

DAWN
DARLING

one little
Nightmare



ONE LITTLE
NIGHTMARE

OF GODS AND MONSTERS

DAWN DARLING



One Little Nightmare, written and published by Dawn Darling

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Author's Note

Acknowledgements

Did you love OLN?

About the Author

To all the girlies whose fascination with American Horror Story got a little too deep, and the obsession with malevolent gods went a little too hard. For all of those who listen to the Queen of the Damned soundtrack on repeat and relate to Wednesday Addams on a spiritual level.

This one is for us.



PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



Zeus — zoos

Pandora — pan-door-uh

Brooks — br-oo-cks

Lytta — lit-uh

Geia — j-ee-yuh

Molpe — mole-pay

Clotho — klah-thoe

Lachesis — la-kuh-sis

Atropos — uh-traa-pose

Moirai — moy-rye

Xia — zee-yuh

Melinoe — mel-een-aw-ee



A Playlist For Your Nightmares, Darling

Human — Sevdaliza

Slept So Long — Jay Gordon

Change (In the House of Flies) — Deftones

System — Chester Bennington

Sound of Your Scream — Brain, Melissa

Flesh — Ghostmane

Halo — Little Dume

Her Eyes — Fame on Fire

Lovely — Lauren Babic & Seraphim

Gods and Monsters — AHS Cast

STARZ — Elley Duhe

Don't Save Me — TWENTYTHREE

Comin Out My Cage — BertieBanz

Sick Like Me — In This Moment

Sleeptalk — Dayseeker
Just Pretend — Bad Omens



TITANOMACHY

A SILENT BREEZE RUSTLED through the valleys of hell carrying the stench of battle and blood. Zeus inhaled deeply and reveled in his victory. The Olympians would spend days glutting themselves in celebration, but he had work to do.

Zeus knelt, sank his fingers into softened clay, and piled handfuls of the moldable material until it reached his chest. He had never been one for dirty work, but there was something about the silence after battle that left him restless. Working with his hands soothed this feeling, his mind finding comfort in simple tasks.

Zeus wetted his hands with the cursed river and carved elegant dips and curves into the mud pile, his palms smoothing every crack and dimple. His mind drifted as he worked, falling back into the calculated dance of battle and recent victory.

The Olympians had been held in the throes of the Titans until Zeus came along and pulled their sorry carcasses

together. Half were drowning in the bile of their father, Cronos, while the other half cowered in the shadows.

For years Zeus survived in a godsdamned cave, hidden away in fear by his mother Rhea, while his siblings cowered. His mother was just as weak as the rest of them. It was a mercy, really, what he had done for her. He spared her life and sent her to be a silent servant in her precious temple as he had been for years before he was strong enough to break the ties that held him there.

Well, not a temple yet. But it would be.

It took ten long years to beat the Titans into submission, and his band of warriors were still clueless as to what he'd had to do to secure that victory for them. What he had to take and the sacrifice he had to be willing to make to obtain it.

Zeus paused his musing to focus on his work. The face was, after all, the most intricate. He used deft fingers to shape the contour of pouty lips that turned up ever so slightly at the edges. Her nose was pointed delicately at the end, and the dip between it and her lips was deep and feminine.

He took time to weave every strand of hair and placed it in long exquisite waves down her back. Flecks of sand dotted the tops of her rounded cheeks that would morph into a cluster of freckles. Zeus carved well into the night, shaping the figure that would solve all of his problems.

Zeus grimaced at that thought. He wouldn't be in this position if everyone around him hadn't given up hope – If they had been more willing to fight for their place in this world as

he had. But, if one wants to control the outcome, one must sacrifice what it takes.

He shook his head hoping to rid it of residual anger and focused instead on the finished product before him. She was perfect.

Zeus placed a hand on the back of her neck and gently covered her lips with his own. With a soft but firm exhale he forced the breath of life to fill her lungs. Clay morphed to skin, the color of the river mud turning to a flushed, feminine pink from her rosy lips all the way down to her toes. Small strands of clay pulled from her head and came to life in the breeze, wisping around her naked shoulders and brushing his own.

She gasped for air, releasing his mouth and sputtering to life.

“Shhh, there, there love,” he whispered and patted her back. “The first breath is always the hardest.”

She coughed and gulped oxygen, then bent over and vomited brown muck.

“That’s it, get it all up. That’s just your insides expelling the clay. It will all be over soon.” As she spit and sputtered, Zeus crafted a leather waterskin from clay and filled it with the cursed water from the Acheron. Known as the river of misery and woe, it ushered the dead into a newly reformed Underworld.

While his clay goddess choked on the ground, Zeus walked to the tree line and searched the greenery budding along the

forest floor. Reaching out toward the bank was an invasive vine with dark green leaves.

Knotweed. Perfect.

Zeus took a handful, drained it of life, and crushed the dead leaves between his immortal fist. He sprinkled the fine powder in the water skin and muttered the binding words over the elixir.

He walked back to where the woman sat near the riverbank. Her coughing fit had eased and her eyes settled on the reflection in the river: stars.

Zeus passed the waterskin and urged it toward her lips.

“Drink. It will make you feel better.”

She watched him wearily as she took her first sip. The gluttony of drink soon became too much and she drank greedily, taking long pulls from the mouth until it was empty.

“Good girl,” he crooned. “Drink it all. Every last drop.” Zeus patted her back as she lowered the water skin and wiped the excess from her chin.

“You’re going to be very important to me, do you know that?” He said as he gazed across the river.

In a scratchy alto, the woman spoke, “Wh-who are you?”

“No one you need to be concerned with. You’re free to go forth and live as you please, as long as you carry something of mine with you and never mention this night for as long as you

live. And you will live, Pandora. You will live a long life if you do what I ask.”

She started to speak again but her raw voice caught in her throat. She cleared it and tried again. “What am I to do?”

“The water you drank was a binding agent. Water of the cursed and an herb to tie your life essence to mine.” She narrowed her eyes at him but didn’t speak. Good. “It will not be soul-bonding. If you decide to take your own life, I won’t fall with you. I have something within myself I need out, but kept close to me and hidden from others. It needs a vessel.”

She seemed to ponder this for a moment, her thoughtful gaze locked on the stars reflected in the water.

“The Oracle says there is a madness within me. Evil. And if I nurture it, the future is unclear. Do you see why I cannot allow it to stay?”

Pandora looked down at her smooth-skinned hands. A rustle in the tree line behind them caught her attention, but before she could turn to inspect, Zeus took her chin in his hand.

“You will be my greatest release, Pandora. The blood lust, rage, greed, envy, craving for death, sickness, and blinding bitterness. You will relieve me from it. All of my madness will be held within your essence, and you will carry it for all time until I come to relieve you of it.”

“I can’t.” She shook her head frantically. “No, I’m not yet strong enough, I can’t carry the burden of an immortal. It will rip me apart!”

“Ah, that is the catch now, isn’t it? The bargain of life. I give you life eternal, and you give me the life I was meant to lead without the burden of the unknown. I’ve thought about this moment every day since the Oracle foretold my glory. How does one rid themselves of feelings that were bred into their very being? It’s simple really. I’ll never be rid of the seed, but I can cut the plant from the stem and place it elsewhere. Time. All I need is more time.”

The rustling behind them grew louder and Pandora moved to stand, to turn away, anything, but strong hands forced her in place and uttered soft whispers in her ear.

“This will only hurt for eternity,” he smiled cruelly, and it was then she could see the madness within the depths of his ochre eyes flashing like lightning.

He forced himself on top of her and held her struggling form in place with ease. Skin on skin, they were pressed against each other, his body a slab of unmoving stone. Zeus forced her hands above her head where something slimy bound her wrists. She looked above frantically and saw the bank coming to life around her.

The foliage surrounded them and pinned her down where his body had been before. She squirmed and screamed, but it made no difference. No sign of life was evident other than the possessed greenery and the more she wiggled, the tighter it held her.

Zeus called for vines from the forest, different from the thin ropes already holding her. These cut her skin as they slithered

down her arms.

Thorns.

He called forth the black roses that surrounded the river of death and wound the vines around her throat. These were no ordinary thorns, however. Bred to keep the dead from the living, they were as long as a man's fingers and as sharp as the steel that carried his armies to victory. The vines cut deep within her flesh and pulled tight until she couldn't move without puncturing something vital. Not that it would matter. She was immortal. If she nicked an artery she would bleed out until death overcame her, but her curse would pull her soul back from the brink. She would feel every tendril of pain and it would show her no mercy.

"Please," she sobbed. She'd do anything to make the fire radiating from her neck stop.

Blood ran down her skin in rivulets, tainting the soft pallor of her chest and shoulders.

"Shhh.. Nothing can help you. We're almost finished."

Her eyes drifted shut as her vision darkened. Zeus hovered above Pandora and watched life drain from her eyes. As she faded further, he focused on her dying soul and guided it out.

Before him, rising slowly from her perfect, pouty lips, was her essence—a physical representation of the soul.

Zeus closed his eyes and inhaled, centering his mind before diving deep into his own soul. He conjured the curdled sickness from his core, cutting it at the knees and balling it up

with a fraction of his own light as he guided the piece of his essence from his chest to intertwine with hers. He would never be rid of the core, but this would have to do for now.

Pandora's light was the purest of white as it had yet to be tainted by life. The ball of madness he brought forth from himself was a sluggish black mass plagued with disease. When it mingled with the purity of her essence, it spread like black ink in water, dulling the luminosity.

Tainted. That's what she would be. Blighted by his madness.

Once he was sure the bond was complete, he sent the oily mass of dull light back down her throat and into her being. This time when the light shone in her eyes, it was a dead color of ochre.

That just wouldn't do.

Any immortal would recognize the eyes of their ruler and the bloodlust that dwelling in the depths. They'd spent the past ten years cowering from it. No one could know what he had done tonight. His weakness would not be exploited and used against him, and there was no way he would allow even a single piece of his essence in someone else's hands.

Zeus called more of the thorny bush forward and urged the black roses to bloom in the moonlight. Beautiful silk petals blossomed in abundance. He took a moment to appreciate the flower budding at death's doorstep.

It was remarkable.

He drew his focus back to Pandora and rubbed a thumb over her cheek, wiping stray tears from the porcelain skin. She sobbed silently, the razor-sharp thorns mutilating her throat with every movement.

“Try not to scream, Pandora. It will only make it worse.”

She could have never anticipated his next move.

Zeus held her face, grazed the pads of his thumbs over her eyelids and urged them closed as he applied pressure to the delicate orbs. Slowly, drawing pleasure from every gasp of pain and muted scream, he pushed his thumbs into her eye sockets until he felt a soft pop beneath the thin skin.

She jerked and pulled against her botanical restraints as she gurgled a scream. Blood bubbled from every inch the thorns pierced. The movement mutilated her neck further, but the pain radiated from so many places that she soon became too numb to notice.

Zeus kept pushing, tearing the paper-thin skin from the brow bone and disconnecting the cords holding the gelatinous orbs in place until he could remove the evidence of his essence with a scoop of his thumbs.

Zeus looked down at his hands, studied the results of his act noncommittally for a moment, and then flung the contents to the side. He walked to the edge of the river to wash the gore from his hands as she continued to moan.

When he returned to the squirming body on the ground, he stopped to admire his brutality.

He'd solved all of his problems tonight.

His madness was stored in a being unknown to his people and erased any evidence of their encounter.

Before he called back the vines and released her completely, he plucked two fully bloomed roses of death and placed one in each socket.

Zeus tsked, "You should have listened and not moved as I said. Look at you. It will take months for your neck to heal. It's utterly mutilated."

The skin was pulled back in all directions exposing delicate muscle, tendons, and ropey veins that pounded to the drum of her heartbeat. She lay in a pool of her own blood, hair matted to the back of her neck in sticky clumps.

"Listen to me. It will be a long first few months of life if you don't. Follow this bank until you reach a small gathering of shelters," he pointed over his shoulder. "I will erect it on my way back and send humans from Prometheus to it to help you. You will settle there until you heal, and then you will leave. You will not mention me, ever, and you will not speak of your scars. If I hear whispers of anything on the wind I will come and take your tongue as I have taken your eyes. Do you understand, Pandora?"

At her weak nod, he continued, "You will carry my madness with you, and it will take its toll. You will have to learn to keep it within the confines of your mind or settle alone. No one— are you listening?" Another meek nod. "No one is to overpower you and take your essence. Lock it in a box within

you, Pandora. If it is released on the world it will wreak havoc, but it will be nothing compared to what I will do if you lose it before I come back. Do you understand me?"

Another nod. Good.

"Go get some foliage and wrap your wound to stop the bleeding before you pass out and become useless. I would hate for you to be eaten by Themis's beasts before you find a resting place."

He was going to leave it there. He could so easily shift and fly away. He was done with her, but a sense of trepidation tugged at his mind.

"You wouldn't die, by the way," he murmured. "Not with parts of my immortality inside of you. You would just lie in your own misery until your pieces could stitch themselves back together."

She sobbed, and he scoffed at her weakness

"Leave the flowers to bind to your skin. They will reform what you've lost. They're fertilized by the soils of the Underworld and will cover any lingering traces of my essence. Consider this information my parting favor for your help."

With that, Zeus turned, transformed, and flew away leaving Pandora on the riverbank. She still bled from the mutilated sockets where her eyes used to be, and her neck throbbed as if the wicked vines were still lodged in her skin.

Pandora rolled to her stomach as the agony burned white hot. She crawled in the direction she last heard the cruel voice,

blood painting the drag marks in the muddy clay, and followed the sound of rushing water to what she could only hope was a sliver of solace.

When Zeus arrived back on the top of Mount Olympus all had fallen silent. He planted his feet atop the summit where he'd ruled since the end of Titanomachy.

He should feel power and glory atop his mountain, but instead he felt a lingering air of dread. It felt as if the darkness would smother him if he took his eye off of it, creeping from its corner like an errant child while its mother's gaze strayed.

A cool breeze rustled his air and wound around his shoulders like a lover's caress.

"You did great," it whispered, the flow so feminine and ethereal he shivered. *"Now rest, and revel in your glory. Your deed is done. For now."*

That breeze left him with a soft laugh and, while her words should have comforted him, a stone of dread weighted his gut.

Without shifting his gaze, Zeus erected a throne of platinum from the minerals of the glorious mountain behind him. He sat, his eyes never leaving the horizon.

Through the years the immortals would say he built his throne here so he could watch over them, to be the e'er seeing eye of man and immortal, but the truth was much more.

No, Zeus erected his throne at the summit of the mountain facing north because chaos was coming, and gods be damned if he wouldn't see it before it saw him.

The
ASYLUM





PROLOGUE

A man with no name roams through crowded halls with nameless faces. His body is agonizingly stiff and aches all over, but he can't remember why.

Bright white lights burn his retinas, his mind too groggy to shade them.

Where was he going again?

“This way, handsome.” A feminine voice rings in his ear.

Why does she sound so far away?

He stumbles and two sets of hands rush to keep him upright.

“I can't hold them both,” came a high-pitched, whiny voice.

“Just put the watch in his pocket and we will take it out when we get him settled,” an older, more feminine voice says.

They walk, and walk...

He wasn't sure when they started.

His head was too heavy to hold and his legs turned gelatinous. He couldn't even muster a cry before his knees buckled and his eyes shut.

When he opened them, he was no longer standing. A ceiling with brown stains filled his vision as rough hands moved his body about.

“There we go,” came the lower female voice. “You’re all settled in, Brooks. Sweet nightmares, darling.”

A brush of air tickled his ear as the high-pitched voice rang, “We’re going to be best friends, you and I. We’re going to play for eternity.” She giggled maniacally and his skin prickled.

A man with no name slips into his dreams, and in his dreams forever he will be.



BROOKS

BROOKS STARED AT THE ancient drop ceiling centered above his metal framed bed. The tiles were plagued with brown spots that ranged in color from sand to wet coffee grounds. If he stared hard enough, sometimes the stains molded themselves into identifiable shapes. Other days, they were just as abstract as his life.

Every morning as he laid underneath those shit-stained tiles, he cataloged the atmosphere of his prison. Once-white walls had yellowed and peeled over the years, and a single barred window in the center of the back wall was his only source of light. He braced his ears against the ever present buzz that filtered through the walls and the smell of mold.

His bed, under the window, held a sagging mattress, fitted sheet, one hospital blanket and a pillow that the Void himself had slept on.

He was one of the lucky ones, he supposed. Most of the patients in St. Dymphna's Hospital for the Mentally Disturbed were only allowed a cot on the floor because of the risk metal

objects imposed—whether to themselves or others depended on the day. It was the same reason the limp mattresses didn't have metal springs.

The worn cotton of the hospital-issued scrubs irritated his skin, the sensation like centipedes crawling across his sensitive flesh. Brooks focused on his breathing, tapping the fingers of his right hand against his thumb.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four...

He muttered a prayer to the goddess of peace and relaxation, Pasithe, knowing godsdamned well it would do nothing but try his patience. The gods had never answered him. Once, he'd prayed to any deity who would listen— the Christian God, Allah, Shiva, The Dagda, Odin, and Zeus himself. Their only answer had been a vast eternity of silence.

“Fuck them.” He gritted his teeth and sprang from the bed.

“*They've never done us any good anyway,*“ a feminine voice brushed his mind.

Brooks paced the small space, his fingers working at his side searching for an outlet. He'd never been one to punch things, but the wall to his left was asking for it.

Rather than earn himself a trip to the infirmary, he knelt by the bed and lifted the flaccid mattress from the frame. In one swift motion, he swiped a worn leather wristwatch from a tear in the mattress. It sat heavily in his palm. The clear face was

scratched and whatever color had painted the edges was long gone. Both analog arms sat frozen at twelve along with the slim arm that ticked away seconds.

“That old thing again?” she sighed.

“How did you know?” he said aloud.

“You think out loud when you’re stressed. You practically screamed it at me.”

Brooks had found the watch in his scrub pocket the night he woke in this frozen hell hole. It quickly became clear that his possession of the watch was a misstep on someone’s part, so he kept it hidden. His one act of defiance.

“How was your night? Did you sleep well?”

A vivid nightmare tinged with crawling black veins and blazing blue eyes flashed across his vision. The demon’s stare was relentless and sent shivers down his spine.

“I slept fine,” he returned noncommittally.

“I know that tone...”

“Of course you do. You are, after all, a hallucination my sick mind likes to torture me with.”

“How many times—”

“I’m not doing this with you today,” he paced and ran his fingers through thick black hair. “Fuck! I’m not doing this with *me* today. Just get out of my fucking head.”

If only it were so simple as to demand a disease to rip its claws from your mind.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, an edge of hurt in her voice.

He felt the need to apologize, but what did it matter? That was the definition of crazy, he supposed. Having a complete argument with yourself.

Instead of facing his hallucinations, Brooks turned to something he was more than capable of dealing with.

Most of the time.

He returned to the watch and stared at the broken face as flashes of his recurring nightmares flitted through his mind like old movie reels.

When he lay in bed every night, he may as well have parked his ass in a one-man theater, the wall to wall screen rolling films starring the one and only paranoid schizophrenic, Brooks No Last Name.

Sometimes he was a monster with black fingers and shining eyes molding the planet to his will, other times he was a mass of shadows light as the wind gliding through the darkness.

The one constant through it all was the terrifying ruthlessness of his dreams. The sick crunch of bones breaking in his grasp had become so common that he no longer flinched. Would he be too desensitized to feel horror if it happened in real life?

That was the shit that kept him up at night. Could nightmares mold you into a monster? Or did a kernel of it have to already exist inside to sprout?

“I can feel your anxiety. It’s making my heart flutter. What’s happening? Talk to me.”

Brooks took a shuddering breath and answered reluctantly, “I just wonder sometimes. About my nightmares, I mean. What if they aren’t fake? What if that monster is just a part of me biding its time until I’m too weak to hold it back?”

“Even if there were a monster lurking somewhere inside you, Brooks, it wouldn’t matter. I know you, and your kindness exceeds any darkness you’re capable of.”

She, his mind, whoever, struck a sensitive chord. How could he trust what he was or wasn’t capable of if he was only a passenger in his own mind?

“You don’t know that,” he whispered.

“Trust me. Brooks. I know what a monster looks like and what ink stains his hands. You’re not one of them.”

His chest warmed a bit and a small smile crept up his face. Sometimes, he didn’t care if she was an illusion his sick mind created— she never ceased to illuminate the darkness within.

“That’s not the tune you were singing when I told you I sleep with socks on,” he teased. Maybe he was deranged for talking to himself, but what did it hurt if it could turn his mood and fight away the monsters?

“That’s truly atrocious and only psychopaths are capable of such debauchery.” She giggled and the serotonin burst through his veins like heroin.

“Debauchery, huh? Stick around, Siren, and I’ll teach you the definition.”

He swiped the pad of his thumb across the watch face and waited for something to happen but, like every other day, his ritual was fruitless. The analog arms refused to budge just as the gray lens shrouding his vision refused to lift.

“What are your plans for the day?” she asked.

“Oh, the same as usual. Look at the color brown, sit around with people who either drool on themselves or talk to walls, and find a way to deal with the fact that I’ll never get to leave this place.”

“Wow, such an optimist.”

“What about you?”

“My plans sound about the same as yours.”

“Of course they are,” he scoffed. “That’s what happens when you are, in fact, a part of me.” Brooks said it more to himself, but that was the irony wasn’t it?

“Whatever, Debbie Downer. I’m choosing to be happy and hopeful today. It would do you some good to try it, too.”

Frustration nipped at his heels.

He would bet his best pair of grippy socks that the food was shit and the world didn’t turn, just like every other goddamn day in the asylum. He sighed.

“Brighten up, buttercup. It’s time to face the day.”

He tried to stop the small smile from lifting the corner of his lip, but it was hard to be grumpy when she was such a ray of light. Even if she was a hallucination.



BROOKS

IT WAS A SAD existence when the only color in one's day was the disturbing brown mush the kitchen staff called oatmeal. Brooks pressed his spoon into the shit pile and barely suppressed a shiver when the prunes sprinkling the top didn't budge.

"Fuck. I hope those are prunes," he muttered under his breath. From the looks, it could just as easily be roaches.

Brooks put the sludge to his lips and chewed begrudgingly, his gaze sweeping the room and cataloging everyone in it. Most of them avoided Brooks like the plague and didn't dare sit too close. He wasn't sure why, but didn't care enough to seek an answer. It was fine by him. He preferred to be alone, anyway.

When his assessing stare had come full circle, he stopped and looked at the bald man sitting across from him. His

crossed eyes were so close together they almost merged and the hairy pudge hanging out of the bottom of his scrub top made Brooks cringe. He watched as the poor fucker shoved the prunes up his nose gingerly with a single finger, his paranoid gaze looking left and right to make sure he wasn't caught.

As the man buried his treasure with fervor, the thin cotton of his long sleeve undershirt slid down and a hint of black peeked out from under it. Brooks trained his vision on the spot and was surprised to see a tattoo.

A black, eight-pointed star joined by a circle in the middle decorated the man's wrist. Small tendrils of black bled from the design as if small shadows were seeping into the surrounding skin.

A loud gag pulled Brooks from his examination and he realized that the man had stuck so much up his nose that the airway was blocked there.

"You poor, sick bastard," Brooks mumbled under his breath.

The man didn't even look Brooks' way. He just gathered his composure and continued cramming shit into his numerous hidey-holes.

"Choking on a dick would be better than this," a deep, male voice slithered through his mind.

He jumped at the intrusion, his eyes scaling the shadows pooled around the room in search of his Passenger.

"Get out of my head," he whispered.

“How about we try something new, and you get into my head? Then we could blow this fucking joint.”

Before the paranoia could really set in, the intercom crackled to life around them. Maybe it made him a sexist motherfucker, but if he had to choose between the auditory hallucinations he would pick the sing-song woman over the serial killer any time.

“Tables A through C, please proceed to the med station for your morning medications. Keep your hands in front of you, single order and make no contact with those in front of or behind you.”

Brooks dropped his spoon, pushed his chair back and made his way hastily toward the med station. He couldn't help but throw quick glances over his shoulder to see if the shadows darkened or gathered where they shouldn't. Paranoia was the name of the game here, but the way his spine tingled forced adrenaline to flood his heart. Someone was watching him, and he didn't have the nerve to find out who.

To keep his mind occupied, he stared out the window on the far side of the cafeteria. The skies were ashen and clouds rolled by at an unsettling pace. Muted thunder rattled the walls during his early restless hours and he spent his time pondering the sound. Soft shivers of vibration shook his bed, but the sound never matched the intensity. Brooks assumed it was something to do with the thickness of the asylum walls and windows.

He hoped the storm would pass before breakfast was over. If the skies were clear, sometimes they were able to visit the greenhouse.

He spent so much time shut in his room that any chance to be outside was something to look forward to. Even the miserable landscape choked with weeds was a better sight than the peeling paint of his four-walled prison.

“For every rolling storm, a Siren has caught a sailor in her web,” that sing-song voice lilted.

“What does that even mean?” Brooks answered her silently. He couldn’t risk talking to her out loud with so many orderlies around. He wasn’t trying to get sedated into oblivion today.

“Good morning, Brooks,” the orderly’s voice pulled his attention back to the med station window. “Multivitamin, fiber, antipsychotic, and a little something for nausea.” The cup was passed through the small opening at the bottom of the plexiglass shield.

Brooks grabbed the cup, his attention shifting back over his shoulder, and threw the meds back dry. After countless years of the same routine, you learned to complete the task without the fuss of water.

Had it been years? He couldn’t remember.

He slid the empty med cup back through for inspection and opened his mouth, wagging his tongue. The orderly gave him a bored nod and waved him away with a swift flick of the wrist.

“I know what your profession was before you landed yourself in the psych ward,” she laughed.

“Shut up,” he huffed, out loud this time. “You wish you could swallow even half as professionally as I can.” A smirk lifted the corner of his mouth at her resulting chuckle.

Brooks was ushered by another faceless orderly to his first activity. His skin prickled as nerves raced down his spine, his hands clenching and releasing.

Therapy time.

Some days it was a sedative and hours in the sunroom where patients were encouraged to soak up the vitamin rich rays. Rocking chairs were placed in a line in front of a large protruding wall of glass facing the rising sun. If Brooks got to choose a therapy route, he would pick that one. Typically accompanied by a session with the psychiatrist or hydrotherapy, he would count it as a good day in the asylum.

Hydrotherapy was another favorite. It could get a little steamy, but a box filled with hot water and healing oils was a walk in the gardens compared to other treatments.

It was when the voices were too loud and orderlies overheard his whispers in the dark that therapy became something to fear.

Then, he and the other schizophrenics would be taken to the gymnasium and lined up, their backs pressed against the wall as they stood silently. Black privacy screens littered the wooden floors hiding everything but the orderly’s feet as they

worked. Muffled screams echoed to the tall ceilings along with a spine-shivering buzz as patients were shocked into compliance with nothing to protect them but a rubber heel between their teeth.

The asylum kept electroshock therapy down to twice a week, but if you gave them any reason to up the dosage they wouldn't hesitate to take you to a separate treatment floor.

And if electroshock therapy failed too many times? You went to the door at the end of the treatment hall. The thought alone made him sick to his stomach.

Brooks couldn't remember when he arrived at the asylum. As a matter of fact, he couldn't remember how or why, either. He assumed that the multiple rounds of electroshock therapy wiped his long-term memories as it so often did his short-term memories.

One thing he did recall was the initial treatment. Anger curled in his stomach as he recalled praying to a benevolent god for mercy. He begged his gods to stop his eyes from closing, to keep the needles out of his arms. But no one listened.

No one helped him, and no one ever fucking would.

The idea of trust was a ghost story, an illusion spun by others for comfort. In most realities, one could only trust themselves. But for Brooks? Trust was an unfathomable concept.

How does one trust a mind as broken as his?

Brooks couldn't keep track of the passing of time while in the insulin-induced comas, but when the voices finally quieted he was allowed to open his eyes and really *see* for the first time.

What he found wasn't hope or freedom, nor was it the promise of a quiet mind.

It was desolation.

He lost something then. Maybe it was the willpower or energy to fight. Maybe his soul, beaten and tortured as it was, left him that day. Or, perhaps, it didn't just leave. Leaving would indicate it was somewhere to find.

No. It died that day.

From then on, events were so blurry that time was incomprehensible. Voices were hushed and ambient sound was nearly non-existent. It was as if St. Dymphna's was in its own little time bubble sequestered away from the world around it. Maybe it knew that one sound out of place could send the residents into a frenzy. One solid bump into their small loop of time and chaos would ensue.

He started going through the motions, a shell void of emotion, and the steady flow of insulin administered by doctors made sure of it. The drugged haze kept him unaware and complacent.

Brooks thought back to his first few days coming out of the coma induced from insulin shock therapy. His faceless nurse

walked him through the greenhouse attached to the asylum and encouraged him to pick a bouquet of fresh flowers.

“Idle hands make idle minds, Brooks,” she tsked. A slight nudge on his shoulder urged him forward, and she said, *“Pick a few of your favorite colors. Sheer it at the stem and we will find them some water.”*

Vibrant reds and yellows dotted the large pots on the floor as lush vines spilled from hanging pots overhead. Lily of the valley, daisies, carnations and other species he couldn't name decorated the muggy enclosure.

But it wasn't the bright blooms that caught his attention. It was the dark-as-midnight petunias hanging in the corner and the black dahlias growing up a wall of lattice, their dark petals bleeding red in the sunlight. Most of all, it was the thorny bush lining the back wall with the silkiest black roses his fingers had ever touched.

Brooks had trouble focusing his eyes and mind, and when he went to pick one of the bloomed roses his finger caught on a thorn. He jerked it back and sucked the wound, pain lancing up his hand as drops of blood speckled the leaves surrounding the black rose.

Horrorified, he held his wounded finger and watched as the plant soaked in every drop.



BROOKS

BY THE TIME HE was escorted back to his room, the sun had wilted from the sky and the memories of the day blurred with all of the others. Recreational time had been extra exhausting. He and several other patients had been forced to take up an easel and paint before the great wall of windows that faced the greenhouse. Brooks wasn't sure how well the therapy would work if the scenery never changed but had long since stopped questioning it.

He worked on painting the same tree as all the times before when the blank faced woman beside him dropped her brush. Paint splattered all over Brooks and his canvas. He took a steadying breath before looking to the woman to ask her what her fucking problem was.

Her name was Ariadne, and he knew that because she made a point to speak to him every session. She was bubbly and always had an annoying pep to her step. They spoke about

nothing in particular. She would tell stories based on Greek myths about the great creator of the universe and how the Titans fell before the Olympians.

It was all bullshit, but he supposed it gave her mind something to focus on other than their bleak situation.

She was different today, though, like the flip of a coin. Her eyes were blank and unseeing as they stared out the window. Her hands hadn't reached for the paints she normally adored and no stories of great Grecian heroes spewed from her lips.

He hadn't even been fully seated before the brush placed in her hand fell to the floor and paint splattered over everything.

Rage was his first reaction, but as he studied her empty face a sense of wrongness fell over him. When the orderlies had turned their backs and he was sure no one was looking, Brooks retrieved her brush, dipped it into a muted purple and placed it in her hand. He didn't try to speak to Ariadne, and she never moved during therapy.

She was wheeled away in silence and Brooks followed her shape with curious eyes until the chair turned the corner.

It was odd, but he decided brushing it off was the best course of action.

As he lay in that same metal bed, staring at the same shit-stained ceiling tiles, Brooks knew he should fight. He should do something more than just roll over and take this life that was handed to him. But that spark of defiance had never caught, and the flame of life within him had died long ago.

Restlessness fought with hopelessness and he reached out to his drug of choice on impulse. “You’re awfully quiet tonight, Siren,” he spoke into the darkness. “No uplifting advice or smartass remarks?”

He was met with silence. Of course, trust his fucking mind to leave him alone when he needed the company of his hallucinations the most.

With a defeated sigh, Brooks rolled off the bed, knelt and retrieved the wristwatch from the tear in the mattress once more.

He stood at the side of his door so that the moonlight beaming in from his barred window wouldn’t stretch his shadow beneath the door. He didn’t want to betray his position to any passing orderlies. It had happened once before, and the outcome was not in his favor.

He pressed his ear to the cold metal door and held his breath..

Silence.

His heartbeat roared in his ears as he tested the door. Sometimes, if he were lucky, it was unlocked. Whether it was a forgetful orderly, a broken door, or the luck of the draw, the door would swing inward with the twist of its handle.

Brooks sent a silent prayer to the gods as he twisted the knob.

Click.

If he weren’t trying to be silent he would have celebrated.

Brooks peeked cautiously around the edge of the door. Nothing but shadows gathered and he didn't waste any time escaping.

His room was one of the dorms closer to the employee halls. If he was fast he could make it without being caught.

A stray thought made his steps falter as he padded on silent feet through the halls. His passenger liked to lurk in silent corners where shadows gathered so darkly they seemed to eat the light from existence.

Hair prickled on his neck. He didn't dare look back as he fled to the employees' exit. It was just one stretch of hallway, a quick turn and a door away. The familiar sense of being watched set his nerves on edge, but it was too late to turn around.

The kitchen door was nestled in a dead-end hallway and, if he could make it there, he was in the clear. Brooks knew by now that no one was in the kitchen at night.

When he turned the corner this time, however, he stopped dead. Muffled voices sounded behind the thick swinging door, and they were growing louder. Closer.

Brooks held his breath in a desperate attempt to stay quiet and searched frantically for an escape. He could go back the way he came but stealth would be near impossible. Besides the outside exit, the only way to leave the kitchen was through the hallway he had just come. They would, at the very least, hear him run.

At the very worst? They would catch him. He shivered at the thought of solitary or, even worse, the door at the end of the therapy hall.

He couldn't move. Panic seized his chest as indecision clouded his thoughts. The voices drew nearer, shadows stretching into the hall from beneath the door.

"The corner. Now," his passenger demanded.

Alarm flared as his anxiety deepened, his body as stuck as his mind.

"Calm the fuck down before you have an anxiety attack and we get the rubber heel. Get in the godsdamned corner, Brooks." Each word was accentuated.

Brooks grappled with the rising fear and forced his body to move one step at a time. His darker hallucination sparked a fire of fear and anxiety, but not more than being caught out of bed.

The shadows engulfed the end of the hall. If he didn't know better, he would say it was a portal into another world. The darkness bled so black that nothing was visible behind it.

When he was only a few steps away, the door swung open and two orderlies stepped through. Brooks took the final silent lunge into the void and closed his eyes as the shadows hugged him tightly.

"Atta boy, Brooky."

"Don't call me that, asshole," he thought back. The irony was that he was scolding himself about a nickname that he

had, in fact, given himself.

When the orderly's voices drifted into nothing, Brooks took a full breath and collapsed.

"How many times do we have to go over this? You can trust me," his passenger grumbled.

"I can't trust anyone, and I definitely can't trust you. Now shut the fuck up or I'm going to puke," he answered out loud this time. Trusting his hallucinations was never on the table. Especially one who wrestled so aggressively for control of his body. That was what he feared. Not the voice itself, but what it was capable of.

When the shaking ceased and his legs were sturdy, Brooks pushed himself from the floor and stepped from the darkness.

His body guided him through the kitchen door, out the employee exit and up the access stairs to the rooftop while his mind numbed itself with useless, pitying thoughts.

He wondered how that situation would have played out before he was a broken shell of a man. Had he been strong? Steel willed? Or had he always been so riddled with fear and anxiety that one whisper from his passenger had him nearly pissing down his leg?

He would never know and that scared him more than anything. This bleak future that suffocated him slowly over time had the ability to crush him.

But, maybe it already had.

Like a soul separated from its body, he watched from above as his rigid form navigated through metal exhausts and ventilation hubs housed on the concrete roof. Puddles lay here and there from rainfall and leaves flocked to the corners, but it was otherwise empty.

His body sat and pulled its knees to its chest. They sat unmoving, both soul and body, as the brisk night air rustled his raven hair. His ability to dissociate so completely was alarming, but he was long past caring.

Brooks watched his body, and his body watched the stars. He didn't have to look up to know what his dead eyes stared at.

The constellation Aquila was situated in the northern sky on the celestial equator, nestled snugly between Aquarius and Hercules. It was said that a great king was honored by the gods and placed in the stars as an act of eternal glory for his servitude, a reminder to all what can happen if your faith remained unmoving.

Christian bibles were littered in every dorm and stocked in the small stack of shelves in the recreation room. Texts like the Quran, Vedas, and the Tripitaka were kept as well as books filled with Nordic, Scottish, and Grecian lore. He had read them all thrice over and, even though the names of creatures and gods were different, it all felt the same to him.

Brooks thought it was all bullshit. If people really knew their gods, would they be so quick to act as sheep destined for slaughter? They put such blind faith into a deity whose only proof of goodness and morality was his word. Did anyone ever

stop and wonder if it was a test? What if the true secret to eternal peace was doing positive deeds because it was the moral thing to do, not because some god was watching over your shoulder? What if worshiping their sacred texts as they turn a blind eye is what damns them all in the end?

Maybe that was just the paranoia talking. Or, maybe it sealed the coffin on the ideal of trust. You couldn't trust the word of anyone, but you most certainly couldn't trust the word of an immortal god. They've had too long to decorate the blade sticking from your back.

The sheep may be slaughtered, but at least their lives were easy.

He didn't know how long he spent watching the man on the roof hold the broken wristwatch staring at the stars. His body's gaze never faltered, and the constellation shone back just as unyielding.

As his body lost itself in the stars, Brooks turned his mind's eye inward. Scenes from dreams and nightmares alike replayed and he was helpless to stop them. One in particular came hastily to the forefront.

He walked through a damp cavern, the air thick with moisture and a hint of soil on his tongue. Blue-green fields of grass surrounded the path and, though he didn't know where his feet were taking him, his gut knew there was a destination. In the dreams, his mind was not in control of his body, rather a dormant passenger looking through his eyes.

The field of unique grass had a slight glow and illuminated a path through the darkness. Mist filled the cavern and instinct screamed not to enter it. The field ahead seemed endless and the illusion was too perfect to be real.

His body didn't walk for long before the grassy runway opened into a larger enclosure. The mist cleared and the most magnificent garden a mind could conjure appeared.

Asphodel stalks grew from every surface, bioluminescent petals lighting up the dim space in an ethereal glow. They grew from the floor and attached to the walls like viny creatures and hung low from the ceiling. There had to be millions of blooms filling the domed cavern.

Water trickled somewhere in the distance and a quiet hum filled his ears.

A voice.

Low and feminine, the song carried on the cool cavern breeze. Too soft to hear the words, but loud enough to give his body direction.

Narrow paths just wide enough to fit a foot wended and curved through the cramped garden and Brooks swore the flowers reached out to brush his skin as he passed.

He followed the hum until it grew louder and the words more clear.

"A meadow full of Asphodels,

A secret she will never tell.

Ashes,

Ashes,

It all burns down.”

A lithe figure swathed in white with silver hair falling in waves sat hunched over an asphodel stalk at the base of a single column, her back turned to him. Her voice was as elegant as her graceful stature, as soft and unobtrusive as her presence. Had she not been humming, he may have missed her entirely.

“My, my. What an honor to be graced by such a presence, don’t you think my blossoms?”

The flowers buzzed in response and a shiver of awareness brushed his mind. He never responded to the maiden in this recurring dream, only continued his slow pace until he stood directly behind her. She never turned to face him, but continued to fuss over her flowers.

He hovered over her as she pruned wilting buds from each stalk, clearing room for the newer and thriving blooms.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they? At first glance they all appear the same, but when you look more closely, they’re unique.”

Snip.

“Some are fat and short.”

Snip.

“Others tall and lanky.”

Snip.

“Some blooms are aggressive and try to smother those around them.”

Snip, snip.

“The one thing they all have in common is their fragility. Each bloom is delicate and must be tended with care. They don’t live long, their life span less than a century.”

A pale hand reached out and caressed a bloom as tender as a mother holding the cheek of her babe.

She stood, her back still to Brooks, and tucked the long gardening shears into the thick belt holding the diaphanous fabric against her body.

When she turned, his awareness flinched from the sight but his body held fast. Her face was beautiful, lips full and pouty with a softly defined jaw and long neckline. The epitome of feminine grace until you stared into the unseeing, milky white eyes. Blue iridescent fluid wept like tears and left glistening trails down her pale face and a menacing crown of thorns protruded from her head.

“Atropos,” he spoke. “It’s always a pleasure.”

The Goddess of Lifespans was the oldest of the three Fates known as the keeper of the past and taker of life. Once her sister determined the span of a mortal life, it was up to Atropos to trim the stalk. Her shears were sharp and once she plucked a bloom there was no returning it.

Her small smile made her round cheeks raise a fraction.

“Have you come to oversee creation, Father of Darkness?”

“Always with the theatrics.”

“Never. I’m merely humbled by your presence in my garden. What brings you forth from the chaos?”

“I need to see Lachesis.”

Lachesis was born second and was the seer. She tended the blooms of life with a gentle hand and measured their life span along with the destiny they bore upon fragile shoulders. It was impossible to tell Atropos and Lachesis apart aside from their crowns and mannerisms. Where Atropos wore a crown of thorns and was a strong leader, Lachesis wore a crown of stars that complimented her meek temperament. Physically, they were identical from their bare feet all the way up to their milky, weeping stare. Except, perhaps, for the wilted white roses that grew from cuts decorating Lachesis’ exposed skin.

Atropos turned her gaze to the great tree in the center of the domed cavern.

It stood from floor to ceiling with branches reaching out to make a canopy over top of them. The asphodel plants weren’t hanging from the ceiling... They were budding from the system of branches.

Suspended in the great hollow of the tree was a nude woman.

Clotho. The Weaver, grower of life and presence of the Here and Now.

Clotho had a love for human life that no other daemon could compare. When the great tree of life started to wither at the

beginning of time, she gave herself to it for eternity so that it may prosper and hold the souls she cared so dearly for. In exchange, the tree kept her suspended in animation, giving as freely as it took.

She was attached to the hollow by vines that snaked out and pierced her paper-thin skin. Her lower body was split into hundreds of smaller threads like a sweater unraveling and continued up her abdomen.

Opened wide and spread like wings, her ribs fanned out and joined more hearty vines acting as great arteries for the tree. The lush vines pulsed an ethereal blue to the vivid red heart peeking out just below the fraying ribs.

Where the other Fated sisters shed bioluminescent blue tears, Clotho wept red. Blood ran from every remaining orifice and dropped on the petals closest to the base of the tree.

Her blood permeated the soil and tinted the blooms red. The life force of a Fate was potent and gave the blooms immortality.

The daemon. Olympians. Gods. Whatever they called themselves.

“How does Clotho fare?” His voice was low and concerned.

“My sister is well. Always threading vines and seeding new life.” That small smile reappeared and her face softened as she gazed upon her lifeless sister.

“Lachesis has been waiting for you. She says you’re intending to sleep.” A crinkle of worry graced her brows as

her nose wrinkled slightly.

“I am,” he said softly. “I grow tired, Atropos. I’ve molded galaxies with my hands and filtered chaos into every corner of it. Shouldn’t I get a day of rest?” He tried to reassure her, to form an easy smile and bring lightness, but it didn’t seem to ease her unrest.

“Life has begun to bloom throughout on its own. It doesn’t need my help, and I am restless, goddess. I seek solace in the void.”

It was more than restlessness, but the Fate wasn’t privy to such information. He was lost and without purpose. What more could he give the universe?

With her head bowed subserviently she answered, “Yes, my king.”

Bold rays of yellow and orange pulled his consciousness back to present and away from the mysterious maidens in the field of glowing asphodels.

In what seemed like a blink, the stars were fading and the sun bled into the horizon. Brooks watched himself stand and make the silent trek back to his room.

Only after the wristwatch was nestled back into the mattress and his body lie lifeless on top of it did he return to the confines of his broken mind. If the gods had granted him solace in anything, it was the ability to dissociate so completely.

He thought briefly back to his recurring dream, one that had become a consolation between nightmares. A dream that appeared so often, it was becoming as real as his rooftop escapades.

He forced his muscles to relax and sank into the knotted mattress. Just as waves of sleep lapped at his ankles, a scream more shrill than a harpy cry rang through darkness and pierced the very center of his being.



Glass.

It was her home.

Her solace.

Her nightmare.

Her prison.

Xia lay under downy blankets soaking in their last moments of warmth and comfort as she swept her eyes around the familiar room.

So familiar, but always so at odds.

Tucked far beneath the surface of her island, Xia's room was where it all began and, she supposed, where it would all probably would end. She was born in the same glass prison she would die in.

The Fates were heartless bitches.

She studied the rock walls that rose to meet vaulted ceilings with ornate light fixtures hanging about. Glass covered every

portion of the rock appearing as though it was frozen over.

Her room was fixed into the cliffside of her island so far under the water that the sunlight rarely made it through. An enormous glass bay window encapsulated the cave mouth to keep the water from entombing her.

Pity. She had started to believe a watery grave wouldn't be so bad.

Xia lost count of how many times she stared at that window and urged a web of cracks to form, to weaken the glass and fill the room in a violent rush of seawater that would wash away any evidence of her miserable life.

That was where it stopped, though. Wishes.

Xia could never bring herself to grasp any of the gilded finery in her prison to shatter the surface and be free of the misery herself.

Cowardice.

Such was her curse.

Her sisters used to taunt her for being weak.

A coward never willing to do what it took for the greater good.

She supposed they were right.

How many times did they fight their urges to feed? To push their songs into the hearts of men, capsize their boats and draw the soul right from their hearts?

Too many to count.

Too many to ever remember.

Xia, however, never resisted.

Even when she tried to starve herself of the essence, to feed the ember of humanity her sisters coveted, the beast inside reared its head and fought for survival. And so she stopped resisting.

Instead, she wallowed in a bloody pool of misery and shame.

Too afraid to die, but too broken to live.

Xia looked from the glass encapsulated walls to the gold adornments and furnishings placed about. Silk robes and gowns hung from nearly every surface, thrown about carelessly and forgotten. Embellished bowls of various shapes and sizes filled every table top with colorful fish of every breed from the sea.

Humans weren't the only living creatures her song would bring forth.

For every man Xia had taken from the sea, she called a fish from the depths to take back to her glass prison. She couldn't bring herself to think about the countless lives her bloody song had taken or gaze upon her monstrous stare, but she could look at the fish.

Whether it made her good or bad, Xia didn't know. But she tended the fish as she wished she had been able to care for the dead, their innocence one and the same.

There were hundreds of bowls placed delicately around the room, each large enough to hold at least ten fish.

How many lives had been taken by her animalistic drive to live?

Her prison was short of entertainment or ways to pass the time.

Piles of parchment were scattered around the floor. They had been ripped from various books and shoved hastily under the door for reading material whenever the Oneiroi cared to remember her existence.

What a pitiful fucking life.

She wasn't even worth a full book. Just single pages ripped from random texts to fill her time.

Xia couldn't complain, however. The attention of the Oneiroi was far worse than any shame or guilt that had ever soured her gut.

She and her sisters had been cursed to their island since birth. It was all the three of them had ever known apart from each other.

When the Lord of Nightmares captured their island and enslaved the three Siren's, the simplicity of their lives was over. It was the moment she'd learned the true meaning of suffering.

Before they'd been cursed, yes, but life still thrived on the island. Lush green fields rolled and dipped with the land and birds flitted through the trees singing of their adventures. The ocean was full of vibrant life and the sun shone brilliantly until the Sirens called forth the fatal storms.

It was as if the Fates had forgiven them and were encouraging them to thrive even though what they did brought such misery.

Since his arrival though?

Her sisters faded to dust and the sun itself had forsaken her island.

A constant cover of stormy clouds that never wept settled in and, once the golden rays left, so too did the trees and the birds. Her island twisted into cliffs and craggy outbreaks as if it mourned the life it lost and raged at the sky.

It was desolate.

The only friends she had were the fish who dared swim by the bay window and the small rays of moonlight that shimmered through the sea and refracted iridescent waves within her glass prison.

Xia pulled her attention from the gilded finishings and glass furniture and closed her eyes. She willed her lungs to breathe steadily and her heart to still.

The Lord of Nightmares would call upon her tonight.

He would feed on her like she did on so many innocent human men except, where the sailors were granted the mercy of death, Xia would suffer eternally.

He would pull her darkest fears from the depths of her mind and drown her in them until she lay like a broken doll on the floor.

Her only solace would be the man she found within the stars.
The only soul as dark and empty as her own.

Brooks.

Her cheeks heated at the thought of his deep voice caressing her mind. It sent shivers through her body that left her restless and aching with nothing but her own fingers for release. She traced her hand down slowly, pretending it was more firm and calloused. If she was going to make it through a night with the Devil, she would take advantage of the quiet hours before to relish in bliss.

Xia tried to imagine what handsome features would be attached to a voice as deep and silky as Brooks'. Her body was helpless to control its response at the thought and her thighs clenched. She was the only one who could relieve the tension building in her core, but she dreamt it was someone else nonetheless.



BROOKS

BROOKS WAS PULLED BACK from the grip of sleep and slammed into a nightmare so intense he nearly seized.

Vivid colors flashed behind his eyelids as spasms wracked his rigid frame. Stars imploded, galaxies expanded and every manner of life ended where it began all in one fluttering moment. His senses were short circuiting as frantic, feminine screams filtered into his psyche, encompassing his mind and digging their talons deep into his dreams.

Veins of static electricity charged the vast expanse of space his mind was captured in, but it was the pulsing darkness he couldn't pull his attention from.

Screams reverberated through his mind as the expansive void called to him, the chaos in between the stars whispering a name he couldn't quite hear.

Flashes of memories danced across his vision too quickly to capture as the screams deafened him.

A broken girl falling, her body war beaten and bleeding as she surrendered her body and soul.

Tortured ocher eyes glossed over in a lifeless sheen.

A bright stain of red splashed across his body and dotted his face.

Deep red arterial sprays lie painted across the floor of darkness, the tinge of iron coating the back of his throat as it cooled upon his skin. It tingled where the blood settled. Brooks lifted his arm and watched in both horror and fascination as the blood soaked through his skin.

Brooks' heart raced, his breaths coming in quick succession as an invigorating burst of adrenaline coursed through his veins.

It unlocked something so deep within his soul that the blood sizzled within his veins. Shadows pulsed around him with every labored breath as his mind tunneled into chaos. Brooks squeezed his eyes shut as his fractured mind cracked further and opened the floodgates to the whispers lost in between the stars.

He screamed as voices forced their way inside and converged all at once, becoming louder...

“...I give myself...”

And louder...

“...take me to the void between the lights...”

And louder...

“...the chaos filled night...”

...until he was wholly consumed by pandemonium.

Brooks rocketed back to awareness with the grace of a train wreck. His eyes sprang open, pulse throbbing and sweat coating his clammy skin only to realize in abject horror that his body was still experiencing the paralysis of a waking dream.

Bile burned his throat as his paralyzed body lay prone to the stalking shadows. Soft feminine whimpers drifted through his door, but his mind was too preoccupied with the swirling shadows blackening the room to listen in.

Sobs choked him as the nightmare stepped from the darkest corner of the room. The demon flashed in and out, its form shifting between one physical plane and another— first human and then *other*. Its smile sent shivers of dread down Brooks’ spine. He wanted to beg it to leave him be, or bargain with the desolate gods who never cared to answer, but his body turned to ice and his eyes refused to close.

The mass of swirling shadows stopped at the foot of the bed and stared intently. All sense of time vanished, and what he found looking back was scarier than any demon from the depths.

It was like staring in a mirror.

Shaggy raven locks, defined cheekbones and a slim athletic frame hid under baggy tan scrubs. Eyes the color of burning blue hellfire illuminated the dark space and black, webbed veins wriggled under glassy skin. Ethereal power rolled from the demon and it made Brooks' clammy skin crawl.

Sharp pain lanced through his mind as he tumbled toward unconsciousness.

A familiar baritone voice whispered a million light years away. *"Tick Tock..."*

"What—" he choked, "What do you want?"

"I want you to wake up. You've been useless long enough."

The demon sneered, its voice edged with cruelty like humanity had never touched its soul.

"We have recovered a missing piece of our chaos. She has sacrificed herself to us and it is time to make them all pay. We gave them everything, and they shit on us like ungrateful swine. The darkness calls for blood, and it will not be ignored."

Hellfire flared in its eyes before as he raised an ink-dipped hand and called forth the shadows. One flick of the wrist and they bolted toward Brooks' paralyzed body.

The shadows barreled down his throat, forcing his back to arch off the bed as they assaulted him. The darkness seeped into his bloodstream and overcame his senses, shrouding his

mind and stealing his awareness until nothing but the void called his name.



BROOKS

P^{AIN.}

It was all Brooks could feel as his mind rallied to wake. Cold heavy tile lay atop his prone form, pressing unbearably at every point of contact and pinning him to the bed.

Wait.

Brooks opened his eyes and realized that the tiles weren't on top of him. Quite the opposite as he was lying on the scuffed floor of his room, the scratchy hospital-grade blanket carelessly wrapped around his torso. His cheek was plastered to the yellowed tile, saliva gluing it in place. He did a quick inventory of his body and, once he deemed himself mostly unharmed, pushed into a sitting position.

He leaned back against the metal-framed bed, stretched his stiff limbs, and pondered just how the hell he had ended up on

the floor.

“*Good morning, sunshine,*” a beautiful, sleep-laced voice rang. “*Did you sleep well?*”

Adrenaline made his heart flutter as he recalled the waking nightmare. How he looked into his own azure stare and choked on shadows before falling from consciousness.

“Sleep?” he answered. “Is that something people do?” His voice was ragged and his body restless from the night before.

Her only response was a chuckle.

His breath was visible in the frigid air, the puffs leaving his lips and dispersing as quickly as they’d come. Cold seeped into his skin where it met the bed and his toes had gone numb.

A subtle ticking pulled him from the cold and danced around his thoughts as he spiraled. He ignored it at first, brushing it off as an auditory hallucination, but when the beat of his heart started to sync to the rhythm it became impossible to avoid.

A familiar instinct dug its claws into his psyche and urged his hand toward the tear in the mattress.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” he groaned.

Moving on autopilot, he removed the broken wristwatch and turned the face upward, swiping the pad of his thumb across it like he did every other day.

But today was different.

Brooks’ breath caught in his throat as he watched the thin arm meant to count seconds make its revolution one mechanic

tick at a time.

“Whaaaaat the fuck,” he whispered, voice shaky.

Alarm urged him to drop the timepiece, but curiosity made his grip tighten around the ticking face.

“*Brooks?*“ She sounded concerned. “*Brooks, what’s happening?*”

“I’m not sure,” he answered aloud. “I have a watch. I don’t know where it came from or why I have it, but it’s broken. Or, at least, it was. It’s ticking now. It’s working.”

“*Why is that so alarming?*”

“I don’t know what made it work, and the air is heavy and cold like there’s something here with me.”

His nose itched from the dry air as blood dribbled from it.

“*What does that mean? Are you hurt?*”

“I think he’s coming.”

“*Who, Brooks? Who’s coming for you?*”

“My passenger,” he gulped and searched the room frantically. “He’s going to take me.”

A pounding started in his head, the sound reverberating like a drum.

“*Get up,*“ a deep male voice urged. Ice crept along the floor and coated everything in beautifully unique patterns as it spread like a virus.

Him.

It was coming from him.

Air petrified in his lungs, every breath harder to manage than the last.

“*Get up!*”

He pressed clammy hands to his ears and curled into himself, desperate to stop the voice from weaving its way through his mind. A hand of smoke and ancient power gripped his fluttering heart and squeezed.

Please... Brooks begged silently.

The door to his room burst open as pounding footsteps barged. Firm hands grasped his shaking shoulders and his panic became primal. He lurched forward in a blind fury, slashing and clawing at whatever came too close. A raw scream echoed through the room.

It took him a moment to realize it was his scream.

“Hold him down!” a gruff voice yelled as rough hands forced him to the floor.

A sharp pinch to the abdomen vaguely registered through the fog and his muscles ceased reacting to demands as he slumped forward.

The voices around him slurred as time slowed.

“We have to give him more...”

“...figure out what to do with the girl.”

The girl? The one crying in the hall?

“Dr. Kore said to give him enough of the song to make him forget...”

“...keep an eye on him and dose him again.”

It's like they were waiting for me to wake up just to throw me back under.

His mind raced with the thought as his awareness prickled. A powerful but familiar essence surrounded his own as they both watched his body struggle from above.

“They're afraid. But we are inevitable,” his passenger whispered. *“Sleep it off. We'll need our strength.”*

With that, the vice gripping his mind eased and Brooks relaxed into the sedation, a sigh of relief ushering in the darkness.

Soft murmurs lapped at his mind, dragging him back to the surface with every wash of the waves upon the shore of his conscience.

“Ah, Brooks. So glad to see you could make it today,” a too-happy tenor rang out.

He knew that fucking voice. Hated it, too.

Brooks forced movement through sluggish eyelids to clear his foggy vision and mustered the strength to swallow the saliva that was dangerously close to escaping through the corner of his lips.

What was worse than being slipped sedatives during an explosive episode, you ask? Waking from said episode propped in a wheelchair, drooling on yourself, and being forced into psychotherapy.

“Roger,” Brooks slurred in greeting.

Brooks couldn't see Roger's face yet, but he knew that happy motherfucker was smiling so wide that you could see your face reflected in his molars.

Roger continued his positive affirmation bullshit while Brooks focused on bringing his body back up from the depths of sedative hell.

“*You gave me quite a scare there,*“ the Siren said. After a beat of silence, she tried again. “*Brooks?*”

He didn't bother to answer.

It was never more clear that she wasn't real than when he was strapped to a wheelchair and in front of a therapist.

His hallucinations could fuck off. It was their fault he was here.

“How have you been feeling, Brooks?”

Brooks scoffed and looked pointedly at the wheelchair. “Not so hot, I'd say. How about you Professor Optimism?”

Rogers' tone was reprimanding, but still annoyingly happy as he said, “Brooks. Sarcasm masks honesty, and we are all here to help. So why don't you take that mask off and tell us what you've been feeling.”

He sighed but decided a sliver of the truth would probably get Roger off his back faster than sarcasm.

“Empty,” he admitted. “I feel like I’m living in a loop with no purpose.”

Roger nodded as his pen scratched across the clinical notepad resting on his crossed legs. Gods how Brooks fucking hated that pen and pad.

“Have you been participating in any facility activities, Brooks?”

“Don’t say daydreaming about me. That will get you thrown in solitary.”

He could practically hear the smirk in her tone. It was a real battle to stop his eyes from disappearing to the back of his head.

“Yes. Every day.”

More nodding. More scratching.

“Do you understand why you’re in those activities, Brooks?”

“To bore me to death so you save money on medication?”

Roger stopped writing but didn’t look up.

“It’s to prepare your mind for reentry to the world.”

All functions ceased.

“What do you mean reentry?”

Roger looked back to Brooks and chuckled softly. “Did you think this a permanent residency, Brooks?”

“It sure fucking feels like it, yeah,” he said dumbfounded.

“This is merely an institution to help your mind heal so that you can be successful during reintegration into society. Have you thought about what you would do when you were well? Aspirations, perhaps?”

Brooks sat in silence as his brain shorted. He’d never thought leaving the asylum was an option. It was, after all, all he had ever known. All his broken mind could pull from his memories.

“I—” he stumbled. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I suggest you start thinking about it. There are books in the common room to guide your path. The world is full of possibilities. All you have to do is work with us to heal. Not against us.”

Brooks took a moment to stew on that information before Roger repositioned in the chair and pulled him back to the present.

“I’m going to show you some images now,” he said, his eyes never leaving his pad as his hand reached to a small table perched beside him. “I’d like you to tell me what you see. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer.”

“Seriously, Roger, not your fucking coffee stains again,” Brooks sighed, agitation flooding in like a tsunami.

“I’ve gotten reports from orderlies of increased discontent and aggression. I’d like to test you again. Are your auditory

hallucinations increasing? Last we talked, you had one voice separate from your own.”

As Roger spoke, he shuffled through clinical notes and pulled ink blot images from a separate manilla folder.

“Sounds like you’ve got me all figured out bud. Did you scribble all that down? Got some good notes to take back to the suits?”

Roger raised his eyes from the papers to Brooks for one assessing stare, then scribbled once more on the pad.

“Way to go. Now he’s going to think you’re more paranoid.”

He sighed but wasn’t sure if it was irritation toward his Siren for being a pain in his ass or for being right. Roger always said that sarcasm masked the truth. If he didn’t reel it in, the psychologist would be quick to make assumptions.

“This is the part where you play along so they don’t make you black out for weeks like last time. Don’t let them take you from me, Brooks...”

The pang of guilt hit him hard but also tightened the anxiety in his chest. It was getting so fucking hard to determine reality from hallucination.

“Fine,” Brooks conceded. Irritation flared like a heat wave up his neck and made sweat bead along his brow. “I’ll play your games. Let me see the pictures, dickhead.”

Roger held up the first inkblot photo from the Rorschach test. The ink spread from the crease and out like a monochromatic angel’s wings. In the center, the stains formed

two raised hands with straggling dots blotting the outside of the lines.

“It’s a herald.”

Without missing a beat, Roger said, “Elaborate.”

“The two larger stains spread to form wings, the center stain is the body, and up at the top,” he pointed, “are the hands.”

“You could have said an angel or a bat or body part. Maybe even an X-ray. Instead, you named it a herald.”

“I don’t know, Roger. Its hands are lifted like it’s shouting. Like it’s shouting a warning. A fallen angel calling a warrior to battle. A fucking herald, okay?”

“I see.”

More pencil scratching against paper.

“Oh, great.” Sarcasm coated his tongue like honey.

Shit. Reel it in.

Roger put the card face down and reached for another.

“What about this one?”

Black spread across the page with mottled red spatters placed strategically toward the top and bottom.

“It’s a face,” Brooks answered without hesitation.

“Elaborate.”

“It’s the bottom half of a jaw. Skeletal. That small stain in the crease is the nose bone. Its mouth is open, yelling. And the two red spots up top are like eyes. Angry eyes.”

“Angry because they’re red?”

“No,” he mused. “The way the red spatters at the bottom and around the image aren’t rounded but spiked? The image is angry. I can just feel it. Like it’s been wronged and is set on revenge.”

Roger writes and nods. Without skipping a beat he replaces the image in his hand for another more sinister than the last.

“Have you ever met the devil, Roger?”

The pen stops scribbling and those calculative eyes flick up.

“Come again?”

“Have you ever met the devil?”

“Who is the devil, Brooks?”

“I think the devil is subjective. To a drug addict, the devil is heroin. To a widow, he is death.”

“And what is the devil to you, Brooks?”

He smirked at Roger and with a wink threw back, “Asked you first, dickhead.”

“Refer to the inkblot, please.”

“Must have been hard to keep that eye-roll under control.”

Roger looked back at him, a line of impatience written across his forehead.

“Fine,” Brooks sighed and made a show of looking over the ink-stained card. What he didn’t expect was to get lost in its image, for within it, he did see the devil.

He saw Lucifer with horns atop his head. He saw Grimm with his scythe hung proudly over his shoulder. Surtr holding his flaming sword. Donn of the Gaels and his black horse of shadows.

But more than any, he saw chaos.

Darkness spilled over the page, black as the void and even more ominous. Within its depths, he saw a devil and a savior. A creator and a sword of destruction. Life and death. A chill ran down as spine as the dark presence within stirred.

“Brooks?” Roger’s voice cut through the spiral and brought Brooks’ attention back to the drab room.

“I think I’m done for the day, Roger,” he swallowed. “And I fucking mean it.”

Roger took a moment to write more notes and each scratch of lead against the paper made Brooks want to crawl out of his skin.

“I would like to see you again to discuss this reaction further. I can see that you’re still experiencing some drowsiness and irritation from your injection, so I’ll call an orderly to escort you to breakfast.”

Roger didn’t look up from the pad as he continued scribbling bullshit down— a clear dismissal.

“Fantastic, doc,” the sarcasm rolled off effortlessly, the last syllable a loud pop that echoed through the taught space.

“Being an asshole will do you no favors. Seeing the devil in an ink stain, however? That’s the nail in your coffin. You’re so

screwed,” his Siren whispered, her voice quiet like she had been a silent observer.

He tapped impatient fingers against his thigh as a no-face employee grasped the handles of the wheelchair and pulled him from the room.

“In the ass, it would appear,” he huffed under his breath.



BROOKS

WALLS BLURRED ON THEIR way to the mess hall, different shades of musty brown furniture blending with door frames and worn tiles. It was no wonder time in the asylum felt like swimming through a pool of molasses—everything was unremarkable.

He watched the other residents in the cafeteria, both envious and disgusted by how content they were. Some ate in silence while others talked to residents seated around their tables. There were those whose silent stare was focused a million miles away and others whose paranoia forced them to stay alert.

“Brooks.”

A tray dropped to the table with a loud thump, startling him from his musings. A small woman sat clumsily beside him, her leg bumping his elbow as it swung over the bench and

knocked the spoon from his hand. Brown mush splattered across the table and into his lap.

Brooks closed his eyes and sighed, battling for patience.

He deserved an Olympic medal for not cursing.

“Rue,” he returned with gritted teeth.

“Whoops,” she chuckled.

They sat shoulder to shoulder and Brooks bristled at the contact.

Rue was a patient at St. Dymphna’s long before Brooks ever showed up. He didn’t know much about her other than her high-pitched voice made his skin crawl and she was way too happy to be living in an asylum. Her hair was an unnatural shade of red— so deep in color it matched the ripest of berries and looked almost pink in the sunlight.

Brooks met Rue in the greenhouse right after he woke from one of his insulin-induced comas. He was taken to pick flowers after electroshock therapy and found her pruning the spring flowers. He knew he was in trouble the instant their eyes met.

Her cheeks flushed, flowers forgotten as she turned to watch him pass. There were few clear memories from those first few days after waking, but he would never forget her look in the greenhouse.

Obsession.

“So,” she started. “How are you? How’s life? What have you been up to? Anything new?”

“Impressive,” he spoke over her, attempting to patch the dam before more words could burst from it. “You found four ways to ask the same question and didn’t even need to breathe in between.”

Rue dug into the food like she was ravenous, the only sign of emotion at his words a small quirk of her brow.

Brooks made a subtle shift away from her as he pretended to give a fuck about the forgotten spoon, but Rue was relentless.

“I haven’t seen you since our last electroshock therapy session,” she said around a mouth full of food.

She pushed her tray over to his and scooted until their sides connected.

Ice chilled his veins as anger flared, and he drew in a large lungful of air to gain some semblance of control.

“Get her off of us,” his passenger growled.

“Is it cold in here today or what?” Rue made a show of rubbing her arms, her shivers more dramatic than her entrance.

“Feels fine to me, Rue.”

“It’s because you’re so hot-blooded,” she giggled. “Men like you don’t get cold. You’re too rugged and smoldering and muscular and intense and—”

“Rue!” Brooks’ hands slammed to the table as he stood, their trays and silverware rattling with the force of impact.

What looked back at him was not a girl filled with fear. Fear would have been manageable. Preferable even, because then she would stay away.

No, her eyes shone with fanatic desire.

Rue was a stalker.

Brooks turned his stare to the table where his palms rested and recoiled. Ice crept out from under his hands in intricate patterns and spread across their small table. He turned his hands over and back frantically searching for any string of explanation.

“That’s enough.” A large hand gripped his shoulder as another took his tray from the table. “Come with me.”

Brooks tucked his hands behind his back as he was dragged away. He turned back to look at Rue and cringed. Her eyes shined, emphasized by the small smile and waggle of her fingers. Her gaze never left him as he was shoved to the other side of the cafeteria and seated, her eyes burning holes through his brain and straight through his nerves.

Brooks let the orderly push him to the table and sat without fuss. The last thing he needed was for Rue to piss off his passenger and get him sent to therapy.

“She’s a fucking problem and we need to shake her. I don’t like the way she looks at us.”

“Shut up,” he hissed, eyes roving over the cafeteria to be sure he wasn’t caught talking to himself.

His skin crawled from the intrusion in his mind.

“I don’t have time for your bullshit and, more importantly, being shocked literally into next week because some psychopath ruffles your feathers.” Brooks kept his voice low.

He rested his forehead in his hand and sighed, realization donning once more as he whispered, “My feathers. The psychopath would be ruffling *my* feathers. The voices are not real.”

A wisp of wind fluttered his hair as an orderly placed a Styrofoam bowl beside his tray of pig slop. Brooks lifted his head from his palm and nodded without sparing the man a glance. His hand brushed the bowl and he stopped dead.

Plump, juicy fruit rested in the disposable dish, the blues and purples so vibrant they looked like splashes from a Cezanne still-life. If Cezanne had painted fruit in a fucking Styrofoam bowl, of course.

In all of the time he spent in this prison of a hospital, he had never seen fresh fruit. Dried brown pieces of leather sprinkled over everything, sure. But never anything so fresh and still full of life.

He blinked, and blinked again.

When the blinking failed, he rubbed at his eyes furiously to clear the fog. When the vibrant colored berries were still sitting before him, a sense of awe washed over him. It was too good to be true.

Brooks couldn’t make himself waste the fruit over the mush pile on his tray. Instead, he grabbed handfuls at a time and

gobbled them down like a toddler presented with cake. The juice from the plump berries ran down his chin and stained his tongue, the tartness raising the hairs on his arms as the contrasting sweetness coated his throat.

“So vibrant and full of life. A taste of what lies ahead.”

He ignored his hallucination as he gorged himself on fresh berries in a frenzy. It wasn't until his sticky fingers scraped the bottom that he came back to reality. A pang of sorrow struck him in the chest at the loss. The first taste of anything real in this fucking place and he had wasted an opportunity to cherish the experience.

Brooks looked up, eyes wide, in search of an orderly to demand more of the tart berries, but what he found wasn't a faceless employee in pristine white scrubs.

Blueberries forgotten, he stared across the room at the most broken woman he had ever laid eyes on.

Angry, mottled scars decorated her exposed skin like violent paint splatter on canvas. Crosses and deep gashes spider-webbed across her wrists and biceps, some long healed and others still puffy and pink.

What drew his eye, though, was the scarring that spread up her neck like veins of lightning, the flesh raised and violet like it never fully healed. Over top of it was one angry slash from ear to ear.

Her high, pixie-like cheekbones were as strong as steel and the fire in those cocoa eyes pooled like lava. Her pouty lips

were blossom pink and her long brown hair fell in luminous messy waves down her back.

He wondered why she had been allowed to keep it long. All of the other residents, male and female alike, were forced to keep a shorter cut so that it wouldn't get in the way of medical intervention during an outburst.

Or, fucking forbid, lice.

The hair raised on the back of Brooks' neck as a tingle of awareness washed down his senses.

His eyes flicked up to meet her deep, assessing stare. Heat flared in his cheeks, but he couldn't bring himself to look away from her espresso eyes. There was something unnerving in their depths.

Something broken.

Detached.

Not a single hair moved on her body, no obvious rise or fall of the chest, but she was tense as if poised to bolt at the sound of a pin dropping.

Bolt... Or maybe fight.

"Like calls to like," a whisper brushed his ear. *"We needed her, and she has given herself to us. Do not let it be in vain."*

As their eyes searched each other like starving beasts, something flared in her gaze and her entire body went stiff as stone.

She stood, her movements quick and jerky, and made a beeline toward his table with her mouth opened in a wordless scream.

Brooks couldn't move, his limbs paralyzed in anticipation for their collision. He wasn't sure whether he would run from or toward her given the chance.

His eyes tracked each hurried step she took, fury written across her features. She was a fucking storm hurtling his way and he was helpless to avoid the disaster she wrought.

Pandemonium ensued.

The asylum was on the fringe of chaos, but all he could see was the woman forcing a path straight toward him. Time stood still as the tips of their toes met. Ringing filled his ears as her hushed breaths stirred the hair along his forehead.

She reached out and the moment her scarred hand touched his cheek the expanse of the universe imploded with a shudder. Words froze upon their lips, and the darkness within their souls rejoiced.

The air chilled as that baritone voice skated across his psyche, "*Like calls to like.*"

"I'm home," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "I've finally come home."

Time started back in a whirlwind as shouts erupted around them. Orderlies rushed the table from all sides prepared with loaded syringes. By the time he realized what was happening it

was too late to stop it. He couldn't pull his face from the scarred hand caressing his cheek.

He didn't move. Didn't try to fight the inevitable. Instead, he used his last conscious seconds to decode her look of wonder before the needle plunged into his thigh.

His traitorous body refused to move as his mind swam in a drugged haze. Only one thing was for certain— he was lying in a bed.

Whose? Probably his own. Hopefully not the infirmary.

Everything else was to be determined.

Brooks attempted to move his limbs but to no avail.

Alright, he thought. If this is how it's going to be...

He was either awake or falling in and out of consciousness, his mind sluggishly navigating a dreamscape. With the amount of sedative pulsing through his blood, there was no way to be sure which.

Left to his own devices and unsure of his fate, his mind wandered to anything that promised comfort. If he thought hard enough, he could almost imagine his head relaxing in the lap of a beautiful woman while she stroked his hair. She would hum a soft tune or whisper sweet nothings into his ear.

His chaste thoughts turned indecent when he imagined what it would feel like to have her lips so close to his ear. Her breath

would tickle the small hairs as she spoke and he would crane his neck to give her access to his throat.

She would mock him for being so wanton as her hair fell over him, its feather soft ends tickling his skin and sending shivers straight down to his dick. It would be indecent the way he ached for her.

His breaths became ragged and he urged his hand to move—

“Brooks?”

He froze, his racing mind pulling from the fantasy and searching for the voice.

“Brooks? Is that you?” She tried again.

“Um—” He cleared his throat. “Siren?”

“What are you doing?”

“I, uh,” he stammered as his cheeks flamed. “I’m lying here.”

“Where?”

“To be honest? I’ve no idea.”

“How...” she started.

Brooks interrupted before she could finish that thought. “Don’t ask. It’s a long story and I don’t have all of the answers.”

“Ookay.”

The silence was awkward as fuck and embarrassment was riding his coat tails.

“I feel like maybe this was a bad time. Should I go?” Her voice was strained.

“No— shit, I’m sorry. I’m a little off my game,” he admitted.

“Oh, there is no way the great charmer is thrown off his game. It’s impossible. Who are you and what have you done with Brooks?” Her light teases warmed his chest.

“You’re so funny, Siren.” He tried to sound put out, but it was hard with her.

“What could possibly have made the great flirt fall from his throne?”

“You think you’re so fucking funny don’t you?” He quipped.

Her only response was a laugh— a real laugh. Not a chuckle or a huff, a real laugh that starts deep in the belly and you’ve no control over the way it sounds when it leaves your lips.

“Something shifted today, and I can’t name it or identify it. But something changed in the asylum today. There was this girl...”

“Oh?” Her tone was oddly neutral.

“She came in out of nowhere and was a complete train of destruction. And then there were berries. Fresh ripe berries I’ve never seen before and—” he stopped as frustration flared. He couldn’t form a complete sentence to save his life.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

“You know what, I can see that you’re struggling and am going to do you a favor. You can thank me later, okay?” More

mocking.

“Whatever, Siren.”

“So, there was a girl—”

“No once upon a time?” He interrupted.

“Seriously?”

“Fine. Continue.”

“There was a girl molded from the clay of a cursed river. A powerful god sculpted her to perfection and used all of his power and might to bring her to life. She was said to be the most pure and beautiful woman in existence. The god coveted her beauty and crafted an elixir to tie their lives together so that she would live an immortal life span, just as he did. Their souls were bound and if he fell, so did she.”

“Fell? Like died?”

“Obviously, Brooks.”

He hummed, and she continued.

“She knew nothing of the world she was born into and clung to the god, putting all of her trust into him for her safety on the riverside. She never expected that he would be the danger she needed to hide from, for the god was cruel and his agenda... monstrous.”

“Of course.”

“The god was full of madness and feared he couldn’t contain it any longer. He needed a vessel to carry that weakness for him. His burden became hers, and it drove her mad.”

“Mad? Mad as in she was pissy about being bossed around? Or mad as in the next patient in line at the med station in the asylum?”

“Her body couldn’t contain the taint he filled her with year after year and, eventually, she went insane. She rode through the lands spreading disease and decimating anyone unfortunate enough to cross her path. She stole babies from their beds and fed them to her rabid hounds. A great crown of fangs dripping with venom sat upon her head and was deadly to anyone but her and the god who made her.”

“Fucks sake!”

“Oh, calm down. It’s just a scary story told to children to make them listen.”

“So she’s like the boogeyman?”

“No,” she swallowed, her tone somber as she continued. *“She is nothing like the boogeyman. I’ve come face-to-face with him, and his demons stray further from divinity than hers do.”*

“I’m sorry, Siren. I didn’t... I didn’t mean to—”

“I know. It’s okay.”

The silence fell heavily and sat uncomfortably on his chest.

“So what happened to her?” He blurted.

“I’m sorry?”

“The crazy girl. What happened to her?”

“Well, it depends on who you believe. Some say that she lives with rabid animals and roams the land torturing anyone and everyone she can. Others say she’s caged in the underworld because even the gods couldn’t control her rage. But, they all say that she is the only thing standing between life as we know it and the destruction of our world. Legend says that she has a box tucked away somewhere that contains all of the sins of the world and, if ever she were to die, the box would be opened and all would be lost.”

“That’s pretty goddamn serious,” he breathed.

“It would be. If it were real of course.”

“Thank fuck it’s not.”

“You’re not kidding,” she laughed.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “For the story, I mean.”

“Of course, Brooks.”

He reflected on her story as his awareness faded to black. In the Christian bible, pestilence, famine, war, and death were to usher in the apocalypse. The Horsemen would ride and raze the planet until it was free of sin.

What his Siren described sounded similar, although its origin wasn’t familiar to him. A woman with a secret box who held the fate of the world in her hands.

If it were opened, she would be the hand of God and, as far as he knew, no one was powerful enough to stop his fist from falling.



BROOKS

SINCE THAT MOMENT IN the cafeteria, he was entranced.

Brooks searched for the broken girl in every room in hopes of catching a glimpse of those brown locks and patchy scars. He spent many restless nights on the roof wondering what room she was assigned to, filling his mind like an obsession. How quickly the fresh berries, now an everyday offering, were forgotten in the mornings whenever his eyes searched for hers. But, day after day, he came up empty.

Nights became even more restless as he would lie in bed and search the water stains plaguing the ceiling tiles for reminders of the broken girl. Dark russet stains complimented lighter tones of almond and he could imagine the unique, vibrant colors as individual strands of hair falling over her tan scrubs.

“Gods, get ahold of yourself,” he whispered to the darkness.

He was fascinated and that made him feel just a touch guilty. He didn't want her to think he was obsessive like Rue. He just wanted to understand why every part of her seemed so...

Alive.

Why had the color brown suddenly gained dimension? What was it about her that forced life into his veins?

He wasn't attracted to her the way Rue seemed to be drawn to him.

No, she felt like something he wanted to study. Dissect. Learn about.

She was beautiful, but she was tragic. He wanted to know her secrets.

Brooks rolled off the bed with an exasperated sigh and pulled the old wristwatch from its hiding space. The hands were still ticking slowly around the clock face. He swiped the pad of his thumb over the glass, stuck it in his pocket, and padded toward his door.

He needed out.

Fresh air, after all, was the cure for restlessness.

He pressed his ear to the door, listened to be sure the hall was empty, and then trekked silently to the rooftop. Since her arrival to the asylum, he found more often than not that his door was left unlocked.

Maybe they were too busy trying to contain her chaos to be bothered with his.

Shadows hovered in corners and doorways along the way, the darkness inky and saturated. Phantom wisps of wind caressed his skin and sent tingles running down his spine. That ever present feeling of being watched sat heavily on his shoulders and made his skin clammy. Brooks picked up his speed and didn't dare look over his shoulder where the shadows pooled. He didn't want to face the monsters on his heels tonight.

Brooks didn't take a full breath until the exit door was at his back. He stood against the chilled, heavy metal door to collect himself before ascending the access steps built along the back wall of the asylum.

His fingers tapped against his thumb in quick succession to chase down the anxiety as he focused on taking step after step up the metal stairs.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four.

One, two, three, four...

He faltered at the landing. In his space, right under the constellation Ara, sat a small figure huddled against the cold. It felt like an eternity before he could encourage his frozen body to resume functioning.

Her.

He started slowly toward her prone form, each step placed with intention so as not to scare her away. The moonlight stretched his shadow across the rooftop as he maneuvered

around her until it mingled with hers. Her spine stiffening was the only indication she noticed.

Brooks stopped moving, stopped fucking breathing, and waited for her response.

“Can you imagine thinking that you’re falling asleep for the last time, only to wake up and find yourself in this shit hole?”

Her voice struck him, different than he’d heard it the first time. Rather than a hoarse whisper, she was a raspy alto.

Brooks cleared his throat and continued forward slowly as he said, “I can imagine the disappointment.”

He stood awkwardly at her side, unsure whether or not it was okay to sit. The last thing he wanted was to spook her. Not when he’d finally found her.

His eyes soaked in every detail of her profile, his curious gaze inspecting her like an animal. His spine stiffened when he caught a glimpse of bruising around her wrists.

She turned those blazing brown eyes toward him pointedly, “Are you going to sit? Or are you going to stand there like a hulking serial killer?” Her lip was split and one eye sported a nasty bruise.

He cleared his throat and muttered, “How could I resist that invitation?”

Brooks lowered himself to the ground but his eyes never left hers, silence thick in the air. She was the first to break as she turned her gaze back to the stars. Brooks had a million questions but couldn’t seem to make his lips form a single one.

How did she get up here? Where did she come from? Why was she here? Were those her screams echoing down the halls that night?

“What do you see in them?”

Caught off guard, he stuttered, “I don’t– I’m sorry?”

She sighed, “The stars. What do you see in them?”

“I...,” he paused and looked at the burning orbs in question. “I don’t really know. I come to look at them and they never change, almost like they’re sitting there having a grand fucking laugh at all of us. The constellations never shift, the stars never burn brighter. I guess I’m looking for something new. Something to prove that I’m alive.”

She turned her attention to his face and studied it, eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he searched the night sky.

“Do you think that you’re dead?”

“Depends on your definition of alive,” he scoffed.

She studied him as she chewed on his response. Brooks watched her think, intrigued by the way the movement of her brows reflected every emotion.

“Close your eyes,” she said abruptly.

“For what?”

“Just do it.”

He wasn’t wholly comfortable with the idea of being blind around a stranger, so he kept his eyes slit.

“Do you hear it?” she said.

“Hear what?”

“Gods, just focus.” Agitation laced her tone, and he tried his best to humor her.

He’d been on that rooftop a million times and had only ever been met with silence. No trees rustling, no wind howling just—

His ears perked as a faint rhythm brushed his senses.

“Is that... chirping?” he asked incredulously.

“Crickets,” she replied matter-of-factly. “Have you never heard crickets here before?”

“No.” He answered, stunned.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she murmured.

His curiosity was piqued by her answer, but nothing could overcome the wonder he felt at the music of cricket song dancing through the air.

As many times as he had sat on that roof, he’d never once heard the sound of a creature filter through the dead air.

“Let’s play a game,” she interjected.

Confusion, curiosity and intrigue warred within him as he pulled his mind from the crickets and asked, “Does this game involve you telling me your name?”

“Names aren’t important,” she scoffed. “And this isn’t some stupid truth or dare bullshit.”

“Okay, you got me, cold queen. What are you proposing if it’s not the traditional looney bin icebreaker?”

She graced him with a small smile before falling serious once more.

“It’s called a nightmare for a nightmare.”

Brooks’ brow furrowed and the atmosphere strained between them.

“That sounds pretty serious.”

“If you play,” she looked at him again, “I’ll tell you my name.”

He pretended to ponder, but his mind was made up before the stakes were laid bare.

“Deal. I’ll play your game, and you’ll tell me what I can call you. Other than cold queen, of course,” he said with a smirk and a wink. “But you’ll have to go first. Show me how it’s done.”

She touched the cuff of her sleeves hesitantly and, with a sigh of resignation, pulled them up past her elbow. A series of small scars made a ladder all the way up to her bicep and disappeared under the worn cotton.

“This,” she pointed, “isn’t exactly what it looks like.”

Brooks looked her in the eyes but said nothing.

“I never knew my mom. I always just assumed she was dead. For as long as I can remember I’ve lived on my own. I never lived in one place for long, but it was always alone.”

“That must have been lonely,” he said quietly.

A small, sad smile pulled at her lips. “It could be. But it was better than the alternative.”

Brooks watched as darkness crept into her eyes like a hurricane making landfall.

“What was the alternative?”

“My dad,” she bit out. “Once a year, every year, he would find me. No matter how far I ran or how little I left behind, he always found me.”

Brooks became weary. He did not have to know this girl or her past to guess that she had been through a lot. It was written in her posture and every fine worry line on her forehead. What was worse was that it was embedded in her eyes.

“Why was that so bad?”

She huffed a small laugh. “My dad is not a nice guy.”

Her expression deepened, anger changing to anxiety, anxiety to fear and panic.

“Every year. Every visit. Every... touch. I marked it. So I would never forget. So that when I had the strength, I could hurt him for every time he hurt me.” Tears streamed down her cheeks leaving small, gleaming tracks in their wake.

She forced her sleeves back down and rubbed her arms like she had done it a million times. There had to be hundreds of scars on her arms. She was painted with the ghosts of her past, an artist with no control of her situation other than the brush.

“You...” he said tentatively. “You said he came once a year, but there have to be hundreds of scars on your arm.” A gentle question to pull her from her mind.

She looked his way, wiped at her cheeks, and nodded.

“That’s a nightmare for another time. Now, I think you owe me a nightmare.”

The weight in Brooks’ stomach was hard to bear. What she revealed made him sick. The thought of one girl having to go through even a fraction of that pain, and caused by someone she was supposed to be able to trust... It was daunting. But the anger? No, the sickness had nothing on the anger bubbling in his chest.

She leaned in and nudged him with her shoulder, a strong awareness lingering where they touched.

“Your turn.” The starlight reflected off the unshed tears in her eyes.

He swallowed his own emotions, determined to stay as stony and strong as she seemed. He couldn’t change her past, but he could be a solid wall for her to lean on now, even if he wasn’t sure why he wanted to play that role.

“I’m a paranoid schizophrenic with no memories other than what the shadows whisper to me. I have a dark passenger inside me, and I have no idea what it is capable of. Sometimes I worry that when I black out, it’s in control. Every night, I take this stupid watch,” he pulled the wristlet out of his pocket and held it in front of her, “clean the face, and bring it to the

roof hoping that it will show me something. It's the only thing I have from *before*." He turned his gaze from the watch to her calculative eyes.

"Can I see it?"

Brooks shrugged and passed the time piece over. She inspected it silently for a few moments before looking back at him.

"What do you remember from before?" Her curious gaze grew more speculative like she was testing the waters.

"Nothing," he scoffed. "Absolutely nothing. All I can remember are the fifty shades of fucking brown in this hospital. Every day is the same, like I'm in this unbreakable time loop and the longer I'm here..." he paused. "The longer I'm here, the more I deteriorate."

She handed the watch back, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her after his confession. Brooks was afraid that if he met her stare she would ask for an explanation, and he wasn't sure he had one.

They sat unmoving and lost in the depths of their own thoughts as the moon moved through the sky to usher in the daylight. He stole a few glances in her direction and tried to memorize the way her brows dipped and how the small bit of cheek she held firmly between her teeth gave her a small dimple. Her expression was contemplative and pained, like words formed and died on her tongue, unable to make it past her lips.

“Have you ever thought that maybe you spend too much time expecting guidance from the stars, and not enough time seeking what’s in between them?” Her expression was pointed and serious.

Her question caught him off guard and he was sure it was painted all over his face.

“There is nothing in between the stars,” he argued. “It’s just empty space. Air doesn’t even move through it. Life, answers, brilliance... it’s all found in the stars.”

Her hands were restless and she spoke with urgency.

“The stars do not exist without the space that holds them. Think of the universe as an ocean. The water is filled with fish, molecules, coral, beings big and small. But what are they without the water that holds them? The water that nourishes them and helps them thrive?”

She didn’t give her revelation time to fully sink in before she flicked a paranoid glance over her shoulder, stood, dusted off her scrub pants and said, “The ocean came first, and everything else was born because it existed. Let the darkness speak to you. Answer its call. I have to go. I’ve said too much and they’ll be coming for me.”

“Wait, what do you—”

“Lytta,” she whispered. “My name is Lytta. *Remember.*”



BROOKS

THE DOOR FELL SHUT with a silent click. He leaned against the frame and listened to the pounding of his heart.

“Remember,” she had whispered.

He had never expected to find her on the rooftop and left with more questions than he had answers.

It would do, though. For tonight.

“Lytta..”

Brooks cringed, the raspy voice of his passenger making him recoil in his skin.

“You don’t get her,” he growled under his breath.

“She is already mine.”

He pushed the voice aside along with the rising unease it caused.

He padded to the bed and slipped under the blankets, determined to catch a few hours of sleep before the asylum woke for the day. He was dreading the week to come but knew he couldn't think about it. It was always worse when he lingered on thoughts of the future.

He'd been sedated multiple times in the past few days and his passenger was taking control more often than not. He knew the staff saw what was going on because he woke up to Roger and his bullshit.

It wouldn't be long until he started receiving more advanced therapy for his schizophrenia.

He would have to see *her*. His stomach twisted at the thought of the lead doctor of St. Dymphna's psychiatric care. She was a master of hiding her delight for cruelty under the guise of medicine.

Brooks inhaled shakily in an attempt to clear his mind.

Rest.

If he was going to live through treatment, he was going to need rest.

He tapped his finger rhythmically against his chest to lull himself to sleep as he focused on relaxing each muscle one at a time, starting at his toes.

"Brooks?" Her voice was quiet, hardly a whisper.

"Siren?"

His finger stopped tapping as he waited to hear her speak up again. She'd been abnormally quiet these past few days and it worried him. Which was stupid, he knew.

She wasn't real.

She wasn't real, and yet the feeling that fluttered in his chest when she spoke... It felt *very* real. So real that he fucking hated himself for it. But there was something about the adrenaline of the past few days and the thought of what was to come that made him vulnerable. The doctor was going to make him forget, anyway. He might as well find joy in the quiet moments, right?

"Hey, you."

"Long time no see," he murmured sarcastically.

"Miss me, did you?"

"I wouldn't say that. Mostly just worried that some other hallucination was going to take up residence if you left, and I was afraid she would be uglier than you."

"That may have been the most pig-headed thing I've ever heard you say."

"Nah, you've heard my thoughts. It gets worse."

They shared a laugh, but the silence shortly after it died down was deafening.

"Siren?"

"Yes?"

Tears sprang to his eyes as emotion clogged his throat.

Fear, uncertainty, relief... All wrapped into one heart-stopping mass he couldn't push past alone in the dark.

"Tonight... can we just pretend?"

"Yeah, Brooks," she said after a moment, her voice raw. *"We can pretend for tonight."*

A bit of the pressure eased from his chest. Tomorrow he would face what was to come, but tonight he would find solace in her voice.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, Siren, I don't."

He cleared his throat and urged the tears away. He may be talking to himself but he damn sure wasn't going to cry about it.

"Do you?" He asked.

"What makes you think there's anything to talk about?"

"You sound tired," he whispered sympathetically. "Beaten down."

"That's when you would typically come to the conclusion that I'm upset because I am you, and you're upset."

"Not tonight. We're pretending, remember?"

"Yeah. I remember." The sadness only thickened between them.

"So, do you? Want to talk about it, I mean."

“No. I don’t want to burden you with my nightmare of a life.”

“I played an interesting game with someone recently that may intrigue you, actually.”

“Oh yeah?” she laughed.

“Yeah. It’s called Nightmare for a Nightmare.”

“Zeus Almighty, that sounds terrible. What kind of shit do they teach you in therapy there?”

“Only very applicable-to-real-life things, thank you very much snooty Judy.”

She cackled and it warmed his frozen heart.

“Okay, how do you play?”

“It was super easy. She confessed something horrible and then I did the same.”

“For fucks sake, Brooks. Why?”

“Does that mean you don’t want to play?” He laughed half-heartedly. Brooks wasn’t sure if he actually wanted her to say yes. He wasn’t ready to share his nightmares, and he didn’t know if he could bear the weight of hers. What he did want was for her to have a safe space to talk if she needed it.

“I live in a nightmare, Brooks. I don’t want to recount them.”

Her voice was small again, and he wished he could manifest her into reality to hold her close while she wept.

“Fair enough, Siren.”

“How about this? Rather than tell you a nightmare, why don’t I tell you a story?”

“A story huh? Does it end in a happily-ever-after? Please tell me it’s dirty. Is there sex involved?”

Her attempt to talk through laughs pulled a smile from his lips and he swore he could listen to it for the rest of his life.

A dark feeling cast a shadow from her light and in it lived his doubt. He would never be able to experience her skin against his or roam her body with his eyes. He was a fucking idiot for entertaining its presence, for letting it in when he was most vulnerable.

Brooks ran his fingers through his hair and shut his eyes against the thoughts barreling through his mind.

He shouldn’t be here with her.

He should be forcing sleep—

“Brooks? I thought we were pretending.”

The lump of emotion came back twice as strong and threatened to choke him.

“Please, Brooks. Just stay with me. Please..” Her voice broke and the pain that seeped through the cracks made his heart ache.

He hated himself for the way his body reacted to her, but maybe he hated himself even more because he knew he needed this too. Needed the comfort he felt within her voice.

“I’m here, Siren,” he sighed, defeated.

“I know a story and, I’m sure there’s some dirty stuff I could throw into it along the way. But it’s not a happily-ever-after. Do you want to hear it?”

“Yes,” he swallowed. “If you want to tell it, I want to hear it. Although I’m not sure either of us needs a sad story right now.”

“Sometimes it’s good to feel the pain, Brooks. It helps us to remember our vulnerabilities and stay grounded in compassion. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Once upon a time, long before the Earth was filled with life, great immortal beings roamed its lands. They created, destroyed, and wreaked havoc among themselves. They fucked for pleasure and status and, more often than not, produced heirs that would enhance their own power rather than create a great line of succession.”

“Shocker,” he interjected in an attempt to bring lightness with humor.

She laughed, but continued.

“It wasn’t long before the children of the great gods grew tired of cruelty and oppression and rose against them. A great battle raged for ten years before the most powerful of them all mustered a final kernel of great power to bring the Titans down. No one knew how he won the battle, and no one cared. They were free.”

“Of course,” he scoffed. “He gets this last burst of great magic to win it all and no one second guesses where or how he got it. That’s going to come back and bite him in the ass later isn’t it?”

“This story isn’t really about him.”

“Oh? Do continue, Siren.”

“So the children of the great gods won, and they raised new civilizations to worship them while they lived and prospered above. But, it wasn’t long before they began to grow restless.”

“As cocky immortals do.”

“They began to fight amongst each other over territories, rights, and power.”

“Is this where the fucking comes in?”

“Brooks!”

“Sorry,” he giggled. Fucking giggled. Gods help him.

“In an attempt for control, two of the new gods conspired against their mighty leader. Their territories ruled most of Heaven and Earth and they were confident that if they planned it right, they could overthrow the monarchy in a matter of days.”

“Cocky bastards.”

“They met in secret under the cover of night while the great sun god rested. With each meeting, they grew closer both in body and spirit.”

“Ha! They did fuck! I knew it.”

“Are you done?”

“Yes,” he smirked. “Proceed.”

“The two gods became lovers and, as the bond between them grew, they second-guessed their tactics. Originally she was to seduce the leader, lure him to her bed and cut his throat while the seed was still warm between her thighs—”

“That’s fucking gross. Why would you say it like that?”

“—but it soon became clear that their options were limited. She was pregnant, and though they planned the fall of royalty with the heirs they would bear, neither could stomach the thought of a future without their children. War always brings death.”

“Goddammit.”

“He wasn’t willing to risk her or the babe, and she couldn’t fathom the thought of him standing before their leader and demanding war. They got sloppy and it wasn’t long before whispers rode the wind straight to the ear of their leader. The great shape-shifter laid low at many of the lover’s meetings and gathered all of the evidence he would need against them.”

“I don’t like where this is going, Siren.”

“When she was heavy with child, the leader of the gods confronted the pair on an open beach. Not even the crashing waves could cover the sound of her screams as he cast down her lover and ripped the babes from her womb. All three of them.”

“Three? Three fucking babies?” He asked incredulously.

“He sent them off with a nursemaid to a faraway island, never to be seen or heard from again. What the lovers didn’t know was that their offspring were capable of razing the world as they knew it. Children born of the sea and sky with the power to lure gods to their death and create mighty storms to drown them all. Power so great that even the God of Chaos, their great creator, would be in awe of it.

As she lay broken in the sand, her lover mutilated beside her, she begged their leader for mercy. Spare them and their babies and no one in their line would ever raise a hand against him.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t go well?”

“He sneered at her weakness and made her watch as he ripped the legs from her lover, bound his body with the tail of a whale and cast him to the sea, cursed to never walk the lands again.”

“Fuck. What about her? Did he kill her?” Brooks was one hundred percent invested.

“No. Worse.”

“Worse? How could it be worse? Her man is basically dead, her babies are gone, she’s all fucked up and you’re telling me it’s worse?”

“The great ruler cursed her children to an island and then bound her immortality to her domain. If ever she were to leave, she would wither and die like a human and her home would crash to Earth, killing her children and lover.”

Brooks was silent as he digested the ending before something dawned on him.

“Wait... you said ‘crash to Earth.’ Does that mean she was a star?”

“No,” his Siren said, that sadness lacing the edges of her voice again. “*She’s the moon, Brooks.*”

“The moon? So—” his words broke off as the full reality of her story hit home.

“The moon and the sea were once lovers. The way the waves danced with the pull of the moon was so beautiful that even the stars were jealous. But now they spend their lives mourning the loss of a lover’s touch. The tides rise as the sea reaches for the moon but, as she falls to the sun, so too does the tide.”

“That’s fucking tragic, Siren.”

“Not all love stories end happily, Brooks. Some just have to be grateful for the time they get.”

“You sound like you have experience with that type of tragedy, sunshine.”

Her voice was weak when she answered, “*I do.*”

“I’m sorry.” Defeat plagued him.

“I know.”

“If I could, I would kill the motherfucker and give you his dick as a trophy.”

“Slow down, killer. The last thing I want is some guy’s taxidermied dick hanging above my fireplace.”

They laughed together and it eased some of the ache in his chest.

“For what it’s worth, Siren, I would let the stars fall from the sky and watch the world burn before I let anyone take you from me.” His throat tightened as longing set in. Longing for what his life could be like if she were real and he didn’t have to pretend.

Her breath caught and it was a moment before she whispered, *“I would raise the sea and drown them all to spend even a moment in your arms.”*

The silence was heavy as they mourned broken dreams.

“We should try to get some sleep, Siren. I think we’ve both had a rough day.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

Neither wanted to be the first to place the rigid bubble of reality back around them.

“Brooks?”

“Yeah?”

“I wish we didn’t have to pretend.”

Her words hit him harder than electroshock therapy ever could.

“Sleep tight, sunshine.”



XIA LIE NAKED AND curled on the bathroom floor huddled against the pile of towels she'd pulled from the rack. Goosebumps pimpled her skin from the cold tile, but she couldn't move. The last of her energy had been spent pushing herself away from the vomit mere inches from her face.

The Lord of Nightmares, or the Devil as he was called in his nefarious club, had been greedy and took more than normal. If she didn't know better, she might think death was knocking on her bathroom door.

She wasn't so lucky.

Brooks asked her for a nightmare, but she couldn't bring herself to speak of them. She couldn't tell him she was lying lifeless on the bathroom floor in a pile of her own sick with nothing but a couple of towels to prop her head.

No. Dealing with the aftermath of the Devil's greed was nothing new— there was no need to bring anyone else into it now. Especially when their time together was so precious to her. She wouldn't burden him with her truths when she could simply enjoy his company.

Regret flooded her mind. Rather than a story to ease them both, she tainted their time with tragedy. She would do better. They both needed hope and during the times he let her in, that's all she wanted to feel.

Hope.

Hope that he would rescue her from her gilded prison. A knight in shining armor who struck down the Devil and obliterated anyone on his path to save her.

Xia took a few steadying breaths and pushed herself from the floor. She didn't know how much time had passed since the Devil left her chambers but her body was growing sore from the cold tile.

She rolled to her hands and knees and tested her right leg to stand, but it was too weak. No matter how hard she pushed, the muscle wouldn't support her weight.

Tears sprang to her eyes as anger and sorrow built but she refused to lie helpless any longer. She urged her body forward and crawled to the small walk-in shower in the corner of the bathroom.

It was an effort and the tile was ruthless on her battered knees. Lifting to reach the knobs, however, proved even more

difficult than the crawl over.

She allowed one sob, one moment of weakness, before she steeled her spine and walked her hands up the wall, turning on both the hot and cold as her body trembled from the exertion. Whatever temperature she managed would have to be good enough.

Xia slumped against the wall, knees hugged closely to her chest, as the water fell over her naked body. It was too hot, but she couldn't muster the energy to adjust it.

She let the water warm her chilled skin and wash the stain of the devil away. She tried not to think of it, the way he tied her up to stop her body from thrashing against the pain. How he held her jaw in a bruising grip to keep their eyes locked, his magic probing and digging its claws into her mind, shredding it as it pulled her worst nightmares from her memories.

Xia had endured physical abuse. She was a victim in every form of the definition. But nothing came close to the pain of someone tearing your psyche apart from the inside out.

And when he was done making her relive her own nightmares? He would twist them into something worse and feed them back to her.

How many times had she thought her heart would burst from the absolute terror those nightmares inflicted?

Xia watched the bellowing steam curl in the air as the water pelted her skin. She wanted nothing more than to scrub the memories away.

Later. She would muster the energy for that later.

For now, she would fill her mind with Brooks.

“Tonight... can we just pretend?”

Had she not already been on the floor, she may have fallen from the vulnerability of his request. She would give anything to ease his pain, to pull him from the dark and hold his face between her hands. If he only knew how often he saved her... How often he was the only thing standing between her and the abyss.

Xia pushed a small bit of her magic into the water and occupied her mind by bending it to her will. She'd always had an affinity for water and learned how to manipulate it over time. She could make the steam dance or stop the rain around her from hitting the ground. Once she even pulled the water from a plant and watched it wither. It had become a challenge to see how small of a molecule she could influence, or how large of a puddle she could control.

As she swirled the droplets around her finger, she thought back to the first time she ever spoke to Brooks. She was in a similar position and on the cusp of letting her flame burn out. How close she had gotten to dying that day.

She had pushed her awareness into the chaos and begged the stars for a single ray of light in all of her darkness.

The answering call wasn't what she was expecting, but it was everything she'd needed. Their soft cries mingled, the

only sound traveling down their tenuous connection. She was the first to stop and listen.

“Hello?”

Xia’s eyes scanned the bathroom. She tried and failed to lift her body to see around the door. Her heart raced. Could he be lurking outside? Was he feeding her illusions, or thrusting her into another nightmare?

A sob escaped her lips as she silently begged the great God of Chaos for safety. She didn’t have anything left to give the Lord of Nightmares. If this was his dreamscape, he would kill her.

“H-Hello?” A masculine voice filled her mind, but it wasn’t one she recognized. It wasn’t the Devil’s, and it didn’t come from her memories. So who was it?

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“Just fucking great,” he groaned. “I wake up from a massive blackout and I’ve got a new voice floating around in there. You’re a sick bastard, God. Really sick.”

“How are you in my head? Who are you?” She was really starting to freak the hell out.

“The irony is not lost on me here,” he sighed more so to himself. “Hello, lady voice. I’m Brooks, and you’re just a figment of my broken psyche, so this introduction thing is weird. But here we are.”

What was he talking about?

“I don’t understand,” she said slowly, wearily. Xia raised to a sitting position and leaned against the wall, the heels of her palms pressing to her aching head.

“If schizophrenia was understood, you and I wouldn’t be in this position. My voice would be the only one in my head.”

“Schizophrenia?” What did that even mean?

“I’m not doing this with you. Or, rather, myself. Fuck!”

She flinched as he yelled, cowering back into the wall.

“Listen, I don’t know what’s happening, but I can’t.. I can’t do it. Just leave me alone, okay?”

When she’d asked the Father of Chaos for a lifeline, this wasn’t exactly what she’d had in mind. It made her hands tremble and scrambled her thoughts.

A deep laugh rumbled through her mind as he said, “That’s a new one. Usually, I’m the one telling the voices to shut up.”

She didn’t respond, only covered her ears and closed her eyes against the intrusion.

After a few moments of silence, he muttered, “Today sucked.”

She pressed harder on her ears, but it only made his voice louder.

“I woke up from a coma a few days ago. I’m not sure how long I was there. The fucking psycho doctor loaded me with insulin until I couldn’t wake up. She said it would make my voices go away. That’s why I said the irony isn’t lost on me. I

lose months of my life trying to stop the flood of them through my head and when I wake up there's always more rather than less."

Xia lowered her hands slowly, her mind whirling as her body sat frozen. Whatever this was, it wasn't an illusion or a nightmare. The Devil never had the patience to hold off on theatrics this long.

"What's insulin?" she asked hesitantly.

"It's a drug used as a sort of therapy here. They overload your system with it to try and reboot your brain through a coma. Heavy sleep that you don't wake from until they stop dosing you."

Her mind whirred with the horror of his situation but, even worse, the familiarity. In large doses, her song could cause something similar among gods. In small doses, it was exotic and liberating, an aphrodisiac of the highest sort. If she were to use too much? To overdose? She could force them into an endless illusion if she so chose, or exsanguinate them completely.

She forced her mind from the thought and brought her attention back to the voice invading her mind. "Someone does that to you?"

"Someone does a lot of things to me here. I live in an asylum for the mentally unwell. They can do whatever they want to me as long as it's in the name of medicine."

"That sounds awful."

“Oh, one hundred percent. My head still feels like it’s not fully connected to my shoulders. Which would explain why I’m talking to you rather than trying to ignore you.”

She bristled. Like she was the one intruding on him?

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re kind of an asshole?”

“Lots of people, but calling myself one is new.”

“I told you, I’m not you.”

“Yeah, and I’m not the most handsome schizophrenic in this asylum.”

Stunned. She was stunned.

Who was this man?

“Look, I don’t know who you are or how we’ve connected, but I’ve had a really shitty day and I—”

“Yeah, you said that already.”

“Fuck. You,” she spat, her voice ringing through the bathroom. White-hot anger flooded her veins as she fought for control of her body. She didn’t know that walking away physically would help, but she was damn sure going to try.

She made it to standing and used the wall to walk toward her bed chambers. Screw taking a shower. She needed out, and she needed it now.

“I wish you could, honestly. It’s been me and my favorite hand for too long.”

Xia screamed, though it sounded more like a mix between a shriek and a growl. She urged her body faster, but it wasn’t

ready for the change in pace. She stumbled, her ankle buckling as she twisted and fell.

Her head hit the bathroom counter on the way down and the resounding crack made her stomach lurch. Black spots dotted her vision as something warm ran in rivulets down her ear and neck.

Blood.

Pain reverberated through her skull as she laid a whimpering mess on the floor.

“I just want it to be over,” she wept. “I’m so tired.”

Nausea hit hard and it took the last tendrils of her willpower to hold back the vomit. Not that anything would come up. She hadn’t eaten in days.

“Hey,” he spoke up, his voice low and concerned. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Leave me alone. I’m just a figment of your imagination, remember? So what do you care?” Xia gagged from the exertion threatening to overcome her.

She was bitter, sick, exhausted, and tired of his games. She’d only known whomever this was for a few minor moments but she already hated him. The Fates were twisted if they thought this asshole was anything close to a lifeline. If anything, he would be the hand that pushed her from the cliff.

“I... I don’t know what to believe. I spend all day, every day fighting my own mind to determine what is real and what’s a

hallucination. I hear voices, I see shadows move, I live in nightmares. It's exhausting," he whispered.

She knew defeat when she heard it for she'd felt it every single day of her life.

Her compassion quickly overrode her fury as she spoke "I spend my days locked in a glass prison. I spend my nights dancing for handsy men and whatever else they'll pay for that pleases my captor. And that's if I'm lucky."

"What happens if you're not lucky?"

"If I'm not lucky, I spend my nights tied to the bed enduring nightmare after nightmare to feed his power, and then sleep in a pile of my own mess on the bathroom floor where he leaves me."

He cursed under his breath, the words unintelligible through whatever bond they shared.

After a moment he spoke again. "Are you up for a deal?"

"Depends on what kind. I already kind of hate you."

He chuckled but continued. "Let's just pretend."

"Excuse me?"

"I'll pretend you're real, and you'll pretend you don't hate me. Then we won't be alone in the dark."

His words and the depth with which he spoke them made her throat bob. She didn't want to be alone in the dark anymore.

"Okay. Let's pretend."



BROOKS

HE WOKE WITH AN odd sense of calm. Odd was the only way to describe it because no one was ever calm in an asylum without sedatives.

As he lay in silent contemplation, a soft patter caught his attention. Brooks' ears perked as the sound resonated from above his bed.

Was it coming from the window?

He stood on the bare mattress to look through the pane and froze.

Rain.

It was raining. Every soft splash of the droplets rang through his ears in the most beautiful of harmonies. In all of his time in the asylum, he had never heard the rain. The constant dull buzz that filled the halls drowned out most sound. He had

assumed, too, that the asylum walls were built thick to keep any upsetting noise from the patients.

Brooks stared in awe and reveled in the rhythm of rain as he replayed last night over and over in his mind. He hung on every word that left his Siren's lips, and he fucking hated it. Her voice was so tender and sweet.

So incredibly... broken. Just like him.

It made denying her existence that much harder. But the facts were indubitable.

For starters, he was in an asylum because he suffered from auditory hallucinations. He'd never seen his Siren, only heard her. Therefore, she fit the definition of a mind-fuck.

Her appearance was inconsistent and usually when he was feeling the most vulnerable. He was no Roger, but it made sense that his brain would send a slice of comfort when the anxiety was too hard to handle.

The first night he'd ever heard her voice was, in fact, one of the hardest nights of his life. He was questioning his will to live and so was she. Would it not make sense that she was a projection of his pain?

The facts were there as solid as stone.

So why, then, did he question them so often? Why did he feel the indescribable need to believe her when she said she was real?

He knew the answer. It was just hard to face.

Because he was lonely. Fractured. Looking for a familiar companion that didn't live in this shithole asylum.

Maybe that made his mind more brilliant than the average person's.

Maybe his mind recognized his needs and provided them in more advanced ways. When others sought community they were assaulted with social anxieties and petty dramas.

But Brooks?

If he just accepted the Siren and their friendship he could avoid the political schemes of socializing altogether.

Not his passenger, though. Accepting that darkness resulted in a loss of control over his body and blackouts with extreme consequences.

The Siren was harmless.

She was a companion.

She was... more.

When they agreed to pretend, he lived in bliss.

Fuck it, he thought.

"Siren?" he spoke out loud.

"I'm here," she whispered solemnly.

Alarm bells chimed in his head.

"You sound off. What's wrong?"

Her huff of laughter was half-hearted.

"I don't want to talk about it."

“And if I do?”

“Luckily for me, it’s not up to you, and you’re not here to make me.”

“Oh,” his tone was sly. “Tell me more about this ‘making you’ idea. Would I use force?” He hoped his attempt at cheer would bleed into her.

“You wouldn’t have to if you made the right moves.”

“Okay, I see you, Siren. You’re a romantic. You want to be wined and dined before that cute ass is sixty-nined.”

“You’re insufferable, Brooks, honestly!”

The laughter that burst through their bond felt like sunshine in his veins and he couldn’t help but chuckle alongside her.

“I can’t take you seriously when you cackle like that. Dammit to Hades, Siren, you sound like a dying nymph.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk. You brood so loud I can hear it across the realms!”

“I do not brood,” he said, mock-offended. “I suffer in silence like a man. And even if I did, do you not think I deserve a little brood time? I’m locked in a damn asylum.”

“Well,” she replied, her laughter dying down. “You make a fair point there. I suppose if brooding makes you feel more in control, then that’s your prerogative.”

“And don’t ever fucking forget it, wise ass.”

They sat in companionable silence, each keeping a tight grip on their tenuous connection like it was a lifeline.

“How was your night?”

“It was... rough. I didn't get much sleep.”

“You were exhausted when we hung up.”

When he was pretending and believed that she was real, neither Brooks nor his Siren understood how their connection worked. They didn't know how to summon it or stop it. ‘Hanging up’ was a familiar term and it made them laugh. He had been the first to describe it that way and it caught on quickly.

“My body was exhausted. My mind wouldn't stop racing.”

“Funnily enough, that's how I spent my night, too.” Doubt crept in and he covered his face with the flat, useless pillow.

She sighed, *“I guess we aren't pretending anymore.”*

“No, Siren. No we're not. We're back to you being the luring, seductive part of my brain that just wants to keep me company before I face the hell today will bring.”

“What kind of hell?”

“I just have a feeling that I'm going to go through another round of extensive treatment.”

“Like, they're going to put you in another coma?”

“Not that extensive. Just,” he gulped, not ready to come face-to-face with the reality of the situation. “You know what? We should pretend.”

“Brooks, I'm not in the mood to argue—”

“Please? Just humor me. They’re going to melt my brain soon. Another round of good conversation will help me get through it.”

“Alright.”

“So, why don’t you pity me and tell me your name since you’re so real?”

“You know the rules. No personal details.”

“Because you’re me?”

“No, asshole, because I don’t want to be me when I’m with you.”

“You stick to your guns, I’ll give you that.”

Silence expanded between them and he hated that it made him anxious. He wanted her to keep talking.

“Do you remember the first night we ‘met’ Siren?”

“How could I forget?” she scoffed. “You were a grade A asshole and I was—” she stopped. They hardly talked about that night. The night she thought she wouldn’t make it through, whether it was by her hand or Fate’s. “I was in pretty rough shape. I hit my head really hard and couldn’t see straight for days. It was even longer before the nausea went away.”

“Do you still hate me?” he blurted.

“What?”

“That night. You told me you hated me. Do you? Still hate me?”

Why did he feel like the ability to live through the week was dependent on her answer?

“No, Brooks... I don't hate you.”

Relief flooded his system like a dam breaking. Another stretch of silence fell between them but, to his surprise, she was the one to break it first.

“Tell me what you look like.” Her voice was soft and more relaxed than it had been.

Her question made him smile and determination to hear her laugh decided his answer.

“It's unfair that you ask me to tell you such personal information when I can't even have your name. But, since I'm a nice guy, I'll give them to you for free. I'm ruggedly handsome with biceps so big I can't touch my face and golden hair so pretty it would make the sun weep. And don't get me started on my dick. Compared to my forearm, it's—”

“I know you're being sarcastic, so until you're serious I'm going to assume that you're covered in hairy moles and that your pinky is bigger than your manhood.”

“Wow, Siren. That is downright fucking offensive.”

She huffed a laugh, but it was a tepid response.

Brooks cleared his throat. “Okay. I've never been measured or weighed, so I don't know exactly how tall I am. But I do know that I'm one of the tallest in the asylum. I'm pretty trim, but I try to exercise daily so I've got a little muscle here and there. I've black hair that needs some serious attention and I'm

pretty sure my eyes are some dark shade of blue. We don't have the luxury of mirrors around here. You know, what with the safety concerns and all. I'm pretty pale because I never get to go outside during the day, so who knows what the potential for a tan is."

They both chuckled.

"What about you?"

Her silence was loud, and he hated leading the conversation. He felt helpless and wanted to go to her and, when that desire was the strongest, he was reminded that she was just a sick part of his brain. His mood soured.

"Forget that I asked."

"No, I want to tell you. I just—" Her sigh made his heart ache. *"My life is miserable because of who I am, what I look like, and what I can do. I don't want to be that person here. I just want to be me with you, Brooks. Can you give me that?"*

"I couldn't deny you anything, Siren. Ask for the world and I would sacrifice my flesh to lay it at your feet." The rawness of his confession burned his throat, but he didn't regret it and couldn't pull it back from the universe. On the off chance she was real, he wanted her to know that.

He felt kind of silly saying it out loud. Brooks wasn't sure if he had ever felt love, but the feeling of warmth that flooded his chest every time she spoke and how he hung on every word she said... It confused him. The only time he felt close to being alive was when she was there.

He pressed the pillow to his face harder, stopping the flow of air to his lungs. He couldn't think if he didn't have oxygen to power his brain.

"I don't want the world, Brooks," she said, her voice drifting as she gave herself over to her dreams. *"I just want you. I want this."*

He didn't answer. He couldn't speak past the knot in his throat even if he wanted to. How sweet her words were, but how bitter they left him feeling.

A knock on the door pulled his attention from the internal struggle he faced.

"Breakfast in fifteen. Proceed with dressing and hygiene," a no-name orderly shouted in the hallway.

Brooks pushed back the blankets and took one last stabilizing breath before standing. He made quick work of dressing and completing his bathroom routine as he rebuilt his walls and hummed to shut out her voice. He couldn't listen to her speak anymore today.

"Brooks?" she pleaded.

He didn't answer, only hummed louder.

When he re-entered his room, an orderly in pristine white scrubs was already holding the door open. Brooks didn't bother to look at his face, just walked into the hallway and stood by his door until all of the other patients assigned to his hall were ushered out. They were ordered into a single file line and led to the cafeteria.

The walk was unremarkable, as always, and it wasn't long before he was standing in line for his morning slop. He scanned the cafeteria for Lytta, but either her hall hadn't been brought in yet or she was undergoing initial treatment and would be taking meals in her room. Brooks didn't remember much about the first few weeks in the asylum, but the chills running down his spine meant his body would never forget. He hoped it wouldn't be the same for her.

He exited the end of the line and surveyed the large room for the best table. Brooks preferred to sit alone, and usually, it was so packed that it was impossible to find an empty place. Today, however? He had almost half of the tables to choose from.

What the fuck?

Brooks walked toward a table and scanned the room. Gaunt eyes were fixed on empty space and the chatter was non-existent. Trays of food went untouched and the only sound was a wracking cough here and there.

As his stare traced the sickly faces, he made eye contact with a bright-eyed redhead and he cursed under his breath. Her stare was heavy and nearly vibrated in her seat. He knew he wasn't going to be able to avoid Rue, but he was damn sure determined to try.

Brooks turned back to the line and, without much thought, took a step forward and hit a brick wall of a back. Broad shoulders turned to face him, and the man stared menacingly through his one eye.

“Shit, sorry, Paul.”

Brooks patted Paul’s firm chest but the mute man only stared. Brooks hadn’t heard Paul talk a single time. He didn’t know why Paul was in the asylum, but the rumor was it was for brute, mindless murder.

Oddly enough, it didn’t scare Brooks.

He would bet Paul’s IQ was in the single digits and had caught him shoving things down his pants a few times. Maybe Paul was a murderer, but he would be easy to outsmart.

Paul grunted and turned back to face the front of the line. They moved forward and as they got to the service bar, Paul simply stared at the kitchen staff. Food was portioned into bowls but it was up to the patient to grab what they wanted and place it on their tray.

“You gonna get some food, buddy?”

Paul didn’t acknowledge Brooks or make a move to fix a tray.

“Alright, then,” Brooks said under his breath and raised his eyebrows at the awkwardness. He scooted around the mountain of a man and took two tan trays from the stack.

“Don’t tell anyone I was nice to you. It’s your lucky day. I’m fucking starving and you won’t move your ass.”

Brooks moved down the line of assorted brown shit and plucked one of each for Paul’s tray. He claimed burnt toast and wilted berries for his own meal.

When both trays were loaded, Brooks motioned for Paul to follow as he exited the line. After a moment, Brooks checked behind him because he had a hulking suspicion that the dumbass wasn't following.

Just as he'd expected, Paul wasn't there. Brooks sighed and returned to the doorway, trays in hand, and found Paul still standing at the beginning of the line.

“Hey, bud? It's time to move your ass. You're in the way and I can't carry you.”

The blank stare was answer enough.

Brooks left the line in search of the nearest orderly.

“You may wanna grab the giant brute from the front of the line. Here's his food.”

Brooks passed the tray to the orderly and turned to walk away, but a hand clamped around his wrist in a punishing grip.

His passenger reared its head as ice flooded his veins. The reaction was instant, the hold over his mind lost. Before he knew it, the monster was in control.

Brooks' body turned and smashed the food tray across the orderly's face in a fit of rage. His body fell to the floor in a mess of limbs and food and made no move to retaliate.

Brooks' voice was inhumanly low as he growled, “If you touch me again, slave of the underworld, I'll rip you to pieces and lay them on the doorstep of hell.”

In an instant, Brooks' passenger was back in the corner of his mind and he was left to face the consequences.

He shuddered as the pounding of footsteps rushed toward him.

What did you do to me, he thought back at it.



BROOKS

“**A** MEADOW FULL OF asphodels..”
Nausea.

“...a secret she will never tell...”

Pain.

“...ashes...”

Suffocation.

“...ashes...”

Cold.

“...they all burn down.”

Blinding light burned his retinas as he fought to wake. His body ached like flesh-eating poison was sludging through his veins and he couldn't move to ease it.

Brooks shook his head to clear the drugged feeling but it was unbearably heavy and wouldn't move. Vertigo came next and he gagged from the intensity.

“Don't throw up. You've got a rubber heel in your mouth and you will aspirate.” Her voice sliced through his skin and carved into the bone.

His blood froze and he couldn't stop the whimper that escaped around the heel when realization struck.

He was with *her*.

Dr. Mel Kore.

He lay naked on a wooden slab where sharp splinters pierced his skin. Brooks was thoroughly papoosed with leather straps around all of his extremities. He ran his fingertips over uneven gashes along the sides.

He gulped. The gashes felt ominously familiar.

They were claw marks.

Desperate slashing from those who were on that very table before him. Some of them may have even been his own.

Brooks' breathing was heavy, sprays of spittle arcing in the air and landing on his face. The rubber heel in between his teeth left little room for air to pass. His eyes bulged as he searched the room for anything to stop her. To save him.

He wasn't sure why he bothered.

Nothing ever saved him.

“You’ve been hearing voices again, Brooks,” she tsked. “I was sure we had taken care of that problem.”

Her voice floated from behind him as she pressed a cold hand to his shoulder. His skin prickled from disgust, hatred, and absolute terror.

She rubbed small circles on his bare skin that others may mistake for a kind, soothing gesture, but he knew it for what it was.

Excitement.

Anticipation.

The longer she waited, the more frantic he became. Fear was nothing but an aphrodisiac to her. He tried and failed a million times to be stoic. But when you’ve been through therapy with Dr. Mel Kore more times than you can count, bravery and modesty were nothing but ghosts of the past.

“I’m going to place your head gear now. Do try not to move.” The smile in her voice was evident. Of course he couldn’t fucking move. He was strapped to a table.

She was drinking terror like fine wine.

“Please,” he tried, but the heel turned his words into a muffled grunt.

He hated being vulnerable. He hated begging. He hated how fucking weak it made him feel and not a night went by that he didn’t dream of gutting her.

But, as the pronged metal apparatus that would deliver the electricity was placed upon his head, the fight drained from his soul. All that was left was a broken man terrified of never waking up again to a sing-song voice of sunshine.

Then again, maybe he should welcome the death. Gods knew how often he craved it.

“There, there, Brooks. We’re going to fix you.” Dr. Kore walked to the control panel and readied the machine.

The instinct to fight for his life urged him to move, to flee, to survive.

Instead...

He cried.

He screamed.

He begged.

Nothing stopped her from flipping the switch.



IT TOOK XIA OVER a week to recoup what the Devil had taken from her. She lay on her satin sheets under the feather duvet for days before her kidneys screamed for relief. Emptying her bladder felt like a mountain of a task, but it had been unavoidable.

That was always the worst part of dealing with the wreckage he caused—climbing out of it. Sometimes she wasn't sure where she found the strength to do it, but she always did.

The covers atop her were soft and made of the finest materials. Her four-poster bed was gilded with intricate carvings in the wood that matched all of the furniture placed about.

A pretty prison made of glass and a shattered princess to keep it company.

She studied her fish swimming in their own glass prisons as a pang of guilt hit her chest. How many fish would she collect before it was over? How many men would have to die so she could live? It was a question she'd lived with unanswered her entire life.

Sometimes, one man would do. But when she was drained? Or her island demanded blood as payment? It was a massacre.

Tonight, she would have to take a life. Many lives.

Tonight, she would have to face the monster that looked back in the mirror and reconcile with what it has done.

A soft knock sounded before the heavy ornate door swung open.

“Get up, little bird.”

The Devil himself entered her room and crossed his arms across a broad chest. He wore many masks and she never knew which she would get.

There was the Devil who dressed in fine suits with slicked-back hair that lorded over his Playground in Club Hel. The Devil was often half-phased between daemon and god form, his skeleton flickering starkly under his skin. It was intimidating. Terrifying, even.

Then there was the Lord of Nightmares. If you didn't know him, you would never guess that the Devil and the Lord were the same man. The Lord was usually shirtless, his black tattoos standing boldly against pale skin. They covered his torso and dipped below the waistband of the leather black pants he

avored. His dark blonde hair was always mussed and disgust weathered fine lines into his features.

She knew he had a third mask but had never seen it. Phobator, the dream god responsible for weaving nightmares among mankind. Xia didn't know how he differed from the Lord. Maybe he didn't but she had never heard him called by his given name.

It would be exhausting, she thought, to wear so many masks.

She moved to swing her legs from the bed but screamed before her feet could touch the floor. Snakes piled atop each other as they slithered from all directions. There were so many that it looked more like the roots of a tree writhing about.

Xia pulled her feet back to the safety of her sheets and looked to the Devil standing in his perfectly pressed black button-up.

The bastard was laughing.

Xia looked back to the floor but found nothing. No snakes, only pristine marble.

“You fucking lunatic!” she yelled. His favorite hobby was projecting nightmarish hells to flood her veins with fear.

“Oh, come now, little bird. I needed a snack. It's been a full week since I've tasted your fear.” His smirk made dread curl in her gut.

“You took plenty. Your gluttony truly knows no bounds.”

Xia knew she shouldn't press her luck with him. She should be dutiful and obedient, but in a world where you have nothing left to lose... Sometimes it felt good to fight back. Even if it was in the most insignificant of ways.

There were times he would punish her for her defiance and, if she were honest, she liked it. Not in a sexual manner, though she knew any other daemon, man or woman, would kill to be in his bed.

Xia liked the reaction to her insubordination. Usually, she felt like she was too small to leave an impact. Like her life, no matter how long, meant nothing. To create a stir so resounding that it required action? Attention?

Sometimes she needed it.

Or, perhaps, she thought she should be punished for the evil sewn inside her heart.

“I don't have all fucking night, Siren, so move your ass.”

His eyes darkened and her pulse hammered. She moved quickly to the oversized armoire but, when she reached for a garment, a hand stopped and turned her. The movement was so quick and forceful it made her teeth clack.

The Devil stared her down before he spoke, “Times up, princess. Your slutty little gown will have to do.”

“But it's freezing out there—”

“Move!”

Hissing and clicking sounded from the armoire as bugs of all sizes poured out. Some flew, others slithered, but they were all headed toward her.

Xia shrieked and ran toward the door, the Devil close on her heels. No matter how many fucking times she told her mind it was an illusion, he never failed to induce terror. As was his power, she supposed.

Getting to the private side of her desolate island was a quick trip from her prison. Her rooms were under the island and a quick elevator ride to the top. It bumped slightly along the way but was always a silent trip. Neither one deigned to speak.

When the Oneiroi had invaded Anthemoessa, they torched and ravaged everything in their path. Eventually, their taint infected the core of the land mass and life was incapable of growth. She used to enjoy the dark cave-side they stepped out into. The sound of the waves would reverberate calmly against the rock walls and the sand was as lush as downy feathers against the pads of her feet.

Now the sand was black and sharp, and the waves no longer sang in harmony to the cave. They crashed violently like claps of thunder in the musty space.

She hated it.

Somewhere she used to find solace was now tainted with dread.

Xia hadn't realized she'd stopped walking until a rough hand shoved her forward.

“Make it quick. I want you on Level Desecration tonight.”

“But—”

“Move, Siren!” His power pulsed through the cave and she cowered.

Xia walked swiftly from the exit and scurried toward the middle of the beach. The sand was so black it devoured the moonlight and the waves crashed in the distance as if they were dancing in anticipation.

Water always called to her, and oftentimes she felt that it could read her moods. She was restless, anxious, and furious, and the waves reflected it.

When she met the line where the sea touched sand, her blood came alive. Moonlight seeped into her skin filling every dark space and lighting her from the inside out. The water caressed her ankles and lapped at her legs lovingly, welcoming her home.

The feeling made her sick.

It was always this moment when the poison in her soul revealed itself. The reason she couldn't sleep at night. Why she knew she deserved death but couldn't take the plunge.

The moonlight on her skin and the sea at her feet...

The feeling of being so completely and irrevocably alive with an unending source of power flooding through her system?

It was fucking exhilarating.

She should have felt more guilt. Killing innocents was nothing to be proud of and certainly not something to crave. But when the ocean called her? She was nothing but a moth to the flame.

Xia spread her arms and lifted her face to the sky. Her eyes closed as the wind embraced her, strands of hair whipping wildly and stinging where they struck. As she inhaled, the sea stirred and the anticipation buzzing through its waves turned to a roar.

It was as if a great sleeping beast was stretching its muscles as it prepared to unleash its chaos.

Xia called on her song and sent it rushing through the sea and wind, letting the elements carry its power like a war horse rushing toward battle.

Her song had many different effects, one of the very reasons she was coveted by the Lord of Nightmares. She was the only living Siren among their kind and carried a power that even she didn't know the limits of.

Her power was saccharine on the wind and made her cheeks heat as it pulsed through the air. Even she could not contain the effects and fell prey to its spell.

Freezing water thrashed and sprayed, soaking her nightgown and chilling her skin. Her flesh pimpled as she roared to the sky.

It was a roar of pleasure and triumph. Of greed and lust. It was a call for power and everything she knew she could be.

Tonight, the Siren raged.

Blood rained from the sky and dotted her skin. It ran in inky rivulets down her body, staining the sea-blue chemise she wore and soaking her hair.

When the song blew on the wind, it didn't just feed the Siren. It fed the island. The life of one man was not enough. She couldn't just steal a sailor from a ship and satisfy her needs. She pulled the life from anyone who rose from their beds to answer her call, drained their blood and carried it through the skies so that it may fall upon her gluttonous land and feed her never ending well of power.

That was her secret.

Her regret.

Her darkness.

She drained the life from anyone who dared answer her call, and she craved the power that flooded her veins.

Xia stood on that black beach covered in blood, and as waves crashed at her back and moonlight poured through her skin, something unlocked inside her.

Something primal.

Something... Inevitable.



BROOKS

A TICKLING SENSATION LAPPED at his ankles as the crash of waves filled his ears. Brooks always imagined the ocean during his relaxation techniques, but never had it felt so real.

“Wake up, prince.”

Brooks’ eyes shot open and adrenaline charged through his system at the intrusive feminine voice. It wasn’t the lyrical voice of his Siren or Lytta’s scratchy alto.

A black sandy beach surrounded by craggy shores and unforgiving waters stared back at him. Wind blew through his shaggy locks and rustled his heavy clothing.

He looked down in surprise, the feel of the material different from the lightweight scrubs he was used to. Black leather hugged his arms atop a gray cotton t-shirt and ripped black jeans.

“Do you not recognize yourself, prince?”

His head swiveled toward the intruding voice and was taken aback to see the sightless woman swathed in white that haunted his dreams almost every night.

“Atropos?”

“What a clever, fragmented man to pull out a name on such a whim,” she smirked, but there was a sense of pride behind it.

“I see you. Every night, I dream of you. But,” Brooks glanced around, “we’re never on a beach. And *I* never speak to you.”

“Oh?” she hums. “And if you don’t speak to me in your dreams, then who does?”

“My passenger,” he answers without hesitation. “He’s always in control of my dreams.”

“Have you ever thought, little prince, that perhaps he’s in charge of your dreams because they aren’t dreams at all?”

Her insistent use of the word ‘prince’ was irritating, but the way she seemed to mock him with the term ‘little’ rubbed against his skin like steel wool.

“Always speaking in fucking riddles,” Brooks murmured under his breath. “I’m assuming asking you questions does me no good then.”

“And why is that?”

“Uh, more riddles?”

“Maybe you’re asking the wrong questions.”

Brooks rolled his eyes because of fucking course she would say that.

“Okay. What is this place?”

“This is where your journey begins.”

Brooks analyzed the beach and up the jagged cliffs. Static built in the air and raised the fine hairs on his neck. The tinge of metal sat on his tongue in anticipation of the impending lightning strike.

A heavy fog obscured the landscape as waves crashed against the rocks like claps of thunder under their feet. Everything about this island screamed desolation and danger.

Brooks swallowed the rising fear and settled on irritation. He wouldn't let a dream get the best of him.

“Why are we here?”

“Try again.” Her eyes never looked from the endless horizon.

He let out a sarcastic laugh.

“This is just a shitty, empty island,” he scoffed.

“Look through your passenger's eyes.”

“No fucking way.” His heart raced. “I try to avoid that bastard, I'm not calling him out to play on purpose.”

She turned that depthless stare toward him, her lips set in an unforgiving line as power pulsed around them, stirring the dried soil and lifting it to the air.

Brooks scoured the island for any clues as to why his dreamscape had changed. He was used to seeing the three women in the field of asphodels, but he'd never truly paid attention after the first time.

What was it they talked about? Sleeping? Gods he couldn't remember.

"Just let me in," his passenger rumbled.

"Not a chance. Your temper tantrums land me on wooden tables with a rubber heel in my mouth or in a goddamn coma! I'm not losing any more of my life to you! Now shut up and let me think."

His thoughts were chaotic, grasping in the dark for something it knew was there but could not see.

Brooks imagined the recurring dream but couldn't call forth the actual words. Only scenes. He was so good at dissociating that he was blocking memories out with no one else to blame but himself and that realization was like a sucker punch to the dick.

How many times had he been so angry at the asylum or his passenger for taking precious time away? How many grudges did he keep wrapped around his fingers like a rosary?

"Every slip of time... every moment you're made to forget... You can stop it. You can take your power back. Let him in, prince. He will guide you."

Every breath was an effort as the panic weighed his chest. He couldn't let his passenger sink its claws in further, but he

also couldn't keep living the way he did— losing time of his life by his hand and everyone else's.

“H-how?”

Atropos stared into the horizon as she said, “You've been led to believe that it is night and day— that you are the sun and that he is the moon, never to inhabit the sky together. Look deeper, prince. You are the stars, and he is the darkness between. You exist because of him and he because of you. Without light, there are no shadows. Without darkness, the light is blinding.”

Brooks sat on the sharp, black sand and held his head in his hands. To say he was overwhelmed didn't justify the pure adrenaline flooding his pounding heart.

Was he really doing this? What if—

No. The fear and doubt stopped now. He had nothing to live for, so what could he lose?

“Alright, buddy. We do this my way, or we don't do it at all. Got it?” He spoke out loud.

Brooks didn't get a response, but he felt a presence stir in his mind. It scared the absolute shit out of him.

He relaxed, body and mind, and released one inch of control with every exhale. He had no memories of his life before the asylum. Maybe he had been more than a patient lost to the outside world — more than an orphan no one wanted. More, even, than a no-face man who would be lost to an asylum and forgotten forever. Maybe, he was more.

The denial was hard to let go of. Every slip of will made him flinch, and the memories of metal headgear and blinding pain stung him like a whip. He recoiled, his body tense, when something familiar brushed up against that denial.

“That’s it,” his passenger whispered. *“I’m here with you.”*

Rather than run, Brooks embraced the lurking darkness and it was like he took a full breath for the first time in his life.

His lungs filled, glutting on the energy his passenger fed him. He turned his hands over and around tracing the inky black that slowly wept like watercolor through his veins. He fought the urge to run, to lock his mind back up and return to the asylum, but determination for change flared from the dying embers that had been his soul.

It’s not real. It’s just a hallucination. He recalled the doctor and her taunting words and let the hate fuel those embers into a raging fire.

When next he looked up, he was surrounded by curling shadows. They were drawn to him, and he couldn’t help but feel their pull too. They mirrored his movements, dancing with each wave of his arm and curling around his legs.

He couldn’t possibly control the shadows... could he?

“Now,” said his passenger. *“See.”*

Brooks was thrown back into the dream where he stood underneath the woman encased in the tree like a dragonfly in amber.

He looked from her to Atropos as he said, *“Life has begun to bloom throughout on its own. It doesn’t need my help, and I am restless, goddess. I seek solace in the void.”*

With her head bowed subserviently she answered, “Yes, my king.”

Power flared in Brooks’ veins in answer.

King.

He turned from his memories and back to the woman standing in front of him. “Why do you call me prince?”

“Because you are not yet a king.”

The darkness in his mind bristled at her response, but only said, *“We mustn’t waste time on the musings of sinister beings. Ask her why we are truly here.”*

His passenger had always forced itself on him, testing boundaries and barreling through the smallest holes in his armor. It was easy to use that fear and anxiety to fuel the strength to push it back and patch the walls. Never, though, had he broken the barrier on his own and, now that he had, his passenger seemed to be working in tandem with his will. Rather than bucking against the restraints, his passenger was standing patiently beside him.

It was empowering to control the lurking monster, and through that budding strength he found a certain familiarity with the presence slowly creeping in. It was as if he donned glasses after stumbling around a blurry landscape.

“Why have you brought us here?” Brooks spoke, but the deepness of his voice surprised him. It resembled his passenger’s more than his own. He tried not to let it deter his focus and closed his eyes.

“She is here, and she is the key to your destiny. Look through his eyes and together you will find the way.”

Brooks inhaled deeply and let the brine and power fill his lungs. When he opened his eyes the island was different. Still gloomy and craggy, but bustling with life.

People.

To his utmost confusion, the scene before him was like the underground hussle of a big city. Everyone was dressed to impress in barely-there strings of fabric and loomed around an enormous building placed right at the peak of the sloping island.

A sleek black sign with purple neon lights adorned the broad face of the building and read Club Hel. Bobbing heads loitered around the entrance and funneled through more slowly than sticky ambrosia.

Sweat and something sickly sweet burned his nostrils, and he was overwhelmed by the sudden change in atmosphere.

“Do you see it now?”

“Christ!” Brooks startled. Lost in his surroundings, he had forgotten Atropos was at his side.

“Club Hel? Seriously? What is this?”

“I told you. It is where your journey begins.”

“You’re pulling my dick,” he deadpanned. “On an island in the middle of the ocean at a shady club full of illegal, black-market shit?”

“She calls to you.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that already. Who calls to me? Who is my destiny?”

“The Siren.”

Her tone was so matter of fact that it set his bones on edge.

“I don’t know what you’ve been steeping in your looney tea, but no one calls to me. I am a paranoid schizophrenic. I have auditory hallucinations. Including you, now that I fucking think about it,” he scoffed, throwing his hands up to the sky before placing them on his hips.

Atropos turned and stepped toward him, crowding his space until he had no choice but to step back.

“It’s time for you to wake up and take your crown, prince. We have waited long enough.”

Her skin grew more sallow with each step she took. A crown of thorns, long as her forearms, pierced through her skull. The ever-present iridescent tears streaming down her pale face pulsed with power as lightning thrashed violently through the night sky. Each strand of silver hair illuminated in the moonlight was alight with her tears. She was deadly and radiant— a true goddess.

Panic surged but a quick scan revealed nowhere to run. His passenger rose to the forefront of his mind, but whether it was to take him in his moment of weakness or protect him, he didn't have time to analyze.

His back hit ragged stone and caged him between it and the raging goddess closing in. Brooks raised his hands in surrender. What he glimpsed from the corner of his eye pinned his stare on his splayed digits.

The black covering his fingertips engulfed his hands dissipating into crawling veins and disappearing under the leather cuff of his jacket. Pure terror made his heart skip a beat. A yell caught in his throat as a great chasm opened in the sky and released the mother of all storms.

Rain pelted his skin as he scratched and rubbed at his hands, the fear pushing every rational thought or instinct from his body. His passenger was making a lunge for control.

He groped at his jacket and ripped it free clumsily, bile rising as he saw the blackness spreading up his arms.

“Do not balk from it,” Atropos urged, stopping a few steps from his thrashing form.

Brooks whimpered, pleading with whoever would listen to stop the spread. He didn't want to lose control of himself. Whatever lurked inside him was evil and the idea of watching the demon's actions through his own eyes sent tremors down his spine.

“This is who you are!” she yelled above the storm.

Brooks lifted his shirt, and clawed at his skin, desperate to stop the spread.

Faster than he could register, Atropos rushed forward and pinned his back to the rock, her crown of thorns a menacing silhouette to the storm on the horizon. She placed her thumb against his forehead and in that instant time slowed. Lightning spread like a winding river rather than striking as the rain fell in lazy, gluttonous drops from the sky.

Brooks stared deep into those orbless depths as Atropos breathed three words straight into his essence.

“Embrace your chaos.”



WHEN XIA LAY DOWN for bed that night, the high from her song still rushed through her system. The destruction it wrought on humankind was horrific, but when the power flooded her veins it was... exhilarating.

Intoxicating.

She was just as addicted to her power as other daemon were.

Xia looked to her nightstand where a beautiful purple anthias now circled the water in its new home, its shiny scales reflecting off the light from her chandelier. Gilded seaweed curled around the bottom of the ornate bowl and spiraled above the top like tentacles reaching for the sky.

Xia watched the fish bump against its glass prison and knew she should feel guilt. She was, after all, a prisoner in a glass castle. Instead, she pushed those feelings down to the deepest part of her mind and lived in the small joy her fish brought.

This was the only way she could thank those who sacrificed their lives to feed her power, and she would cherish them.

Xia's thoughts drifted to her power as she watched her new fish swim. When she used her song on daemon kind it acted as a drugging agent. Sometimes drugs were brought back from the human lands, but they were just appetizers compared to what she was capable of.

Her song was both stimulating and lulling, arousing and calming. Perfect for a Devil trying to wipe the pockets of his patrons clean.

When she danced for them, her naked body on full display as her hips led the rest of her body, arousal rose thickly in the air. Eyelids fell as erections rose, and they were happy to pay Club Hel to keep her on stage.

She never saw any of the money, of course. The Devil draped her in fine silks and luxurious jewels, kept her fed and made sure her materialistic whims were seen to. It wasn't out of kindness though. She was his most valuable possession and he made sure she looked the part.

The Devil's workings weren't her concern tonight, however. Her confidence was at an all-time high from the power her song brought her on the beach. Her magic was overflowing and even the guilt from the lives she'd taken couldn't keep her down. Flashbacks to the red stained rain sent shivers down her spine as her body recalled the rush of power. The blood that was pulled from the veins of her victims mixed with the water that washed down her was euphoric.

Xia's hands roamed over her body, skin soft from the fine soaps and oils she'd used to wash the taint of Club Hel away. She wasn't in the mood to spend the night alone. Before, she may have attempted to sneak around the club dedicated to the Christian's deadly sins to find a willing participant on Level Lust, but ever since a grumpy, sarcastic schizophrenic entered her life...

No one on Level Lust would be good enough.

She pulled her restless hands above her head and tucked them under the pillow to keep from straying down her body again.

Sometimes they were lucky and could speak whenever they hit their lows but, tonight, she was high.

Xia settled into her downy pillow and focused on her breathing until it became slow and even. A few twitches from her restless legs and she was fast asleep.

Xia opened her eyes to near darkness, the only light visible was the soft blue rays of moonlight shining from a window. She stepped forward slowly, her bare feet making soft patters on the cold tile floor.

As her eyes adjusted, she could make out metal framed beds lining the walls on either side. Right below the lit window was an occupied bed, but she couldn't see who or what lay there.

Her heart raced as she considered the probability of this being a nightmare woven by the Lord. He was known for slipping into her dreams to continue his torture.

Her steps became more hesitant as she scanned the room and tried to stay in the light as much as possible.

There were no sounds other than her footsteps and harsh breaths. She threw a paranoid glance over her shoulder and saw nothing but darkness so black it swallowed the room.

As she got closer to the illuminated bed, she watched the thread-bare sheet rise and fall to the rhythm of the stranger's breathing. The face was turned away, but a head full of hair so black it shone like ravens feathers fell over the pillow. The body twitched ever so slightly at random intervals. Whoever this person was, he was dreaming hard.

Xia approached the bed leery of what she might find under the mess of black hair. The skin she could see in the moonlight was pale and mottled, a purple bruise coloring the side of his face and disappearing under his hairline.

She reached out a tentative hand to brush the tousled strands from his face and her breath caught. He was stunning in the most unique of ways.

His features were so innocent and boyish in sleep, but she could imagine the lines shaping his face as they came to life. She wondered if they were from laughter or worry. Maybe he lived lost in thought and had worn creases between his shapely brows.

Long black lashes dusted his cheeks and a soft snore accompanied every exhale. His face, she imagined, was normally clean shaven but had a fine layer of hair growing in.

Xia looked around again to determine where they were. There was a small, basic nightstand beside the bed that housed different bottles of medication and a long-forgotten glass of water. Small flecks of dust settled along its rim and, if it had ever been cold, the condensation long since dried.

All signs indicated a medical facility or infirmary of some sort.

She turned back to the sleeping man and an emotion she couldn't identify squeezed her chest. She wanted to hold him. Care for him. Protect him from harm, even.

Why? This was only a dream, after all.

Remembering the reality of her situation made her a little bolder.

Xia touched his forehead again and moved more hair aside to study the bruise along his temple. What she found made her sick.

It was no simple bruise. There was a circle of yellow, puffy burnt flesh right in the center that continued to ooze blood around the edges. It was too damaged to scab and would have to be something that shed its layers completely to begin the healing process. It would be dreadfully painful.

Anger flared red hot in her veins as the hand not touching his face clenched to a fist. The bruise that spread from the seared

circle was massive and looked as if it could still be actively bleeding out under the skin.

She let go of the hair and startled when she found a pair of navy eyes watching her. She'd been so distracted by the wound that she hadn't registered his shift in breathing.

"Hi," she said breathlessly.

His brow furrowed, those lines popping up just as she'd imagined they would.

"This is a new one for me."

"I'm sorry?"

Xia didn't know what she'd expected from him, but that response was low on her list of guesses.

"Normally I dream of some lady in a tree, blood raining from the sky, or falling into darkness looking up at a bright circle of light. No complaints though." His eyes dipped down.

His voice was rough from sleep, but he seemed wide awake and very aware.

There was something familiar about that voice...

The realization of where his gaze was fixed clicked, and she couldn't stop her reaction. She slapped him on the shoulder and scowled.

"My eyes are up here, asshole."

A sudden burst of laughter disturbed the silence, and he held his chest as it continued.

"I'm glad you think it's funny."

“You’re just a beaming ray of sunshine, aren’t you? My brain must have known I needed a laugh. Thanks, bud,” he said more to himself than to her as he turned away.

Xia’s breath caught as her heart stopped dead in her chest. The way he’d said sunshine...

“Brooks?” Disbelief laced her tone as tears sprang to her eyes.

His face whipped back to hers and his body sprang to a sitting position. He nearly knocked her to the floor, the blankets pulling out from under her as he twisted, but a strong hand reached out and grasped her own before she could fall.

His hand was a bit dry but soothingly warm, and the way it wrapped around hers sent a bolt of electricity up her arm. She pulled away quickly, and he stared at his own hand as if he’d felt it too.

“Well that fucking hurt.” He shook his hand dramatically, and the annoyance lacing his words struck a chord so deep in her heart she nearly wept.

Could it really be him?

“I touched you,” she whispered.

“No, you godsdamned shocked me is what you did. Do you see this?” He pointed to the angry bruises on either side of his head. “I’m fucking done with electricity for a while okay?”

“Someone used electricity on you?”

“Look around. Do you think I’m in a fucking day spa? No. I’m not. I’m in an asylum housing the insane and every time someone like you shows up in my head, I get this.” He pointed again.

Baffled, she tilted her head as she assessed him. Xia had never told him what she looked like or, as silly as it was, even her name, but the way he described himself during their last talk fit him perfectly. She knew who he was, but how did she convince him of her identity?

“You look pretty beat up, buttercup.”

He paused, and his expression turned more leery rather than bursting with recognition.

“Who are you?”

“I’m kind of disappointed you don’t recognize me.”

“Why should I?”

“You spend a majority of your time convincing yourself I’m not real,” she said sarcastically but then lowered her voice to something more somber. “Sometimes, you let me convince you to just pretend that I am.”

His brows rose as his mouth fell agape, but his eyes shone with recognition.

“Siren?”

Her smile was small, but inside she beamed at the way her nickname sounded on his tongue.

“Took you long enough.” She threw him a teasing wink, but the tension in his body didn’t relax.

“Oh my god I’ve got to be dreaming.” He covered his eyes with his hands and rubbed vigorously.

“I think you are. But so am I.” She shrugged.

“Oh, you’re dreaming too, huh? This is fucking ridiculous.” He stood and paced between the head and foot of the bed. His long legs could have covered the distance in one stride but anxiety kept his steps short and brisk.

“Is this how you always are? In real life I mean?”

He stopped pacing and stared her down, his features incredulous.

In one swift movement he was back on the bed and had her face in between his hands, urgency making his movements less graceful. They both held their breath as their eyes searched the other’s face.

Xia was the first to breathe, the exhale short and ragged.

“Brooks?”

Tears glistened silver as the moon reflected in his eyes.

“Are you real?” He whispered.

Her answer was breathless as he caressed her face, his thumbs rubbing small, delicate circles along her cheeks.

“Yes.”

His expression told her that his mind was still at war, that ever-present struggle to decide whether or not the object in

front of him was real. What a nightmare it must be to not be able to trust your own mind. Xia could empathize. Living with the Lord of Nightmares could leave her mind just as dissociated from reality as Brooks' was.

Brooks moved his hands so that his fingers laced themselves through her hair and held her head while his palms still embraced her face.

“Can I— can I touch you?” His voice was raw and, had she been standing, would have made her knees weak.

Her heart leapt. How many times had she dreamt of his touch?

How many godsdamned times had she touched herself and pretended her hands were his?

She tried to keep her tone light and teasing to ease the tension, but her words came out breathy as she spoke, “Isn't that what you're doing, genius?”

His answering smile made her pulse stutter.

“You are such a smartass, Siren. I meant more. More than your face. I need...” His words faltered as the struggle for what he needed painted his features. “I'm afraid you may disappear if I don't keep my hands on you,” he whispered, his voice raw and honest.

“Yes, Brooks. You can touch me.”

His resounding swallow was all she could hear over the pounding drum in her chest.

He pressed his forehead to hers as one hand left her scalp and ran slowly down the length of her hair. He kept a strand between his fingers the entire way down. Xia closed her eyes and reveled in the small touch, silently praising herself for keeping the moonlit locks long enough to graze her lower back.

“It’s so silky,” he whispered.

“You say that like you’ve never touched a woman.”

She opened her eyes to catch him staring at her, but he didn’t shy away when he said, “I haven’t.”

“Never?” She didn’t mean to sound so appalled, but a man who looked like Brooks would easily be the center of any woman’s attention.

“Don’t sound so surprised, Siren. I live in a fucking asylum, remember? We aren’t allowed to touch other residents.”

“What about from before?”

“You know I don’t remember before.”

His fingers were twirling the ends of her hair like he was hesitant to continue his exploration.

“So I get to be your first, huh?”

His body froze as the realization of what she implied caught up to her.

“I didn’t— that’s not what I—” she stammered, but he was quick to relieve the tension.

“You could hardly be my first, Siren. Fucking you would be like fucking myself, and that’s nothing new.” His wink sent a shiver up her spine, her face heating with a mixture of embarrassment and... need.

“Careful, Siren. You’re blushing.”

Xia looked away but his hand gripped her steadfastly. His irises changed from navy to a glowing blue, and his presence in the room dominated that of the man she’d found sleeping in the bed.

“Don’t hide from me, sunshine. I want to see every expression that pretty face makes when I talk about fucking you.”

He used his firm grip to tilt her head back and expose her throat, a breathy whimper escaping her lips.

“Fucking perfect,” he praised.



BROOKS

S HE WAS HERE.
She was *real*.

At least, in that moment. Brooks wanted so badly to believe it could be her, that somehow, some way, she wasn't just a dream. It wasn't possible. Real people couldn't just appear in dreams. It had to be a projection. A face that his mind put together when he heard her sing-song voice in his head.

Fuck. She was a voice in his head.

But tonight... Tonight he couldn't help but pretend. She felt so solid in his hands as her pulse thrummed against his palm, her skin so warm and soft in contrast to the fire in her eyes.

"Tonight," his passenger growled. *"She is ours. She is mine."*

Brooks cradled his Siren's head in his hand, the column of her throat open to him and so pale in the moonlight. Something primal rose in response to her submission.

You can't have her, Brooks thought back at the chaos inside.

"Let me in. Let us share her. She calls to us, and I will not sit back as you reap the benefits."

Brooks only had a moment to consider, just one breath as the anticipation built in the room. He didn't want to waste a second with her in his bed.

Okay, he conceded. *Just don't— don't hurt her.*

"I will not hurt her. I will worship her."

Brooks opened his mind to the being stirring inside and shivered as black washed over his fingertips. A feeling of calm, strength and reassurance washed over him.

He felt... powerful.

When Brooks spoke next, he hardly recognized his voice. It was deeper, a mix between the voice he heard with his ears and the voice he heard inside his head.

"I will not hurt you, but I *will* make you feel every touch. Do you understand, Siren?"

He still had her head tipped back firmly, so she answered, "Yes."

Brooks traced her jaw and ran the back of his hand down her neck. The black inking his hands stood out starkly, and the contrast between her light and his darkness was heady.

Slowly so as not to startle her, he dipped his head to the base of her exposed neck and inhaled deeply.

Her scent was intoxicating.

All of his senses were alive with her presence. The fact that he could see, touch, hear, and smell her... She had to be real.

The scrap of fabric covering her body left little to the imagination as her pert nipples pebbled beneath the silk, a reward for his small touches.

He traced his nose up her neck reveling in her scent until his lips brushed her ear. He pulled her hand to the hardness tenting his scrub pants and shivered at the needy gasp that slipped past her lips.

“Do you feel what you do to me, Siren?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

He released her hand, giving her the option to remove it. He wanted to dominate her, to make her his own, but he didn't want her to be uncomfortable.

Slowly, he urged his chaos. She's been hurt. We can't scare her.

“What do you want, Siren?”

Her brows furrowed, and he released the hold he had on her head as he nuzzled into her hair.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I want to touch you, but I want you to tell me how. I want to know what pleases you.”

“No one... no one has ever asked me that before.”

A mixture of confusion and an emotion he couldn't name dampened her voice, and the anger that boiled in his blood dropped the temperature in the room. Their breaths were visible in clear puffs of mist as unique ice crystals formed against the metal bed frame.

“I will not take from you. I want you to show me how to *give*.”

She was silent for a moment, a million emotions flooding her expression before she faced him again. Her stormy green eyes were bright and highlighted by the pale light flooding over them.

“Lay down.”

It was not a question.

It was a demand.

Brooks smiled devilishly as the anticipation rolled off of his passenger. This dominant being inside of him was not used to being put in its place.

It liked it.

They liked it.

He laid back and placed his arms behind his head, a silent invitation.

She stood wordlessly and straddled him, her eyes drinking him in as she moved. When she settled atop him with her core pressed against his dick he almost lost it.

“*Fuck,*“ he groaned, and he knew she felt it too as she threw her head back on an inhale and ground against him.

Gods how he wanted to reach out to grab her hips and make her do it again, but he kept his hands gripped on the metal headboard.

She was in control, and he was hell bent on keeping it that way.

After the initial shockwave of pleasure, his Siren looked back down at him. She looked tentative, shy, even, but that didn’t stop her from tugging at his scrub top to expose his bare torso.

Brooks lifted, coming face to face with her, as he pulled the stiff fabric off his body. She took both of his hands and placed them on her hips and she explored every inch of his shoulders and chest. She lingered on his scars, showing each one attention before moving on to the next.

“What are these from?”

“Some I got here. Some, I don’t remember.”

He didn’t expect her next move.

She placed her hands on either side of his head, careful to avoid his new wounds, and pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead.

He swallowed the rush of emotion and wrapped his arms around her. He hugged her body as close to his as he could manage without squeezing too tightly.

“We’re just two broken people held together by bandages,” she spoke softly into his hair. “But you make me feel like I could be whole again.”

She pulled back, the gap small between them, and lowered her mouth to his. Her kiss was gentle, and only when he tasted a hint of salt did he realize she was crying.

Or, maybe, they were his tears. Her words opened a chasm of pain within his chest, but not because they hurt.

No. It was because her words filled him with hope and that fueled a great war inside him. Tomorrow, he would face it.

Tonight, though, he just wanted to get lost in her.

Their kiss deepened, desperation and urgency fueling their fire. Slow licks turned into biting and ragged breaths, his hands roaming her body as hers gripped his neck and held him firmly to her mouth.

Brooks cupped her ass and pressed her fully against his erection, their cries of pleasure mingling.

Xia drew her hand up the back of his head, laced her fingers through tousled hair and tugged his head back, exposing his throat to her.

A low growl rumbled through his chest, his passenger longing to meet her dominance head on. Her lips pressed against his hammering pulse point, earning her a desperate moan that echoed through the empty room. One soft flick of her tongue was the only warning she gave before her teeth

sank into his vein. Her hold on him became instinctual, a huntress in the throes of the kill.

He jerked and writhed beneath her as his hands grasped her hips in a bruising hold. She moaned against his skin, losing herself in the feel of where their bodies met and the blood washing down her throat.

Her tongue grazed where she'd bitten down, and when she came away with his blood on her lips, he lost all sense of control.

“Gods you’re going to fucking kill me, Siren.” His words were breathless as his passenger clawed his way forward.

Her smile was predatory and the challenging glint in her eye did things to him that he would have to analyze later. Brooks had never been in control of his life and, in every other scenario, it left him restless and hopeless. But here? With his Siren?

He wanted to be controlled.

Put in his place.

Dominated.

She was so fucking powerful sitting atop him, a goddess in her own right and he was desperate to be used by her.

She didn't break eye contact as she ran a hand down her body, a finger teasing her breasts as his traveled slowly down to her navel.

Fucking hell he wanted to watch that hand, but he wouldn't back down from the challenge in her stare.

Can you resist me? It seemed to say.

He could never, but he didn't want her to know just how fucking desperate he was.

When her hand slipped beneath her flimsy gown, her teeth catching her bottom lips between them, he nearly came right then and there.

She brought her hand back up with two fingers held out to him. He could smell her wetness as it glistened and the primal chaos inside snapped.

He grabbed her hand in desperation, leaving any sense of control or pride long behind him. He wanted to dominate, to overpower her in every sense but her allure was too powerful. His Siren made him beg, and he fucking loved it.

Brooks brought her fingers to his mouth and took them in, sucking every last drop as he licked them clean. The fucking taste of her drove him absolutely wild.

More. Not a question from his passenger... A demand.

"I don't care how it happens, Siren, but if I don't get inside you in the next ten seconds I'm going to lose my fucking mind."

"Haven't you already?" she teased him with a sinful smile.

She put two hands on his chest and shoved him down with an unnatural strength.

“Fucking hell, Siren, just like that,” he groaned.

“Your eyes are so blue when you’re desperate.”

She was playing coy, and the pout of her lips was asking to be between his teeth.

His Siren took his right hand and curled the last two fingers into his palm. She tucked his hand under her gown, lifted her hips and slowly sank down onto them. She placed his thumb on her clit and made one smooth circle with her hips.

He felt her moan straight down into his essence, and he knew right then that he would raze the world and watch it burn for her.

“God yes, Sunshine, just like that. Fucking use me.”

She found her rhythm in no time and rode his fingers like a promise for what was to come.

Brooks moved his thumb in time to the movement of her hips and squeezed the soft flesh of her ass where the gown rode up. Her moans became breathy and the anticipation of her climax made him ache. Each dip of her hips pressed against his balls and they tightened in response. His hips moved in time with hers, desperate for a touch he wasn’t willing to take but needed all the same.

His Siren lost herself on top of him, and when she came it set his blood on fire.

Her nails dug into his chest and she screamed his name as he fell with her.

“Fuck!”

The force of his orgasm sent tremors down his body as he rode it out. He was a shaking mess as he came down from the high and opened his eyes. His Siren gazed at him and he would never forget her expression as long as he lived. There was no name for it, no words to describe the feelings it stirred within him.

It was everything.

She took a minute to catch her breath before she lifted herself off of him. The stain soaking his scrubs was a mixture of her orgasm and his own. He made note to stuff them into the tear in his mattress.

A trophy for her pleasure.

“You made a mess,” she smiled as she leaned back onto his thighs.

“That’s what you do to me,” he said seriously. “Even when I’m not sure you’re real.”

Brooks sat up, embraced her body and pulled it down with him. He rolled at the last second so that she was on her side facing him, tucked into his arms.

He thought vaguely about how he felt no pain during their time together. Normally the convulsions from electroshock therapy left him sore and groggy for days. Tonight, however, he felt none of it. What it meant, he wasn’t sure.

He ran his fingers through her hair as they sat in silence. He wasn’t sure what tomorrow would bring, but he couldn’t find

the energy to care.

If he could hold onto this feeling, he could make it through anything.

“I don’t want to wake up,” she confessed into the darkness.

“Me neither, Sunshine.”



LYTTA

SHE LAY IN THE hospital bed next to Brooks and observed as he twisted and turned, restless in sleep. She was unsure of her next move after the rooftop.

When she fell into eternity and landed in the asylum, despair was at the forefront of her mind. The poison inside distorted her temperament and it felt like a lifetime before she crashed.

She studied him from afar, though. Studied him. Taking in information and processing what made him tick. He was distant from the others, but did noncommittal acts of kindness here and there.

He picked up fallen paint brushes in art therapy for those who were too far gone from reality to paint. Sometimes, when a patient came from the forbidden hall with burn marks upon their head, he would pass them part of his meal and encourage them to eat. She had even seen him smile affectionately when

he sat with the patient who liked sticking objects down his pants or up his nose.

He always made sure no one was looking, though. Except for Lytta. She was always watching.

The one time she tried to get close to him resulted in detainment and *therapy*. There was a force that roamed these halls and recognized her for what she was, and it would stop at nothing to keep her from him.

Many times throughout the last few weeks she'd tried to get to him by sitting at his lunch table or picking flowers in the greenhouse at the same time as him. All attempts had been futile. She wondered if he even remembered their time together on the roof. Had that been taken from him too?

Lytta remembered every second of it. Her life hinged on her next moves.

She couldn't deny the draw she had to him. Their chaos called to each other, and she was desperate to return what was stolen from him.

It was odd, this place. When the Deathless God of Chaos went to rest, the world fell into disorder. The Olympians became greedy, power hungry, and took more than what they gave back.

Entitled.

Disgusting.

Guilt filled her chest as she recalled the misery she'd inflicted on the world, too. How she had been no better than

those she despised. Some would say it wasn't her fault. She was a victim with no control over her madness.

And now? That misery had followed her into the afterlife. Sickness spread through the asylum, a wave of pestilence infecting each and every patient unfortunate enough to have crossed her path.

Lytta shook her head. She couldn't think of that now. What's done is done, and the only way to make it better was to follow through with her plan.

It took Lytta a day or two to figure out what buttons to push to receive electroshock therapy alongside Brooks. She had taken a calculated risk that the head of the asylum would be so consumed in her sadism with his torture that Lytta would be overlooked.

She was right.

Lytta watched him sleep as she plotted her next move.

She had to get to him.

Waking him up would be imperative. The world was depending on her to make him *see*, for the disease she inflicted upon it would leave nothing alive in its path.

She was carnage.

The
AWAKENING





BROOKS

RHYTHMIC TAPPING AND THE worst humming he'd ever heard filtered through his mind. His head pounded and the light pouring in made his eyes sting. They felt like they'd been burned from the inside out.

Come to think of it, they probably fucking had.

It was rare he recalled anything from the electroshock therapy sessions, but this time they came flooding back.

Dr. Kore and her sadistic need to see him suffer. He had a feeling that he was her favorite patient, but he would never understand why.

He tried to be a model patient in the beginning. He thought if maybe he didn't cause trouble, she wouldn't look his way after initial treatment.

He had never been so godsdamned wrong.

Brooks tested his body one limb at a time. When he decided they were all still attached, he tried to open his eyes. It was hard at first, but it wasn't long before he was blinking against the light.

He raised his hand to shade the light, but paused when he glanced through the window and realized night had fallen. The electroshock must have been extra harsh if his eyes were sensitive to the dim light of the moon.

“I think you pissed yourself.”

Brooks jumped and immediately regretted the sudden movement. The instant burst of nausea accompanied with vertigo and immense pain left him stunned.

“Fuck that hurts.”

“Take it easy, big guy. I think they almost killed you.”

He wiped his eyes and attempted to open them again as he moved wearily into a sitting position. When his foggy vision cleared, he found Lytta sitting on the bed next to his. He cringed when he noticed burn marks on her temples with the same bruising he knew matched his own.

“You, too, huh?”

“That's what happens when you talk to people who aren't there.”

Brooks could empathize.

“Are you okay?” Brooks asked.

Her brows furrowed and she took her time before she answered hesitantly, “Why do you care?”

“Forget I asked,” he scoffed.

“I just mean, you hardly know me. We talked one time on the roof and it looks like you’ve got your own demons to fight.”

He let her response sink in. He was too tired to lie or be sarcastic.

“I don’t know why I care.”

“You feel it too.” Not a question, a statement.

“Feel what?” He answered wearily.

“The connection between us.”

“Oh. Uh, well, I’m not really looking for anything, and I had kind of a rough night so—”

A pillow smacked him in the face and nearly ended him right there.

“Not romantically you idiot. For fucks sake. Men and their superiority complex.”

She grumbled under her breath as Brooks tried to pull himself back together. She must have undergone therapy way before him if she felt well enough to sit up, bitch at him and throw a pillow at his face.

“You need to pull yourself together. They’ll be coming for us at sunrise, and we need to talk.”

He froze as dread filled his gut.

“Why are they coming for us?”

“Doctor Crazy ordered hydrotherapy. You know, to ease the muscle ache after hours of post-shock convulsions.”

“Right. Okay. And why do we need to talk? We hardly know each other— your words by the way. Kind of weird to be friendly now, don’t you think?”

“First of all—”

“And where have you been the past couple of weeks anyway?”

Her smile was mischievous as she said, “That implies you’ve been looking for me. Did you miss me, Brooks?”

He could have denied it. Could have ignored her, or lied straight to her face. Something about her, though, felt... companionable. Like they were one and the same. She was just as sarcastic as he was and, if he were one for assuming, just as broken.

“I have been looking for you, but only because I was intrigued by your dramatic entrance into the asylum. Not to mention your roof top escapades. Then you disappeared off the face of the planet and I got shocked into fucking oblivion.”

“Do you remember your intake therapy?”

“Random, but no, and I’m probably better for it.”

“That’s because you’re weak and happy to live in ignorance.”

“That fucking escalated quickly. Tell me how you really feel.”

Either she didn't catch the sarcasm or ignored it when she replied, “I did. You have the ability to remember. You just don't want to because it's easier that way. I know what it's like to have a dark passenger. It's powerful and either it will control you, or you will control it. It's chaos, but it is yours.”

Before he could form a snappy response, she continued, “Now go to the bathroom and get cleaned up. Seriously, I think you pissed yourself.”

Brooks looked down and, sure as shit, there was a large wet spot covering the crotch of his scrubs.

“Fuck.”

“Don't be embarrassed. It's pretty standard with electro. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd shit yourself on that table, too.”

He had in the past, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

Brooks stepped carefully from the bed and padded toward the bathroom. He used the wall to guide his way as his weak knees threatened to buckle. Each movement was agony, a result of the post shock convulsions that racked your muscles.

The infirmary was a large square room with beds lining both sides. The entrance was on the wall perpendicular to the beds, and the bathroom was straight across from it. There was a station dead center where two nurses normally monitored the infirmary patients, but they would have already gone home for the night. The orderlies would be in control now, and they

weren't the best at watching over the sick bay. What did they care if a patient died? Less work for them.

The walk to the bathroom was short. He stumbled in the dark to find the light switch and avoided the mirror once he flipped it on.

It was a basic square bathroom equipped with one toilet, a pedestal sink, and an acrylic mirror screwed into the wall right above it. Glass mirrors weren't allowed in the asylum for obvious reasons, so something sturdier was used in its place. One light fixture was placed in the middle of the ceiling and burned the brightest, medical-grade white light possible.

Brooks leaned his backside against the sink as he studied the stain on his pants. There was a possibility he'd pissed himself, but his heart pounded as he thought of the other possibility.

He thought of the dream with his Siren and what they had done.

The dreamer was eager to remove the scrub pants to see if he could still smell her on them. Hopeful, even, because then he could prove that she *was* real.

Prove to whom, exactly? He wasn't sure. No one in this hospital would listen and the likelihood of ever leaving this place and returning to society? Low. Very low.

That was the cynic talking.

Brooks turned and stared in the mirror. His face was gaunt and the burn marks oozed. He would have to ask the nurse to wrap it tomorrow before it got infected.

He stood back from the sink to stare at his pants again. The indecision between want and need made his heart race, a mixture of panic and fury.

Impulsively, he ripped the scrub pants from his body and threw them in the corner. He wanted to run his fingers through his hair and pull it until his scalp screamed, but if he touched those wounds he knew he would end up on the floor.

Pain.

He needed controlled pain to take his mind from the stained pants laying in the corner. He would rip his briefs off too if it didn't mean walking out naked in front of Lytta.

He was afraid to confront the answers waiting within the fabric of those pants. What if they didn't hold her sweet smell? Confirmation that it was all a dream would be devastating and he was sure it would break the last of the fragile binds keeping him sane.

Even worse would be the indisputable fact that she was real. Brooks couldn't fathom what possibilities that would bring. He would have to consider that his entire life had been a lie and he just wasn't sure what could be done with that information.

When the rage was too much to contain, Brooks swung at the fake mirror. A sickening crunch made him flinch as his knuckles bled. Something was bound to be broken.

It wouldn't have been the first time.

Brooks was desperate, but for what he didn't know.

Confirmation? Denial?

He needed to hear her voice as a sense of desperation fueled his hysteria.

“Siren?” He called hoarsely.

No answer.

“Siren!” His yell reverberated through the small space. His ears rang from the deafening scream as a ball of emotions rose from his chest to clog his throat.

He was miserable. So many emotions warred within and not a single outlet was visible. He could see her, and touch her, *feel* her. Gods, the way she smelled... Like sea water and sunshine. That had to mean something, right? How could something feel so goddamn real only to turn to dust when reality came back around?

Brooks stammered backward until he found the wall. His back pressed against the cold tile as he slid to the floor and held his knees to his chest. He played his dream over and over in his head trying to determine how his brain could have tricked him so perfectly.

It was because he was vulnerable.

It was always because he was fucking vulnerable.

No more.

Perhaps it was desperation or a fear of the truth, but Brooks could no longer entertain these thoughts. If life as he knew it were shattered, he wasn't sure he could pick up the pieces.

From now on, no matter whose voice rattled around his skull, he would not entertain them.

They weren't real.

A small knock sounded at the door before Lytta pushed it open.

Concern etched her face as she asked, "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he replied, his voice a dull monotone.

She hesitated before stepping across the threshold and taking a seat beside him.

"Wanna play a game?" Her voice echoed in the small bathroom. It was rough as if her vocal cords had been damaged. One look at the mottled scar running across her throat was explanation enough.

"Why not?" he sighed.

"A nightmare for a nightmare. You go first this time."

His gulp was audible.

"I hear voices, and sometimes—" his voice broke. "Sometimes they feel so *real*. Sometimes, they even convince me that they are. My dark passenger used to just be this unholy, demanding voice, but now I see him in my dreams. Sometimes I even think I see him looking back at me in the mirror. But I can't trust it. The same brain that projects voices can project images. I can't trust what I see, and I can't trust what I hear."

She was silent for a moment, her brows furrowed as if collecting her thoughts.

“What can you trust?”

Brooks scoffed before he said, “Nothing. Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.”

“You said you have auditory and visual hallucinations. That doesn’t cover taste, smell or touch. If you can touch it, smell it, taste it, it must be real.”

“I don’t know, Lytta. I want it to be real. I want it so fucking badly, but there is no explanation as to how other people live in my head.”

“What if I told you there was?”

“Seriously, Lyt?”

She smiled as he caught himself.

“A nickname, huh? Does that mean we’re friends?” She bumped his shoulder with her own as she teased him, and it thawed something inside of him.

A friend.

He’d never had a friend in the asylum before. Only the voices in his head.

Somberness settled in, and Lytta leaned her head against his shoulder.

It felt nice. Companionable. Even though they didn’t know each other very well yet, Lytta felt like she belonged with him.

“I know that the deck is stacked against you, Brooks, but I was serious earlier. I think you’re holding back because you’re scared. You think that if you let the voices in they will destroy you. The misery of knowledge is always better than the ignorance of bliss. You know that deep down inside there is more to this. Your dreams are guiding you. All you have to do is listen.”

“Say that I listen to you. Maybe I stop fighting back and let the darkness in. What comes next? I kill everyone in this asylum and walk away.”

“No, Brooks. Let the darkness in, and you will *see*.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he huffed.

Before she could argue her point, he said, “Your turn, Lyt. Nightmare for a nightmare.”

She nodded in what seemed like a concession, her mouth working as she chewed her lip.

“What do you wanna know?”

She looked up at him and, in those espresso eyes, he saw determination and clarity.

“The scar on your neck. How did you get it?”

Her skin, so thin and fragile in appearance, stood starkly against the angry imperfection. One thick, straight line ran from ear to ear over top of what resembled a necklace of thorns. Tissue long since healed puffed in places where the skin failed to knit correctly. It crossed and slashed as if she were hanged her with barbed wire.

“You get straight to the point huh? No questions about how I got here, my diagnoses, what I had for breakfast... Just an immediate question about the deformity around my throat?”

“Nightmare for a nightmare, Lyt.”

“Fair enough,” she shrugged.

It was a moment before she answered, but her face was set in concentration.

“Don’t lie,” he warned. “I told you a truth. A truth that leaves me more vulnerable than anything that whack job of a doctor could do to me.”

“Okay.”

She inhaled deeply and released a shaky exhale before rolling up the thin white sleeves of the cotton shirt under her scrubs.

“I have a lot of scars, Brooks, and they all have a story to tell.”

She held out her arms with the palms facing up to reveal matching ragged scars across either wrist.

“Christ, Lytta,” he breathed.

But she wasn’t done yet.

Lytta lifted her scrub top to an array of scars of all different sizes and shapes. Some were short and thin like a healed stab wound while others resembled sloppy cuts or death-dealing slices.

“I’ve been running all of my life.”

She turned her back to him and lifted the scrub top further to reveal a pattern of small, horizontal scars tucked between each rib. They were meticulously placed. Methodical, even.

“I’m not good, Brooks.”

Lytta turned back to face him with guilt and shame written over her features.

“I’ve done terrible things. My darkness would take over and I made people suffer. I toyed with them for my own entertainment and slaughtered them in bloodlust. When I came down from the high, I looked upon the destruction I wrought and nearly drowned in my misery every time. I tried to end it. Gods, Brooks, I tried a million times to rid the world of my taint, but every time I thought I succeeded... *he* came to save me.”

Brooks was speechless. His chest ached at the rawness in her voice.

“He would pull me back from the edge of oblivion and the first thing I saw every time were those amber eyes full of hate and menace.”

“It’s time for you to repent and pay your penance. I gave you one mission— to carry my darkness and keep it hidden. Instead you wreak havoc. You’re a fucking blight on this world and I’m tired of cleaning up the wreckage you leave behind.”

“Just let me die,” she screamed. Begged. “Please!”

“Whores like you don’t get to die.”

Brooks stared at her with absolute horror churning his stomach

“He would make me live, and then he would make me pay. This,” she pointed to the scar on her neck, “was just the first of many. He did this to me when I was a little girl. An innocent who knew nothing of the world or the evil it held.”

Tears fell relentlessly, but her face stayed stoic.

“The little girl died that day clutching her throat, and from her ashes rose a phoenix of death and fury.”



XIA WOKE THE NEXT morning riding an absolute high.

The taste of him was still on her lips and the words he spoke played on repeat through her mind.

His presence had been unyielding and dominant in that darkened room, and yet the way he let her take control... It sparked a craving so desperate in her blood that she shivered.

Xia had never known a man so willing to relinquish control when so much power lay vibrating beneath his skin.

Flashes of blue eyes and inky fingers crossed her mind. Curiosity sparked in the moment, but she was too enraptured with the man before her to ask any questions. Those eyes, so navy and depthless to start, burned a blazing cerulean so bright they nearly lit up the dark.

The blackness covering his hands and bleeding up his arms was something Xia had never seen before and, the more it rose, the more suffocating his power became.

She didn't know who or what Brooks was, and she wasn't sure he did either. If he knew that kind of power radiated beneath his skin, surely he wouldn't be tethered to that god awful place she found him in.

He was not human, and yet assumed he lived among them. Or maybe he just never questioned it?

Xia distracted herself with shaping the water into sea creatures as she thought of her mystery man. It was funny how someone could be such a stranger while being so intimately familiar.

She had firsthand experience with strangers being too familiar. Each time her body was exposed on a stage or sold to a patron for the right amount of cash, she was all too aware of how familiar men could get.

But Brooks... It was something else entirely. She felt like she'd known him all her life. Their banter was effortless and the safety net he cast around their space was as shelter she never wanted to leave.

When they were in the dream together, though? Something came over him that was so unfamiliar.

Could it be that he was a daemon like her? It was odd for someone like her, someone that the humans claimed as their

gods, to be stuck in the human world so helplessly out of control.

Come to think of it, she couldn't even be sure the human world was where he resided. Their night in the infirmary was the first time they'd ever met in person. Well, as in person as you could get inside a dream.

Xia let her thoughts drift to daydreams as she wove chaos, the term her kind used for magic, through her bathwater. Tiny seahorses roamed in herds around her feet as pods of dolphins dove over the bubbles she kept blooming to the rim.

She knew it was a poor use of her magic, but replicating the intricate details of the sea life kept her restless mind busy. It would be another rough night. The Lord of Nightmares was expecting her.

Xia scrounged whatever lurking courage she could find and took a deep, stabilizing breath.

It was no small feat to lift her head from the porcelain tub. She knew she should stand up. Knew she should drain the water and don the armor that would get her through the night. Steam no longer rose from the cooling water and her skin wrinkled like a newborn babe, and yet Xia remained.

It was no puzzle as to why. The sooner she stood, the sooner she would meet the handmaiden in her bed chambers. After she was groomed for him there would be no turning back. She halfheartedly wondered what he would do with her. At least she would have new memories of Brooks to carry her through the night.

A soft knock on the door pulled Xia from her thoughts as a meek voice carried through the barrier. “Mistress, Xia? The Lord grows anxious. He wishes me to bring you to him.”

Xia closed her eyes and rested her head on the tub again. She used to feel anxious when the handmaiden would come. Her body would shake, sobs wracking her rigid frame as she prayed desperately for a Hercules who would never come. That was long ago, though. Life had to flow through you in order to feel anxiety. Xia was naught but a shell, resignation and emptiness the only inhabitants inside her soul.

She thought vaguely about the strength she felt when she was standing on that black beach soaked in the blood of her victims. She tried to draw on that strength, to place it in her heart and light that blazing fire that left her soaring.

Each night with the Oneiroi Lord, however, she lost a piece of herself to the darkness making it e’er harder to draw on that strength. But, that was to be the curse of the Siren. A spark of humanity to burn brightly within, only to be dampened and withered by darkness.

“Even the brightest of stars burn out,” she said to the empty room.

“What was that?” the handmaiden asked from outside the chamber.

“I’ll be out shortly. Please have my things ready and tell the Lord to expect my arrival within the next hour.”

“I must insist you move with haste, as he’s waited—”

“He will wait as long as I please,” Xia snapped.

She forced steel into her voice in hopes the handmaiden would leave her be, but she didn’t feel the forced bravado. Xia wondered if the handmaiden could tell just how far her spirit had fallen, maybe even pitied her.

A small shuffle sounded at the door, a temporary reprieve, just before a sharp pain crossed her temple. She pressed her fingers to the ache and gritted her teeth.

A rhythmic *drip, drip, drip*, echoed and her blood ran colder than the bathwater. She opened her eyes and watched as small tendrils of ruby red fell into the water, each drop unfurling uniquely as it thinned. Xia touched her nose and, when her fingers came back bloodied, dread spread like rot in her gut.

The spear of pain in her temple sharpened, and she understood it for what it was— a man made of nightmares prodding her mind, weeding around for an entry point that she so desperately tried to deny. But what was a Siren compared to the Bogeyman, manipulator of dreams and realities?

“What a bold little Siren to keep me waiting,” a male voice scraped against her senses. *“Maybe the pretty little handmaiden will take your place tonight.”*

Another shuffle outside the door and a small feminine whimper made Xia’s head snap up. Anxiety gripped her chest tighter than her fingers clawing at the porcelain lip of the tub.

“Don’t!” she said out loud. “I’m coming, I swear it.”

Xia stood quickly, the splash of water drowning out the pounding of her heart. The handmaiden was nothing but a human stolen from her world. She would never survive a night with the Lord of Nightmares.

The Oneiroi were daemon born of the void between stars. Long after the Titan Chaos fell into a restless sleep, creatures slithered out of his darkness. They were no longer bound by the chaotic magic holding them captive. The Olympians didn't know how daemon like the Oneiroi came to be, only that those born of Chaos were no better than Pegasus shit on their heels. Zeus was fine to turn a blind eye as they pilfered and plundered their way through the darkest corners of Olympia, as long as they didn't dare to step foot near Olympus.

Xia stepped from the tub and donned a silk bathrobe, not bothering to dry herself with the rough cotton towel she'd thrown aside. In three strides she reached the door and jerked it open. Lying on her bed was a man in black leather pants with silken wings of leather cast carelessly off the side. His blonde, shoulder length hair was mussed like he couldn't bother to run a brush through it and he had forgotten his shirt. He was laid back, hands propping his head in a show of carelessness. Xia knew not to be fooled by his lackadaisical posture.

She scanned the room for the handmaiden and nearly choked on terror when she found the human impaled on her four-poster bed. Her green eyes were still open and she wore a pale, shocked expression glued by death.

A trickle of blood tickled Xia's lip as it ran from her nose. She looked Phobeter in the eyes, his acrid smile spreading from ear to ear.

"Mistress?" A meek voice pulled Xia's stare from the monster, and her heart stopped as green eyes looked back to her.

Xia turned her gaze back to the bed, but the body of the handmaiden was no longer ornamental to the bedpost. Instead, she stood by her side, eyes questioning.

"Come again?" Xia asked, her voice shaky in a panicked effort to delay her knees buckling.

"Do you need help dressing before I depart?"

The handmaiden was none-the-wiser of the vision Phobeter had impressed into Xia's reality.

"She will be fine without your services, human. Leave us," Phobeter spat.

With a gulp and a single nod, the handmaiden backed out of the room, the small click of the door resonating like the lock of a prison cell.

Xia stood on shaky legs as water dripped from her wet hair. She couldn't remember how many nights she stood in that very chamber preparing for the onslaught the Lord of Nightmares impressed upon her, but now was not the time to dwell. She took a deep, steadying breath and buried her consciousness in the darkest corner of her mind. If she hid well enough, maybe he couldn't hurt her this time.

“Are you ready to play, pretty bird?”

He could have asked out loud, but this was part of the torture. The power he held over her knowing that she could never wrestle her mind back from him once he gained entrance.

Xia walked toward the bed, tunneling deeper and deeper within her mind until she was just a body on autopilot. She was aware of her skin settling on the silk duvet, but it felt like more of an afterthought than an intended motion.

Just a little further, she thought.

Xia gritted her teeth, dredging up the last ounce of courage she possessed.

“Do your worst, Demon.”



BROOKS

LYTTA HADN'T SPOKEN SINCE her confession in the bathroom, and it was just as well because Brooks was too horrified to form a solid thought.

They sat on their beds in silence until the nurses bustled in for the morning and checked their wounds. Brooks' had to be wrapped, but Lytta's was healed enough to be left alone.

When orderlies came with trays of food for breakfast, they continued their streak of silence. It wasn't until they were escorted to morning therapy that either had the balls to speak up.

Brooks and Lytta entered the treatment area and dressed down to the undergarments on their respective sides of the room.

Hydrotherapy was one of the milder forms of treatment at St. Dymphna's. The idea was that if you relaxed the muscles

enough, it released the demons. Brooks wasn't sure how true that theory was, but anything to ease his aching muscles sounded like a positive. It consisted of a row of wooden boxes with a gate latch up front, a slanted top for steam to escape, and a hole for the patient's head. Once you were in the box, it was locked so that you couldn't escape.

Even the more peaceful treatments were archaic.

Brooks and Lytta were placed side by side as other patients filed in.

Unfortunately, Rue was one of them.

"How nice of you to join us, Rue. I didn't think it was your day for Hydrotherapy." Lytta's gaze was accusatory, and Brooks got the feeling he was missing something between the two women.

Rue's eyes narrowed and her gaze filled with hatred. "I couldn't let the two of you have all the fun, now, could I?"

"It must be lonely being a snitch—" Lytta started.

"You watch your fucking mouth or I'll shove a rag in it and watch you choke until that pretty little face of yours goes slack." The gleam in Rue's eye was unhinged, and Brooks was suddenly thankful they were all locked in a steaming box.

"God almighty, would you both calm down?"

"Brooks, I—" Rue started.

"Shut your fucking mouth, Rue. I don't have the patience for your stalker antics today."

“Anything for you.” Her beaming eyes cast down before turning to Lytta with a sneer.

“Lytta, I think we should talk—” Brooks whispered.

“Not here.” Her tone was final.

“I just think that after last night—”

“I said not now!” she hissed, and the sound was not remotely human.

A flash of black veins slithered down her pallid cheeks away from orbs of midnight. She turned away quickly and cleared her throat before saying, “We’re not in good company.”

Brooks’ brows furrowed as he looked between Lytta and Rue.

The silence during therapy was awkward, and Brooks couldn’t help but turn inward. He tried not to think of his Siren or the darkness that lurked within. Instead, he thought of his dreams.

Last night with his Siren was the first his mind had ever strayed from the petrified woman in the tree or the circle of light shrinking as he fell. He much preferred the cave of asphodels to the fall that made his stomach lurch, but his mind drifted toward it anyway.

In his dream, he looked to the stars as he let loose a breath and tumbled backward into oblivion. A voice rattled in his mind, so full of sorrow and relief that it made his heart ache.

“I give myself wholly to you, take me to the void between the lights.”

Even those were but a whisper.

Falling, falling, falling.

A freeing, weightless feeling tinged with a million emotions.

Dread, relief, sorrow, and acceptance.

Brooks dreamt it over and over again, but it didn't make any more sense now than the first time he sprang awake to his stomach lurching. At least when he dreamt of the three mystic women with weeping eyes there was no feeling involved. He could float above his body and seek respite in the dark.

That's because you're weak and happy to live in ignorance. Lytta's voice from that night on the roof filtered through his mind and he bristled.

The audacity she had to call him weak.

He'd gone through extensive electroshock therapy as well as an insulin-induced coma for gods knew how long to rid the disease from his mind, and he had survived it all.

Brooks was not weak.

He was a fucking survivor.

“What a life it must be to only survive when you could hold the power to destroy them all,” a deep voice rumbled in the confines of his mind.

The dark presence stretched as it stirred from its slumber.

“Good thing no one fucking asked you,” Brooks muttered as a thought. He didn’t dare speak out loud.

“I only speak the truth. You and I did great things once when we were one.”

“Shut up. I’m not talking to you. No more voices.”

“You cannot hide from me.”

“I said shut up!”

It was only after everyone turned his way that Brooks realized he’d yelled out loud.

The orderlies monitoring the therapy stared. One even reached for the walkie-talkie at his belt and whispered something into the black hand-held device.

“He was talking to me,” Lytta spoke pointedly to the orderly, an edge of panic ringing through her voice. “I was talking to him and he didn’t want to get in trouble. He told me to shut up.”

Brooks looked between Lytta and the orderly, but her pleas didn’t stop him from pressing the button and saying, “I need Dr. Kore to the hydro room.”

The small radio crackled as someone answered from the other line.

Somehow, Brooks knew this would be his last straw.

Dr. Kore only gave so many electro-treatments before patients were taken to the last door in the treatment hallway.

Patients who went in rarely came out and, if they did, they were never the same.

If a lobotomy were to be his fate, it would be the end of the road.



LYTTA

THEIR WALK TO HYDROTHERAPY was miserable. Did she say the wrong thing? Maybe she didn't spell it out correctly?

Lytta knew she could not tell him outright. She had been in this hellhole long enough to realize that any time a resident got too close to Brooks, the asylum shifted, and the resident lost a little more of themselves. Not that he had noticed. They kept him so doped up on some elixir that he was none the wiser. Lytta couldn't identify the mystery potion, but she'd be damned if she stopped looking for it.

Everyone in St. Dymphna's was just a walking shell, and Lytta refused to become part of that crowd. She had worked too hard to be there to fail now.

Brooks had been silent the entirety of the morning, and she wasn't sure what to say to make it better.

When he asked about her scar... she hadn't been sure what to say. A truth within a lie. Something small enough to slip under the radar of the ever-present eyes but solid enough to keep it in his mind.

She didn't know much about what he'd been before his arrival at the asylum, but she knew he had the power to shift their fates. She just had to bring him back.

After they were locked up in the steaming boxes from hell, the worst-case scenario happened.

Rue.

Lytta had been watching Brooks for weeks after her arrival, and around every corner was Rue. Sometimes she annoyed the piss out of him, and other times she watched from afar just like Lytta. Little did Rue know, Lytta was watching both of them.

It took her a while to figure out what was happening, but when she started to catch on she knew she was in trouble.

They were running out of time.

She was running out of options.

There was nothing she could say or do in front of the stalker. Brooks thought it was infatuation, but Lytta knew better. How odd was it that she was the only resident able to interact with him so freely? Everyone else was shooshed, ushered away or so drugged out of their godsdamned mind that they couldn't even see to their own needs. Every patient in the asylum was no better than a ghost, all to keep Patient Zero isolated.

Except Rue.

Lytta had one advantage that Brooks didn't...

She remembered.

Chaos ran so heavily within her that, whatever this place was, it couldn't get its claws into her.

Sure. She could be shocked, prodded, sweated to death, and injected with gods knew what, but it never took her mind.

That meant she remembered the world she came from. Where *they* came from.

Lytta knew madness because she was its mistress. It never truly took over because its purpose was to torture, and the true torture of madness was the moments of clarity in which you see the carnage you've caused. Just as the arrow strikes, the taint takes root and you're lost again.

She considered the disease swimming behind Rue's eyes as the three of them soaked in steam boxes. Lytta recognized the monster in Rue because it was like looking in a mirror— a monster will always recognize its likeness.

But what Lytta didn't see in Rue was the clarity of cruelty. She was just an image projected to skew the big picture.

Rue was a goddess torn in two, and somewhere in this asylum was her other half.



P^{AIN.}

It was all Xia could feel inside and out.

As she lie on her downy duvet underneath the ornate ceiling of her glass prison, Xia silently begged for the relentless torture to end.

The Lord of Nightmares sat beside her and stroked her moonlit hair as his chaos dug deep into her psyche. Xia could neither move nor scream as he plowed through her memories and pulled the worst to the surface.

She relived her sisters' deaths over and over again, the pain shredding through her empty soul like shrapnel. It was like she was back in those rooms at their bedside as their last bits of chaos filtered through the air.

Their empty stares haunted her dreams and twisted into her worst nightmares. Phobator took great pleasure in animating

their corpses as she sobbed on the floor beside them.

“You!” They screamed and pointed their stiffening fingers in her face. “You did this to us!”

“Please,” she begged. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was too scared to die!”

“You were a coward,” her oldest sister, Geia, would sneer.

“We protected you from him and you were content to hide as we withered,” Molpe, her middle sister, yelled.

“We were stronger together and you failed us,” they hissed in unison.

“I don’t know how to be brave,” Xia whispered.

Phobetor was content to let her wallow in the misery of losing her only family. A betrayal she could never undo. She hid in the darkest corners of Anthemossa and listened to them scream as they were used by the highest bidders and sucked dry by Phobetor.

Her sister, Molpe, was the most dangerous. Each of the three Sirens had a unique song with distinctive effects. Molpe’s song could call anyone and, rather than drugging them, she could manipulate their minds.

Molpe was successful against the Lord of Nightmares all of one time before he pushed her to her knees and broke her.

She was the first to die.

Phobetor spiked her to a wall on Level Desecration for all to use and see, and that’s where he left her.

Xia was the one to find her.

She would never forget being shoved into that room and being forced to look at her disfigured sister on display. She had fallen to her knees and vomited, her stare unblinking as she screamed her pain into the universe.

Molpe had been tough on Xia, but Xia always thought she was better for it. When they were younger, if she stumbled and scraped her knee, Molpe would punch her on the shoulder and tell her to get up.

“Don’t let anyone see you cry,” she would say with a firm set to her brow. “If you show them weakness, they will break you. You’re either a fighter or you’re dead.”

It took Xia a long time to understand that expression of love, but Molpe sat so deeply rooted in Xia’s heart that a core piece of it broke the day her sister’s flame was extinguished.

Her fault.

Molpe’s death was on Xia’s shoulders.

Geia was given as a gift to Phobetor’s brother, Morpheus.

Xia had only ever seen Morpheus twice— one time to pick her sister up and the other to drop her corpse at the doorstep when he was finished with her.

Geia’s song was specific to the untouched. It sang to virgins from miles away, their minds entranced by the innate seduction of her voice. It was different from Xia’s though. Xia’s song was alluring because it was a drug to the mind. It

could call forth carnal desires and allow the listener to revel in intoxication.

Geia's song was a promise.

Whatever they longed for, be it happiness, marriage, sex, or frivolity, Geia's voice promised it to them.

Morpheus used her to call forth virgins to his doorstep. Men, women, and children alike flooded his dreamscape.

Xia never uncovered why he killed her sister. She had been sitting on the black beach as she watched Geia fall from the sky. She would never forget the sound of skin and bones hitting solid ground.

Phobeter liked to squeeze every drop of pain from the loss of her sisters. Every time he replayed their deaths and twisted their memory, guilt clogged her throat. She should have been stronger. She should have stepped from the shadows and fought the dream daemon just as strongly as her sisters had.

Instead, she flew under the radar and watched as they were slaughtered. Not once did she attempt to stop them. Fear was a vice around her chest and kept her feet firmly rooted to the shadows. Selfish enough to save herself rather than die fighting alongside those she loved most.

Once the Devil had her primed, he moved on to her darkest secret.

Her hunger for power and lust for blood when she fed.

It took a sky full of blood to satiate her and she loved every drop that fell in her favor.

“You’re a killer, Xia,” Phobedor whispered in her ear as her tear-stained face pressed against her downy pillow. “You’re a killer and you fucking love it.”

“No,” she whispered, pleading. “I don’t want to be a killer.” She stared blankly at the ceiling, her open eyes drying as nightmares danced behind them.

“But you are, and you’re so fucking good at it, little bird. I love to watch you on that beach as you drain the life from anyone who will listen to that pretty little mouth of yours.”

“Please,” she begged, her voice hoarse in the chaos of her mind.

Phobedor projected flashes of her standing on the beach of craggy rocks and black sand as the waves crashed. She looked like a goddess on a throne made of glass and hungry waves as her hands lifted to the stormy sky. Lightning flashed as blood speckled her skin, her body but a silhouette on the horizon.

His finger trailed up her leg and played with the line of her silk nightgown. Her skin pebbled beneath his touch and he chuckled.

Xia hated herself for her body’s reaction. She ached to be touched and was desperate for a kind love and doting attention, but this wasn’t it. Phobedor wasn’t it. Why, then, did her body betray her?

“I’ll never let you go, little bird. You are mine to break.”

Xia lay in the aftermath of Phobetor's destruction. He carried her to the bathroom, collected her tears in a vile and dropped her to the floor as he always did. Though he never abused her physically, her body refused to move from the cold tile.

She wished she could just die there. Her muscles tremored as the convulsions from his torture finally started to ebb. Tears streaked her face and her nose ran as sobs wracked her body. Anger and despair sparked a flame of self-hatred in her chest, and Xia screamed for the life she wished she could have led.

Hopeless.

She ached for control, but it slipped further from her fingers each day.

Xia closed her eyes and reached for that tentative connection in her mind. It had saved her life all those years ago and she was desperate for him to save her again.

“Brooks?”

Anxiety crushed her chest, each breath a laborious effort.

“Brooks?” She said a little louder.

No answer.

“Brooks!” she screamed.

Silence.

Xia was alone in the dark.

She sobbed until her nose and throat were too swollen to continue, and then she cried until she had no tears left to give. She was unsure how long she'd been on the floor this time, but

thought maybe tonight was the one she would finally stay there and never stand back up.

Soft whispers drifted through her bathroom, and she brushed it off as a trick of her numb mind. But, when she heard her name, her ears perked.

Xia strained her ears to follow the sound as she pushed the dead weight of her body off the floor. The sounds weren't coming from under the door.

So where, then?

She turned her head in every direction, quieting her breaths as she waited for another sound to drift her way.

A *clink* of glass and a low rumbling voice sounded near her bathroom vanity and she rushed on quiet feet to get closer. Placed in the ceiling right above the mirror was a vent and, from the vent, filtered in a low conversation.

There was the smooth voice of a man and a sultry feminine tone drifting through.

Xia had never heard the female's voice, but she would recognize the male voice anywhere.

The Devil.

"I told you I've got it handled," he said, low and dangerous.

"Forgive me if I don't trust your intentions, pet."

The woman's voice made Xia's blood curdle. It was so beautiful but so... poisonous.

The pause was so long that Xia wondered if they'd left before the female said, "Where is the song? Do you have it?"

"Of course I fucking have it," he retorted.

Her tone was low and deadly when she responded, "Do. Better. This isn't enough."

"Fuck you Mel—"

A loud crash sounded followed by an ominous gurgle.

"You listen to me, you piece of shit," she spat. "You are *mine*. Do you understand that? You do as I say and you do it as you're told. I fucking own you and the moment you stop being useful to me I will paint these walls with your insides."

Another thump, this one smaller, before she continued, "This doesn't work without her. I cannot hold him without her song and we are not finished. Do you get that?"

He spit and Xia hoped for his sake that it wasn't toward that terrifying woman.

"Yes." His voice was pure venom.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, mistress."

A satisfied *hmm* filtered through the vent before the woman purred, "That's a good pet. Now, make your mistress happy and get on your knees."



BROOKS

HIS HEART HAMMERED IN the empty moments before the entrance of Dr. Kore. A cloy smile filled her face and there was a spark in her eye that made his stomach churn.

Her red hair was in a neat chignon with a pencil stuck through the back. Black square glasses covered her face and a dainty chain hung from either side disappearing to the back. The beauty mark above her lip rose with her smile and he could have sworn her brown eyes flash red. She had a clipboard tucked into her arms and a pen at the ready. The perfect image of a professional.

Brooks knew she was anything but.

She looked first to the orderly who'd opened the door but then directed her stare toward Brooks. It lingered, their eyes glued together and he grew more panicked as hers gleamed

with excitement. She was like a rabid animal on the hunt and, by the looks of it, was finished stalking her prey.

She looked ready to pounce.

“What’s happened?”

The orderly nodded in Brooks’ direction.

“I can’t be sure, Dr. Kore, but I think treatment may have failed on Patient Zero.” The orderly’s voice is low, meant for Dr. Kore’s ears only.

Her head snapped to the orderly and, in the blink of an eye, they were nose to nose. The color leached from his face as Dr. Kore mumbled something too quiet to hear. The one orderly shrunk and left the room as the other stared subserviently at the floor.

Patient Zero?

Brooks’ dark passenger stirred, and its feelings of disgust and rage lingered with his fear and panic.

Lytta had gone still as death to his right, her eyes locked on the approaching doctor with a mix of emotions he couldn’t begin to untangle over the knot in his own chest. And Rue?

That loony bitch was smiling with admiration shining in her eyes.

Heels clicked on the tile floor as the doctor moved toward their boxes and the sound rang through Brooks’ head, his eye twitching with every resounding step.

Dr. Kore stopped in front of his box, her eyes set on his, and the small smile returned.

“Brooks?” A weak, female voice entered his mind.

His Siren.

She’s not fucking real, he told himself. Ignore it, or it’s going to get you killed.

“I’m going to do a quick examination to determine how we will proceed.”

“He was talking to me,” Lytta tried again, but Dr. Kore cut her off with an icy glare.

The doctor raised her penlight and shined it into both of Brooks’ eyes in quick succession.

“Brooks?” The voice in his head was louder now and laced with panic.

His soul wanted to respond, begged him to call out to his Siren, but he closed the lid and sealed it shut.

She was not his.

She was not even a she.

She was him, and he seemed hellbent on getting himself killed today.

“Just as I thought. Dilated,” she muttered to herself. She pulled the clipboard from her chest and flipped through several pages before asking, “Brooks, have you been hearing any voices since electrotherapy?”

“Brooks!” His Siren screamed in agony.

He could not, would not, respond to a hallucination.

Not here.

Not now.

Not ever again.

“No,” he said firmly, even though his breaths were ragged.

She stared for a moment longer before scribbling on her clipboard and continuing the interrogation.

“Are you experiencing any more auditory hallucinations?”

“No,” he answered again.

“I see.” Her face was serious as she wrote, and with every letter Brooks grew more antsy. He was glad the doctor couldn’t see through the steam box as his fingers rubbed anxiously at his legs.

Dr. Kore turned and addressed the remaining orderly. “The patient will continue hydrotherapy. Call me if anything changes in behavior.” Without another word she exited the room.

Whenever Dr. Kore’s clipped steps were but a whisper down the hall, Lytta turned to Brooks and whispered, “Whatever happens we will make it through together.” Her scarred throat bobbed above the wooden head hole and Brooks nodded.

Though their friendship was still new, it had blossomed and flourished at an alarming pace. Brooks didn’t have the energy to be concerned about how or why the broken girl had entered his life so unexpectedly.

Especially when he felt so close to losing it all.



BROOKS

THAT NIGHT, BROOKS LAY in his bed and allowed his imagination to run wild.

Would he ever get to sneak away to the rooftop again to see the stars?

Would he ever feel the pull of the alluring darkness between them?

If Dr. Kore had her way, she was going to take his life. Her tortures had been endless and he knew she was only looking for a reason to lobotomize him. It would be the ultimate way to deal out pain. She was a doctor, after all. If she wanted to prod his brain without killing him, she'd know how.

Lobotomies were unpredictable at best, but that didn't mean he would die.

Brooks thought back to the countless patients returned to morning therapy after being missing for several days.

Orderlies escorted them in a wheelchair and placed them right in front of the bay windows that looked out toward the greenhouse. More lively residents painted on easels or organized dominoes delicately into patterns. The patients in the wheelchairs, however, gazed out the window with their one good eye, the other covered in a bandage that wept red.

Those patients never walked again.

They never spoke again.

They never lived again.

That's how Brooks knew Dr. Kore kept an eye on him.

He would never forget walking the greenhouse days after a session of electrotherapy with a fragile, brown-haired man. They pretended to pick flowers in an attempt to expand their time in the lush gardens. They both enjoyed the wall of black flowers and spent time brushing the velvet petals with hesitant fingers, careful to avoid any thorns.

They had good conversation, he and Brooks. Lighthearted with small touches of sarcasm in between. Toward the end, he threw paranoid glances over his shoulder. Brooks hadn't paid any mind to it at the time. They were in an insane asylum, after all.

“Answer the darkness,” he whispered.

Brooks looked from the flower he grazed and met the man's bulging stare.

“The darkness calls to you. Answer him.”

“What are you—”

“The darkness calls to you, answer him. The darkness calls to you, answer him. The darkness calls to you, answer him!”

On and on, his voice crescendoed with each word until the orderlies came and dragged him away, syringe in hand.

Brooks hadn't seen him again until one day he was escorted to the bay windows and placed in front of an easel with an array of paints scattered about. The fragile man with brown hair was rolled in with a blooming red bandage. That was the first time Brooks had seen the results of a lobotomy, and it hadn't been the last.

After the second, Brooks began to keep his distance from the other patients. If for some reason those people were being hurt because of him, it was easier to be a lonely asshole than it was to watch them lose part of their brains for talking to him.

Once they made contact with him, their lives were at an end.

Except... for Rue.

Brooks didn't have long to ponder this before his door opened and shut with a quiet click. His heart raced as he shot from bed prepared to fight whoever had come to gather him for Dr. Kore.

When a small frame with erratic brown hair turned to face him, he was stunned.

“Lytta?”

“Come on,” she grasped his hand firmly in her own. “Come with me.”

“Lyt, where are we—”

“No questions.” Her tone was final. “Just come with me.”

He couldn't describe why he was compelled to trust her. Lingering outside of their rooms was dangerous at night. If they were caught their punishment would be isolation, and being alone in a room for days was not good for mentally ill patients. To be left alone with your broken mind was complete torture.

Lytta grasped his hand, desperation falling over her features that confused and concerned him. When he nodded, they slipped from his room on silent feet and stuck to the shadows lining the wall.

They reached the familiar metal door that led outside to the back of St. Dymphna's and opened it swiftly. Once the door closed behind them, Brooks stopped to take in his surroundings. A cool autumn breeze tousled his hair and raised goosebumps on his arms. The crisp air smelled of wet leaves and saturated bark.

A twitch of fingers on the back of his hand brought his attention to the woman beside him. Eyes closed and head tipped back, strands of hair danced across her pallid skin as the rest fell in waves behind her.

Shadows surrounded her as if even the moonlight was afraid to brush her skin. Her scars contrasted with the pale light and

called to a part of his being like a missing piece to his puzzle. Familiarity.

“Like calls to like,” that baritone rumbled under his skin. He startled, but pushed the resurgence of the voice aside.

A tear fell from Lytta’s closed lashes and dropped slowly, landing on her lips and disappearing into the crease. His heart ached. While the ghosts of her past were known only to Lytta, he felt each and every one of them as if they were his own.

Her eyelids fluttered open and the sheen of tears reflected the moonlight.

Broken.

“Come on,” her voice cracked.

She led him up the metal fire escape in silence, the only sound a symphony of crickets chirping and their hushed pants of exertion.

Once on top, Lytta pulled her hand from his and walked toward the center of the rooftop where the space was most open. Their space. He was surprised when she dropped to her ass and laid back. He stood to observe her for a moment more before making his way to join her.

Once he stood at her side, he took the time to study her face. She didn’t look at him. Her gaze was focused toward the sky, and he followed it dutifully with his own.

“It works better if you lie down,” she said.

After a moment of consideration he lowered himself to lie beside her. They were silent as their minds wandered.

As he gazed upon the night sky, his thoughts drifted to creation. Who crafted the stars? Did some omnipotent god mold them with his hands? He imagined a great artist posed in the sky, his brow lowered in concentration, holding a brush and using gentle, purposeful strokes to paint the most intricate details.

Maybe it wasn't so complicated.

Maybe, they just *were*.

He looked for the millionth time to the darkness between the burning orbs of light in the sky and recalled Lytta's words from their first night on the roof.

"The stars do not exist without the space that holds them."

It was alluring, that thought. The stars get so much credit for their beauty, but what about the space that fostered and nurtured them? The more he thought about it, the more the darkness spoke to him.

Brooks inhaled the crisp air and let his thoughts soak through his mind and into his blood. Something about the air and the darkness made him feel alive.

"They're beautiful aren't they?" Her whisper pulled him from his musings.

Brooks curled an eyebrow but didn't look over.

“They’re all I think about,” Her voice was strained as emotions pulled the chords in her throat tight.

“Why?” he asked. “Because you’ll never reach them?”

“No,” she scoffed. “Most people know they’ll never reach the stars, Brooks. That’s not why we look at them.”

“Well I’ve been looking at them for my entire fucking life and they’ve never given me shit, cold queen.”

She smiled at the nickname he’d given her that first night.

When he was met with silence, he propped his head in hand and turned to face her.

“Why do you look at them, Lytta?”

“Because,” she whispered hoarsely. “They’re *free*.”

She closed her eyes again, her throat working to dam the flood of tears.

“You fit a piece of my soul so perfectly, Brooks, that sometimes I’m scared to take my place in yours.” She looked vulnerable. Scared, even. “Like maybe I should take the coward’s way out and stay here forever. With you, like this.”

“You don’t have to be scared, Lyt,” he said, reaching out to brush a finger against her cheek. “Whatever this is, it doesn’t have to be your downfall. I will hold you up.” And he meant it.

A friend.

She had been a friend to him, and he was determined to return her goodness.

Her smile was sad as she looked into his eyes, almost apologetic.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“When I need to remember who I am, who I truly am, I come and talk to the stars. They remind me that though I am grounded here, in what I am, there lives a possibility to be more than that. To be more than rage and madness. I could be at peace, just like them. Looking at the stars is like looking through a mirror and seeing the person you expect yourself to be, but never being able to reach through and grasp them. You are the darkness holding me captive and the downfall I fear. You are my place among the stars, Brooks.”

Her words scared him. It sounded like a letter patients left behind before swallowing a bottle of stolen pills. Their friendship had only just begun to bloom. He wouldn’t see it smothered now. Not when he had just started to care.

“How often do you come up here, Lytta?”

“Only as often as I need to remember my purpose.”

Was she planning to hurt herself?

“Your purpose is to live, Lytta. Always.”

She stayed quiet after that, leaving him restless in his own mind. Her tears had stopped falling and, for the moment, she seemed to be reveling in the peace she worked so hard to find.

Brooks broke the silence first hoping his small confession would keep her with him.

“I know our situation isn’t ideal, but friendship could make this place easier to handle. I feel like I’ve known you forever, Lyt, and I don’t want to go back to isolating myself out of fear and ignorance.”

“You have no idea,” she huffed. “I’ve been ignoring my fate, putting off my place in this giant scheme,” she said, turning her face to his.

“I don’t understand.” His confusion was palpable. What did she mean running from him? She had been the one to find him. To talk to him.

“It’s hard to accept our responsibility, our fates, when life has been nothing but madness and brutality. Torture. Pain. It’s unfair. But there comes a time when we have to face it head on, and I’m tired, Brooks. So, so tired.”

A pained, stubborn calm fell over her features, like she had come to some sort of important conclusion or settled on a decision.

“What do you mean?”

A small bit of urgency laced her voice as she spoke, “What do you remember about your life before?”

Brooks, caught off guard, stumbled to answer, “I— nothing. I don’t remember anything. Lytta, what’s going on?”

“This isn’t real, Brooks,” she whispered, glancing to the stars and over her shoulders in paranoia. Her somber attitude turned to raging anxiety at the drop of a hat.

Insanity.

“Lytta what are you talking—”

“It isn’t *real*,” she emphasized, the madness sparking, turning the cocoa in her iris to ocher. “This place, the people, you, it isn’t real.” Lytta gripped his arms roughly, pulling him closer and urging him to focus. “This is all a dream, Brooks. You are so much more than this and you can stop it. The hurt, the fear, the downfall. You can stop all of it, you just have to wake up.”

“Lytta, I’m not— I’m just me. Just, Brooks. I don’t—”

“You are the darkness, Brooks. You are the void, the space in between, the ocean that holds us all afloat. You are lost, but I,” her voice broke, “I have given myself to you wholly so that you may rise and take your place amongst the stars, so that you may rule over them once more and sow the seeds of destruction that *she* has planted.”

“Oh, my,” a high pitched voice slithered through the dark. “Mistress is not going to like this.”

Brooks and Lytta whipped their heads around to find Rue on the landing.

“Rue?” Confusion muddled his thoughts as she stared at him with that unhinged gleam in her eye.

“I should have fucking killed you!” Lytta screeched, those black eyes reflecting the moonlight eerily.

“You couldn’t touch me if you tried, Zeus’s whore,” Rue hissed.

Brooks gripped Lytta's shoulder and turned her body to face him, but her stare never left Rue.

“Lytta, what the fuck is going on?”

“She's been watching you, Brooks. Clinging to you like a little shadow so she can report every move you make because she's spineless fucking filth!” Lytta screamed the last part in Rue's direction, tugging against his hold in a flurry of madness.

Lytta continued to scream degrading words and threats, but all Brooks could register was Rue's maniacal laughter.

“Hey!” Someone yelled across the rooftop. “You can't be up here. What are you doing?”

Rue wiggled her fingers in their direction before fleeing down the steps.

Why didn't the orderlies take her? He wondered a split second before men in white scrubs appeared.

Footsteps rushed to the small space on the rooftop they had made their comfort zone, the thundering threatening to taint the safety it once imposed.

A rough hand grabbed his arm and yanked, pulling Brooks from Lytta's grasp. Rage flared inside as he watched the other orderly do the same to her. An iron grip dragged her toward the fire escape where another orderly was waiting with a syringe.

“I've opened the box and given the world destruction, Brooks. You have to wake up and—”

Lytta screamed, a gut-wrenching sound that rang in his ears and boiled his blood. Blackness stained his fingertips and flooded his veins, a monster of night taking shape as ice spread from his feet and covered the rooftop in glittering sheets.

His passenger roared, the sound reverberating through his skull as it took control. His body turned out of the orderlies grasp, a mere human lacking the strength to hold him there. Brooks didn't have time to smell the fear rolling off of the man in waves before he gripped his throat and hoisted him into the air. With one swift movement, Brooks' arm was inside the man's torso, reaching under and up through the rib cage to hold the beating life force in his palm. With a sneer and one quick squeeze, the useless organ beat no longer, but rather crumbled in his fist.

The body burst to ash and Brooks' mind lurched at sight.

"Let me in and we will devour them!" His darkness raged.

"No!" Brooks yelled into the night. "She's hurt, I need to get to her."

"If you do not let me in, I cannot help you, you fucking idiot!"

"Help. Her," he pleaded.

Lytta was lying prone on the ground with the two orderlies standing over her, one pulling the syringe from her neck as the other stared at him in horror.

He and his passenger stalked predatorily toward the two, their pulses thrumming through the air like the beat of a drum in his ears. To their credit, they didn't run. They prepared to meet his passenger head on in battle armed only with a syringe laced with toxins to tame his beast.

Brooks lunged for the orderly holding the syringe first, careful to avoid the broken girl on the ground. As he reached for the man's throat, intent to snap his neck quickly and move on to the next, the other moved to tackle him low and fast. Brooks was on the ground before he could blink with the weight of a man on his chest.

He struggled to move, his passenger raging inside as his strength dwindled. His burst of energy was evidently all it had to offer before being swallowed back into his psyche.

A sharp stab to his thigh wrenched a cry from his lips and, as the drugs swept through his system like an airtanker battling wildfire, he listened to the beast roar inside his head as he stared helplessly at the unmoving body on the ground. He reached for her, using the last morsel of muscular control he could wrangle from the sedative.

"Lyttal!" Silent screams wracked his chaotic mind, pleading for her to rise.

As the world began to fade, his passenger pacing the confines of his mind like a caged cat, Brooks let slip his last shred of awareness and fell into darkness.



BROOKS

BROOKS WOKE TO THE lazy thrum of music and a terrible, unnatural heaviness in his eyelids. He tried to move his limbs but they hung like leaden weights. His mouth was dry and cottony and his head felt too heavy for his shoulders.

Where am I?

A strong baseline rumbled along his skin like the touch of a tender lover. It seeped into his shoulders that were pressed against a rough leather couch and thrummed its way down through his biceps.

The soft tendrils of music wriggled like snakes in his veins, caressing his forearms and slithering down through his fingertips. He clenched his fists to feel the serpents tense with his movements, surely as alive as he was.

They moved under his skin in time with his breath, with each beat of his heart and swam behind his eyelids, blurring with each pulse. Or maybe it was the music they were moving with?

They seemed to have become one by this point, his being and the sounds around him. His eyes tried to process his surroundings, the edges of the room blurry with the lazy drone of lights surrounding him.

He felt high, euphoric even, and wasn't sure he wanted it to ever stop.

A subtle movement caught his attention.

A silhouette stood on the platform across the compact room. She moved slowly to the rhythm, twisting and turning, her beauty incomprehensible. A small stage was set before him with a golden beam placed from floor to ceiling— a private room to hold a private show, meant for his eyes only.

The edges of her hips blurred in and out of focus as they swayed seductively side to side. She turned circles on the beam keeping time to the slow river of the music, flowing with it as if she were submerged in the currents. He closed his eyes to rouse himself from the haze.

His pulse met the rise and fall of the music, moving along with the woman across from him. It was drawing him into her, bringing them together as only an enchantress of men could.

As only a Siren could.

As she drew nearer it was as if she were coaxing the breath from his lungs, slowly pulling his life force into her and he was nothing but willing to submit. The seductress before him left him unbound.

Unguarded.

Bare to her will.

The desire surrounding her would drown him, gravity holding him under the dark depths of her eyes.

A whisper of breath teased the hair by his ear. Brooks forced his eyelids apart, a task becoming harder by the second. The woman was no longer dancing across the room, but instead right in front of him. She began to circle him, just as slow and bewitching as she was when she stood on the platform, dragging her fingers softly around his shoulders as she passed.

He came alive under her touch.

The lines of her body were hard and defined as if crafted by the hands of a goddess, each bone chiseled with care and every muscle sculpted with intention.

“Brooks?” Her voice was as light as a lover’s touch and just as familiar.

His vision blurred again, and the weight of his head on his shoulders became unbearable. He released the tension in his neck and let it fall backward.

“Siren?” He slurred, his body not fully connected with his brain.

Those well-defined lines and curves of her body grew hazy. She seemed to slither in tune with the serpents beneath his skin like they were a part of her rather than himself. The lazy flash of the red lights illuminated everything but her, keeping her a secret of the darkness.

She dropped to her knees and pressed her fingertips just above the knee. Brooks shuddered, the breath leaving his lungs with a murmured curse. His body was aware of each finger, tracking their movement and reacting to each gentle, teasing stroke and twirl. She was electrifying, his seductress.

“*Mine,*“ his passenger growled. Or did that pass through his own lips?

Her body invaded the empty space between his legs, pushing herself into the encirclement of his thighs.

Each point of contact between them generated electricity that set off a kaleidoscope of explosions behind his eyelids. The soft ebb and flow of her breath was like a lifeline tethering him to what he was hoping was reality.

“Relax,” she whispered. “I’ve got you. You’re under the influence of my song. Just breathe.”

His senses were becoming addicted to her touch. Each brush of her hand drained the trepidation away a little at a time and promised safety as it guided his gaze to her. There was no space in this room to indulge fear.

Only her.

She moved her hands from the crease of his thighs up his stomach, pressing firmly as she made her way toward his chest.

“I’ve dreamt about this a million times,” she moaned. “Touching you, pressing my skin against yours... It’s intoxicating.”

“Where are we?” he slurred.

“The Devil’s Playground, love. Though how *you* got here, I’m not sure.”

The world tilted, the couch shifting beside him as it absorbed her weight. Blood pounded in his ears as she straddled him, rushing like a lost river in the chasm of his mind.

He was helpless to her touch, her servant body and mind.

“More,” he pleaded.

Her fingers made their way to the bare skin of his neck, teasing and taunting. Gone was the firm pressure she had used on his belly and chest, and in their place the touch of the seductress. Her body swayed on top of his, hips still circling to the soft purr of the music. The exhilaration of her left him breathless.

With every small victory of consciousness his mind could win, every effort to clear the fog, her dance dragged him back under her spell tenfold. Her hips held him like the ticking of a metronome, their steady movement keeping him caught up in her influence.

She brought her lips to his ear, her breath teasing his neck and sending a shiver down his spine. Had he any control over his body he may have arched into her, but he had nothing.

“We have to be careful,” she breathed. “He’s watching.”

His arms were still leaden weights at his side, the blood sludging through his veins like molten lava. She traced the outer part of his ear with her tongue, made her way confidently down to the lobe and sank her teeth into it.

“Open your eyes, Brooks” she whispered, “Watch me dance for you.”

A fire rose in his stomach, willing him to open his eyes and face her. He lifted his head with an effort that seemed to drain him and, through the thin opening he managed, Brooks could see the veil of her hair hovering around his vision. The strands were impossibly soft as they stroked his cheek.

A gentle brush of her fingers skimmed his forehead that soon escalated into something more truculent.

Just as she had the night in his dreams, his Siren grabbed a handful of his raven locks and wrenched his face up to look at her. With a strangled groan, Brooks arched into her as his eyes flew open, the heat searing his skin where their bodies met.

“Good,” she praised. “Look at me, Brooks.”

He dragged his eyes down her body, the drone of red led light flashing in waves across her skin.

“Why are you here?” He asked sluggishly.

“The real question is, why are you?”

He didn't know the answer. Or, if he did, he couldn't reach it through his muddled mind.

His Siren was here with him, and that was all that mattered in the moment.

“I missed you,” he slurred.

She was silent for a beat before responding, “I called for you. I called for you and you didn't answer.”

“I'm sorry,” he answered. “I'm in trouble. She's going to kill me. I don't know what to believe.”

Her hips stopped moving as her frame went rigid atop him.

“Who's going to kill you, Brooks?”

“Don't worry about it. I just wanna be here—”

Vivid scenes flashed before his eyes of his Siren in the water, the waves lapping over her delicate frame and draining her of color, each pull of the tide taking a piece of her with it. The sun denied her, a daughter of the depths doomed to reside in the veil of darkness. Though the sun turned its back, the moon opened its motherly arms and filled the woman before him with her light, so pale and transparent yet so insurmountably bold. She was like a white flame born to and molded by the moon goddess, Selene, herself.

The vision cleared and he was back in the red room with his Siren dancing in his lap. Something about the thought of

Selene niggled at the back of his mind until some sense of clarity broke through the fog.

“Selene,” he said. “The story you told me about the moon goddess and her three babies. You were speaking of Selene.”

She continued her seduction slowly, hesitantly almost.

“I was.”

“Who told you that story?”

“Someone I knew a long time ago thought it may be of value to me.”

His sluggish wheels tried turning to piece together thoughts.

“Why would it be of value?”

“Because,” she said in a low voice, her lips back to his ear. “Selene is my mother.”

There was a storm brewing in her eyes, the irises the color of the sea during a hurricane. The roiling blues clashed violently with grays as turquoise boiled from the abyss, raging on as lightning illuminated the battle.

He could imagine that they used to be the color of seafoam with specks of cerulean throughout. Through time and tribulation, Brooks could envision the stark black of her pupil mixing with the colors of the iris, draining them of their vibrancy and birthing the storm in their place. Vibrancy was replaced with brilliance as the moon took her in and lit a fire in her soul.

“Close your eyes,” she murmured. “Listen to my voice.”

At her command his eyelids fluttered closed and he focused on her breath at his ear, the sound rousing his passenger once more. Her breaths made him ravenous as a starving man with a buffet laid before him.

“I’m in trouble, Brooks,” she whispered. “I think– I think he’s going to kill me.” Her voice held a hundred emotions, but the most pressing were fear and sadness.

“I...” he faltered. Bells were ringing in a distant part of his mind, but whatever drug laced his system blocked any sort of clarity. She continued to ride his lap so that any onlookers were none the wiser to her pleas.

“You’re not just a human. I can feel the power caged inside you. I tasted it in your blood. I don’t know who or where you are, but you’re all I’ve got. Please, you have to believe me. *Help me.*”

His movements were lethargic, the room spinning around him faster than his mind was able to comprehend.

Something glistened, an opalescent sheen in delicate patches along her exposed skin, but he was too drugged to discern exactly what it was.

“You have to go now, Brooks,” she peered over his shoulder. “They’re coming, and they don’t take kindly to strangers.”

“I– I can’t,” his speech fumbled, lips heavier than lead.

“Shhhh,” she soothed, trying to calm him even when her own anxiety was a rising tide. “It’s just the song making you feel sluggish.”

He tried to talk, to move, to do something, but was fading quickly.

Her head dipped to his neck and a sharp, searing pain along his collarbone pulled his awareness back toward his secret beauty. He raised shaking hands to put out the fire that was blazing on his skin as red bloomed through his shirt and spread like watercolor.

Her eyes were urgent, his blood staining her lips and tongue as two pointed canines stood starkly against the redness. The color was striking against her pale skin and roused the predator within him.

“You have to go now,” she urged again. “I’ll be there when you wake up, I promise.” Her hand stroked his cheek, a lover’s caress.

The drugged feeling faded, but so too did his grip on the room, on *her*. The last thing Brooks heard before fading into his depthless dream was rattling his bones.

“Xia. My name is Xia.”

Brooks stood in a desolate landscape surrounded by disfigured bodies covered in flies. Their skin had taken on a green pallor as the sun accelerated its decay.

It was an absolute war zone.

The dead were scattered for miles all about the dying fields.

Famine was evident in the landscape.

He turned in every direction attempting to discern where he was when he noticed a figure stalking toward him in the distance. His first instinct was fear, but he quickly reminded himself that this was a dream.

“No one can hurt you in a dream,” he mumbled under his breath.

With that knowledge at the forefront of his mind, Brooks walked to meet the approaching figure head on.

It wasn't long before he could make out some of the features. Dread soured his gut. The nightmare that stood at the foot of his bed all those weeks ago walked toward him with menacing determination.

Brooks took a few more steps before stopping. Everyone knew the best tactic in battle was defense.

Or was it the other way around?

His nightmare approached swiftly and in the blink of an eye was toe-to-toe with it.

They stared at each other for long moments before Brooks swallowed and managed a weak, “Who are you?”

His nightmare with blazing blue eyes replied, “I think you know who I am.”

Black ink wriggled up the nightmare's veins just like they had in his dream with his Siren.

Xia.

She'd spoken her name aloud and something inside clicked into place. Why a name made her feel more real, he would never understand. With every step he took into denial, she pulled him two paces forward into acceptance.

What if...

What if she was real?

That would mean he was not schizophrenic.

If he wasn't schizophrenic, then he didn't belong in the asylum.

"Her name is like honey on our tongues," the demon spoke.

Brooks fell back to reality and startled.

"I didn't say her name out loud," Brooks said hesitantly.

"You didn't need to. I was there. I am *always* there."

"Are you spying on me?"

"I *am* you."

"I don't understand what's happening to me." Brooks placed his hands over his eyes and tried to rub them until he fell back to reality.

"Look around you. Pandora's box has been opened. Pestilence, war, famine and death have taken control of the Earth and they will soon spread to Olympus. They have spread to your illusion. We can contain the carnage. No one else."

"Why me?"

"Not you. *We*."

“Fine, why us?”

“Because we are the darkness from which Chaos is born.”

Before Brooks could comprehend the words, piercing pain lanced along his spine and infiltrated his mind like a lightning strike. He screamed as the nightmare attacked with veins of shadows flowing from his hands.

“Do not deny them,” it said. “We are ready. It is time.”

Brooks clawed desperately at himself to dispel the inky stains before they soaked into his skin and tainted his blood.

Darkness shrouded his vision as he choked on the shadows invading every orifice. The pain increased in intensity and Brooks dropped to his knees as he fell in and out of consciousness.

His skin was on fire, his body convulsing as the darkness invaded.

“Embrace your chaos,” it whispered.



BROOKS

“**B**ROOKS? HEY, ARE YOU awake?”

There was a warm hand on his cheek with a thumb tracing slow, reassuring circles around his knuckles. A quick body inventory revealed that everything was too heavy to function, including his eyelids. He mustered what strength he could find, lifted one eyelid and was both relieved and concerned to see the broken girl by his side.

“Lytta?” His voice was a raspy whisper, like he had been screaming for days.

Whack!

“Oh my God, Lyt, what the fuck?”

Had she just slapped him?

Pain reverberated through his sore muscles as he tensed to deflect any other swings.

“What the hell was that for? Are you crazy?” His eyes most certainly couldn’t open by this point and his hands were having trouble finding his face to hold his stinging flesh.

“Seriously?!” Her hand shot out quick as a viper toward his arm and left a sharp sting behind.

“Ouch!” Did she just pinch his arm?

“Jesus, Lyt, stop! I feel like I’ve been hit by a train and you’re not helping.”

She stopped her advances, but he could tell that she was still fully tense beside him. She was probably waiting for him to say something stupid enough to allow her to continue beating the shit out of him. Her breaths were coming in ragged huffs that echoed in the small space.

He wasn’t sure where he was, but he didn’t want to take his eyes from the spitfire sitting beside him.

“What did you think you were doing?”

He peered into her eyes and was shocked to see the gleam in them. It reminded him why she was in here. The display of psychosis was only fitting, he supposed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Lytta.” She drew her arm back fast and violent. He barely raised his own arm in time to block the potential strike.

“Lytta, I told you to fucking *stop!*“ Ice flashed through the room, and he lunged for her, wrapping his hands around her throat and pulling them face to face. What he saw reflected in her surprised eyes made him cringe.

Hastily, he released her and sat back in the bed. His passenger had come out to play and that was way too fucking close for comfort after last night.

Fuck, last night.

He released a long sigh and closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Lyt.” He slid his hand toward hers as an offering; a white flag. “All I remember is falling asleep in my room. I had a nightmare. I wake up and you’re pummeling my ass.” He smirked at her, or at least what he hoped was a smirk, to try and ease the tension. Those muscles hurt too.

“Brooks when I found you last night, you were lying in a pool of your own blood screaming and clawing at yourself like you’d been dipped in acid.” Her features were weary, her eyes unsure.

He really didn’t want to get into any details right now, mostly because he still wasn’t sure himself. He hadn’t been totally honest with her, but hadn’t lied either. He remembered the dreams vividly. He remembered Xia and her ominous words as well as the passenger suffocating him with shadows.

“Well that explains why I feel like absolute shit,” he sighed.

“You look like the definition of absolute shit. Do yourself a favor, if you pass any mirrors try not to look.”

“Gee, Lyt. Thanks. You’re a real friend.”

She released a small huff of a laugh with her even smaller smile, but it was a start.

“Friend,” she said. “I’ve never had one of those.”

“Well, I feel lucky to be the first. And friends,” he sighed, “aren’t supposed to hurt friends. I’m sorry for grabbing you. This part of me I can’t control - it’s...” he hesitated. “It’s dangerous.”

She chuckled and looked at her scarred body pointedly. “Do I look like I’m afraid of dangerous men?”

She was trying to make him feel better, he knew, but he didn’t want to become a story written on her body.

“Brooks?” She asked in a low, weary voice. “Do you remember talking to anyone in your dream?”

Confused, he glanced up at her. She looked cautious, unsure if her questions would throw him back into the mania. As if his mental state were so fragile right now that one wrong word would be his undoing.

“No,” he lied.

The look in her eyes confirmed she didn’t believe him but, in some unspoken miracle, decided not to push it.

“Are you okay? I can get you some water?”

“It’s okay, Lytta. I just need some rest.” It only took one quick glance at his surroundings to confirm where he was— the infirmary.

Fucking great.

If the steam room didn’t seal his fate, this sure as fuck did.

“Brooks?”

He let out a long, exasperated breath through his nose.
“Yes?”

After a moment of silence he opened his eyes toward Lytta. She was looking down at her hands, worrying her thumbs and lower lip.

Brooks took one of her hands into his own to stop her small act of self-harm and held it gently, but firmly. Her face was gaunt.

“What is it, Lyt?”

Her brows furrowed even further and she had to clear her throat after a false start. She brought her eyes up to meet his own and a crescent of silver lined the bottom of those glassy eyes.

A single tear fell, skimming her rosy cheek and landing in her lap. “Brooks, you’re... you...” she looked horrified. “I think you need to go to the restroom and look at yourself.”

“Why?”

“Come on, I’ll help you.”

She stood, threw a paranoid glance over her shoulder and turned the blankets down. He was wearing the issued blue and white, vertical striped cotton pajama bottoms, but had only just noticed that his torso was bare except for the bandages that wrapped almost every inch from sternum to wrist.

“What the—?”

“Come on.” She took him gently by the arm with both hands, supporting his stumbling body with her own.

As he walked he was suddenly glad for the trip to the bathroom. The weight in his bladder was a rapid growing pressure and the nausea from standing might make him sick at any moment.

When they reached the bathroom, he braced himself on the sink and felt Lytta move from his side to support his back. He looked up and grimaced.

His skin, which was normally a pale shade of olive, looked sickly and stretched thin over his bones. His nose was swollen, and either the bags under his eyes had become more severe over night or they were bruised. His black hair that was normally as soft and dark as a raven’s feather stuck out in odd angles with an arrangement of matted knots. The navy eyes staring back at him had never been vibrant, but they had never been that dull either.

He looked like he’d been drawn to a horse and dragged for years.

Lytta stepped forward and placed her fingertips to the exposed skin on his hips asking silent permission that he answered with a hesitant nod. Her fingers were delicately slim, feminine, and dotted with scars. She pulled the velcro fastening and worked on undoing the fabric holding him together.

Swollen, raw flesh revealed itself as the bandage fell. Pieces of gauze stuck to the larger wounds and removed the healing

flesh. Small beads of blood swelled and ran from the small tears. What was left when the bandages were gone was devastating.

Desperate claw marks dragged across his sternum and chest, the whole area of shredded skin so tattered it was hard to find anything still solidly intact, his arms in much the same condition.

Brooks ran his fingers gently over his marred abdomen. He should have been sorer than he actually felt, he knew, but assumed that they'd given him a pain killer that was dulling the sensation.

He rose onto his tip-toes and gently pushed his stomach and chest closer to the mirror. The breath caught in his throat as his eyes adjusted to the lighting. There was a weird pattern to the gashes his nails had left behind. The more he stared the less random and frantic the tears looked. His brain began to organize a pattern.

Letters? What the fuck?

His eyes drifted to the only set of stitches on his chest and his eyes bulged, saccharine laughter filling his senses like opium as he stared at his ruined chest.

Chaos.



“This doesn’t work without her. I cannot hold him without her song and we are not finished. Do you get that?”

What did that mean?

Xia’s mind drifted back to the conversation she’d overheard over and over again. One of the conclusions she’d come to was that the Devil was collecting and using her song. She hadn’t known it was possible to use blood or tears to steal chaos but supposed it made sense. Chaos was, after all, the magic woven within her essence.

What could hold someone’s essence more truly than the blood they shed or the tears they wept?

And then there was Brooks.

Her broken man who was so brave...

He was there in her red room. Only, he wasn’t.

She could hear and see him, but when she pressed her hands to his body it was... wrong. Like he was half there, and half

somewhere else.

She recalled stories the old nursemaid used to tell her and her sisters before darkness fell upon their island. Tales of ancient magic given to their ancestors from the Father of Chaos himself. Each original god was given a gift from their creator to live freely and shape the world as they pleased. Some were given powers of shadow manipulation while others were blessed with creation or the ability to manipulate weather.

All of the original gods with blessings from Chaos were perfectly balanced. One did not out-power another, and their gifts all worked in harmony to mold the world into something of grace and beauty.

But, as they would learn, peace does not last forever.

The gods mingled, creating the next great generation and, as they anticipated, their offspring were born with chaos as well.

Of all the daemons, she had never once heard of someone containing the ability of projection.

Not to be mistaken for casting a blurry image to fool your foes.

True projection. The ability to split the soul and send it somewhere else. To be seen and heard while the majority of your essence is elsewhere.

There was no other explanation for what he'd done, and something shivered along her spine.

The only being she'd ever known to have the power of projection was the Soul Eater himself...

Chaos.



BROOKS

HIS FINGERS TRACED THE angry patches of skin on his torso and down his arms. The biggest mark ran diagonally between his pectorals, a flaming red around the edges with tell-tale signs of a nasty bruise forming around it. A stream of blood ran from the torn stitch down his side and soaked into the lining of his cotton pajama bottoms.

Brooks caught Lytta's assessing stare in the mirror and held it, attempting to decipher the thoughts running through her fractured mind. Anything was better than having to think about his ruined torso. She was contemplative and a nagging voice told him she was trying to say something. Maybe she couldn't find the right words?

"Stay here, I'll be back." That was all the warning he got before she stepped from the bathroom.

He couldn't bring himself to continue looking in the mirror, so he sat on the toilet and placed his head in his hands. The wounds stung as he bent, but he was too exhausted to sit upright.

Brooks stayed like that until Lytta slipped back into the bathroom with clean gauze and bandages. She made quick work of applying ointment and rewrapping his ravaged torso, silent but efficient.

When she finished, she stood behind him contemplatively, but it didn't take long for a steely wall of determination to fall across her features.

“Come on. There's something you need to see.”

Brooks searched her face trying to find anything there that would help this make sense. Ever since she crashed into his life at the asylum, it had been a snowball of change that he couldn't stop or deny. Lytta turned his life upside down, and he was afraid he couldn't fight it anymore.

With a resolute sigh, he nodded and stood to follow.

It was odd the way Lytta traveled so unnoticed around the asylum. She showed up out of nowhere more times than he could count and was never reprimanded for being near him like so many other unfortunate patients.

He pondered this as they made their way through the dark winding halls of St. Dymphna's. He should have been keeping track of their path in case they were caught and needed to flee

but, unsurprisingly at this point, his trust in Lytta dulled his paranoia.

It was easy to let her take the driver's seat.

That, too, was alarming.

He pulled his attention from the thoughts drawing him from reality and focused on where Lytta was dragging him in the dark.

The passing halls were unfamiliar.

It wasn't the hall with faded photos of different flower genres leading from the treatment hall to the greenhouse, nor was it the hall filled with inkblot photos where the psychologists worked.

They turned into a hall with a single door at the end lit up by a dim light on the overhead frame, and a sign with a person stepping on a zigzag placed in the center.

A stairwell?

Brooks supposed they could be in the employee wing. Patients never climbed stairs and were only escorted in the elevators when sedated and preparing for any sort of treatment. This was typically in a wheelchair.

"Lytta," he whispered as he tugged on the arm grasping his hand. "Where are we going—"

"Shh." She didn't stop to explain, only tightened her grip and sped up their pace.

When they reached the door, Lytta opened it cautiously before peeking inside. Once she was satisfied, she opened it wide and pulled him through. His bones ached and his muscles screamed from the torture he'd been through, but that didn't stop her from urging them forward.

The race down the stairs left him breathless and, when he was close to begging for a break, they reached a platform where she shoved him off to the left and forced him into a crouch.

She knelt beside him and covered her mouth with a finger, urging him to be quiet.

He threw her an exasperated glance that he hoped said, *"I'm fucking trying but you just pulled me down a million flights of stairs after I had one hundred and twenty volts of electricity coursing through my body."*

Her answering wink confirmed she got the message.

Lytta walked in her crouched position to the other side and stood.

There was a rectangular window at the top of the metal door. She stood on her tiptoes to peer through. Brooks held his breath as she watched and prayed to Zeus that the coast was clear.

He wasn't sure he could make it back up the steps as quickly as they'd come down.

When she crouched back down, her eyes met his urgently.

“I need you to listen to me, okay? It’s going to sound crazy, but *please*, shut up and listen.”

He wanted to argue. Wanted to let his confusion take the reigns as millions of questions boggled his mind. Instead, he placed that trust in her hands once again.

“When I open this door, Brooks, everything changes.”

His brows furrowed and she raised her hand motioning for him to stop.

“I am begging you, listen, because I will not get the chance to speak with you like this again.”

Warning bells rang and the paranoid panic reared its ugly head, but he nodded.

“There are things behind this door that are unsettling, but you need to see them. You’ve been living in a loop of ignorance. I think you tried to fight. I think you gave it hell in the beginning, but after every reset you lost a little bit of spark. I think she beat you down until you didn’t know who you were or what your purpose was.”

She?

Loop?

“That watch under your bed was never meant for you, Brooks. It was meant for her, and when it started ticking again it became her countdown to failure.”

“Lytta. I don’t—”

“Listen!” She hissed, and those other eyes of hers filled with black that spilled into the veins of her face.

Brooks jumped backward, but he was met with cold, unmovable railing.

“She knows her time is up and she will be plotting her next move. That is why you have to see this. You have to *remember*.”

He didn't know what to say, or how to think or feel. It was all so overwhelming. Brooks tried to recall facts that grounded him in reality, to convince himself that this was all a hallucination.

If it were, though, it would have been a constant projection rather than shadows moving in the hall or a voice here and there in his head.

He didn't know what was fact or fiction anymore, but what he did know was that when he was having a nightmare, the only way to wake from it was to play it through.

“Okay,” he swallowed. “Show me.”

She nodded grimly before rising to stand and checking through the window once more. When she was sure it was secure, Lytta motioned for him to move as she opened the door and stepped through into his deepest nightmare.



BROOKS

DARKNESS.

His vision was the first sense to react.

Death.

The stench that filled the dank space nearly sent Brooks to his knees.

Buzzing.

Insect activity flooded his ears as they swarmed his head and crawled over his bare feet.

Blood.

The tang of copper was so heavy in the air that it coated his tongue alongside decay and dust.

“Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. That’s what we say when we choose to live in ignorance. You and I, though, Brooks, do not have that luxury. If we avoid evil, then we

cannot do our part to change it. If we live in ignorance, it consumes the world.”

Her voice was but a whisper in the dark, and maybe it was for the best. Brooks wasn't sure he had the courage to face what lay in this room full of death.

“My ignorance was the catalyst and yours was the flame.”

A soft shuffle sounded to his right before a loud *click* reverberated through the dark space.

A flickering light sparked above them and more lit down the large room systematically. With every loud flip of a switch, decimation unfolded.

Bodies were flung carelessly across the floor, entrails thrown about and dripping from the walls. Most of the gore wasn't even attached to its owner any longer, because most of them were not whole. Scattered limbs littered the space.

What hit him even was the pieces of fabric he could make out here and there.

Tan scrubs.

“Are these patients?” He breathed, pain choking every word.

“They were,” she whispered. The dim light reflected off of her tear-filled eyes as her solemn gaze stared into nothing. “They were sons and daughters of the darkness. Of *your* darkness, Brooks. They were drained of their chaos to make her stronger and to keep you weak, siphoning your magic from them and into herself. She has taken every single one of them from you.”

He was too horrified to speak. To ask her what she was talking about or who the ominous 'she' was.

“You’ve been living in a lie, Brooks. An illusion spun by a weaver of death who took advantage of you while you were lost, and this is the cost. This is everyone who tried to get close to you, and now they will never again see the light.”

“This... this is my fault?”

“The actions of others will never be your fault, Brooks, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t consequences to our choices. This is real life, and real life is ugly.”

“And you? What have you done to cause this?”

“Everything. I knew what was happening from the near beginning. I was born, and as soon as I realized I hated my father she was there, whispering in my ear and guiding my path to fit her agenda. I thought I was on my own path to rebellion and revenge, to bringing him down and living a life for me. It took me too long to realize that I was only a pawn. When the consequences to my actions became clear—”

“What have we here?” A voice slithered through the space between them and the door.

Lytta’s eyes bulged as they turned to see a feminine figure in the doorway.

“Dr. Kore?” A mix of fear and confusion slammed into Brooks.

“I warned you,” she spoke directly toward Lytta, her stare so venomous it made his heart flutter.

Dangerous.

A small figure stepped from behind the doctor and Brooks startled. He would recognize that demented stare anywhere.

“Rue?”

She tittered and wagged her fingers in his direction like a shy school girl with a crush.

“What are you doing here, Rue?” Brooks questioned.

“Who do you think has been reporting your every move to me all of this time? You couldn’t possibly think I wouldn’t know about your little rooftop escapades now did you?” Dr. Kore’s tone was smug and her face reflected every ounce of it. “Poor, Brooks. A victim to his own illusions and paranoia. It was easy enough for Rue to keep track of you when you believed the lurking shadows were of your own doing.”

Rue giggled, still positioned behind the doctor, and added, “I loved watching you, Brooks.” The infatuation in her eyes made his stomach cramp.

“Why, Rue? She puts you through the same hell as me. Why be loyal?”

“I thought you were smarter,” Dr. Kore tsked, “but perhaps I’ve mistaken your silent observance for ignorance. Our little Rue here is near and dear to me. Let’s just say she was the innocence of my past. A poor girl so in love that it left her blind to the world.”

Dr. Kore petted Rue’s head as she spoke and Rue leaned into the touch like she was starving for it. It wasn’t long before the

soothing touch turned malicious and an ugly sneer distorted Mel's face.

“She was stupid,” Mel spat and grabbed Rue by the hair. “I ripped her from me the moment she put her trust into the wrong hands. Never again will we be fooled by sanctimonious men who rape and pillage as they please. We will be the fall of Olympus and the obsidian throne of the Underworld will rule.”

Rue cried out at the sudden onslaught as fear flooded her eyes. Brooks felt his passenger unfurl in his mind.

“I warned you to stay away or I would be your eternal end,” Mel looked to Lytta.

“That was your one miscalculation, Mel. I was never afraid of death. I embraced it and I will revel in its release. The peace I find there will be eternal, and I'm sorry your rage has twisted you into something that will never find it, Melinoe.” The look on Lytta's face was one of defiance and determination.

“You stupid little bitch,” Dr. Kore spat.

Brooks felt a strain in his mind as his passenger tried to take control. He was hesitant at first, but images of the bodies lying on the floor flashed across his mind colliding with every session of *therapy* she put him through. If losing himself to his passenger meant expelling the taint of her, he would take that chance. Rather than fighting his darkness, he let it in.

It was like taking off one of his shoes and letting the beast slip its foot in. His body came alive as something familiar, and yet so foreign sizzled through his veins.

“He will do you no good here,” Dr. Kore turned to Brooks. “This is the land of the dead, and it is under *my* control.”

“I cannot save you, but I can make sure you do not forget who you are. You may not remember this moment, but I will not let you slip back into oblivion.” His passenger’s voice was a deep rumble in his mind. Black stained his fingertips as it melted up his hands and forearms.

Why? Why now can you hold the memory? If Lytta speaks the truth, why have you let them reset my memories?

“Because you’ve never let me in enough to hold them. You’ve fought me every step of the way, but this time you have opened up to let us bond. This time, we are one.”

Though fear prickled the hair on the back of his neck, Brooks steeled his shoulders. He may be lost, and he may be broken, but if he had learned one thing since Lytta’s arrival, it was that you had to let go of control in order to trust.

To trust her.

To trust his mind.

To trust the darkness within.

“Do your worst, you fucking psycho,” he spat.

Dr. Kore smirked as an ominous shiver raced through the air. Groans echoed about as a truly terrifying scene unfolded before him.

The bodies, dismembered and bloody as they were, rose from the floor in awkward, jerky moves. Unseeing eyes turned

his way and Lytta cursed beside him.

Brooks scanned the faces, every single one of them familiar. Ariadne, Paul, and even the poor bastard who lived with prunes in every available hole.

All of them... massacred.

“Take a look around, Brooks. This was your fault. You and your pretty little rabid dog. You could have stayed here forever in solitude, living out your days in peace. But instead you’ve tested my patience and brought a plague to my doorstep.” A smile of pure venom spread across her face. “Luckily for me, the deader, the better.”

The room shifted as every corpse moved in toward him and Lytta. They weren’t particularly fast, but the issue would be cutting through enough of them to run.

You can’t, afterall, hurt the dead.

Dr. Kore turned and left, and her confidence in their defeat made him see red. The mutilated bodies were closing in, herding them until their backs pressed against a cold, concrete wall.

“We can’t fight them all,” Lytta murmured.

“Maybe we make a run for it?”

“It’s as good of a chance as we’ve got.”

Brooks surveyed the incoming horde of undead and tried to discern the clearest path to the exit. There was no intelligible

movement of the corpses and they seemed to stay on the same path they started.

“Brooks, just run!” Lytta burst forward and shoved the bleeding bodies from her path.

It was a mistake. As soon as she touched them, their animation changed from lumbering to mania. They hissed and clawed, tearing at Brooks’ clothes as he tried to follow behind Lytta, kicking and shoving in every direction.

Fire burst through his shoulder and hindered his movements. Brooks turned to see Paul’s mutilated face, his teeth tearing through the fabric and cutting through flesh. More corpses rushed to where he stood, their unforgiving fingers bruising his arms where they ripped and clawed their way to his skin.

Brooks screamed, agony overwhelming his senses.

“Brooks!” Lytta’s scream echoed through his ears, but he was becoming overwhelmed, his knees giving as the force of the onslaught took him to the ground.

The last thing he saw was a path clearing and a head of fiery hair stopping before him.

“We must make mistress happy, Brooks. Then she will let us be together.” A syringe plunged through his neck and he met the dark with open arms.



BROOKS

WHEN BROOKS WOKE, IT wasn't the shit-stained ceiling tiles he stared at, but pristine white padding. He tried to move his head, to sit up or use his arms, but everything was too heavy to move.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” his Siren's voice sounded.

“Where am I?”

“I don't know. I can't see you, remember? Only hear you.”

Brooks sent tendrils of awareness to his limbs.

His arms met resistance and, with a more detailed examination, he realized they were crossed and bound tightly over his chest.

“Great,” he sighed. Brooks didn't have to continue cataloging his limbs. He knew that they, too, would be bound to the metal frame he rested on.

A small huff of laughter sang through his mind.

“Do you recognize where you are now?” The smile in her words was obvious but it felt tired and dredged up for his sake.

“I do. But I don’t remember getting here.”

“Describe it to me. Maybe I can help.”

For a second he pondered her question. It was ludicrous to describe anything to her since she was just a part of his broken mind, but what else was there to do when you were in a straight jacket cuffed to a bed by your ankles?

“I’m in a padded cell. Everything is white. The ceiling, the walls, the door... solitary.” He scanned the room as best he could with the mobility in his neck minimized by his bindings.

Although, what he’d done to get there, he couldn’t remember.

Visions flashed through his mind, dredging up the most awful nightmare he’d had while under sedation.

Bodies...

Bodies mutilated and strung along concrete floors.

Bodies turning their milky stares to him and caging him in.

Bodies holding him down while they ate him alive.

He shivered and thanked whatever god was out there that it had only been a dream.

Off to the side, he caught small gleams of surgical light bouncing off of metal equipment.. Resolute dread sat on his

chest as the realization of why he was here strapped to a table settled in.

He was in the room a lot of patients entered, but never came out of.

Dr. Kore was going to give him a lobotomy.

At the thought of her name, a memory swam in his mind that he couldn't quite grasp.

"How did you get there?"

"I can't... I can't really remember. Kind of like a dream that you can't quite grasp."

"How do you get out?"

"I don't," he confessed with a heavy swallow. "I'm powerless."

"You are a lot of things, Brooks, but you are not powerless."

"How would you know?"

"Do you remember that night in your dream?"

Heat rushed to his cheeks at the memory. How could he forget? It caused such a tangled web of emotions that he had yet to unweave.

"Yeah, Siren. I remember."

"Xia, Brooks. My name is Xia."

The sound of her name made him shiver, but he didn't speak.

"I tasted you that night. There is an endless amount of chaos running through your veins."

“Chaos?”

“Magic. It’s what we call magic.”

He wanted to argue, to tell her to stop being so fucking ridiculous. Wanted to shut her out and fall back into reality where he could figure out how to get out of that godsdamned room unscathed with his mind intact.

“That night, Brooks? In your bed? That was real. When I danced for you in the red room? It was all real, Brooks. You were there. You projected a piece of your soul and it found me.”

“No, this is all bullshit. Just shut up, Xia. Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“Please, Brooks! You trust in everything else, why is it so hard to trust me? To believe in me? Do not deny this, us. You are in danger, and I need you to fight. I am begging you to lay down your denial and embrace acceptance. If you don’t—“ her voice broke. *“If you don’t, I’m afraid you’re going to die. And I can’t lose you.”*

Brooks grit his teeth against the anxiety and fear and his blood pulsed through his ears and drowned every sound except his heartbeat.

He wanted to deny her. Wanted to ignore her, to make her go away, but... what if she was right? He had put his trust in Lytta and his passenger and, though it put him in a situation to be fighting for his life...

He was *alive*.

For the first time in his whole god-forsaken life in that fucking asylum, he heard the rush of the wind and felt the sunlight on his skin. Days were vivid and memorable and he always had something to look forward to.

If putting his faith in Lytta and his passenger gave him all of that beauty before death... then maybe believing in his Siren could save him.

He had accepted Lytta's truth and his passenger's role within himself. It was time to accept the possibility that all was not as it seemed and that his future was becoming solid enough to grasp and control. His Siren was real, and he was ready to listen.

Magic.

Though magic felt unrealistic, so too, did his reality.

Unexplainable gaps in time. Being so tied down to a place but never really immersed into it, rather, living like a fly on the wall. No recollection of his life before the asylum. Two voices inside his head with lives of their own. The way shadows seem to press themselves against him and purr in response to him.

And then there was Lytta.

She crashed into his life like a lost comet and changed everything. Vibrant colors replaced the shades of brown and he felt more awake than ever before. Birds sang in the trees and smells drifted through the winding halls of the asylum. The monotony changed and the days ahead became something to look forward to.

Trust.

Friendship.

She had given him something to cherish in life where, before, he had nothing. Nothing other than himself and a fractured mind.

Then there was his Siren— his sunshine on stormy days. Even when all felt lost, she was there to guide him back from the edge, and the night they shared together...

It had to be real.

It *was* real.

If his everyday life didn't make sense, then there was no reason he couldn't entertain the thought of magic.

“Okay, Siren. I'm listening. Tell me about magic. Tell me everything.”

After a moment of silence, she spoke, “*No more pretending?*”

“No more pretending. I saw you. I touched your skin, and your scent has been burned into my memories whether I believed it or not.”

As he lay strapped to a bed in the middle of a padded room, he confessed, “I kept my scrub pants from that night and stuffed them in my mattress. I've yet to smell them, but it will be the first thing I do if I ever make it back there.”

Her laugh was golden and, in that moment, Brooks decided he would do anything to hear it over and over again.

“I know why you’re in an asylum now. You’re obviously a stalker and can’t be trusted around women.”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong. If there’s anyone I can’t be trusted around, it’s you.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I’m liable to give you my heart, and if that happens there’s no way I would ever let you give it back.”

“I couldn’t accept that gift,” she said after a moment. *“I don’t deserve something so precious from a soul as kind as yours.”*

“Don’t mistake my kindness for goodness, Siren. I am not the hero. Heroes walk a just path and sacrifice their wants for the needs of others. I would raze the universe to have you and would never look back. I’m the villain, Xia.”

The tension between them was palpable, but he couldn’t stand the silence. “Tell me another story, but this time about magic.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you a story about magic, or chaos as we call it.”

Brooks relaxed and let his eyes fall shut, desperate to pretend he was anywhere but strapped to a table in a padded room.

“To know about magic, you have to know about its creator. Long before the Titans, there was a man born from the darkness. He awoke to empty space in an endless sky and decided that he didn’t want to be alone in the dark.”

“Makes sense.”

“*Brooks,*” she scolded.

“Sorry. Continue.”

“He gathered the smallest gasses and molecules and pushed them together so tightly that eventually they formed the stars. Once he had brightened the sky, he decided he needed a place to call home. Somewhere he could always come back to even if a hundred years had passed. He picked his favorite star out of all and crafted the Earth. He set the Earth to orbit the sun so that no matter where he was, he could see his favorite star.

One day he realized that Earth was too barren and lonely, so he decided to craft a great ocean to circle it. He created the most beautiful life within its waves, each unique in color and size. When he was finished with the ocean, he discerned that he was still not truly happy.”

“For fucks sake, is anything good enough for this guy?” Brooks interjected.

“Anyway. He decided to craft beings to live upon the land, and it was his greatest task yet. He would make sentient beings with thought processes and free will. He knew that with free will came choices, and with choices came consequences. He needed to create order. So, from his chest he sprouted Tartarus and, within it, Hades’ realm for the dead. He made great rivers in the underworld to ensure that the choices and consequences of the souls met the requirements of their afterlife.

Then, he crafted the great pillars that hold the heavens and a mountain where he could sit from the summit and watch over everything he'd built. In the middle was where the daemon, his most beloved creations, were meant to live out their lives. He loved them so much that within each of their hearts, he placed a morsel of his essence to give them the gift of magic."

"He sounds like a pretty cool dude."

"The magic morphed into each being differently and made them unique, just as he wanted from the start. Years passed and he became unsettled again. Everything on Earth ran on its own without his intervention and the stars still shone brightly in the sky. He didn't want to be alone in the dark again, but he knew he could never live among his beloved creatures. If one were to get greedy and take from him, it would tip the scales and the world he crafted with such care would fall out of balance into chaos.

As he watched them live and die, he became jealous. They lived, died, fought and fucked. Everything he had ever wanted, but he was destined to never have. That was the curse of such power. To guard it, always. As time went on, he grew bitter and cruel. The joy of creation faded and he lost his purpose. The magic became tainted with his resentment and the daemon overindulged in carnality. They fought, schemed, betrayed and murdered. He never saved them, and their downfall was written in the stars."

"What happened to him?"

“No one knows. Some say he left the world to the Fates and left to create other worlds. Others say he fell into the darkness between the stars and ceased to exist.”

“What a douchebag! What was this guy’s name?”

“He is the Deathless God of Chaos.”

Brooks’ blood turned to ice in his veins.

“Chaos?” His voice came out strained, and he cursed himself for not finding composure.

“Are you okay?”

Chaos.

The same word was written in blood on his chest after confronting his own darkness.

Embrace your chaos.

“Well... Aren’t you all tied up in a pretty bow?” A familiar alto voice slithered along the room.

Familiar, and yet something was off about it.

Something *unhinged*.



BROOKS

BROOKS CRANED HIS HEAD toward the voice to find Lytta standing by the entrance of his padded prison.

“Lytta? I thought they killed you! Where did you go?”

The smile that crossed her face was off kilter, her fingers twitched and her eyes bulged. With every slow step Lytta took toward him, the lights flickered in the room.

“It’s easy to manipulate this reality, Brooks. I’m afraid they’ve stripped me of my disguise, however.”

The way she spat his name sounded like a taunt. He closed his eyes hoping that when he opened them, she was *his* Lytta.

“That’s not going to work,” she crooned. “This is very, very real. Look at me, Brooks.”

He refused, his eyes squeezing harder as the footsteps grew closer.

“Look at me,” she said, her syllables exaggerated in a sing-song tone.

He focused on his breaths, keeping them deep and steady.

In a rush of movement, Lytta straddled his prone form and grasped his face, her nails digging into flesh and breaking the skin.

“*Look at me!*“ she shrieked, her voice a shrill scream.

Brooks’ eyes flew open and he flinched. They were nose to nose, so close he could see the dirt filled pores on her cheeks and the dark circles under her eyes. Her brown hair fell in limp, greasy strands and the cuts on her face, once white and healed, were puffy and freshly opened.

Her breaths came as quickly as his own, the smell of rot suffocating him, but what was most concerning were the sockets where her eyes should be. Rather than the soft espresso irises he’d grown so accustomed to, black rosebuds replaced the orbs and rooted into her flesh, spreading beneath the skin in inky spirals.

“Now,” she smiled. “Now you see *me*.”

“Lytta,” he gagged, the decay forcing its way down his throat. “What happened to you?” Brooks tried to turn his face from hers but the straps held steadfast.

She laughed, the throaty sound crazed.

“The better question is what has *not* happened to me. Let’s play a game, shall we?“ Lytta released her grip from Brooks’

face but continued to straddle him. “Nightmare for a nightmare, Brooks. But don’t worry, I’ll start this time.”

Fear lanced through his heart.

“These.” She raises her sleeves and points to the festering twin gashes up each arm. “Are when I used wooden stakes to slit my wrists. I woke up the next day, knit together.”

Horror.

“And this.” She raised her shirt and brushed her fingers over an enormous rip in her abdomen from hip to breast. “I taunted a horned beast so that it would tear me to ribbons. I woke up disemboweled with birds pecking my bones clean. Took me *months* to heal from that one. Which was sad, really. I’d hoped that would be the one.”

“The one?” he scoffed, overwhelmed with fear and disbelief. “The one to what?”

“The one to kill me you fucking idiot! I have spent my life in a miserably endless cycle— Receive the taint, purge the taint, regret the purge, and try to die. Over and over and over— do you know how mad that can make a person? To spread destruction only to wake up and live with what you’ve done? And then to not be able to die?”

She turned her stare to the ceiling, grounded her breathing and shifted subtly to the side. A metal tinkering stopped sounded before she sat upright with an instrument in her hands. It resembled a syringe, but was much larger. And,

where there were usually two thumb holes for anesthetic syringes, the one in Lytta's hand contained three.

“Lytta, what are you doing?” His ragged breathing was the only sound penetrating the sterile room.

“I'm going to give you your truth, and then you will give me my revenge.”

His brows furrowed, words forming and dying on his lips as he attempted to translate her madness. His eyes never left the syringe she prepped, fitting her three fingers in them just so.

“Do you know what this is, Brooks?”

He couldn't think, couldn't see, couldn't *breathe*.

“I'll tell you. It's called a leucotome,” she said matter-of-factly. Like she didn't hold his death in her hands. “This little beauty is used to rid the mind of all diseases. It's like a reboot, you understand?”

“Lytta, please,” he begged.

She dropped the hand holding the syringe to the side, brows dipped as if she were capable of compassion. “I didn't want it to be this way, Brooks. But that's what we've been missing. It has to. We cannot break this cycle unless we break *you*.”

She lifted the syringe back to her face and tinkered with the thumb holes until comfortable with the grip. Light glinted off of the pointed probe, sharper than any needle Brooks encountered in the asylum. Except where most were small and hollow, this one was as thick as a screwdriver with a hollow tipped point sharper than a scalpel.

“I always thought this instrument to be rather cruel. So archaic, the lobotomy. But it will get the job done, I suppose,” she huffed to herself.

Lytta depressed the syringe to test its glide and a thin, wire metal loop came out at the end.

“Once the tip is in the right position, I’ll use the loop to fix you, Brooks. To make you whole again.”

“Lyt, look at me. Please.” Tears fell freely down his cheeks as he begged for his life.

She turned those petaled eyes to his and, for a moment, he thought he’d swayed her. A fine line wrinkled her forehead as her brows dipped and lips set in concentration.

As quickly as the moment came, it was dismissed. She turned back to the syringed and made her final adjustments.

His friend. His only friend. And she would be the one to take his life.

“You were dropped into this cage and have been content to live in its lies, but it is time to wake. I am tired of waiting.”

“Lytta please, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

More tears.

More sorrow.

“I know,” she soothed, her hand making a slow path from his temple down to his jawline. “But you will.”

The silence between them was heavy as his harsh breaths rang through the room. She lowered the leucotome and lined it

up with his eye so perfectly that it was like looking down a long hallway instead of facing his death.

“I lied to you,” she whispered, syringe shaking in her hand. “I lied to you about my name.”

Brooks thrashed against his restraints, but the straight jacket restricted any hope of moving his arms. Straps kept the rest of him held steadfast. Tremors racked his body as wetness warmed the front of his pants.

“Lytta, please!” His scream was raw, and the sobs inevitable.

She moved, and a sharp prick lanced between his brow and eyelid.

“I am Lytta, Goddess of Madness, bred by the taint within Zeus himself.”

She pushed until blood welled in the corner of his eye and mixed with his tears.

“I am madness.”

She pushed until the syringe pressed against bone.

“I am rage.”

She pushed until a quiet *crack* resounded in his skull.

“I am fury.”

She pushed until the bone gave way to soft tissue.

His screams were guttural, the agony penetrating his marrow.

“I’ve had many names throughout my lifetime. When I was hiding from Zeus, I was Lytta in hopes it would make it harder for him to find me.” She smiled a soft, sad smile as she pressed the syringe.

Brooks wavered in and out of consciousness as the metal wire loop scrambled what was left of his fractured psyche.

“It never did,” she continued. “As my madness grew, it became harder to see what was real, to tell who I was and who his essence was making me become. I did terrible, unimaginable things.”

Black tears fell from her ruined eyes and streaked down her cheeks as she depressed the syringe, repositioned, and pressed it back into his skull.

“But I wasn’t born like this.” She shook her head with one hand on his cheek to hold him still. “I was born pure and good. My essence, my soul, was clean. I was born Pandora. I was the only human created untainted, full of goodness and hope. But to be Pandora means to be all-giving, and that’s what I did.”

She *shooshed* him softly as she retracted the instrument of torture with nothing but his moans and the squelch of bloody tissue to fill the silence.

“I was only Pandora for a span of minutes, but what he took from me felt like a lifetime’s worth. He made me immortal so that he could dump the madness he couldn’t hold in his own soul into mine.”

Lytta wiped the leucotome on a cloth and grimaced as she tossed it aside. She lined the instrument up with the other eye and slowly penetrated beneath the brow bone.

“I was a garbage can for his weakness, the bearer of all of his burdens,” she continued. “And every year, when it was too much for him to hold, he would find me. He would find me and he would rip me open from the inside to satisfy his need for cruelty. And when he was finished with me?” She huffed a laugh, but it held no humor.

Crack.

“He would leave me on the ground to knit myself back together.”

She depressed the syringe, repositioned, and pushed the loop back into his brain tissue.

“No one deserves what I’ve been through. But I lost sight,” her voice broke. “I lost sight of who I was, and all of the rage and madness and fury coursed through my blood like a disease. It rotted me from the inside out.”

Brooks begged silently for mercy, or even death. Anything to be rid of the white-hot agony pounding in his head.

Why hadn’t Hades taken him yet?

A clatter sounded to the side, and a blurry Lytta still sat atop his prone form wiping her red-stained hands on a cloth.

“He made me this!” She yelled and gestured toward her ruined body. The scars on her throat ripped open anew, the skin tattered and raw as inky blood stained the collar of her

tattered gown. Blood oozed from every orifice, black staining her teeth and spilling from her mouth like the rot within couldn't be contained.

“I have given myself to you so that you may rise and conquer. I have sacrificed the Earth to ruin so that you may restore balance. You are the Great Void of Chaos, the Soul Eater. I have released you from your prison and given you death so that you may wake.”

The agony in his head dulled to throbbing, and the throbbing dampened to an ache. The blood rushing through his ears slowed to a whisper and he struggled to keep a grip on the room.

He was dying.

A soft tickle touched the remnants of his awareness, and she whispered, “Forgive me, friend. For it was the only way.”



BROOKS

***H**E WAS RUNNING. THE world was dark and cold, rain falling in solid sheets that stung his skin as he raced through it. The panic coursing through his veins was too thick to focus on the path ahead. He looked over his shoulder, his mind urging him forward from a threat that loomed behind.*

Run, run, run! Just as his eyes adjusted to the darkness ahead, something caught his foot and threw him to the ground. Unforgiving twine wrapped around his ankle and pulled, intent on dragging him back toward the deepest shadows.

“No!” he screamed, the words bubbling up and out with his permission. He pawed at the ground, frantically digging his nails into the soil to gain traction against the evil pulling him backward. But, when he saw his hands, a moment of confusion cost him the effort.

They were small and feminine, painted with scars thin and thick, pale against the moonlight. The fingertips were bleeding, torn raw and nails missing.

Lytta, he thought. He was in Lytta's body. This was her dream. But why had she thrown him into her nightmare?

"Oh, my sweet Pandora," a deep voice rumbled behind him, her name a lilting accent. "Why must you run from me every time?"

Brooks didn't know why, but the voice induced a new surge of panic inside this unfamiliar body.

"Every year you hide from me. You run from me. You fight me. Why? Why put yourself through so much pain, when I am inevitable?"

His temper flared at the bold statement.

"You are nothing but a waste of space," she spat, a deeper voice mingling with hers giving it an inhuman quality. The deeper voice flared an ember of recognition inside. "You are a fucking monster and you do not deserve the air you breathe!" The baritone took over her voice, and Brooks heard the steps falter.

The tension on his ankle eased as Brooks fought against the vines. They withered and fell as he stood and faced the darkness behind him.

"Do you know where we are," she emphasized, "Zeus?"

An arc of lighting lit up the night sky and illuminated a golden-haired warrior. He was broad and dressed in finery,

not a single hair out of place. His brown eyes lit to a familiar ocher, a color Brooks had seen flash through Lytta's eyes when her temper rose.

It's the sickness, her voice filtered through his thoughts as her body continued to speak in the dream.

"We are in a holy place," her voice raised and carried across the storm. "A place where our ancestors worshiped the most ancient of our kind."

A flicker of surprise crossed Zeus' face, but he was quick to squash it. Zeus flicked his wrist, rage simmering below his stoic facade. When nothing happened, he looked to the offending appendage and tried again, emotions warring when nothing happened.

Lytta laughed as she walked toward a monument of marble ruins. Steps led to a broken dais, and atop the dais was a single fixed stack of stones.

No, not broken stones. A well, he realized as they got closer.

"Do you know why your vines do not work here? Why you can't call forth your magic?" Her voice was confident and haughty.

"It's because, dear Zeus, this is where our ancestors worshiped him." He didn't need his stolen body to turn to know that a look of surprise washed across Zeus' face. He could feel it through her.

She made the ascent toward the well and, when she reached the top of the dais, she stopped to turn.

“I have to give credit where it is due. You did a fair job wiping his memory from the world. You planted seeds of lies mixed with truths to make sure your tracks were well hidden. Tartarus, the great being who sired the Titans, falling to rest and creating a space to hold all those who commit bad deeds. Or, is it just a space to hold those who threaten you and the lies you’ve built your crown of lightning upon?”

“Pandora!” Zeus screamed. “Get down—“

“And what about Gaea? She birthed her mate, Uranus only to plot against you? To set into motion the downfall of the Olympians? But what about him, Zeus? What did you tell the Olympians about the void?”

“You ungrateful bitch!” Spittle flew through the air as his rage grew. Though he was angry, Zeus couldn’t seem to move forward to stop her from getting close to the dais. Something glued him in place.

Fear, Lytta whispered, narrating the scene for him.

“I knew something was different. Why would the great Zeus need to siphon off power into an immortal of his own creation?” She mused. “Surely, if it were his own power, he would be able to house it. But there was something unstable about it. Something that you couldn’t control. It was too great for you to contain.”

The look in his eyes was pure loathing, his hatred so palpable in the air it caused the hair on Lytta’s body to stand on end.

“So I started to do some digging and even made an ally. I had an immortal lifetime to contemplate, after all.”

“After all I’ve given you, you use it to plot against me?” Zeus spat on the ground in Lytta’s direction.

Anger flared in their shared body, the edge of madness creeping in. Lytta forced a breath to reel it in. She knew that if she didn’t play her cards correctly, it was all for nothing. Zeus would destroy this place and she would never have this chance again.

“You have given me an eternity of rage, torture, and suffering! I am rotting from the inside out, and you do nothing but take from me!” She screamed, emphasizing the open wounds in her soul.

By some miracle, Zeus kept his mouth shut, but she didn’t think it was out of any sort of kindness. No, he was most certainly plotting his next move. If he knew what she intended to do, then he would be desperate to get her off the dais.

Lytta pulled a blade she had sheathed at her thigh and let it glint tauntingly in the moonlight.

“Do you know what this is, Zeus?” She paused for a moment to let the realization sink in. “It’s a brimstone blade forged in Tartarus.”

“Pandora,” Zeus urged. “Get down off of the dais and we can make a bargain.”

She huffed a small laugh filled with sadness.

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted.” Lytta turned her gaze from the dagger to the god before her. “A bargain with you for my life. Anything to ease this pain and fury raging inside me. But all you ever did was laugh and revel in my misery like a sadistic fuck. I’m done wishing for bargains from a false god.”

Lytta let a smile of rage cross her features, her scars alight in the flames of her chaos. She turned back to the well and sat upon its lip. She didn’t let herself turn to see what may lurk in its depths. She refused to let fear change her mind. She had made a commitment to herself and this world that she helped to burn.

“I learned a little secret on my path to discovery, Zeus. Would you like to know what it is?”

“Pandora...” He was panicking and had begun stepping slowly toward the bottom steps of the dais. He was still a good hundred feet away, but no distance was too far if it came between a ruler and his crown, a man and his legacy. She wouldn’t make the mistake of underestimating him.

“A little birdie told me that you haven’t just been dumping your chaos into me. It’s much more complex than that.”

Genuine fear and panic flashed across his features.

“No, you tied your essence to mine. Our very souls are bound, Zeus, and you lied to me that night on the river. Your arrogance clouded your judgment. But, by the fear painting your face, I’m betting you knew that and counted on me never figuring it out. I know what you did,” she sneered. “You stole from the Deathless God to win your war, and now you can’t

contain his power. It would drive you to madness and rot you from the inside out like it has done to me. But, that's not my favorite part. My favorite part was when I learned that by giving me your essence, I am bound to the Deathless God as you are, Zeus. Did you know that?"

She didn't give him time to answer before continuing.

"I don't think you did. Because if you did, you would have held that part of you a little closer. You would have treated it better so that it would have stood by your side rather than run from it. You may have made me an immortal Zeus, but here? In this place of sacrifice to the Deathless God your magic is impotent. I'm just a mortal woman here, and if I make my sacrifice to him I can give back part of what you stole."

"Gods fucking dammit, Pandora! What do you want? What will make you stop this and come home? Do you want a place at my side in Olympus? Handmaid's waiting on your every whim? Fields of flowers? Say it, and it is yours!"

"The great Zeus begging at the feet of a lowly goddess," she mocked. "How disgusting. If only your Olympians could see you grovel."

Thunder rolled through the night with an unforgivable wind that threatened to knock her from the well. Rain poured from an open chasm in the night sky. Pandora took in her surroundings, appreciating the elements as they came and wishing one last time to gaze upon the stars.

It won't matter soon, she told herself, for you'll be a part of them.

Without wasting any more time, Pandora placed the brimstone blade to her throat, closed her eyes, and prayed to the Deathless God for mercy.

“Father of Darkness, keeper of the light, ruler of the chaos filled night.” As she chanted, Zeus ran, forcing every muscle beyond its limits to reach her in time.

“I give myself wholly to you. Take me to the void between the lights.” She gripped the blade tighter, her clammy palms shaking with effort as she dragged it across the delicate flesh beneath her chin, opening her throat to the darkness below.

Pandora’s body went limp and fell into the gaping chasm of the well. A hand brushed her foot as she fell, grasping in a desperate attempt to pull her back, but the darkness was greedy and eager for her sacrifice. It would not let her go so easily.

Pandora thought death would be painful, that her life would end as dreadfully as it had begun. Her sacrifice would mean the end of the Earth, for her blood would open a box of famine, war, pestilence and death, but she had to hope that it would not be in vain. Her lungs seized in their last effort to pull in oxygen, but her mortal body was fragile. She was dying. What a relief to no longer feel pain, but what a sorrow for the world she was leaving behind.



BROOKS

“DO YOU SEE NOW?”

Brooks opened his eyes, disoriented from living in someone else’s dream and the fall to darkness.

He was standing in the bioluminescent field of asphodels before the naked goddess sleeping in her hollow.

Brooks turned to see twin goddesses standing side by side, one with her thorn of crowns and glistening tears, the other with a crown of stars and white blooms budding from open sores.

A flare of recognition hit him.

“Atropos.”

A small, sad smile graced her feminine features.

“I don’t understand,” Brooks whispered, reality imploding and overwhelming his senses.

“But you do. You’ve no memories before the asylum.”

“Because they keep me drugged out of my mind.”

“Are you trying to convince us, or yourself?”

That hit him like a load of fucking bricks.

“My name is Brooks. I’m a patient at St. Dymphna’s Home for the Mentally Unwell. I’m a paranoid schizophrenic.”

He ran his hands through his hair and dropped into a squat, hugging his knees to his chest to get as small as possible.

Voices plagued his thoughts as his passenger roused, suffocating him from the inside out.

“My name is Brooks...” he whimpered.

“Call on him, prince.”

“...I’m a patient...”

“Call forth your chaos.”

“...paranoid schizophrenic.”

“Take your throne of darkness and seize what is yours!”

In a blink, the fractures of his brittle mind burst into gaping chasms, his passenger filling his mind like poison and commanding every muscle.

A gentle hand caressed his cheek, but her grasp was firm as she pulled his face to meet her empty stare. He startled when he realized it wasn’t Atropos, but Lachesis with her crown of glittering stars.

“I’ve seen many paths in your future, and the time to act is now.” Her forehead creased and a look that could only be described as pity crossed her face.

“You are real. Your Siren is real.” She spoke slowly, emphasizing each word.

Shock.

Yearning.

Fear.

Longing.

It all hit him at once as her words pierced his skin and melted into his very marrow.

“Very real, prince. And she needs your help. She wallows in nightmares and is losing sight of the hope that keeps her afloat. You cannot save this world without her, and she cannot be saved without you.”

Xia’s words came back to him. She begged him to trust her, to believe in her, and he’d made a decision then to do it. He wouldn’t back down now, especially since his life was already changed so irrevocably.

“How do I find her? Where is she?”

“I’ve already shown you where your journey begins,” Atropos stepped forward “But you must be careful, and you must be ready to forgive. She has been used against you, used to keep your mind intoxicated while others prey on your weakness.”

A reel of visions forced their way into his mind—

A great god on a platinum throne flying the nest to mold a woman from clay, rip the eyes from her sockets and pour his madness into her mind.

A great god on a platinum throne leading his reign of terror.

A woman with flaming red hair standing in a glass castle with a vial of blood and a venomous smile.

“Behold your past, for it is the key to your future,” Atropos warned.

“You are the only hope to right the wrongs. You are the hope that her sacrifice left behind. Our world started in your hands, and it is in your hands that we will be saved.” Lachesis’ voice was still gentle but growing more urgent.

Brooks nodded frantically, still unsure but eager to find her. To save her. To *claim* her.

“You must embrace your darkness, for you are one. Chaos resides within— all you must do is let go.”

Violent flashbacks rocketed behind his eyelids as his hand flew to his chest, rubbing the fabric that covered the bandages still wrapped around his torso. The bandages that held his skin together from when he’d nearly carved himself to pieces. When his passenger tried to remind him of who he was. Who *they* were.

“Chaos,” he mumbled. “Embrace my Chaos.”

With a thumb to his forehead and a whispered breath across his lips, Lachesis pushed her magic against his own and threw him from the Fates field of asphodels.



BROOKS

“I GAVE MYSELF TO you so that you may wake and fix what he has broken,” Lytta’s soft alto filtered through his waking thoughts.

He didn’t know how long it took to come back, but when his racing heart pushed blood and awareness through him, Brooks knew that he was not the same as when he’d gone under.

A familiar presence pressed against his consciousness and, rather than shut it out, he took a breath and embraced it.

His passenger, Brooks realized, was no less an intruder in his mind than he was. It was a part of him that he kept locked away. A broken fragment of a power he used to wield with ease until part of it was stolen and used against him.

“Welcome home,” he spoke aloud.

Lytta sacrificed her life at an altar of worship to heal some of his broken pieces. It was a bold move. She couldn’t have

known how much of his essence she contained within her fractured mind, but it was the risk of a desperate, tired goddess.

Brooks opened his azure eyes and found himself standing amongst the stars. No longer did he gaze from a rooftop as a broken man. His place had been here all along, he'd just been unwilling to face it.

The darkness flowed through his fingertips and rubbed against his leg like a purring cat welcoming him home. He swirled it, letting it go in between his fingers and around his arms, happy to be entangled in his space again. It felt *right*.

Black stained his fingertips and climbed through the veins of his hands. A certain familiarity wound its way through his mind, like puzzle pieces locking into place.

Chaos.

Chaos so powerful that it blackened his blood and bled into his hands where the shadows lay in waiting.

Pandora knelt before him, her head bowed subserviently at his feet.

“Stand,” he said simply.

She did as he asked but did not raise her eyes from the floor.

Brooks placed a black stained finger under her jaw and urged her empty, petaled eyes up to meet his gaze.

“What do you wish me to call you?”

“Whatever you please, Prince.”

He frowned, displeased by her lack of self-worth and identity, even though she had been brave enough to make the ultimate sacrifice.

“You don’t have to be afraid of him anymore. You are at peace.”

Starlight highlighted her face as black tears wetted her cheeks.

“What do you wish to be called so that I may honor your sacrifice?”

A sob escaped her lips as lines creased her forehead. She took a moment to breathe and pull herself together before she spoke.

“Pandora. I wish you to call me Pandora.”

“Are you sure it isn’t cold queen?” His lip quirked in one corner and the joy in her eyes was worth all of the pain they’d been through together.

“Alright,” he spoke gently. “Pandora it is. Thank you for your sacrifice. I honor it and will carve your resting place in the stars for returning what was stolen from me.”

He stepped forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, brushing the matted strands of her hair to the side.

“Without you, I may have never returned. Without you, this world would have met its end. Without you,” he swallowed, “I would never have found a friend. I am forever grateful for you, Pandora. Rest.”

He rested his forehead against hers as a small tear ran down his cheek. He breathed against her skin and, with a sigh, he released the taint from her soul as Pandora's essence spread among the stars.

He didn't know how long he stood alone but breathed in a moment of peace. Once he made his next move, everything changed.

With a determined sigh, the Deathless God relaxed into the void of darkness between the stars and sent his awareness into every corner of creation. Gone was the asylum and the lock on his mind. He claimed the darkness and it welcomed him home with waiting arms.

Tendrils of his power split and searched through every shadow lingering between Tartarus and Olympia. He didn't waste a single moment focusing on one path when all were open to him now. Time was of the essence, and he had rested long enough.

His Siren had been a beacon of light through his darkest night, and he would not leave her to drown in it.

Soft sobs called to him in the middle of Oceanus, and it didn't take long to recognize the black and purple neon sign lighting up the island made of nightmares.

Deep within the island under the bustling club was a system of tunnels worn with time. They had to have been there well before the modern nightclub perched atop their center. It took no time to collect his roaming magic and push all efforts toward the sound. What he found, in the deepest layer of the

granite home closed off to the ocean by glass, made his blood run cold.

The most beautiful creature in creation lie broken on a stone floor. Twin puncture wounds littered her naked body, blood crusting where it had beaded and fallen from her porcelain skin. Hair as white as moonlight fell in matted strands around her tear-stained face. Her stormy eyes were open, but whatever she stared at was not in this realm. Her cries were silent and only left her lips with ragged exhales.

Magic bubbled and roared in his veins, demanding violent retribution for whoever did this to her.

Through his rage, he heard a muffled name on her lips.

“Brooks,” she whispered, near intelligible.

His heart ached as he listened to her plead for him. He couldn't stop his magic from reaching for hers.

“I'm here,” he voiced as he caressed her mind.

Her tired, broken expression never changed. A primal need to care for her, to hold her in his arms rushed over his senses. He needed to be there with her, to protect her.

“Brooks,” she said again.

“I'm coming for you,” he promised. “I will find who did this to you. I will flay his skin and spread his bones wide while his heart still beats and, when I'm through, I will let you rip it from his chest as a trophy for your retribution.”

Her eyes sparked, and he could have sworn she turned those glowing irises to look right at him.

“I am the Father of Darkness, the Void Between the Stars, Creator of your Gods and the Eater of Souls. I am Chaos the Deathless God, and I *will* find you.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE



WOW.
What a wild ride.

First of all, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading *One Little Nightmare*. Whether you loved it or hated it, you still took the time to flip from front to back and I'm still reeling over it.

I've gotten a lot of questions as to how the idea for this book even came to be, so how about another story? No pretending. Just truth.

I was living the life of my dreams— a beautiful son, a loving husband, and the home we'd been dreaming of since the beginning. I was happy with everything... except myself. I hopped from job to job hoping to find something that made me feel something. I decorated wedding cakes, worked in childcare, and eventually ended up in the dental field. It was whatever. I didn't hate it, but it still wasn't my dream.

And then came infertility...

We got pregnant with my first son when we were young. Like, young, young. But baby number two? It just wasn't

happening. My body was betraying me, I felt like I was letting my husband down, my mind was in a spiral and I was desperate to claw my way out of it.

One fateful night after about seven hormone injections for IVF prep, we sat down as a family to eat dinner and watch *Dancing With The Stars*. If you've ever watched it, you know that any season starring Mark Ballas is going to slam. Mark and Lindsey Sterling stepped on stage and did the most beautiful, dark, passionate dance to *Human* by Sevdaliza and I was enthralled. I watched them dance those steps a hundred times before I went to bed, and that song was an immediate addition to my Apple playlist.

That night I had an absolute fever dream of an enchantress dancing on a small stage in a darkened, private room. The lights were red and they enhanced every curve of her body as a man with black hair sat in the only chair.

A private room for a private show.

I saw everything so vividly that I woke up the next morning, grabbed my laptop, and took it to our empty third bedroom. I looked around and longed for it to be a nursery. Begged whatever god would listen for it to be painted in delicate colors with a crib and embroidered blankets.

I wrote the red room scene in my empty nursery and, though it has changed a million times before you read it, it still made it into the book.

I poured all of my feelings into this book. Though I don't have schizophrenia, I connected with Brooks on a level so deep that I think he will always have a space in my heart. Because I, too, know what it's like to be trapped between blank walls with no

control over who pulls the strings.

I've felt the suffocation of having nowhere to turn but inward and dealing with the thoughts born there.

I know firsthand how desolate gods can be, and I know what darkness can be born while you beg for their benevolence.

This, my darling reader, is only a taste of what's to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



I HAVE A SHIT ton of people I need to thank. If you don't care, that's okay. But it belongs out in the world, so I will put it there.

My husband, Mr. Darling, always finds a way to make my dreams come true. When I look at him with that spark in my eye and guilty anxiety tugging at my brow, he smiles his softest smile and promises that we can make it happen. He's been holding my hand since we were sixteen and he hasn't let go since. I owe my life to him and I know he hoards it like his greatest treasure.

My sweet, sweet Granna. She was my safest spot. My home. My world crashed and burned when she left, and I was left with a fourteen day old baby, my second son, without her hand to guide me. He will never know her the way my first son got to and it devastates me every single day. Because I know she was holding on for him, and her first day to see him, to hold

him and love him, was her last. I do this all for you, Granna. There will never be another like you.

My amazing family and friends who support all of my hyperfixations just like my husband, but I'm hopeful that this one will stick and that I can do something they would be proud of. That I can be proud of.

My mentor and friend, Lana Pecherczyk. Without her endless patience and willingness to teach me the ins and outs of the business, I wouldn't be typing this. As she nurtured me as her assistant, she also pushed me to write and encouraged me every step of the way. She is open and never once hid her business secrets to hinder anyone's success, and that has been the most valuable lesson I've learned and I carry it with me every day. Even though she knew I would eventually fly the nest, she never held me back. Thanks, bestie. If Mr. Darling was holding my right hand, you were most certainly holding my left.

My team of betas who put up with my constant messages and need for validation whenever the imposter syndrome kicks in. I think I would still be seeking validation for my book if the Darling Divas hadn't stepped in to save it. Sacha, Traci, Marron, Erica, and Jessica... You're the shit.

My artist, Ashley Boehme, who I found a friend in. I'm glad that my characters inspire your creativity because your art

inspires my writing tenfold. If you need ANY art done for any reason my dear reader, she's the one to call.

And lastly, but certainly not least, you. Without you, my Darling reader, this book is but a ghost on the internet. Thank you for taking a chance on my book born of pain and heartache. I hope my journey to heal inspired something within you. Sometimes you've got to embrace your chaos and learn how to live in tandem rather than striving to be someone without it. We all live with darkness. Embrace it.

DID YOU LOVE ONE LITTLE NIGHTMARE?



You can look forward to book two of the *Of Gods and Monsters* series to release in early 2024. You'll meet new characters, experience new conflicts, and maybe even shed a few tears. I'm only in the plotting stage and I'm already devastated.

Join my FACEBOOK READER GROUP for all updates, teasers, and behind-the-scenes goodies! You may even find a few swag freebies and signed copies of *One Little Nightmare* going up soon...

Subscribe to my Patreon for never-before-seen material such as cut scenes, advanced copies of books, exclusive serials and short stories, downloadable art, one-on-one chats with me, and more!

Join my newsletter for first looks, author updates, and a free short story including our favorite villain, The Lord of

Nightmares. That's right. We haven't seen the last of him, and something tells me you're going to want to see him in Club Hel with Nyx...

GET TO KNOW ME, DARLING



By day, Dawn is a mother of two and an amazing wife (ask her husband, he agrees) to a superhero where her first personality shines. By night, she's a coffee addicted, sunshine hating, bipolar ball of darkness who listens to the voices in her head. Dawn's favorite question to any scenario is, "What if?" and she lives for figuring out the answer.

Dawn's favorite way to write is to take something happy and hopeful and to twist it into a dark fantasy where anything goes. Her characters crash and burn, and just when the flames are all-consuming, they find their fight and rise from the ashes. She's not afraid of tragic character arcs and, despite all of the above, loves to socialize.

You can find her on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and probably at a Starbucks near you.