear, breaking the tense moment. She sat with her legs crossed on the bed, Cy handing her a cup of coffee. “Let’s talk about it.”

Here we go.

Saint stretched out, putting his head in her lap, as if her words weren’t stressful as fuck. I mean, I suppose I didn’t really feel stress now either. It was clear as day how I felt now... so there really wasn’t any confusion on my end.

“Talk about what?” Razar asked, his tone cautious.

“Talk about *it*, all of it,” she said, taking a sip of her coffee. “How about we start with the concept of ‘Arabella can’t seem to look out for herself, despite years of doing so, as one of the only humans in an institute filled with nightmares far scarier than her’—*debatable, the woman was terrifying in her own way*— “so we are going to make decisions that limit her scope of who she can and can’t be with by keeping her out of the loop and not asking her opinion on things.””

I felt my brow furrow. *Shit.*

“You know,” she drawled as she mussed Saint’s hair, making me jealous. “I have thought that maybe I was crazy this entire time. I even said, ‘maybe the attraction I am sensing just isn’t there, or maybe it’s that they don’t feel the same way enough for it to matter, or maybe they’re upset that I’m attracted to more than one of them’... something along those lines! Which, for the record, I could understand.”

That was about as far from the truth as possible.

“However, since four of you have kissed me in the last twenty-four hours, I am starting to believe that’s a bunch of bullshit. In fact, I don’t think I was imagining anything at all, so that leaves us with the question of ‘why?’ Why not tell me how you felt? I suppose you have that right even though I have made it ridiculously clear how I felt. Or better yet, why not let me make my own choices instead of shutting me down each and every time that I tried to say something about it? Did you think this would just go away? I just don’t understand.”

Her eyes flashed with authentic hurt. “And one of the worst parts? You wouldn’t let me move on, either! In fact, any time I tried to talk to anyone outside of the team, you’d lose your shit—”

A growl left my throat as I considered another nightmare touching her. Her eyes flashed to mine as she pointed. “See?! That. That right there.”

After a long exhale, she shook her head. “So the conclusion that I have come to is this. All, or at least most of you feel the same level of attraction to me as I feel towards you. However, because of some insane reasoning you’ve worked up in your heads, you aren’t willing to risk my ‘safety’ by entertaining the notion. More so, you aren’t even willing to discuss it with me but instead just limit my options, stick me in a box, and hope I don’t ask questions? Allow me to walk around feeling as though I am imagining shit. Does that seem about right?”

I winced as guilt hit my chest, because I knew I wasn’t completely innocent in this. I’d only changed my tune since my willpower broke hours ago... so yeah, we deserved this and probably far more.

“I tried to tell them it was a bad idea,” Saint pointed out, casting her a smile that had me narrowing my eyes. The bastard could be such a... well, bastard. Honestly, I think he enjoyed the chaos of all this shit far too much.

“Pixie, we could kill you. That’s a very real possibility,” Cy leveled.

Fuck. Those words out loud nearly had me growling, because I never wanted any threat to her life to be talked about so openly. Maybe that was in part why we had avoided it so much.

“No. You. Fucking. Can’t,” Saint groaned, causing Arabella to look down at him.

I paid him no mind—he always said shit like that. I had to assume he was just talking about bringing her back to life if something terrible happened, and that wasn’t okay with me.

The idea of her actually suffering was a fucking horrifying notion.

He continued with a sigh, “If I hear that shit again, I am going to absolutely lose my goddamn mind—”

“Blackwell literally fucking branded her!” Razar snarled. “Burned her goddamn skin and branded her. I bruised her, and that wasn’t even an ounce of my strength, so just fucking stop, Saint.”

“Her pulse did slow when I kissed her,” Amun said.

A growl broke in my throat, my eyes narrowing on him. He had kissed her? When had he fucking kissed her? I knew we shouldn’t have left them alone.

“I kissed him, actually,” she pointed out as I realized that he was part of the ‘four’ that had kissed her in the past twenty-four hours. Even I had to admit that was a lot at once and then expect her to not catch on.

Saint stared at her with an affectionate look before narrowing his eyes at Amun, making me wonder if he would try to kill him for that. It was a possibility.

“I am not saying she won’t be affected, I just said that she won’t die.” Saint closed his eyes, clearly done with the conversation.

Arabella let out a long sigh. “Not that anyone was asking me, because why would my opinion matter, right? But personally... I like the marks! I liked the bruises. I love Cy’s mark on me, and I sure as hell don’t mind any part of what Blackwell and I did last night. I would prefer to do it again, actually. Often. So, now that we know where I stand on all of this, I am going to end this little conversation.”

My jaw clenched as she hopped up, making Saint scowl as she walked towards her attached bathroom. Arabella turned and pinned all of us with a hard look. “Listen, guys, here is the deal... I am done ignoring this. If you really don’t want to give this a chance, fine. Ball is in your court. But I am not going to let you make Blackwell feel bad for something that I very

much enjoyed. Cool? Cool. I am going to get ready for the day, and then I need some food.”

The door closed as a small smile hit my lips, feeling pride in my chest because she so clearly enjoyed my touch. Razar let out a snarl and turned, storming towards her door and letting himself out.

“I’m going to go make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid,” Zain said, seemingly happy with the tone of things.

“She’s right, for the record,” Saint pointed out, his eyes closed and not moving from her bed.

“I have no idea what the hell to do,” Damian muttered, running a hand through his hair and sitting on the edge of her desk. Cy and Amun were both quiet, but if I had to assume, they were equally as conflicted. There had to be a way to make this work, right? *Fucking had to be.*

One thing I did know? Now that I had gotten a taste of Arabella, there was no way in hell that I would ever be able to give her up. Not that there had ever been a chance of that before.

ARABELLA

IT WASN'T VERY OFTEN that we ate in the main dining hall, but considering I had absolutely no desire to spend another moment sitting around and rehashing all this nonsense, I wasn't about to complain. Plus, I was very hungry. Not only had I slept through the day and when I normally would eat, but yesterday had been surprisingly draining, so now I needed food.

I had to admit though, I felt pretty positive about my day so far. Not only had we cleared the air, but I was now surrounded by most of my team as we made our way towards the dining hall.

I could tell most of them were in deep thought, and our silence was surprisingly comfortable as I let them think about what I'd said. Maybe they would realize how ridiculous all of this was. I couldn't fault them for being protective, but I had a right to make my own decisions and evaluate my own risks. I mean, hell, it wasn't like I was even about to just jump right into anything, it's more the principle.

Says the woman who essentially bent over and begged Blackwell last night to touch her in literally any way, shape, or form.

Man, had I gotten exactly what I had asked for and more. I absolutely loved the brands he left on my skin. So much so that I had chosen to wear a top that showed it off, in part. It was a black corset half-top with a loose transparent long sleeve blouse that showed off my skin, almost like under a

veil. Paired with jeans and a pair of kickass stilettos, it was very much showing off the markings that peeked out from where my jeans rested against my hips.

I knew that I wasn't technically at work tonight, but I didn't really like to walk around the institute not dressed up fully. At least not in the high traffic areas. I already had somewhat of a soft image because of being human, so there was no need to make myself look even more vulnerable by walking around in hoodies and pajamas.

Plus, this was more fun. Blackwell's eyes were constantly going towards my hips and then down to my ass, making me feel good about myself. Honestly, I felt a bit hyper under their attention. None of them had denied the shit I'd said earlier, so I had to assume it was true... I had to assume they all felt *something*.

I was curious to know what Cy thought about the mark on my neck. He still hadn't mentioned it.

"I don't like that top." Amun's voice was a near growl from next to me. "Or those jeans. I can see everything. I can imagine what you look goddamn naked."

"Is it good?" I arched a brow, the question slipping out and surprising myself, frankly. He narrowed his eyes, making me smile. "You sound like an old man, Amun."

It was a teasing comment, but it wasn't far from the truth.

"Don't let him use age as an excuse, flower," Saint hummed and shot Amun a look from my other side. "He just lacks obvious adaptation skills."

"I also have been asleep for over four hundred years," Amun leveled, tucking his hands into his athletic pants. "Last time I was around, it was the mid-1600s and women were dressed much differently."

I tilted my head. "How long exactly have you been alive for?"

Amun offered me a cautious look as Saint chuckled. "Much longer than that."

“I have no idea why both of you won’t just tell me how old you are.” I scowled as we entered the large dining hall. “It’s not like I’ll be surprised! Clearly you both are older. I mean, I know Saint is practically ancient, and I put up with him—”

“I’m not old.” Saint flashed a smile. “Old connotes an age, flower.”

“So what? You have just always existed?” I arched a brow.

His smile grew into a dangerous one. “Not in this specific form, but is that so hard to believe with all of this wisdom I am brimming with?”

I shook my head at his sarcasm. “That is somehow the most direct and evasive answer I have ever received from you.”

“That’s because—”

Amun didn’t finish his statement because Saint offered a low growl of warning. I looked between the two of them and threw up my hands, walking ahead towards a table near the front of the room, over trying to get answers from them.

The other five grabbed seats, and I stared briefly at the two empty chairs, hating that Razar and Zain weren’t back yet. I knew that he and I needed to talk. As we sat, the staff that was working in the dining hall approached and began to place down plates of whatever was on the menu tonight. Luckily, it wasn’t anything that odd this time—sometimes it was a draw because everyone’s taste here was so different.

I mean, currently in this room alone, there was everything from nightmares that looked essentially like humans to a large centaur-like nightmare in the corner of the room, laughing about something. At least you couldn’t say this place was boring.

It was actually one of the reasons I enjoyed occasional trips into the institute’s busier areas, because you really were reminded by how unique this place was and all of the individuals that were essential to making it function so well. In fact, almost the entire place was run by a set of nightmares that

were not valued in most of society, and not just human society either.

Class D nightmares were almost as close to being a human as one could and still be considered a ‘nightmare.’ They didn’t fit into human society, some featuring physical attributes that made them different like scales or a tail, while others had small abilities. None of it, however, was enough to be considered dominant in the nightmare culture. In fact, most of them couldn’t survive successfully in Under because their bloodline was so mixed, most of them rumored to come from pairings of humans and nightmares. Something I personally found beautiful, but of course I was biased.

My brow dipped in realization that if anything ever did come of... whatever this was between me and the guys, any children would probably be Class D nightmares. Something that motivated me even more to keep pushing for them to have a comfortable place in nightmare culture, because I knew it wasn’t worth pushing the humans on. If they couldn’t try to work with those they considered a threat, they weren’t going to work with those that they would deem as less so.

Class D nightmares were very often killed or extremely bullied no matter where they managed to find themselves. So whenever one came here, we welcomed them with open arms. They weren’t powerful enough to go on missions safely, but they served in a myriad of roles in the institute, from daily operations to teams dedicated to improving the public image of nightmares. Here they could have their own families and go about their lives as normal. Something I wished they—and all nightmares, for that matter—could do in the outside world as well.

“Arabella.” A young man with dark eyes drew my attention to where he was putting down a plate in front of me. I flashed him a smile, noticing that he had the most unusual orange, almost sherbet-colored hair, and a set of pointed teeth. I had for sure seen him around a few times, but I had absolutely no idea what his name was.

“Thank you so much,” I offered, but before I could ask his name, Saint let out a vicious sound that had my head snapping

to the side, his eyes narrowed on the kid. When I looked back, he was practically running away, making me sigh. Saint's face snapped back to a pleased expression and he flashed me a charming smile, kissing the side of my head and tapping my plate as if I had forgotten about it.

Psycho.

Sitting between Saint and Amun, my gaze jumped to Blackwell, Damian, and Cy, all of them paying no attention to the food in front of them, instead glaring at the man, who looked absolutely terrified. Hadn't I literally explained why this was a problem just an hour ago? Then again, I had to admit... I sort of loved that they were acting so territorial and possessive. It was super hot. I couldn't even be ashamed of that.

"All of you have problems," I teased.

"He's going to have a problem if he talks to you again." Blackwell met my gaze and offered me a serious look.

"I honestly think he shouldn't get a second chance," Damian pointed out.

"No one will miss him," Saint added.

"Yes they will, stop it." I nudged him in the side as he offered me a wounded look, making Cy chuckle. I had to admit, the concept of ever being able to physically injure Saint was enough to almost make me laugh.

I shook my head and began to pick at the plate in front of me, relaxing into the comfortable moment together, feeling far better than I had earlier today. Tilting my head, I wondered how long it would be before Razar and Zain would join us. Was that being needy? I felt like I was being needy today. I also knew that I needed to talk to him, and it was making me anxious to feel tension between us. Razar and I rarely fought, so this was unusual to say the least.

Almost as if on cue, the room turned quiet, the large amount of terrifying nightmares going silent as a trickle of familiar energy ran over my skin. I turned around in my seat and watched as Razar made his way across the space, Zain

offering me a charming smile from next to him. Other nightmares shied away from them, averting their eyes as they neared us, my heart jumping in my chest, thrilled to see both of them. Especially since Razar was watching me with such a heated expression.

You know... in some ways, I truly did think people considered Razar one of the scariest nightmares here. I knew technically Saint outpowered him, but Razar had a certain level of confidence and a very dark edge to him that terrified people. Only I got to see the softer side. Although I couldn't lie, there was a natural dominance that radiated off the man as he approached us, my chest squeezing as I wondered what the hell I was going to say to him.

The others were talking behind me as Zain grabbed a chair and sat down. Razar, though, walked towards me, pulling out the chair next to me. Amun had moved to the end of the table, watching the entire situation with interest.

I squeaked as Razar tugged me onto his lap and buried his head against my neck, on the opposite side of Cy's mark, and squeezed me against him. My breath caught as my eyes stung a little bit with emotion, my hand automatically running through his short hair. I appreciated the others giving us a bit of a moment alone despite them clearly being right there. It did make me feel like I could talk to him without eyes on us, though.

"I'm sorry," he whispered softly.

"Razar..."

"No, I am." He pressed his lips against my shoulder. "We should have talked about this long before now."

I examined his tense expression, seeing guilt and a bit of fear there, my fingers moving down his jaw as I decided to be bold. I knew now was not the best time to talk about all of this, but I decided to take a chance. I tilted my head up and brushed my lips against his, praying he wouldn't reject me.

He didn't.

His entire body tensed, a low groan breaking from his throat before deepening the kiss, causing me to shiver with excitement against him. I pulled away only when one of the other men made a surprised noise. Yeah, probably not the best place for this.

“I have no idea what the fuck to do,” he admitted softly, ignoring the others.

“We’ll figure it out.” I infused as much confidence in my words as possible.

“Saint,” Zain groaned, pulling my attention away from our moment. “You are being fucking ridiculous.”

“I don’t like him in that chair.” Saint’s voice was firm, but I could hear the scowl in it, making me wonder what he was talking about.

“Who?” I arched a brow as I followed his gaze to Amun at the head of the table. *Oh, for real?* Seriously?

Razar shook his head, smiling against my shoulder before starting a distracting pattern of running his fingers up and down my leg.

“Amun,” Saint explained, his eyes flashing with a dangerous light. “I don’t want him sitting at the head of the table.”

“Then switch with him,” I offered.

Saint looked at the chair and then at me, grabbing me by the waist and putting me next to him. Razar growled but left me between them, clearly not bothering to start shit with Saint. I arched a brow as Amun offered me a somewhat tired expression.

“Saint?” I prompted.

“I don’t want to *not* be next to you though,” he rationalized.

“He doesn’t want me to be next to you,” Amun chuckled. “Age has made you so fucking petty, Saint.”

Something dark, almost cold and ancient feeling, flashed in the repair's gaze before he shrugged and kissed the top of my hand he was holding captive. I had a feeling Saint and Amun were never going to properly deal with their issues, and there was a not so small part of me that found it amusing.

“Where have you guys been?” I asked Razar curiously.

“We checked on the girl in the emergency center,” Zain explained, making me sit up and lean forward with interest.

“Is she okay? Is she awake?”

“Okay, but not awake yet,” Razar rumbled.

“We should go see her after this,” I whispered. They seemed to agree.

“You need to eat.” Razar pulled my plate over.

As the table broke into comfortable conversation about possibly going to train afterwards, I considered going with them. Obviously, it wouldn't be training 'with' them as much as training in the gym on the balcony above where they worked, but it would allow me to watch them. I had to admit, it was one of my favorite pastimes and had led to a few very... interesting situations.

Especially since quite a few Class B nightmares had thought it would be a good time to talk to me, and with how worked up the guys were downstairs training, you can imagine how that went. I still had yet to see any of them again—I was sort of hoping that was not the bodies that Saint had been referring to.

THE BALCONY GYM was fairly empty as I walked on the treadmill, headphones on, as I watched Razar and Blackwell train below. The flush that was on my face was one hundred percent because of them and not because of working out, but they didn't need to know that, right?

I increased the speed on the treadmill as I looked over towards the others that were using one of the circuits for non-

combat training. A small sound caught in my throat, realizing Saint and Damian were both shirtless.

Now that? That wasn't fair.

Suddenly, a movement to the right of me had my head snapping to the side, finding a large man on the treadmill... directly next to me. There were twenty of them, and the massive, barrel-chested nightmare had picked that one. He flashed me a smile and began running next to me, his eyes the only part of him that appeared 'non-human' despite feeling a fairly strong signature of magic coming off him. I was going to assume Class B here. I couldn't tell which type though. I refocused back on the training and frowned, no longer seeing Saint next to the three on the training course.

A tap on my shoulder had me muttering a curse while moving my headphones and offering the man a curious look. I turned down my treadmill so I could actually focus on what he was saying, despite knowing it probably wouldn't be all that interesting.

"What's up?" I asked curiously.

"I just wanted to introduce myself." He flashed a smile, jogging as his dark eyes that contained no whites seemed to run over me. I was sorely regretting only wearing a pair of yoga pants and sports bra right now. To be fair, usually my boys didn't allow any other people in here while they were training.

"Okay..." I hedged.

"I'm Travin." He paused his treadmill and stuck out his hand as I let out a small sigh, stopping mine as well. Last thing I needed was to reach over and fall on my face.

"Arabella." I met his hand briefly before trying to retract mine, but unfortunately he gripped it harder, making me freeze up.

"I know who you are." He chuckled and stepped forward. "I actually knew I would find you here."

Oh... well, that was weird.

“Right.” I tugged my hand back, and he finally let go. I stepped back. “Well, it’s nice to meet you—”

“My team. We were hoping to work with you sometime. I know officially you are assigned to your A team, but we could use your advice on some of our missions,” he explained. “And honestly, you’re somewhat of a big name around here, so we have been wanting to spend time—”

“Get the fuck out of here.” Saint’s voice, suddenly appearing behind me, wasn’t that shocking. My chest squeezed with excitement. I could practically feel his hard muscles behind me as Travin’s eyes went wide. To his credit, he didn’t pale or shake like most of the Class B nightmares, but he still looked uncomfortable.

“I’m not trying to start a problem,” Travin promised. “I just wanted her advice—”

“I don’t give a shit,” Saint snarled, his arm coming around my bare stomach. “She isn’t part of your team, nor will she ever be. She’s not yours. She’s ours. Now fuck off and get the hell out of here.”

Oh wow.

I looked up at him and saw something very dark in his gaze, any lightheartedness completely absent. His words were possessive and territorial, making me nearly turn around and attack him with the desire that slammed into me.

Travin made a noise that had me looking over at him, and as he looked at both of us, something that looked like realization hit his face.

“Totally get it,” Travin grunted. My eyes widened as Razar appeared behind the nightmare, a darkness flashing through his gaze that had me feeling nearly mesmerized. I wanted to hear what he said to the man, but Saint turned me into his chest and narrowed his eyes on the figure behind me, his firm grip causing my entire body to feel like it was combusting.

I didn’t even watch him walk out, burrowing further into Saint as he narrowed his eyes on the retreating figure. As a

door shut, his face transformed, a smile filling it as if nothing had happened to begin with.

“What was that?” I breathed out.

“Just got rid of the pests.” He shrugged. “Come downstairs with me. I don’t want any more fuckers bothering you.”

I had followed him in a bit of a daze, I couldn’t lie. He had shocked me.

THAT HAD BEEN one of the more civil times. Other times, there had been people that weren’t as polite as Travin, and those encounters had ended far more violently. Bad enough that Cy had literally picked me up and taken me back to the office, leaving Razar and Saint to have a ‘talk’ with the nightmare. To be fair, they were being a creep... but yeah, I’d never seen them again. I wasn’t complaining, but the more I thought about it, the more I started making a list of who was probably underneath my garden.

Should that bother me? No. Honestly, it would take a lot to bother me, and violence wasn’t one of them. Nightmares were just... different, and I loved that about them. Darkness and all.

I had eaten most of my food before a chill of apprehension ran up my spine, making me feel as though I was going to pass out momentarily. I froze as Razar stilled next to me, and Saint’s head snapped to the side, looking towards the window of the dining hall. The skies were darkening, the last bit of evening still hanging on in a hue of light purple, making the moment feel all the more eerie. I stood up, walking towards the window, looking across the institute grounds.

Something was wrong. I could feel it.

My gaze narrowed on the distance ahead where the gates were, the sensation growing in my chest. I spoke to Saint, who appeared behind me, sliding a hand over my hip and pulling me back against him. “Something is very wrong.”

Almost accenting my words, the alarms began going off right as a massive sound, almost like an explosion, rattled the windows, light sparking over the treetops past the security walls.

Shit. What the hell was going on right now? My lips pulled back in a snarl as Saint's words confirmed my fears.

“The humans. They followed us back.”

ARABELLA

MY CONCERN HADN'T BEEN unfounded.

That was the first thought that popped into my head as the alarms for the institute went off, everything inside of me seizing up. I swallowed, knowing instinctively that this was because of the mission they'd just come back from. My feelings, my paranoid fear, had not been imagined. I just would not have guessed that this would have been the result.

I still didn't regret saving the little girl, even if it brought issues right to our goddamn doorstep. This was bad—really bad—but I knew we could handle it. My eyes moved up to where Saint was already staring at me, the rest of the room breaking into action as I tried to process what exactly we needed to fucking do.

This was far from the first time that we had been attacked, but something told me that this was not some rogue human trying to drive through the gate. No, this felt larger than that. I knew I wasn't the only one who felt it either, because Saint looked extremely tense, his eyes turning more silver than anything else.

“We need to get you to the control room,” Razar demanded, appearing next to us. His eyes were black as his skin rippled with an attempt to control his nightmare form from slipping out. I knew he wouldn't be able to do so for long with the apparent threat on our doorstep.

I nodded sharply and walked with the two of them towards the large dining hall door, the rest of our team following us,

everyone more tense than normal. Anxiety and indignation ran through me at the notion that MAM would feel as though they could attack my home. *Our home.*

We were organized. *We had this.* I knew the Class B teams would already either be on their way out, stationed along the walls, or had already been posted there for security duty. Class C would stay here in the institute as a defensive measure while Class A went directly in to handle the problem. I would be with my father in the control room, and while that normally felt like more than enough, I found myself wanting more. I wanted to make them suffer for feeling as if they could attack our home.

“Why did they follow?” I demanded. They had never done so before.

Saint’s answer was instantaneous. “The girl. They recognize she’s of value.”

Yeah, humans were unfortunately fantastic at exploiting an individual’s value for their own use, so his words shouldn’t have surprised me.

We crossed through a heavy set of security doors and made our way towards the suite that held my father’s office and the conference room.

“Arabella.” My father stood at the door, the heavy metal entrance held open by him as the medical team carted a long bed into the space. I frowned, only to realize that it was the bed that contained the small girl from before.

“What’s wrong?” I tried to peek in as they pushed the bed into the conference room. “Obviously, outside of the attack.”

“We moved the girl, cleared the conference room for her. Figured it was safer to keep her here with us,” he explained as we filed in. My father was already going towards the large set of screens in the control room, his movements panicked and far faster than normal.

“I need all of you out there now, Amun included. This is not a few fucking rogue humans.” My father never swore, causing Razar’s hand to tense on my back, realizing how bad

this was. “Extra uniforms are in the containment room. I’ll open it up so you can leave through there.”

“How many?” I asked, alarmed.

“I don’t have a count yet, but easily over a hundred, possibly more on the way.”

What the actual fuck?

Breaking from Razar, I watched as my father opened up the screens, showing the large amount of massive military trucks and humans outside of our gates as the smoke cleared from an attempted explosion. My lips peeled back in a snarl, feeling a panicked threat hit my chest. I watched the guys enter into the containment room, and my heart began to squeeze, realizing that there was a very large and real danger here when it came to radicals. I had absolutely no idea what extent they would go to, but clearly violence was on their mind.

“I need you focused.” My father squeezed my shoulder. “Go in there if you need to, but I need them out there as soon as possible. I don’t trust any of the other teams to pull it off with the least amount of damage.”

He meant damage to nightmares, not to the humans attacking us.

I nodded, walking towards the door and kicking off my heels before stepping in through the unlocked first door and then in through the second. I watched as my father set into action the building’s hydraulics that removed the room’s ceiling and far wall. This space had the ability to transform as it was, so it sat on the outskirts of the institute. As it opened, the night air and sky flooded in.

My eyes darted towards the locker room as I eagerly waited for them to come out. I needed to see them, tell them that it wasn’t a fucking option but to make sure they didn’t get hurt.

I froze only momentarily when a large hand wrapped around my waist and turned me into them, my head falling

back to look up into Damian's completely black eyes that seemed to streak randomly with a neon electric pink.

"Don't do anything dangerous or risky," I warned, knowing it was pointless, probably, while looking over his nightmare form and finding it almost painful because of how gorgeous he was. Gorgeous and absolutely lethal. His skin was now the color and texture of dark onyx lava that was cracked throughout to reveal a hot pink magma that was reflected in the ends of his hair, which seemed to be moving, almost like live flames. His tail wrapped around my waist as he lifted me up against him, his height several feet taller than normal, making my entire body melt at the easy movement. I shivered as his nose brushed mine, his large horns making my fingers twitch as I considered touching them, and a rumble broke from his throat.

"Damian." My hands came up to cup his jaw.

"Fuck it."

His words only were confusing for a moment. He crushed me further against him and molded his mouth to mine. I whimpered against his lips, the taste of cigar smoke and mint on my tongue as a dangerous electric energy seemed to surge through me. I could feel everything crackle and come alive around me as a frenzied feeling hit my chest, making me want to wrap my legs around him. All too soon he was gone, setting me on the ground, and making his way towards the exit in the back of the room in a blink of an eye.

Holy hell. I swear, he better be careful, because I one hundred percent needed another kiss like that.

The sound of the door of the locker room opening had me turning as Cy strode out with Amun, both of them dressed in their uniforms and talking in a low, quiet tone. They probably hadn't needed to change into their uniforms, but it did provide some level of protection when they weren't in their nightmare forms.

"Don't let them do anything stupid," I instructed. "Specifically Saint."

Cy flashed a smile, his refusal to confirm making me narrow my eyes in frustration. Not that it lasted very long, because he was so completely worked up and eager for a fight, a flash of danger in his gaze as he suddenly dipped his lips to mine in a firm kiss. I whimpered in surprise as his thumb brushed over the mark on my neck before he pulled back and winked at me, walking towards the back of the room. He slipped out into the night, leaving me with Amun, who was watching me with a not so small amount of heat.

“You look good in that uniform,” I commented somewhat absently before frowning. “You know you don’t have to—”

“Yes. Yes, I do,” he rumbled before stepping into me and cupping my jaw. “Now promise me you will stay in that fucking room until we get back.”

I examined the very real concern and almost fear in his eyes, then nodded. “I promise.”

I fought a small sigh of disappointment as he jogged towards the exit, making me wish he had shifted in front of me. *What?* It was sexy! Did it help my concern over this? Of course not, but it would have made me feel a little bit better, if we were being honest.

Shaking my head, I turned back towards the locker room, only to stumble back slightly, a small, surprised noise breaking from my throat.

“Zain.” My head fell back as a cloud of black and red, pulsing energy surrounded me. I placed a hand on the face that appeared, red lit eyes flashing with something dark and emotional, before he disappeared completely. I swallowed, already feeling the loss of his presence as I tried to just view this as a normal mission. Although, to be fair, I usually had far more time to mentally prepare for that.

“So much doubt in our abilities.” Saint’s amused tone was back as I felt him appear behind me. I turned into him, and my chest relaxed a small amount at the confidence he was brimming with.

They could handle this.

“Saint, I want you to get everyone from ISS back tonight, safe,” I demanded.

His lips pressed into a dark, wicked smile. “No matter what?”

I swallowed, knowing what I was giving him permission to do. “I don’t want to lose anyone.”

His eyes darkened to completely black before flashing silver. He nodded sharply. “I understand, flower.”

I’m sure he did. There was a possibility this wouldn’t turn violent, but if it did, I wanted Saint to make sure the people we had sworn to keep safe were in fact kept safe.

I watched him walk towards the back of the room as he tossed me a smile. It was distracting enough that I didn’t realize someone else had joined me until icy tendrils wrapped around my waist, and I found myself looking up into Razar’s dark eyes. Neither he nor Blackwell, who was standing next to him, were shifted, but both were in uniform.

“Stay safe,” Razar warned, brushing his lips across my forehead.

“Or else.” Blackwell flashed me a wicked smile before they left as well, leaving me feeling a sense of loss. I crossed my arms and stared at their exit for a long moment after they were already gone. When the wall began to go up and the ceiling closed, I inhaled sharply and turned to walk back into the control room.

Those bastards better make it back. I didn’t like how anxious this situation was making me. It was like everything about the mission last night and now this today reeked of something suspicious going on.

“Something about this is off,” I warned my father as I stepped into the control room, the doors locking behind me. “This attack, it is too forward and stupid, even for them.”

I couldn’t look at the cameras, not ready to see the chaos unfold until I knew we were winning.

“I don’t disagree.” My father ran a hand through his dark hair. “They aren’t just at the front gates, either. We have also received warnings about a possible threat to our air space. It was almost like they were waiting for us to make a move so they had an excuse.”

I froze and looked at him with wide eyes. “You think?”

“They are government supported.” He grunted and shook his head. “I have all the teams ready, even the aerial ones, but this could get really bad, really fast. I am hoping we can squash this quickly. They have only detonated one explosion, so if we can just scare them enough to leave...”

“If not?” I asked softly.

“Then blood will be shed, especially if they can compromise the gates.”

“Fuck.”

Turning towards the conference room, I went to go grab my tablet, closing the door and letting out a breath, pressing my head against the door as I tried to refocus. I needed to be on my complete A game. I had to be prepared for anything. I turned around slowly, ready to grab my stuff... and I found myself frozen by a pair of black eyes, tinted with silver, that matched Saint’s almost exactly. My mouth dropped open in surprise at the small girl that was staring at me.

Except... well, she wasn’t exactly the same girl as yesterday.

“You’re awake?” I tilted my head, trying to figure out what the difference was between her yesterday and now, besides the fact that she didn’t look nearly as dead. When I say she had looked rough before, that wasn’t a lie, but now she looked far more vibrant, so much so that I was doubting this was even the same girl. She nodded while pushing waves from her face, examining me with a gaze that seemed far too old for her age. I was tempted to call my father in, but I had a feeling that he wouldn’t know what to do any better than I did, and trust me... I was clueless.

“Where am I?” Her voice was soft but firm.

“ISS. It is a safe place for nightmares, I promise. My team extracted you from the humans’ facility,” I explained softly.

Her smile grew. “Thank you, Arabella.”

And she knew my name.

“How old are you?” I blinked, trying to wrap my head around this.

“Currently?” she asked, frowning and looking over her thin arms. “It would appear I am around five.”

“Appear?” I felt my brows raise.

“I am currently physically five.” She smiled and tilted her head. “I have to admit, this is probably one of the more peaceful reincarnations I’ve encountered. Poor girl went through far too much trauma for someone so young. I don’t blame her for giving up.”

“I don’t understand,” I admitted, noticing that the bracelet that had kept her power controlled in case she freaked out was sitting broken open on the bed next to her. Which either meant that she was strong enough that I didn’t need to worry, assuming she had control... or I was screwed.

“The body I currently inhabit is not my original form. In fact, until just a few minutes ago, this body belonged to someone else,” she explained easily. “The girl, the one tortured and held by humans, gave up and begged for death, so we took that burden from her, and I have clearly been reincarnated into her current form. Don’t worry, though—her soul is at far more peace than it was with everything she went through at the hands of those vile pigs.” The hatred I heard was very real, and I was wondering if she realized I was human.

“Who are you?” I choked out as her power filled the space, making me realize just how lethal this small nightmare was. It almost seemed impossible that she could contain this level of energy. This had to be a god terror, easily.

“My name is Eve,” she explained, “but that isn’t what you are asking for.”

I felt my brows rise as she patted the bed. I walked over, sitting on the edge almost immediately. Her head tilted as she examined my expression. “This form bothers you? It isn’t my preference, either. I tend to keep the form I am reborn into for at least a little bit, but I can change it.”

“It’s just a bit trippy,” I admitted.

Snapping her fingers, my eyes widened as the girl in front of me shimmered in a cloud of silver and appeared moments later as a woman in her mid-twenties. Her dark, raven hair hung to her waist, the same shade as the little girl’s. She was the same person but clearly an older version of herself, and her silver eyes streaked with black tracked my expression with interest. She was also wearing a pair of black leather pants with heels and a tank top, making me wonder what the hell was going on here.

I mean... could we also address the fact that she could literally be Saint’s twin? Maybe it was just the dark hair and overall aesthetic, but I felt like the more I looked at her, the more her facial features shifted. In fact, it was honestly a bit difficult to focus on her.

“Eve,” I breathed out, feeling unsteady, “*Who* the fuck are you?”

She flashed a pure white smile. “That’s easy—*I am Life.*”

“What?”

I was not processing her words, my head reeling. I had seen a lot. Been through a lot. But a little girl shifting into a grown woman and claiming she was the reincarnation of... life? Yeah, that was sort of making this day hit a brand new level on the ‘what the hell’-o-meter.

“I am a god terror,” she explained easily. “Specifically, Life. And just as there is Death, there is Life. Which reminds me, where is my brother?”

“Your brother?” I was just repeating shit now.

“Yes, I assume he was called here because of you. You have his mark all over you,” she rationalized, looking at her

dark nails briefly. “I have to admit, I didn’t expect him to find a mate, ever.”

Oh sweet Christ.

“Saint?” she continued. “I think he still goes by Saint, because he’s a ridiculous bastard.” She waved her hand. *Oh my sweet Christ.* “Something about finding it funny because of humans and their religious practices and fear of death? I suppose he could have changed it, but he is a stubborn bastard, so highly unlikely.”

Yes, I was seeing the family resemblance here. I was also going to kill Saint.

“Outside. There is an attack on our institute—”

Eve stood and walked towards the door. I stumbled up to stop her, but considering she was 6’1”, if not taller, there wasn’t much chance of that happening.

When the door opened, my father looked over and arched a brow in surprise.

“You must be the Director of this place?” she asked as I ran a hand through my hair, offering my father a bewildered look. One I assumed he would echo.

“And you must be the god terror we saved,” my father mused.

“Guilty.” She flashed a smile. “Eve.”

My father offered her a real smile as I watched the fucking weirdness, their hands meeting in a firm grasp. I sunk down onto the couch and watched in momentary surprise as he began showing her the screens, clearly not taken aback as much as me.

“I should help.” She frowned.

“They are here for you,” my father pointed out.

“Yes, but they are stupid and don’t understand,” she muttered.

“Let’s attempt a negotiation first,” my father suggested as my eyes narrowed on the screen where that exact thing was

occurring.

“Oh, mind if I make some coffee?” she asked, her hand plucking up the sparkly unicorn mug I’d used only yesterday. “My last life, I lived near this adorable bistro in Italy that had the best coffee.”

“Sure.” My manners got the best of me as I watched her pour a cup.

That was before another explosion sounded in the distance and snapped my head towards the screens.

Fuck. How much did we want to bet the negotiations weren’t going to work out?

SAINT

THE HUMANS SEEMED AUTHENTICALLY SURPRISED when we detonated one of their bombs from a distance, my eyes narrowing as they scattered on the other side of the large security gate. I could feel their nervous energy, and it didn't feel like the anger and volatile nature of someone planning an attack. Even the humans at the other gates seemed nervous, almost jumpy.

My flower was correct—something about this was very much off, and now we just needed to figure out *what*.

I narrowed my gaze as one of our Class A teams stood at the gates, talking with one of the main guards, the rest of us standing behind them. We may have been the lead team at the institute, but that did not fucking mean we were about to waste time interacting with these pieces of shit. None of us had the patience for that.

My fingers tapped against my leg as I considered Arabella's words. She had given me permission to slaughter whoever I wanted, and I found myself annoyed that I wasn't able to enact my desire. Shaking my head, I considered walking back to the institute, but something kept me here.

Probably because I needed to know that Arabella would be safe, for sure, and that I had every piece of information that could assure that. Then I would go back and complete what I had set out to do anyway tonight.

I planned on making it very clear to her exactly how I felt about our little conversation earlier. It was time to put all this

bullshit about the possibility of her dying to rest. I had thought I had enough patience, but... no. No, I was over it. Apparently, eternity hadn't changed my impatience.

Then again, I had arrived a fair amount of time ago and was only reaching my limit now. Maybe I was better than I gave myself credit for. My head tilted as I remembered the first moment I had felt a call to the institute and, more specifically, my flower. For the first time in my life, everything had crystalized, and eons of existence had become nothing but a blink of an eye, because if it wasn't about the radiant light coming from the Americas, it didn't really matter to me, frankly.

BLOOD DRIPPED FROM MY HANDS. I wiped them off on my jeans before tilting my head, frowning at the ringing in my ear. I closed my eyes as a pulsing in my chest began to tug me towards... somewhere. The sounds of the city around me went silent as I let my magic collapse over me, following the jolt and tug that had been pulling at me more and more throughout the night. It was one of the reasons I hadn't gotten to focus on my kills as much as normal. I mean, shit, I had almost let one of those fuckers go.

Sometimes, if it was a specifically peaceful soul or non-confrontational human and I got busy, an extra day or two was no big deal. But these motherfuckers? No. Their time had very much reached its expiration date, and not a moment too soon, considering what they'd planned for tonight.

So you can imagine my distracted attitude was completely unacceptable.

I let out a frustrated exhale as I suddenly found myself landing in a warm room, my hand stabilizing myself on a carpeted floor, before snapping my head up to look around. I frowned, instantly surrounded by a soft, sweet and cool scent that had my cock hardening to the point that I found myself authentically fucking concerned. It was a fairly known fact that god terrors didn't feel any form of desire unless they were around their mate, and after this long? It was truly startling.

A low growl broke through the space as I realized that there was a nightmare in the corner of the room—specifically, a night terror—staring at me with a level of aggression I didn't fully get. I mean, I hadn't even tried to kill him yet. This was me being objectively friendly.

Then I realized why he was so worked up, his magic moving to reveal a small, almost Thumbelina-like form wrapped up in the corner of the two-story ceiling like a sleeping fairy. Her head popped up, sleepy gray and silver eyes squinting in confusion as a mess of pink hair surrounded her face, making me wonder what it would feel like against my skin. My pulse picked up, my body hardening as I found myself completely entranced by her.

After all this time. All of these years. I'd found my mate... and she was human.

EXCEPT SHE WAS SO MUCH MORE than that, and it was something I had realized fairly quickly once getting within a few feet of her. Arabella was human... to an extent, but there was something so much larger and greater to her that I had only been keeping a secret because I wasn't sure she was ready to hear it. I was almost positive we were at that point, though.

Plus, then all of those other fucking bastards could get off their goddamn soap box about being concerned over snapping her delicate frame in half while fucking her.

Arabella would be absolutely fine. Better than fine, if I had anything to say about it.

I inhaled sharply, closing my eyes as I counted to five in an attempt to calm myself down. Unless you were in my position, it was impossible to imagine what eons of frustration all wanting to be released at once felt like. I was past *wanting* Arabella, because that described a momentary desire. Sure, I wanted her... but I wanted to consume her. I wanted to brand and take her soul as my own. I knew she wasn't only mine, but her soul?

That was fucking mine.

“How long have we been out here?” I asked, realizing that the light from before was gone. Sometimes if I zoned out, days could pass, and while that didn’t happen very often with Arabella around, I did have to be careful of it.

“Two hours,” Cy muttered. He was leaning against a tree, Zain floating between the branches. Razar, Damian, and Blackwell seemed far more focused and were standing closer to the fences, attempting to intimidate the humans. It was working, for the record—I could smell their fear from here.

“I should go check on flower,” I noted under my breath.

“She’s probably worried,” Amun agreed.

I narrowed my eyes at the intrusive presence on our team. I honestly wouldn’t have minded him all that much if it wasn’t for him stealing Arabella’s attention from me. I already had to share most of it. On top of that, I preferred to be the only one with death magic on our team, so he was ruining that. I mean, he at least had the decency to be respectful about it, but I also found myself wanting to snap his neck. Just on principle, really.

Just one more reason why I so badly wanted to brand her little soul, sooner rather than later.

Feeling decided on the action, I turned my back on the gates and walked forward, deciding to take my time returning back. It wasn’t like we didn’t clearly have time to waste.

Plus, I wanted to talk to the Director about what was occurring. I really did have to agree that something about this felt off. I had been around humans for far longer than I cared to be, and everything about this attack smelled of distraction. It concerned me that there could be something larger in the works. Something that wouldn’t be nearly as easy to handle and could put my flower’s safety at risk.

After a few minutes of walking, I let my magic collapse over me as I appeared in the hallway outside of the office, immediately sensing two heartbeats. The Director’s was rather standard, but Arabella’s was light and fast like a

hummingbird's wings. I would be able to recognize it anywhere, and I found myself suddenly very eager to see her, wanting to assure her that nothing had happened yet.

I didn't like how anxious she got about these missions and small attacks. Didn't she understand that I would never let anything happen to her? I wouldn't let anything happen to the others either, purely because I knew how much it would upset her... not because I had begrudgingly formed a friendship with them that I was still iffy about most days.

Frowning, I paused as I opened up the door, the locks disengaging easily with a small surge of my power and drawing the attention of... three sets of eyes? An annoyed groan broke from my throat as I realized what exactly was going on. Honestly, it shouldn't have been all that surprising—it had been about fifty years, so it made sense that she would show up again.

Although today, of all days, it was hardly needed.

Before paying mind to the nuisance in the room, I crossed the space and instantly wrapped my flower into a tight embrace, burying my nose in her hair. I scowled, hating that she smelled even a bit like her father or anyone else that she had been spending time with. It was acceptable for her to have my scent on her, and that was about it. Maybe I should just start dressing her in my clothes each morning... she already thought I was crazy, so it probably wouldn't faze her.

“Came to check in on you.” I pulled back as she offered me a wide-eyed curious look, her eyes dancing with confusion and a possible amount of anger and frustration. Fuck.

“No hello for me?” Eve laughed as I tucked Arabella against me and offered my little sister a narrowed, clinical glance.

“Out of all the times you would choose to show up, did you have to pick now?” I questioned, knowing that the Director was watching all of this but choosing to stay quiet.

I knew we probably needed to talk to him, or I did, about what Arabella was... but I should probably tell her first.

Maybe he had already assumed. It did seem odd to me that he was so okay with so many nightmares being around her without him being aware of what made her so special.

“I didn’t plan this!” Eve frowned. “That little girl wanted out, so here I am.”

“You never told me you had a sister.” Arabella’s voice was muffled against my chest as I realized that Eve had probably already put her through the works.

There was far too much I hadn’t told her, actually.

I cupped her jaw and spoke quietly. “Honestly, she is in and out of my life so much, I didn’t even think about it.”

“Nice,” Eve huffed. “To think I thought you would be excited to see me.”

It actually was rather nice to see her... but just not today.

“We have bigger issues right now. What you are causing is chaos, and the humans have followed us back here because of ___”

“Not because of me,” she pointed out. She walked over towards the Director, who looked up from the tablet he was on. He handed it off, watching her with a clinical interest. “In fact, I think Arabella is correct. I think that this is a distraction.”

I felt pride swell in my chest as Arabella’s face lit up a bit, clearly happy that someone else came to the same conclusion. Then I felt a surge of fucking jealousy because I had thought the same thing, but now if I said anything she would think I was bullshitting her.

“So what do we do?” she asked.

“We keep them talking and everyone on alert,” the Director explained and then looked at me. “I’m assuming you got bored with negotiations and that’s why you’re back here.”

I shrugged. “Amongst other reasons.” *Like wanting to toss your daughter over my shoulder and take her back to her room where I can work out a number of my frustrations on her tight, sexy body.* But yeah, sure. Boredom.

“I really would have never expected you to find your mate, Saint,” Eve said clearly as both the Director and Arabella seemed to look up at me to gauge my reaction. A sigh broke through my lips as I felt both exhilaration at the ability to admit that, because fuck, she had already said it... so oh well. But also a bit of unease when meeting Arabella’s eyes that were now shaded in confusion and hurt, because I had no doubt she was thinking of a million fucking reasons why I hadn’t told her. All of them were wrong.

“Mate?” James rang out clearly, his eyes narrowing on me. Unfortunately, her father did know exactly what I was, and not just that I had reaper death magic. No, I was far more than that, and fuck did it make all of this more complicated, because Arabella wasn’t aware either. At least not fully.

“Yes,” I hissed out. Arabella seemed to jolt at my tone. Before I could stop her, she stepped away and pinned me with a look, a range of emotions flashing across her face as she muttered something under her breath. Eve clearly had heard it, because she laughed at the fucking situation I was in now.

“Flower,” I hedged softly, reaching out to her again.

“I need a minute.” Arabella frowned as she walked towards the door, betrayal flashing across her face.

Hadn’t I been shitting on the others for keeping secrets earlier? I suppose I looked like the worst kind of hypocrite now. I let out a low growl as I pinned my sister with a look.

She shrugged, sitting down across from the Director. “You should go fix that,” she suggested.

“And when you get back, we are talking,” James leveled, shaking his head and looking back down at the tablet.

Motherfuckers.

Cursing up a storm, I walked into the hallway and flashed down the space, catching the elevator door before it sealed me away from my flower.

“What?” she growled.

Now how the hell did I explain to the woman I obsessed over that she was mated to Death without her freaking the fuck out?

ARABELLA

THE ELEVATOR WAS quiet as my eyes narrowed on my shoes, feeling an odd range of frustration, excitement, and betrayal. I had already mentally gotten over the bullshit from earlier, but then to also find out Saint had been keeping shit from me? Multiple things? I just... I just needed a moment. And a *moment* I was not being given, considering he was currently bearing down in my space, leaning against the elevator wall and keeping me cornered despite my best attempt to ignore him.

“It wasn’t that I was keeping something from you... not exactly,” he hedged, sounding unsure of himself for the first time in... well, in all the time that I had known him.

I shook my head at his words, and when the elevator opened to my private floor, I walked ahead, needing to get some space. Oddly, and not in a very Saint-like fashion, he let me.

Well, for a moment, at least.

“Just leave me alone, Saint,” I shot back, feeling a flurry of emotions that I wasn’t fully committed to handling right now. I grabbed my bedroom door and flung it open, attempting to close it quickly afterwards. Of course, he not only caught it but slammed it back open, offering a soft chuckle at what had been a somewhat sad attempt at exercising my frustration.

A squeak came from my throat as I was suddenly tugged around the waist and dropped onto the bed, his predatory gaze flashing with a dangerous light as he pinned my body to the

bed. I struggled against him, pushing on his chest as his smirk grew, something flashing under his skin that almost looked like lightning and should have had me worrying.

Instead, I was just getting turned on, which was not okay right now. At all. I was angry at him. Maybe not angry, but frustrated and over this shit. I should have guessed that the danger he posed was so much more than I could have ever imagined.

“You know I can’t do that, flower,” he growled, his hand smoothing up my waist and over my breast to wrap around my neck. A small moan broke from my throat as heat exploded between my legs, my nipples tightening as my fingers dug into his skin rather than trying to push him away.

His voice was low as he dipped his head. “That’s now how any of this works, Arabella. I won’t ever leave you alone, even if you beg.” His entire mannerism was dangerously soft and untrustworthy, a velvet tone to his voice that almost sounded like a purr. This was the truly dangerous side of Saint, because *how* he said something didn’t matter nearly as much as *what* he said. I knew that despite his persuasive, almost seductive tone, he was one hundred percent serious about never leaving me alone.

It didn’t change my frustration with him... but it was hot.

“You lied to me.” My breath caught as his other hand gripped my waist, his fingers tightening on my throat, not enough to hurt but very firm.

“No I didn’t.” Saint’s lips pressed into a smile as if amused, his body dropping against mine, his hard length pressed between us. I attempted to press my thighs together, needing some relief from the ever-growing need. I growled as his knee separated my legs, a devious flash filling his gaze as I refocused on his words.

“If you had ever asked me, ‘*Saint, what or who are you?*’ I would have told you.”

Such a liar... maybe. I actually could see that being the truth. Didn’t I say you have to be exact with the man?

“How about when I first met you?” I demanded, not even touching on the all-important ‘mate’ aspect that Eve brought to my attention, something that was more important to me than his ridiculously overpowered self. Also, could we talk about the fact that Saint had a sister?!

My fingers brushed up his neck and twined in his hair, pulling a bit so that he let out a low growl. Our frames were completely pressed against one another, nothing separating us anymore.

“You asked for my name.” His expression turned calculating. “I told you.”

“You omitted the important part,” I said firmly. “And what’s this about your sister saying we are mates? Is that true?”

I couldn’t help but pray that it was. I knew he had said yes, but fuck—I needed confirmation, because it sounded far more serious than I would have imagined.

His eyes flashed with what almost looked like pleasure. “Yes, you are my mate, Arabella. But how exactly should I have told you that without scaring the living hell out of you? Should I have just looked into your pretty eyes and told you ‘Hey, you’re Death’s fated mate’? Is that what you would have preferred, flower?”

Well, when you put it that way... absolutely.

“Yes,” I said with complete confidence. “Or are you also afraid of the same shit as everyone else?”

He chuckled, a deep, dangerous sound, as his eyes flashed with mirth. “The only thing I am afraid of is *not* fucking you.”

I swallowed, ignoring the jolt that his harsh, crude words sent right to my center. “The others are.”

“The others have no concept of what you are.”

What?

“What are you talking about?” I whispered.

Saint's gaze flashed down to my lips as he seemed to snap to a decision. One that I was completely on board for.

I had imagined kissing Saint far too many times to count, along with a lot less innocent of actions... but the way he kissed me was something my own imagination could never have conjured. There was an almost eager yet hesitant edge to it, filled with hot tension but caution that encouraged me to meet him fully.

Was he concerned I wouldn't want to kiss him? That I would pull away? Saint was overwhelmingly confident, so his hesitancy surprised me, convincing me to prove how much I wanted him. My entire body suddenly broke into shivers, sparking as if an electric current was being shot directly through me. It washed away any sense of being annoyed with him, and the more I deepened the kiss, the harder his grip became on me.

A whimper broke from my lips as something seemed to grow between us, a needy sensation working its way across my skin as every nerve ending seemed to pulse. A wave of desperate need washed through my body as my hips pressed against his hard, unfortunately covered, cock.

I tightened my fingers in his hair, nipping at his bottom lip as he tried to pull away from the kiss.

"Saint," I moaned on a breathy voice as his lips began to move down the column of my neck, his fingers easily tearing the translucent top that I'd been wearing, the material fluttering to the bed. I would have complained, but his fingers were suddenly sliding over my skin, and I worried if I said anything he would stop. I jumped as I felt his lips trail across my stomach, my jeans being unbuttoned and slid off with an expert ease. I felt like the man was taking his time with this, so much so that it was driving me insane, making me grow wetter and more needy by the moment.

I shivered as his power began to wrap around me, the electric nature of it causing my focus to blur as my pulse began to turn erratic and almost uneven. Holy hell, the man

was just undressing me, and I felt like I was on the verge of coming.

“Please.”

Apparently, my ‘please’ wasn’t acceptable, because the word had barely left my mouth before I was crying out, a sharp nip to my neck making me realize that he had discarded his shirt and was once again over me, watching with a predatorial intensity. I felt trapped, and I absolutely loved it.

“I’m going to take as long as I fucking like, Arabella,” he growled, my full name rolling off his lips. He began to place delicate kisses along my jaw, the contrasting energy making my head spin. “I have been thinking about undressing your hot little body nonstop for fucking years now. Do not rush me.”

The command in his voice was clear enough that I nodded, whimpering as he rocked against me, his hard erection pressed against my wet lace panties. I jumped as he suddenly tugged down the corset top I was wearing, exposing my breasts to the cool air.

“Fuck, you are so perfect,” he groaned, his hot mouth coming over my painfully peaked nipple, his tongue and teeth making me feel as though I was going to come from this alone. My breathing was in a near pant, and my legs opened fully so that I could feel as much of him as possible. I was pretty damn sure I was trembling, this teasingly hot pace making me feel almost high.

His magic was sparking against my skin, branding me as a vacuum of energy began to pull and tug against my own, making me feel lightheaded as ecstasy flooded my body. I was a needy mess, and a panicked feeling entered my chest, feeling as though if I didn’t have Saint inside of me, I was going to die.

A whine left my throat as I began to unabashedly rock against him, his teeth tugging harder on my nipple as his fingers teased my other breast mercilessly. Was he trying to make me come like this? If so, it was going to absolutely work.

“I need you,” I finally gasped, my eyes fluttering shut. “Please, Saint.”

I had never needed him more than I did in this moment, and I could feel that if I didn’t have him, my body was going to melt into a puddle of need. I would never be whole again, ripped apart by the absolute, all-consuming desire for Saint.

“I don’t know if you are ready for me, Arabella.” His voice was soft and edged in a heated caution, his fingers gripping my jaw in a firm hold as I focused on his silver-streaked eyes. Everything else around them was blurred, and not because of my lack of glasses that I’d tossed to the side.

“I am,” I promised as his fingers slid against my wet lace panties. A groan rumbled from his chest before he easily snapped the fabric on both sides, tossing them away. All while keeping his eyes on me, my entire body trembling as the cool air from the bedroom ran over my hot core.

I let out a moan as his fingers finally glided across my center, my fingers gripping the bedding, as I wondered if this counted as torture. I think it did. I think the bastard was torturing me... and enjoying it.

The level of possession and intensity filling his gaze was like nothing I’d seen from him before. That side of him, the older and far more dangerous one, was appearing as any hesitancy was whipped away.

I knew I should have been scared. I knew this side of him was powerful and lethal, but instead I found myself craving it more than the normal, teasing Saint.

“I don’t mean how wet you are, flower,” he purred, his voice velvet soft as he brushed his lips against mine, my moan catching as his thumb circled my wet heat over my clit. “I mean for what that would mean between us. If you let me between your legs, I’m going to fucking brand you. I’m going to take that pretty little soul of yours and mark it as mine, completely.”

Holy shit.

His eyes darkened as a deadly serious expression filled his face. “Are you sure you want to fuck Death, little girl?”

Well hell... when you put it that way. Yes. Holy shit, yes.

“I want you, Saint,” I breathed out, knowing what I was agreeing to.

His eyes flashed completely black, a wicked smile stealing over his expression before his lips were back on me. This time the kiss was toxic and almost desperate, absolutely devouring.

My thighs tightened around his hips as my nails dug into his cool, muscular skin, the hand wrapping around my throat turning tighter as he pushed a finger inside of me, causing me to jolt. I moaned his name as I felt the air in my lungs almost escape me, causing everything around me to turn into a dazzlingly beautiful effect of silver and black.

“I could take you away from all of this,” he growled against my mouth. “I could take your fucking soul and lock you away. Keep you to myself. Completely.”

Fuck, why was that so hot?

“You won’t,” I whispered as my fingers left his hair and slid down to his belt, his gaze scorching as he chuckled softly at my words.

“You trust me that much?” His voice was light and almost mocking, but I knew it didn’t match his question. His grip on my throat tightened again after having loosened, and my eyes fluttered shut, everything spinning around me.

“Yes.” It was true. No matter who or what he was, I trusted Saint.

His growl was savage, vibrating through the room, and I felt him snap, those words doing him in. I jumped in surprise as he suddenly disappeared, oxygen flooding my system as I watched him unbutton his jeans and push them down, revealing the massive hard-on he was sporting. He gripped himself in his large tattooed hand, making my center tighten as I realized that he planned on fitting *that* inside of me.

“Holy shit, you’re huge,” I choked out. A cocky smirk filled his face, and without another moment to spare, he tugged my ankles forward, making me fall back before pushing my thighs open completely so that he had access to my pussy. I moaned as I felt his hard, intimidating cock press right against my center, my breathing far faster than normal and a tiny bit of anxiety filling my chest.

Not enough to make me want to stop—rather the opposite, considering I could literally feel myself growing more drenched by the moment—but holy hell, he really was huge. It was almost obscene how large he was in comparison to me. Fucking hot as well, but obscene.

“I’m not going to take you softly, flower.” His voice vibrated through me. “I don’t have it in me. I’m going to fuck you hard and rough until you’re coming on my cock and giving me every single ounce of pleasure that I can wring from your body.”

His words should have scared me. Of course, they didn’t.

“I just need you, Saint. Any way I can get you,” I promised breathlessly.

A scream of surprise and slight pain broke from my throat as he surged forward, filling me in one hard push, my body jumping at the intrusion. I whimpered, gripping his back and probably leaving a mark, as he snarled against my neck. As he began to pump his hips, I realized only half his cock was inside of me... how the fuck was he going to fit the rest?

“Holy fuck. You are so goddamn tight,” he groaned, his voice almost choked.

“Or you’re massive.” I inhaled sharply as I clung to him, his movements becoming deeper and harder, filling me in demanding, even strokes. I moaned out his name as his hands moved to my hips, gripping hard as he began to stroke into me like I was a toy he was using for his fucking pleasure. I loved it. My clit pulsed as everything electrified around me dangerously.

“Goddamn it,” he groaned, his one hand moving up to my hair to grip it, forcing me to turn my head slightly. The sting felt pleasurable against the feeling of him hitting so deep inside of me.

Suddenly, I cried out as he bit down on my neck, causing me to tighten around him, my entire body convulsing against him as dizziness hit me and I felt him break skin. His lips touched my blood, smearing it on my neck, and the power in the room whipped up into a frenzy. Everything seemed to grow darker and cold, his frame growing larger as he stretched me further, causing me to cry out. The pleasure mixed with a sting of pain electrified my entire body.

His pace became far faster, and my hands moved across his shoulders where I could feel his frame shifting, black shadows of magic wrapping around me as I opened my eyes to find a pair of glowing silver eyes watching me with absolute possession. Everything around us was black, filled with shadows, and I could only focus on Saint. Be with Saint. He was taking me so deep and hard that it was the only thing grounding me to the high that I felt saturating my brain and nerve endings.

I knew the risk I was taking, my body being rode hard by someone that wasn't using all of their strength in the least, but I tightened my legs around him as a dangerous, nearly feral growl echoed through the space.

The sound was enough that it shocked my system into its first climax, everything blacking out for a moment as he continued to fuck into me, everything turning into a blur of pure euphoria. I could feel every ounce of his raw power as he stopped holding back, and my body filled with both pain and pleasure at how he was taking me, tears of relief leaking down my face as I lifted my fingers to his lips that were stained in my blood. There was something between us, a bond that I could only describe as *other*.

In a sharp movement, Saint suddenly rolled us, a flush filling my body as the shadows of his magic swarmed my frame. He held my ass and pounded up into me. My nails dug into his chest as I kept my gaze on his, a moan of relief

breaking out as he hit a white-hot point of pain and pleasure. I whimpered in exhilaration as flashes of a different face melded with Saint's, bone and shadows mixing and showing me what he looked like underneath those dark robes of his nightmare form.

Holy hell, he really was Death.

"I'm going to come," I whimpered, my head falling back as my ability to stay upright began to weaken. He continued to fuck into me, faster and harder, and I sincerely wondered if something in me would shatter. There was no way I should have been able to handle this type of power for this long. My lungs felt as though they were compressing as that vacuum-like energy pulled on me, my pulse slowing as my pleasure reached another, much larger climax.

"Give me everything, Arabella." Saint's voice was a hard demand, and my body listened.

A gasp came from my throat, and I felt myself suspended over a cliff as I realized it was entirely possible that I was taking my last breath. My last heartbeat. My last everything.

It was worth it. I met his gaze and realized that it was absolutely worth it, because I never wanted him to doubt how much I loved him.

Oh fuck. I loved Saint.

My climax hit into me like a goddamn tsunami.

A connection snapped into place, jolting me as mind-numbing pleasure filled every ounce of me and life flooded back into my frame like an electric shock. I screamed out his name as everything turned into vibrant, metallic shades around me. My back hit the wall of my bedroom as Saint began to fuck me harder into the surface, my body vibrating with an energy that felt anything but human. I could feel every element of us, and I gripped his back, digging my nails in and drawing blood, needing to mark him.

"Fuck!" I screamed out as the wall behind us cracked, but he continued to fuck me against it, his face flashing between

normal and something so much more as I felt myself mesmerized by the darkness there.

I could feel him. Every breath and every ounce of power. Our connection was complete, like a loop, and I found that I was watching him, holding onto him as tightly as he held me. I felt a strength inside of me that I could have never expected.

“Look at me.” His growl was almost inhuman as my eyes snapped open. “Watch me come inside of you. Tell me you’re fucking mine as I fill up this tight little pussy with my cum.”

“I’m yours,” I moaned.

“I own every fucking part of you,” he snarled, “Your body and soul.”

Didn’t I fucking know it.

I cried out as he slammed into me at a pace that should have shattered me. He had been holding back before our connection snapped into place, but no longer. The lights in the room flickered out as his entire body and mine lit up silver, my fingers both pushing and pulling away from him because he was so goddamn deep I could feel it in my fucking throat. A snarl echoed from his chest as he pounded into me faster and faster, until his lips seared to mine and slammed against me completely, my name between us from his lips.

Oh fuck.

I felt his cock pulse, growing larger and thicker, as he filled me completely with his cum, the satisfaction of it leaving me feeling dizzy with relief.

That was right about when I blacked out.



I WAS STARTING to understand the meaning behind *la petite mort*. It was clear to me an orgasm could very much feel like a transcendent, death-like experience.

Except the French got one part wrong in their euphemism... there was nothing ‘little’ about it.

Nope. Saint was not little in any way, especially according to the ache between my legs and the breathless moment before I came, when something irrevocably changed within me, making the moment anything but small or unimportant.

In fact, I think it was possibly one of the most pivotal moments in my life.

Something I would obviously never tell Saint, because come on—that would totally give him a big head.

To match his big cock?

Wow. Okay. I clearly was still not out of this lust-induced state. Maybe I needed to go through some type of ‘get Saint out of my head’ therapy. I could also try having sex with him again... *just to make sure that’s the problem, of course.*

“Arabella.” Saint’s voice was soft and persuasive as his lips brushed against my neck, bringing me from my internal thoughts that had slowly been dragging me out of unconsciousness. His muscular arms and bare chest were cool against my heated skin, and I stretched against him, refusing to open my eyes fully because I honestly wasn’t positive I was ready to wake up.

A small almost-moan broke from my lips as pleasure sparked throughout every nerve ending, making me shiver. *Holy hell. That had been something else.*

“I think I died,” I said somewhat in amusement as a low, husky chuckle left his lips, edged in something that I needed to see. I opened my eyes to find his gaze back to normal, his body wrapped around mine and a blanket pulled over both of us. The room was completely dark, and for just a moment I could pretend like there weren’t several things we needed to talk about.

“You did, actually.”

I blinked, processing his words before tilting my head in confusion. “What?”

He flashed a dangerous smile, his teeth nipping at my collarbone and making me moan. “You did die, but then you came back to life. Less than a second, really, but when I put

my mating mark on your soul, your heart literally stopped beating.”

“Holy shit,” I mumbled, feeling slightly dazed by the revelation, and then smiled. “So we are really mates?”

“That was never in question.” His eyes flashed with a dark heat. “And no questions, really? I just told you that I essentially ripped your soul out during sex and killed you, while continuing to fuck you... and nothing?”

I blinked at him. “I have to be honest, it’s doing the opposite of scaring me.” In fact, it was turning me on.

His chuckle was louder, his smile authentic as he shook his head, his fingers brushing across my neck, his bite mark pulsating slightly. What? I was being honest! I mean, clearly, I was very much fine, so the notion didn’t bother me at all.

“I have known you were my mate since I first arrived here,” he admitted after a moment, his voice turning softer as he looked down at me. I felt a blush run over my cheeks. “God terrors have ‘fated’ mates of sorts, and I just never expected to find mine, but when I was called here... well, it became pretty obvious why.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whispered.

“Besides the fact that I had to get a hold on myself before I fucking ripped you from Razar’s arms and claimed you on your bedroom floor?” he mused, his eyes sparking at the idea of the challenge, no doubt.

“You were that attracted to me?”

My pulse jumped as his eyes looked down at my neck. I could feel a bond between us, and the pride in his chest made me feel a sense of warmth and affection for him, thrilled that my reaction to him made him happy. Man, this was a lot of warm fuzzy feelings.

“God terrors don’t feel any form of desire until they meet their mates,” he informed me softly as my brows went up.

“So you were never attracted—”

“Never,” he confirmed and then brushed his nose against my collarbone. “Our mates are the only people we ever physically love.”

My heart squeezed, and I blinked. “So this was both of our first times?”

His eyes widened slightly as something rather emotional passed through them, his sharp nod making me smile. He wrapped his arms around my waist and laid his head against my chest. I brought a hand through his hair, loving how intimate the moment felt.

I was cuddling with Death. *Holy shit*. That was... something else.

“What was the other reason?” I asked after a moment.

“Besides the five nightmares that follow after you obsessively? Or the sense of affection that you share for them?” He looked up at me, his eyes flashing with heat rather than being upset. “I figured you wouldn’t take kindly to being taken away from them, and that was very much what I wanted to do at the time.”

I bit down on my lip at the thought of the others and their reaction to all of this. Saint’s eyes snapped to it. “What?”

“I just don’t know what to do about the others. I mean... clearly, I survived... us. So do I tell them that? I am worried they will be upset—”

“I think they have a clear understanding of who you want in your life, flower,” he said, running his fingers up my bare waist. “Razar will probably attempt to start some shit with me, but it is what it is. Plus, it was about time that I explained to them why exactly you can’t die from being with one of us. I had tried several times before, but then figured it was best explained to you first. They like to tell themselves that I’m crazy, but I doubt when it comes down to it that they will be all that surprised.”

“You are a tiny bit crazy.” I flashed a smile. “And surprised about what?”

“Crazy about you.” He offered me a serious look. “You are not human, Arabella. Well, not fully human.”

What?

“What?” I sat up slightly, but he just dragged me down by the waist and pinned me against him, his fingers brushing through my hair possessively.

“Nightmares existed long before humans, and I assume we will continue to do so. However, our worlds have always been rather separate, and that, in part, comes from the inability to mate successfully with them,” he explained softly. “That was until the *sis metas* were brought into existence. It was clear upon the birth of the first that there was something distinctly different about them, because despite being human, they found themselves constantly gravitating towards nightmares.”

“Soothers?” I asked, aware that was what *sis meta* meant in Latin.

“Precisely.” He nodded. “We don’t know where they came from, if it was a natural mutation or something else, but they were born into the world with this innate ability to soothe the nightmares that most humans feared. It was actually one of the reasons that humans would sacrifice certain youth of their community to the ‘monsters’ that lived outside their walls, hoping that one of them would be a soother. Most weren’t, but the ones that were not only managed to stay alive, but often bred with the nightmares.”

“Is that how the Class D are created? Is everyone who has them a *sis meta*?” I arched a brow in confusion, wondering how something that important would have just escaped my attention.

“No.” He shook his head. “Remember, a female nightmare can still mate with a human male and become pregnant, even if the male doesn’t survive the act of mating itself. Although some humans do survive for a time, especially if it is a weaker nightmare. Never a Class A though. No, the soothers are not only extremely unique, but the only species of individuals that can successfully mate with extremely powerful nightmares to continue their line.”

“So? I don’t understand what this has to do with me.”

I was piecing it together though. The realization of what this could mean left me with a sense of satisfaction and exhilaration that everything I had wanted could be that simply achieved.

“You don’t know who your parents were, correct?” he asked, and I nodded.

“It isn’t very important, but if I had to assume, they were terrified humans that realized they had given birth to a child that far exceeded their understanding. They made the right decision by bringing you here.”

“Because I’m one of these soothers?”

“You are one of the *only* soothers left. Many of them have been killed by humans,” he explained, frowning. I felt a stab in my heart. “But that is why you are able to not only soothe nightmares but also survive mating with them.”

“Wow,” I breathed out. “And the others don’t realize it?”

“It would take a special eye to recognize it. They aren’t very well known.” He kissed my cheek gently before nuzzling against my throat. “Which is a good thing, because while you have hand-selected your mates out of free will, some nightmares may try to force you into mating if they knew of your identity.”

My stomach revolted at that. “What? Why?”

“When you mate with a nightmare, you are directly affected by their magic because soothers act as somewhat of a void, a collective vase... so you take in everything, which is why you seem to still be so drastically physically affected. However, as you take in their energy, it cycles through you and rebounds back, not only increasing the energy of the nightmare but leaving you with a marker of their magic. It’s why you have so much more energy now. As much as I love pulling your delicious soul from your body, you are going to be a bit more durable from now on, so you won’t die each time that I fuck your tight little cunt.”

I jolted at his blunt words as he flashed me a smile, a hot, electric surge of desire running over my skin and distracting me. *I couldn't begin to describe how excited I was for round two... especially if I was more 'durable.'*

"I have absolutely no idea what to say," I mumbled, staring at the many tattoos that covered his neck and shoulders. "Does my father know?"

"I think he suspects something." He tilted his head curiously. "I don't think he has put it together fully though, or else he would probably keep you away from most nightmares for your own safety."

"You guys keep me away from everyone," I teased.

"Not everyone," he mused before narrowing his eyes in thought. "I have... somewhat accepted Amun into your mating selection. Although, if you do want me to kill him, I wouldn't argue."

My face flushed. "I don't even know—"

"You feel a connection to him, and that instinct is what led you to choosing all of your other mates." He offered me a knowing look. "Including me. Amun is very much someone you have chosen, whether I like the bastard or not."

"We need to tell the others," I warned softly, anxiety about their reaction slamming into me and ruining my post-sex relaxed haze. Once they had no 'reasons' to hide behind for not accepting the bond that they said they felt towards me, how were they going to react? What if it didn't change anything?

"Only if you are ready for that." Saint nipped my collarbone.

"Ready?"

He chuckled dangerously. "I want you to consider the floodgate you are opening there."

"What do you mean?" I clearly needed coffee, because I only seemed to be understanding about every other word he said.

“You have six other nightmares that have been wanting to claim you for, well, some have been for years now, and the *only* thing holding them back has been your safety. If you tell them that isn’t a problem, that you are meant to mate with them, then you are going to find yourself being fucked, and often.”

I blinked and shivered as he flashed me a smirk. “So maybe you are ready.”

Nibbling my lip, I considered his words. “What if they don’t feel the same?”

“That has never been in question,” Saint leveled, his confidence making me feel far better. “Trust me on that. But ask them yourself when they get back here.”

“Shit, Razar is going to be upset.” I frowned, knowing how protective he was.

“Only because he worries,” Saint pointed out and then chuckled, “Well, that and because he’s a possessive bastard. Serves him right that he didn’t get to bury himself into your tight pussy first.”

“Saint!” I squeaked as he winked at me, sitting up slightly and tilting his head.

“They are still out there negotiating with the humans.” His voice was full of disapproval and annoyance.

“You can hear that?” My brows went up.

His sharp nod had me humming, fairly impressed, before I looked at the sky through my windows, the darkness telling me it had to be nearly ten at night. “How long have we been in here?”

“Give or take three or four hours.”

“Holy shit,” I squeaked, hopping up and running towards the bathroom, not bothering to grab my glasses. I immediately turned on the shower as Saint appeared, frowning and turning it off.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“I like you smelling like me,” he growled, grabbing my hip and pulling me against him before dipping his nose against my neck.

I leveled him with a look. “I am not going down there, where my father and your sister are, smelling like sex. Not to mention all the other nightmares we may come across...”

The shower was turned back on as a near pout slipped onto his face. That was cute. Saint pouting should not have been cute.

I turned towards the mirror and froze, my brows going up as Saint leaned against the bathroom counter, looking proud. I stepped closer to the mirror, noting that the mating marks from both Cy and Blackwell stood out extremely drastically, but more than that, the large bite mark on my neck was rather savage-looking. I brought my fingers to the center of my sternum where a new mark was added, a small, simplistic skull that seemed to flash with silver.

“I like you with markings,” he pointed out.

I liked it too. Way, way too much.

Shaking my head, I stepped into the shower. My eyes darted across Saint’s muscular back as he stepped into the large glass shower with me, noting the damage my nails had clearly done. A sense of pleased possessiveness filled me at that notion.

I was suddenly thankful for all the space, because this man was so damn huge. I tilted my head up as I let the water run down my frame, wondering where his thoughts were as he ran his fingers through my wet hair. It was honestly unfair how attractive this man was, plus the rainwater shower head was making him look like some goddamn male model in a commercial.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked softly as his eyes moved to mine.

His face filled with emotion as he opened his mouth to say something, only to be interrupted by the door of the bathroom being slammed open.

Crap.

ZAIN

I HAD ABSOLUTELY no reason to be surprised. I had rationally known that the water was on when I had all but barged into the bathroom, finding Bella's wet, naked body completely on display like some fucking marble statue of a divine goddess. Yet I still felt like the air had been pushed out of my chest completely, leaving me breathless.

Saint offered me a scowl and I paid it zero mind, already knowing what had happened between the two of them and finding myself far more interested than anything on how she was alive. Jealous also, but mostly fascinated and turned on at the prospect of what that could mean for me.

I was starting to feel like an idiot for not believing Saint about her being able to survive fucking one of us. My biggest confusion? I could smell death in the air still, which wasn't unusual, considering him... but I also didn't think Arabella had died. In fact, she looked more vibrant, and her energy was stronger than I had ever felt it. She almost felt less human, too, and I wasn't entirely positive how that was possible.

It didn't help that I was having issues focusing.

The entire room was filled with the scent of her desire and was completely absent of fear or pain. It was a heady and overwhelming experience that had the urgency from before, the reason I'd shown up in the first place, completely disappearing and leaving me practically breaking down on my knees to crawl towards her. I wanted to taste her more than my next goddamn breath, my nightmare rattling at the neat cage I

kept him in underneath a guise of humanity that I knew made Arabella feel comfortable. I knew he was frustrated with not being able to experience her like this, but we couldn't touch her in our other form... not like this. Not yet.

My eyes ran across her perfect frame, a low growl breaking from my throat as a blush hit her cheeks that had my cock hardening painfully.

Apocalyptic terrors were known for being unhinged. There usually wasn't a separation between our nightmare side and this more 'human' element. In fact, we were considered some of the most vile and uncontrollable nightmares there were.

I had been practically feral, living day by day, avoiding humans and other nightmares when I'd come to ISS, but upon meeting Arabella? My nightmare side had gone quiet and turned into a fucking puppy. He had been not only terrified of scaring her but had stopped trying to force his way out every time that I felt any extreme emotion. Which was why I often shifted just so he could experience what it was like to be close to her, even if it was at random times.

Being at ISS had created a peace inside of me I could have never expected, and the only thing that would foreseeably work me up to the point of shifting was a threat to Arabella. That was clearly not the case here, and despite wanting to touch her and worship the woman, I knew there were larger issues we needed to focus on... if I could just focus on that instead of the way her plush lips were parted and how her eyes were darkening with heat.

"You know, I came in here for a good reason." I tilted my head, inhaling sharply as my eyes tracked the water that ran down her silky skin. Arabella had no right to have that fucking perfect of a body. Her tight breasts and hard nipples were flushed from the hot water, and her tiny waist and hips had me wanting to bend her over so that I could bury my mouth between her long silky legs.

Holy shit. I was practically drooling.

The best part? She didn't even bother covering herself up, making me realize I was going to be painfully hard forever,

because now I didn't need to imagine what she looked like naked. No, I could literally fucking imagine every glorious detail, and when I went to bed at night, stroking my cock to the image of her body underneath mine, I would probably come really fucking fast because now I knew exactly what I was missing.

I tried to form a question. "You are not dead. How?"

Saint let out a groan of annoyance, turning off the shower and grabbing a towel for Bella, wrapping her frame in it despite my growing scowl. I liked looking at her. He wrapped one around his hips and punched my shoulder in passing, hard enough that I growled, but immediately looked back at the pink-haired goddess that was now stepping out of the shower, looking a bit flushed but very happy.

"Long story," she mused, stepping closer and running her fingers up my uniformed chest to the skin of my neck that heated under her touch. "But first, what was your reason?"

"My reason?" I arched a brow, my hand cupping her jaw as I looked at her cleavage that was pressed against her tightly wrapped towel. I ran my tongue over my sharpening teeth, wanting to know what her blood would taste like on my tongue. Probably sweet like her.

"The reason you barged into the bathroom." She smirked slightly.

"Oh." I nodded and then ran a thumb across her plush bottom lip. "You know, it doesn't seem very important anymore."

It was, but not with her pressed against me like this, all soft and warm. Vulnerable to my touch. Fuck.

"Why is that?" She stepped closer, a groan slipping from my throat as her entire body pressed up against mine.

"Because you are essentially fucking naked, and it's very distracting. All I can think about is ripping that little towel from your body and bending you over this bathroom counter," I growled, my cock jumping against her soft stomach. My

hands tightened on her as I tried to not grip her too hard, not wanting to give into the need I had for her.

Not right now. I just needed to keep saying that to myself until I believed it.

“Zain,” she mumbled, “focus.”

A rumble broke from my throat as my nightmare rattled against me, causing me to nearly shift as I met her heated gaze. On impulse—mostly because I couldn’t control myself—I surged forward, cupping her jaw, and pressed a hard, firm kiss to her lips. I knew I was about to completely ruin today with my news, so I savored her taste as she let out a soft, breathy noise and went up on her toes to try to deepen the kiss. I groaned as she nipped at my bottom lip, my tongue invading her mouth as I pulled her completely up against me, her fingers wrapping around the back of my neck.

Holy shit. I loved this woman. I knew I did, but my physical reaction only reinforced that. I had never given a lot of thought to mating, but all I wanted to do was pin her against the bathroom wall and fuck her until she was moaning my name loud enough for the entire institute to hear. When I finally pulled back, she pouted and slid down my body, making me nearly smile at the needy heat in her gaze. I had put that there, and I fucking loved it.

“You were right.” I kept my voice soft and calm. “It is a distraction. We just got word there are more on the way.”

The heat in her eyes disappeared as a clinical shade of coolness invaded. There was also a fierce sense of protectiveness there, for both the institute and the nightmares that lived here. “More humans?”

“Yes,” I admitted. My eyes darted down to the savage bite mark on her neck, left clearly by Saint, as I considered what my own would look like on her skin.

“Shit.”

She ran out of the bathroom, probably to get ready, and I frowned, wanting her perfect, curvy ass back over here. Before I could say anything or grab her, Saint appeared in the

doorway and offered me a knowing look. It was clear he had heard my comment about the humans, because instead of looking relaxed, he looked stressed and was dressed again in his uniform.

“How?” I demanded.

If it was possible, actually possible, to be with Arabella and not kill her... well, that changed everything. I would give anything to be with her. Not just physically, but completely.

Hell, if someone told me I had to fuck her like glass, I would, if it meant being inside of her and forming that bond I knew was between us. As it was, I had already fantasized about teasing her for hours, punishing both of us for giving into something that could be dangerous for her.

Now, when I slid into her, I wanted to take my time. Giving her every inch of me and worshipping her perfect fucking self. I needed to experience everything that was the woman I loved.

“She’s not fully human,” Saint explained. “We need to sit down and talk about it with everyone. I wasn’t bullshitting before—she can’t die. Well, not traditionally. Technically, she died a little—”

“Razar is going to kill you,” I chuckled. I should have been pissed too, but instead I just felt a sense of exhilaration. *Not fully human?* What the hell did that mean?

He rolled his eyes at me as Arabella squeezed past him, my eyes running over her dark jeans and tight black turtleneck, all paired with pink-soled shoes with spikes along the heel.

I wanted those around my fucking waist while I made her come. *Fuck*. This woman was so dangerous for me.

Arabella leaned over the counter, adjusting her hair into a damp, neat bun before sliding on her glasses. It was done with precision, and I could see energy rolling under her skin, making me wonder how her energy felt so different in such a short amount of time. I mean, I was worried as well, but usually she was so calm, and now there was a thread of

something else underneath it. One that almost felt more savage and less clinical. It only turned me on more.

“Let’s head out,” she said, sliding past both of us. Saint watched her with interest, affection, and a sense of ownership I found myself jealous of. He’d been inside of her, something I craved, because I wanted to delve into her very being.

I ran a hand through my hair and arched a brow as she strode towards the door, both of us following after her.

“They are a bit away—”

“Not why I am rushing,” she pointed out and slowed down slightly so she was between us. “I have an idea.”

“What’s that?”

Her smile grew as a flash of something dark entered her gaze. “If they are planning an attack, then we will make sure we are ready, but I think presenting a front of terrifying monsters is exactly the way to scare the hell out of them. After all, isn’t that why they hate us?”

“You think we should all shift?” I rumbled, my nightmare jumping at her possible attention.

“That... and I think we have some members of the institute that would be willing to help us out.”

Saint made a concerned noise as I tried to figure out what she meant. “Arabella...”

“Worth a shot,” she pointed out, and my brows went up as we stepped into the elevator and she hit the basement button.

Oh fuck.

“They are unpredictable and don’t want to be here,” Saint grunted.

“They also hate humans.” Her voice was soft and knowing, making me realize that she was completely serious about her plan.

Arabella wanted to let out those nightmares that were far too dangerous to keep in normal society, the ones who

slaughtered humans for fun and refused to join the institute as part of a team.

“They could also easily just leave,” I pointed out.

Her gaze met mine as she nibbled her lip in thought. “That’s why we aren’t just letting them out. We are also calling up the guards from there.”

My back went ramrod straight as my eyes widened, “No way. They are fucking down there for a reason.”

If you had nightmares that weren’t allowed in society, you had to make sure they were guarded by something far more terrifying, so what she was suggesting... well, fuck.

“And we need their help for a good reason.” Her lips pressed together, and then she looked at both of us as the elevator doors opened, revealing a long, dark hallway. She stepped forward and turned slightly, pinning us with a look.

“It’s time to remind the humans why they fear the dark.”

AFTERWORD

Want more from Arabella and her nightmares? The second book in the ISS series is already available for purchase! Make sure to pick up *Defending Nightmares* today.

I.S.S.

Book 1 - [Soothing Nightmares](#)

Book 2 - [Defending Nightmares](#)

Interested in exclusive access to teasers, cover reveals, and the most updated information on your favorite M. Sinclair series? Make sure to become a raven today by joining my reading group: [Sinclair's Ravens](#).

M. SINCLAIR

International Best Seller

M. Sinclair is a Chicago native, parent to 3 cats, and can be found writing almost every moment of the day. Despite being new to publishing, M. Sinclair has been writing for nearly 10 years now. Currently in love with the Reverse Harem genre, she plans to publish an array of works that are considered romance, suspense, and horror within the year. M. Sinclair lives by the notion that there is enough room for all types of heroines in this world, and being saved is as important as saving others. If you love fantasy romance, obsessive possessive alpha males, and tough FMCs, then M. Sinclair is for you!

Just remember to love cats... that's not negotiable.



PUBLISHED WORK

M. Sinclair has crafted different universes with unique plotlines, character cameos, and shared universe events. As a reader, this means that you may see your favorite character or characters... appear in multiple books besides their own storyline.

Universe 1

Established in 2019

VENGEANCE

Book 1 - [Savages](#)

Book 2 - [Lunatics](#)

Book 3 - [Monsters](#)

Book 4 - [Psychos](#)

Complete Series

Vengeance : [The Complete Series](#)

THE RED MASQUES

Book 1 - [Raven Blood](#)

Book 2 - [Ashes & Bones](#)

Book 3 - [Shadow Glass](#)

Book 4 - [Fire & Smoke](#)

Book 5 - [Dark King](#)

Complete Series

A Raven Masques Novel - [Birth of a Raven](#)

TEARS OF THE SIREN

Book 1 - [Horror of Your Heart](#)

Book 2 - [Broken House](#)

Book 3 - [Neon Drops](#)

DESCENDANT

Book 1 - [Descendant of Chaos](#)

Book 2 - [Descendant of Blood](#)

Book 3 - [Descendant of Sin](#)

REBORN

Book 1 - [Reborn In Flames](#)

Book 2 - [Soaring In Flames](#)

Book 3 - [Realm Of Flames](#)

THE WRONGED

Book 1 - [Wicked Blaze Correctional](#)

Book 2 - [Evading Wicked Blaze](#)

Book 3 - [Defeating Wicked Blaze](#)

LOST IN FAE

Book 1 - [Finding Fae](#)

Book 2 - Exploring Fae

Book 3 - Freeing Fae



Universe 2

Established in 2020

COURT OF RELLA

Book 1 - Fae Fiefdom



Paranormal & Fantasy Series

*THESE SERIES ARE NOT CURRENTLY AFFILIATED WITH A SPECIFIC M. SINCLAIR
UNIVERSE.*

THE DEAD AND NOT SO DEAD

Book 1 - Queen of the Dead

Book 2 - Team Time with the Dead

Book 3 - Dying for the Dead

Completed Series

SILVER FALLS UNIVERSITY

Book 1 - Lost

Book 2 - Forgotten

I.S.S.

Book 1 - Soothing Nightmares

Book 2 - Defending Nightmares



Contemporary Universe

Established in 2021

THE SHADOWS OF WILDBERRY LANE

Book 1 - Perfection of Suffering

Book 2 - Execution of Anguish



Standalone Novels

Peridot (Jewels Cafe Series)

Time for Sensibility (Women of Time)

WILLOWDALE VILLAGE COLLECTION

A collection of standalone novels about the women of Willowdale Village.

Voiceless

Fearless



Collaborations

REBEL HEARTS HEISTS DUET

(M. SINCLAIR & MELISSA ADAMS)

Book 1 - [Steal Me](#)

Book 2 - [Keep Me](#)

Completed Duet

FORBIDDEN FAIRYTALES

(THE GRIM SISTERS - M. SINCLAIR & CY JONES)

Book 1 - [Stolen Hood](#)

Book 2 - [Knights of Sin](#)

Book 3 - [Deadly Games](#)

STALK ME... REALLY, I'M INTO IT.

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