

1.0

Laec

Three months ago I saved a teenage goddess. I'm not talking about some bratty beauty queen or next-big-thing pop star. This was the real deal; the first of her kind since humans dragged their primitive asses out of caves. Epic, evolutionary stuff.

That was then.

Now...

"Don't hold back on him, Alex. He can take it."

Now I'm getting my ass kicked by a girl.

"Hey," I protest when the blade nicks my arm. The cute redhead across the mat grins as she assumes a defensive position, sword ready, green eyes daring. One of these days, Sweetheart...

"Laec, are you even listening to me?"

I turn to meet the less-than-cute, pale blue eyes of my brother, Darrius. My own personal Grand Inquisitor. The distraction allows the green-eyed ninja to slide forward and flick the sword from my grip while sticking the point of her blade under my Adam's apple.

"Uncle, for fuck's sake."

Darrius sighs, shaking his head. "That's enough for today."

I sigh gratefully and sink to the mat, arms draped around my raised knees, eyes peering through a curtain of sweat-drenched hair as Alex gathers her gear and heads for the bathroom to shower. She leans over me as she passes, her voice brushing a warm thrill against my ear.

"Interesting defense, Hellion."

I stare at her retreating ass as Darrius lowers himself beside me, effortlessly folding his legs in front of him as he regards me. "You okay?"

The bathroom door slams on my momentary fantasy.

I shrug. I'm sure when my brother asks if I'm okay, he's not referring to my self-flagellating libido. Especially when it comes to Alex. That subject has been relegated to the dead horse category. Beaten, warned off, and—supposedly—duly noted.

So he believes. Think of her as a little sister, my ass. I never had a sister, but if I did, I wouldn't be having those kinds of thoughts about her. Which means he's talking about the other thing.

It's a fair question, all things considered. A question he asks me at least once a day, and who can blame him? As addictions go, mine was deadly. Literally. When you grow up sharing your consciousness with a slice of the most bloodthirsty species ever to crawl out of the Pit, you tend to inspire caution in those closest to you.

That part of me is gone now—at least physically—but I can't tell anyone. I can't even tell them why I can't tell them without risking a possible Divine smackdown. No one would believe me anyway. Well, no one who didn't already know and try to keep it a secret from me.

"I'm good," I say without looking at him. "How 'bout you?"

"You seem distracted."

"I read somewhere that distraction is a common problem among the mentally-challenged. That's the politically correct way to say it, you know. Mentally-challenged. Not *stupid*, though it doesn't roll off the tongue as easily, does it?"

He sighs and shakes his head, and for a few hopeful seconds I think I might have distracted him enough to skip the rest of this conversation. Darrius does like to converse, one of the things I'm still adjusting to. I never realized how much I hate talking about stuff—which, coincidentally, I also hate thinking about and therefore try to do as little of both as possible—until my need for privacy was pitted against my brother's near-Herculean refusal to acknowledge it.

"You had another nightmare last night."

The reminder catches me off guard...

...searing bite of the torch...white-hot flame on my arms across my chest around my shoulders down my back...ohgodohgodOHGOD...please stop...up my chest across my face into my mouth melting my eyes...please let me die please please...rivers of ruined screaming flesh...killmekillmekillme...burning and healing and burning again.....please kill me pleasepleaseplease...endless unimaginable pain...never stopping, always talking...questions, tireless, compassionless, clinical...just another experiment...

I shudder and push the memory away. "I'm fine."

I can taste his doubt. "You want to talk about it...or anything else?"

What good would that do?

"Nope."

"Well, if you change your mind, I'm here for you."

He stands and offers me a hand up. When I take it, I get rudely flipped onto my back.

"Ow, what the fuck?"

He grins and heads back to his room, leaving me on the mat staring at the ceiling.

"Should've taken the offer."

I close my eyes and blow out a sigh. That's his idea of help? It's almost as bad as this sparring thing, although at least that gives me an excuse to get close to Alex. Too bad she finds that as humorous as Darrius does.

I sit up as the object of my torment emerges from the bathroom in a cloud of steam and her trademark apples and honey scent and heads for the door.

"Can I take the bike?" she asks with an impish grin. It's a game we play. She knows the only way she gets to take my Harley is if I've been captured and/or incapacitated and she needs to ride to my rescue in a green-eyed blaze of glory.

I look up at her, brushing the hair back from my face, and flash a wicked grin. "How bad do you want it?"

I don't even see the shoe coming.

It smacks me between the eyes as Alex slides out the door, her laughter trailing behind her. I turn to glare at my brother, who's leaning against the wall with his arms folded. He returns my glare with a self-righteous smirk.

"Should I grab a hose?"

"Fuck you." I climb to my feet and shuffle into the steamy bathroom, slamming the door and sucking in a deep breath. Apples and honey...yum. I let that thought circle the drain for a few seconds before turning on the shower. Naturally there's no more hot water, though there is a note stuck to the mirror.

Figured a cold shower would do you good, Hellion.

Yep. The girl is seriously kicking my ass.