# NiGHTS: Legend of the DreamWalkers

**Summary**

9 years after the Prologue, Maurisa has grown strong bonds to the inhabitants of the Dream Realm. Questions arise about the visitor's mysterious abilities, while ancient legends of Ideya and peacekeepers emerge to the surface. A corruption has awoken and it has begun to infect the Night Dimension. Now, only the outcasts of both reality and dream can stand a chance.

**Notes**

Author's Note: This continuation is very heavily referenced to the Prologue (If you haven’t read it then nothing will make sense to you I bet) SO GO READ THAT FIRST!

I hope to post chapters in chunks as I’m rewriting using the old documents. That's the plan. :)

If you do fav or review, updates will come in faster. I have poor self esteem already… I have a feeling that probably wont happen if not very few. If any errors or spelling issues come up could someone please point them out for me? I got no beta reader. But I’m determined to see this through.

I’m on a motherfuckin mission yo.

Disclaimer: I do not own SEGA's original characters
Chapter 1

Maurisa’s hand fumbled with her skirt pocket for a split moment, inevitably to find nothing there. Usually this wasn’t the normal custom. Her phone was like an adopted child to her and she always had it close to her person, even when sleeping. Within its sleek silver confines lay over eight-hundred songs, WIFI access and a communication haven that she rarely had a chance to exploit in the real world.

And once again, it was missing.

Blast that tight-wearing bastard.

Grumbling, the young teen scanned the monstrous trees blocking out the sunshine above which in turn occupied Maurisa’s equally monstrous Nightopia and hollered, "Get yer ass down here! I know you’re up there!" She expected no reply, and that was exactly what she got in return. With a loud huff, Maurisa stalked over to one of the lower trees –which in all honesty wasn’t really all that low to the ground– and jumped for the closest branch. The girl missed for the third time and cursed loudly before lunging for it again, then a fourth time, before finally grabbing on to the smooth bough of the tree.

It almost surprised her that she was able to reach it. Almost. Over the nine years since moving in Bellbridge her genetics had only allowed the girl to grow to a miraculous 4’ 11. Eight inches wasn’t much to brag about with the exception of when comparing herself to her companion. What was she to complain? The wonderful amount of stereotype her physique supported towards her culture still never ceased to infuriate her. It just wasn’t funny anymore. Where Maurisa lacked in size however, she made up with strength and with very little struggle she hoisted herself up onto the branch and began to climb.

Shimmying carefully to another tree slightly entwining with hers, a distant garble of sound poked its way out from the upper-most canopy. Jesus Christ, was he trying to blow out the head phones? A menacing chuckle bubbled up within her chest and escaped when realizing the advantage she had.

“Can’t hear me, huh? Poor decision, Renhet.”

Her head broke the surface of leaves and sure enough, there he was. Lounging on the top branch with her ear buds stuffed under his red and purple jester hat, blasting a Linkin Park song that could clearly be distinguish. Maurisa still had the drop on him and it was a nice turn of the table. Having the ability of flight only made him harder to catch.

Ren’s back faced the position she held and his sharper senses were blocked. The time to strike was now. The girl perched herself on the branch behind him and began to debate on whether to just pummel him with her fist or break off the nearest branch beside her. Sure it sounded like an over-abusive punishment, but the guy also wasn’t human and had the inhuman build of a rubber shock absorber. Nightmaren did not batter easily.

A decision was quickly made and corporal punishment would be set at minimal for now. She’d gotten her hands dirty on more then one occasion, so why hold off the inevitable? Maurisa inhaled a sharp breath and scrunched up her nose.

Adrenaline and irritation fueled her next moves. Maurisa’s hand rose up to promptly smack him hard over the back of the head. Even with the jester’s hat there to cushion the blow, the sound of the collision came off as hollow. It almost made her laugh, but she had a façade to keep.
As soon as the physical contact was made, Ren’s head flew forwards and his hand’s flew up in defense. When his face whipped around to see it was only the visitor, he glared.

“OW! WHAT THE HELL?” He voice was a shout, deep and gruff. She doubted he could even hear himself speak over the music. Her mouth opened wide to rival his yell.

"NO ONE TOUCHES MY PHONE AND- WOAH!" With all the grace of a turtle on stilts, Morisa’s foot slipped on the smooth branch and she latched on to the nearest support. As luck would have it the Nightmaren was the one she stumbled into. As luck wouldn’t have it however, it caught Renhet off guard enough to completely forget to use his flight abilities and they both plummeted. Yelling out alarmed shrieks and shouts while hitting a few branches on the way down, they landed on the earthy floor and a dull thud punctuated the impact.

A groan escaped the jester who now lay face down in the dirt. Renhet suddenly found himself thanking the many deities of reality for not having a nose to break. A human knee jabbed him in the side and a noticeable weight held his upper half down.

Maurisa shifted, causing the joint to dig in further and he hissed, eyes rolling. “Oh, get off!” Ren’s hands drew up closer to his body and his arms proceed to push himself upright. It all happened quickly and gave girl no time to vacate her spot before the momentum had her tumbling into the bush. Maurisa squeaked when her side hit the dirt and the jester left the ground to hover above her. His hands briskly slapped away the dirt on his the white, mid-length sleeves before moving on to the vest he wore, not looking dreadfully pleased. Meanwhile, Maurisa re-gathered her bearings. That confrontation hadn’t ended so well. She almost wanted to keep laying there but the glare of icy eyes staring down at her would have nothing of it.

After the dusting finished, Renhet’s pale arms crossed over his chest and he growled crossly. "What the hell was that for?"

Still seated on the ground and not the slightest bit intimidated, Maurisa only had one response to this question. She held out her hand, pointing to the head phone cords poking from his headwear. "Phone. NOW." It was simple, strait to the point, and she put every ounce of seriousness she owned into the words. A long, lecherous grin stretch the Nightmaren’s face and he casually pulled out the device hidden under his vest.

"Oh. You don’t mean this, do you?” Renhet waved it nonchalantly before her face and retracted his hand swiftly before the girl could swipe for it. Delayed, for she still sat on the ground and had to stand, another attempt to pounce was quickly thwarted. Renhet’s feet left the ground further in a shimmer of white sparkles until he was only just out of reach, causing the visitor to snarl.

"HEY!"

He snickered at her from the air. This was how it usually played out with the Nightmaren taunting her inability to apprehend him whenever he took to the sky. What a bully. Always thinking he has the upper hand in these situations. Unknowingly to his fine perception however, she could still reach with a jump start. As he turned away to abscond elsewhere, Maurisa dashed a few steps forward and swiftly leaped upward. Her hands grappled determinedly onto the Nightmaren’s ankle and hoisted herself up while the other struggled to disengage her. Her fingers capture one end tail of his hat and she knew the battle was won.

Gracelessly, she dropped to her feet, yanking the gaudy headwear off. The sight of poofy silver hair and the sound of an undignified yelp summoned a triumphant chuckle from the girl.
Give this guy an award for epic hat-head.

“Hey!” Renhet’s arms shot up protectively to hinder her view. This was a fruitless mission, and it only made her laughed harder. "Give it back!" He then began to zoom around the visitor, looking for an opening to grab the stolen piece of wardrobe. Maurisa smirked and took up the jester’s previously harassing role before the tables had been tipped. As she twisted, shielding the hat closely clutched to her chest from swift hands, the girl asserted sternly.

"Phone first, THEN hat."

The Nightmaren halted his urgent actions and hesitating for a moment. A short battle played out on his face before the reject dream-demon finally groaned in defeat.

Both exchanged the items held hostage. It wasn’t often that the visitor would win. She pocketed the device after rolling the earphones and shut it off, while the other individual promptly shoved strands of hair up and out of sight.

"I've memorized every song on there." Renhet smirked after banishing the last bit of white and the girl stared back in disbelief.

"I don't believe you. You know why? Because there’s 900 fucking songs on here." The jester remained unmarred by the sting and lounged backwards in the air as if the recent argument never occurred. Instead he laughed.

“Aw, Mori’. I’m the one with the better IQ, remember? I’ll bet you full use of that for the night,” He pointed at the pocket her hand had hidden the device in. “If I can guess, oh, 5 songs of your choice?”

That remark about her IQ deserved a good slug to the shoulder. However the visitor’s curiosity had been peaked.

Holding a nerve-breaking stare with him, Maurisa pulled out her phone again and tugged out the head phones. The built-in speaker rocketed to life after she pressed shuffle.

"12 Stones, World so Cold."

Lucky guess. She flicked to the second song, "Fallout Boy, My Song’s Know What You Did in the Dark."

The third, "The Gazette, Zetsu."

This test went on after five. Soon they reached seventeen songs before Maurisa let out an aggravated growled.

"Fine, take the damn thing!" The girl stood from the tree stump she’d claimed as a seat during the quiz and walked up the red jester, slapping him in the stomach with the electronic device before removing her hand. If it weren’t for quick reflexes he wouldn’t have caught it falling. Renhet chucked triumphantly and followed the visitor out of the woods as she stalked off.

This, believe it or not, was the norm for their little twosome. They’d confirmed it as a semi-black friendship developed over almost a decade of nightly visits. Had it really been that long though? Maurisa often wondered where the time had flown. She could speak English now as if she’d known it before birth. Even her accent was nearly indistinguishable now. The language exchange between her and her otherworldly companion had also been deemed successful. Engaging in arguments using both Japanese and English proved to be refreshing for the palette. Hell, Maurisa couldn’t say it was ever boring. The only thing regrettable about teaching Renhet Japanese was that she couldn’t call
him anything obscene to his face now without a follow-up response. Oh how amusing it was in those
days.

Whatever other mannerisms Maurisa had gained over the years, including a horribly sassy mouth and
a brash attitude, had also rubbed off/educated her dear friend in the annoying arts of being an
asshole. Which he really needed no help with since the beginning. Really. Having no decent role
models to grow up with in your own realm can be quite a problem indeed. An air-happy jester and
an old fart of an owl did not count as decent, neither did she for that matter. Wait. This wasn’t her
realm. It was difficult to keep track of ‘what’ happened ‘where’ in her life at times. Memory be
damned. Maurisa had never suffered from the amnesia after affects which Owl constantly warned her
about, yet she still often forgot the littlest things. Like how long it had been since discovering the
Dream realm. If it weren’t for the fact that her and Renhet had grown up things never truly changed.

"You know, Shortie. It’s a good thing you jump like a squirrel. I didn’t think you could reach me
from–"

"Don’t Make Fun of My Height! You’re a guy and still shorter than me." She snapped, hitting back
with another lame and overly used burn.

He’s still trying to pick a fight? Genuine guy behavior. Though he wasn’t one, not really. Oh well,
gives me a reason to smack him. The visitor kept walking with the other on her tail, or braid to be
more precise.

"I do believe we’ve had this discussion before." Renhet hummed. She knew that discussion, fairly
well.

"Yeah, yeah I know. No balls figuratively or physically speaking. Gotcha." There. That was a good
one. It was often that she’d forget the oddity of Nightmaren and their gender confused builds as well.
Renhet held himself as any male would in appearance and in voice. But when the feminine traits slid
in here and there it killed her in all the best of ways. Maurisa smiled to herself and caught wind of the
glare striking her back. A small tug at the cloth-pleated braid running down her spine jolted her
backward.

"Ow!" She growled out a bunch of other intelligibly irritated noises and smacked his shoulder. “Let
go!”

“But it’s such a convenient leash. Never cut it, please." Maurisa’s lower lip curled into a scowl at his
sardonic gush.

"I’ll yell for NiGHTS."

The Jester winced and pulled back a foot or so, releasing the girl’s hair. She could play her cards
well.

“Low blow.”

“Actually I was thinking about cutting it.” Growing up, Maurisa played the occasional video game.
Unfortunately she had horrible coordination when playing and could only fully complete a handful
of games in her lifetime. It was a shameful existence for her. Final fantasy had been one of those
admired games, and with a blind determination set she began to grow out her hair like Yuna. The
character was confident, and confidence was what she needed at the time. It had been a good seven
years since she began sporting the look and the hair running down her back easily reached her
ankles.

A familiar giggle blossomed up from behind them and Maurisa was the one who jumped. She never liked it when others crept up on her.

"Boy, don't you have a way with the ladies." NiGHTS gleefully twirled above them before screeching to a halt not far in the air, a familiar grin situate in place.

“Hey NiGHTS.” Maurisa acknowledged before his son responded.

"Lady? She's a demon in a visitor's body." Ren didn’t even need to look at the girl to avoid her swinging hand. At times he could be shit at dodging, and at other’s it was as if Renhet and her were the same poles of a magnet. He had they habit of being unpredictable, just like her.

"Cut it out." His mother tisked. Probably sensing another looming scuffle in the distance. Just then the girl remembered that she had forgotten something and gasped suddenly after this realization.

“Oh no, no. It’s okay. I need to check on Gimpers.” This caused the other two to stop short and stare at the human.

Ren snorted and NiGHTS gave the girl a questionable look.

“Fuck. That’s what you named it?”

“Uh, Gimpers?”

Maurisa stuck her fists promptly up onto her hips and raised her head smugly. “Yes, I named him Gimpers. Gimp-kun for short. “Thought it fit.”

“No really. Who’s Gimpers?” NiGHTS butted in again. Maurisa turned to the purple jester with a huge smile.

“I found a Nightopian with a gimpy wing. I think he hatched that way. He’s so cute.” She gushed.

“They all look the same.” Renhet received a scowl for his comment before the girl continued.

“But he’s special. He always falls on his face while the other’s scamper around him.” She made a sketchy little circle in the air while twirling her index fingers, “I like keeping him company.”

“Alright?” NiGHTS sounded unsure of himself when the word slid out. The kid was weird already. Why question it?

Renhet yawned and lazily waved the visitor off. “Fine, go. Leave us in peace. We won’t miss you.” Maurisa turned away from the duo and ran for it, waving behind her nonchalantly.

"It's hard to believe she's still able to visit here. I mean, most visitors over her age never stick around for this long and I have yet to see any of her Ideya in person."

"I've come to the conclusion that she’s a three year old stuck in an eighteen year old’s body. 'Throws tantrums like one." Renhet rubbed the spot on his covered shoulder where her hand had hit. That was going to leave a mark. Not like he really cared much. At most times their banter was just a playful exchange. I was just the way they were. But she could really hurl a punch when she wanted to. It kept the Nightmaren on his toes and taught him not to mess around with human females.

"I don't know Ren." That face did not suit his mother. Nope. Not at all. Any worried, serious, or depressing looks were not allowed to be reserved for the happy, carefree soul who raised him. His
slightly longer mouth drooped into a frown.

"Stop worrying will ya. I’d rather you not become a bothered old coot like Owl. Even at your age."
Ren pecked him on the cheek as any other loving son would and dashed off, leaving NiGHTS under
the canopy of trees. A few seconds passed before it clicked in the other Nightmaren’s head.

The best way Renhet had learned to distract others was through insult. Maurisa hadn’t taught him
that.

"H-HEY! What did you just say?!"

All the violet jester could hear was the tail end of tenor laughter fading further into the woods.

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"Morisa. Morisaaa." I heard my name, but had no energy, nor any decency to care. Math was a
school subject that should not exist. These classes were only good for napping. Who the hell was
going to use tangents for the rest of their life anyway? Definitely not me.

A sharp jab to the side told me that my opinion was invalid and in result I was jolted violently from
my nap.

Lucy, my solo human companion, held up the pointed end of her pencil and grinned underhandedly
at my discomfort.

"Hellllooo! Time to get up, class is over!" At this statement my head plunked defiantly back down
against my arms with a loud sigh. My head rose again after gathering a moment more of peace and
reluctantly reached for the bag under my desk.

"Good. I missed all the pointless things I hope?" Muttering was as loud as I was going to get right
now. Shoving the excessively oversized textbook into my bag along with the other supplies. Our
classroom was vacant all except for us lone souls. Even the teacher wasn’t present in the room, but
Mr. Hendrick’s odd disappearance hadn’t shocked me. He spent more time outside the classroom
then in it. Possibly gossiping with the other teacher next door.

"Just so you know, I’m not going to record all your notes for you as of tomorrow. But I said this
yesterday, and the week before that– Anyway, I’ve got a question for you."

That grin earlier did looked awfully lecherous. My lower lip jutted outward in a skeptical response. I
knew Lucy too well. She was up to something. The brunette could be conniving audacious in our
conversations, just like my otherworldly friend.

Darn, do I ever know how to pick my companions.

This friend in particular had actually came to me and nearly out of nowhere. Maybe it was because
the girl was a foreigner too and that those sorts of people flocked together? But people accepted
Lucy instantly after she arrived a year ago. I wished I could say the same.

"Shoot." I suddenly wished I was back in bed, asleep, in Nightopia. Preferably playing with Gimp,
as I didn’t feel like keeping up with any sharp banter at the moment.

"Have you found someone special recently? Or have you been reading way too many fanfictions
again?" She asked slyly.

"Have I– What?" I blinked, looking directly into Lucy’s stare. What did it matter if I read the odd
romantic fan-made work? Odd, as in religiously. Was it really so wrong that they weren’t all that innocent to the purest of virgin eyes either? But seriously though, what the heck was she talking about?


"No, why the hell do you ask?" My eyes narrowed with oncoming suspicious and I stood up, smoothing down the back of my uniform. Distracted by the conversation at hand, I swung my backpack up onto my shoulder –narrowly avoiding getting my braid caught– and failed to notice an open compartment before it was too late. Cursing loudly when four pens jumped ship and hit the floor, I crouched under the table to retrieve them.

Lucy chuckled at this, breathing the word klutz into the hand covering her mouth. This earned the girl a good natured slap to the leg from yours truly. This little bit of failure hadn’t deterred Lucy from continuing.

"Just wondering. You kept saying a guy’s name in your sleep like a fuckin’ mantra. I almost had to stuff paper in your mouth a couple times." Lucy sighed, her Canadian-accent slipping through the British one she had forged.

"A name huh? You’re pulling my leg again."

Let’s play dumb here. Yep, that’ll work fine.

"Yeah, maybe I am." Lucy moved in closer with an odd, half-cracked smile, "So, who's this Ren guy? He cute?"

I nearly flipped the desk I was getting up in front of. Thank god I wasn’t under it when Lucy spoke. Now that they were at the same level I regarded her, aghast. “What the shit, Lucy.” Was my simple, five syllable reply.

"So I was right!"

"I never said that! He’s a just a friend of mine." I snapped and rubbed my heated face with one hand. The other palm simultaneously flashed the universal signal at her to stop-right-now-before-she-regretted-something. Was it universal? That did mean stop, right? Why wasn’t she stopping?

Instead Lucy laughed, "Okay, okay! But who’s this friend? Where'd you meet him? Tell me, because this is the first positive male encounter from you I've heard ever!"

"Seriously?" I paused, leaving the brunette hanging. Renhet had been labeled as an imaginary friend by whoever I had mentioned him to as a child. I kept a journal, just as Owl suggested, so I could record anything that could be lost to memory, but for some odd reason I’d never forgotten a thing. Not a single night. So now it was all I ever focused on. What I experienced every evening was a touchy subject. Not many people in the past ever thought I was sane for believing it. I had problems fitting into my new home from the beginning; the trauma I went through before instigating the move did not help me integrate. My imaginary world hadn’t helped either.

Now I was almost afraid of sharing or bringing up the other world I was a part of. This was the first time the subject had been approached in a long time.

"Um, well, I grew up with him, sort of. He's an old friend of mine, that's all." It was a half-assed answer, sure. But it was better then Lucy knowing just how crazy I was. I'm friends with a rogue trickster Nightmaren who steals my phone and pesters me every night. Sounds great.
"He's in Japan?" I nodded and Lucy looked a little disappointed now.

"Yeah, guess you could say that."

The saddened look quickly evaporated from Lucy’s studious amber eyes. "Too bad, you got my hopes up."

The second bell rang and we both jumped into action, myself less so then the other. My friend had a complex for punctuality, and it was surprising to see that Lucy had lost track of time.

"Shit! We have music next, don't we?" She ran for the door, me following behind the other in attempts to keep up.

"Yep. We’re late." Lucy and I jogged quickly to our next class. On the way, we passed various stragglers wandering the hallways on their spare period. A small group of familiar boys stood at the lockers at the end of the hall and the tallest auburn followed me as I darted around the corner. His stare was an odd one. Creepy. Wasn’t he in my math class? It mattered little at the moment and my friend and I continued on with our race.

Everyone knew who I was. Loud mouthed, strange, slightly Otaku –but who could blame me- and just down right… strange.

We managed to slip in right before the teacher turned to see us scampering to our seats. Quietly, they got out our flutes and sat down. I unlocked the case pulling out three silver bits of metal and assembling them. A smile twitched at my lips, how ironic my choice had been. When I’d first began high school, I merely wished to try out instrumental music for the kicks and the school credit. However, the subject had grown on me and now I have taken it every year since. My marks were fair in the class, however it also helped that one of my friends was a Nightmaren who had been playing for gods only knew how long. That was a nice perk, even if the flute was invisible.

A voice interrupted my thoughts, "Oh wow. Kurt's here today." My attention drifted to the doorway as the girl beside me whispered. A behemoth walked through the square arch. Lanky, pale and silent. My eyes trained on the late student as he strolled over to the piano, giving a quiet apology to the teacher on the way. When he reached the bench, he sat; eyes staring blankly at the carpet floor.

"He's soooooo pretty." Lucy breathed next to me and I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t you swoon on me now. He’s just a rich-kid… and a drone.” A hiccup jumped from my friend’s throat as she turned to face me in shock.

“Drone? My god Mori, no wonder you don’t have a man yet.”

“Hey, not into zombies, thanks.” The look Lucy gave told me that I was going to hell for that comment. Lucy had a thing for Kurtason. Then again, everyone did.

The teacher took that moment to speak up, breaking everyone from their conversations. "Alright! We have three weeks until the next concert date as of today. We’ll be practicing piece thirteen and fourteen." The old man glanced over the latecomer at the piano, giving him a nod, “Kurtason, would you begin piece 13 for us from the beginning? Everyone follow along.”

Everyone’s instruments rose and I readied the flute at my lips. A skillful melody began at the piano and the flute’s part began four bars in. From what I saw, the boy hadn’t taken out any music sheets from his bag. Everything was entirely from memory.

From my gathered knowledge, Kurtason Cartwright was a prodigy pianist and had won competitions
locally and worldwide. He also had a reputation for being notoriously absent for long periods of
time. Many years had gone by since we had both begun attending the same school and yet he hadn’t
even made eye contact with me once. Being born into a family with a ton of money, I alway
wondered why Kurtason even bothered to attend a public school. Not when he could be going to a
fancy-ass academy instead.

Another observation was that even though he was often at the top of the schools latest gossip, he had
no evident associates. Instead the kid acted like a breathing umbra, avoiding people’s attention as if
every other living soul was the black plague. I had to struggle every day to earn whatever positive
feedback I could, and Kurtason didn’t have to lift a finger to get attention.

Rumors could be cruel, and they weren’t very lenient on him either. I’d heard some pretty disturbing
things about him from classmates but I tried not to pay them any mind. He didn’t seem like a bad
person.

My hands fumbled with the notes when I realized the other player was looking up from the keys, still
not breaking the music’s rhythm.

Think of the devil, and he will look.

Our eyes met for a split moment as the song ended. I immediately looked away, feeling oddly
bashful all of a sudden. His blank expression morphed a bit in my eyes, like a hint of curiosity.

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At the end of class, I stuffed my small instrument case into the shelf with the others. Lucy had
already gone, as she had left to give something to one of her other friends.

Someone abruptly shoved into my back from behind. It set my off balance for a moment, but when I
re-gathered my bearings, my head turned to see a familiar blond walk casually away surrounded by a
group of girls. Lizzy Jordan, I sneered bitterly at the girl’s retreating back. What the ever-loving fuck
was that for?

Sensing that the room wasn’t vacant just yet, my attention cast briefly back over the piano and
noticed Kurtason still in the room picking papers up off the floor. When he stood, I realized why I
hadn’t noticed him still in the room. He had been crouching. Closer now that I wasn’t up on a
bleacher, the kid was gigantic next to my petite figure. Had I mentioned his height before? Oh right,
behemoth. If I was a betting girl –and I am– it was assumable that my eyes would meet the height of
the guy’s belly button, if I was lucky. Without saying a passing word to him, I gulped and walked
out into the hallway. It was tempting to approach him, but, I’d lost my nerve too soon. Eventually I
tracked down my companion in the library and we both proceeded to the lunch room.
Tedious. Really, it was. Why bother sending him to locate her when there could’ve been someone else closer in the vicinity? Apparently it was his job now to know where she was at all hours of the day. How shameful, to be reduced to this. Laughable.

Reala petulantly turned the corner, entering the hallway accommodating the highest ranking offers. Three doors stood at attention. One of them in particular remained fully barricaded by stone, blocking it from any curious hands or eyes. It was really too bad Wiseman wouldn’t just tear it up and replace the room with a blank wall. The most recent addition within the corridor lay diagonally across from his own quarters. In all reality however, it was almost a decade old already. Boy does time ever fly when you’re immortal.

The newest dwelling he came to face to face with and Reala’s fist met the door sharply in a few knocks.

It was still fairly early in the day, or, er… night? The time zones of Reality worked differently when compared to the Night Dimension, so what did it matter? As long as the occupant opened up their blasted door and gave Reala what he required, it mattered none to him.

A scrabbled of uncoordinated claws on wood had Reala glaring at the door. Just as he presumed, his partner revealed herself looking half-dead. Reala had been well aware of Coget’s later shift during the previous night and how it had been taxing on her, but if anyone knew about the whereabouts of her dependant, she would. Time to get down to business.

"Where the hell is she? The master’s sent for her but she’s not in her--"

"Already gone." The other first-level yawned. It was such a nonchalant answer.

"What? Gone? What do you mean gone?" Glare tapering further, Reala crossed his arms.

“Early shift. Can’t imagine how she does it,” Another yawn. “Can I go back to sleep now?"

“When did she leave? I--“

"Awn, poor daddy. You can’t always keep tabs on her, she’s a big girl." She clucked. Coget snickered lightly as her partner winced at the word daddy. This wasn’t the correct topic he came here to discuss about.

"HEY! Not so loud!" The red ‘Maren hissed, “And I’m only here, because somebody can’t receive Wiseman’s telepathic waves and has to be informed of orders directly.”

Coget giggled and let out a nostalgic sigh, brushing off the others frantic words. "Yeah. I'm going to miss it too.” Her pink eye glanced away from Reala’s face to observe something behind him and then quickly looked away. Her grin spread wider.

“Are you even listening to me?” Was all Reala could grit out before the subject of their conversation spoke up behind him.

“Onee-chan. Reala.” The brief greeting had the eldest of the group recoiling away from Akila’s presence. He turned to face the Nightmaren no longer in Coget’s, nor his direct care. She hadn’t changed much, but had grown to her full size. Still she was cosmetically the clone image of Reala, however as her build filled out over the years, her form had become far more sleek and
agile.

All Nightmaren had a choice of whether they wished to be addressed as male or female. The irony behind Akila choosing to keep the title of *she* had become rather amusing to Reala. Her other violet creator insisted on the title of *he* and denied of his outer appearance no matter what anyone said.

Thankfully Coget was the first one to speak. "Well, that was fast!" Akila shrugged at this response.

"It didn't take much to get through her, she only had one Ideya." Her soft-spoken voice rung an octave lower then her mother’s. Whenever her voice rose high enough Akila could make the red general jump out of his skin. "Bella said you were looking for me?"

"The master sent for you." Reala repeated and then inquired curiously, "You’ve been taking all the early missions?"

“Yes. I can’t sleep in."

“I wish I could say the same."

Akila glanced over at her guardian dozing off in the doorway. "I see. Um, maybe you should go back to bed." A smirk tugged at her black lips as well as the stitched ones of her caretaker.

"Ah, love to. Have fun sweetie." Coget then paused for a moment and glanced over at Reala knowingly, before shutting the door with a giggle. An silence bloomed between the two. While Reala had become her mentor over the years and she respected him, there still existed a solid wall between them. This wall, was a very awkward wall.

"Well, I’d− better get going then." Akila trailed off, not really knowing how to break the tension. Backing out of the hall she sped off before Reala could respond.

The realization came to Reala that Akila was long gone by now. He sighed and readied a dimensional window where he stood for his next mission. A memory of how fascinated those inquisitive blue eyes were when first seeing a portal passed over Reala’s vision and in turn he worked faster.

"9 years." He shivered at the thought, "Time really does fly."

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“Akila.” Wiseman’s hands peered down at his dwarfed minion below. Me. I knelt over the god’s abyss and bowed my head, playing the proper respects.

"You called for me master?"

“Yes, I have cleared your scheduling for this week and I’ve replaced it with a more… formidable mission.” I gazed up at the impervious being in confusion.

"Of course, Master Wiseman. But, is it necessary to clear the entire schedule?"

Wiseman silenced for a period of time and I briefly wondered if I spoke out of line. I tensed under the gaze of the master’s four visible hands.

“Indeed. It is.” He finally drawled. “I need you to scout a visitor for me. This one in particular has− evaded, all attempts of second-level and third-level attacks. Very few have returned and from what has been reported, the visitor fights alone. Discover the source of power they have at
My mind froze. Wait, was this the same visitor I’d been hearing rumors about? I wasn’t a very social individual, but being the quiet, observant one, I had overheard little snippets of information from the others. Four of the newer Second-levels had vanished from the eating-room tables over the last month. These disappearances happened one after the other. Subtle, as they were. It caused quite a stir up among the brighter Nightmaren. I chose to keep my mouth shut when a vast number of questions bubbled to the forefront of my mind. Angering the master was something that you just didn’t do.

“Now go, you will have as much time as you need to dispose of him if what he carries is not of use to us. Take precautions. If successful, you will be promoted.”

Wait. What?

“Pr-promoted, master?”

Was he saying what I thought he was saying? Was he really?

“You were originally of first-level class. But you have proved your worth loyally to me despite your amnesia. You will be re-granted you’re intended title.”

Oh sweet Jesus. He was serious! It took every ounce of concentration for me to not just squeal out in joy.

“However, if your task becomes known to the other levels, then punishment will be received. No one is to know. Understood?”

A foreboding chill ran down my back at the sound of the warning. Suspicious as it was to enforce this particular rule, my head bobbed in agreement regardless.

“Thank you Master Wiseman. I will be sure to bring back good news.” He briefed me on the rest of the necessary information before dismissing.

As soon as the master’s eyes were out of range I lapped into a little victory dance only meant for no one to see, but stopped short when coming to a solid resolution. It was time to prove myself and I knew exactly how to do it.

0-0-0

Now, how the hell do I go about this? Shortly this became the newest question for me to ponder. After hovering around the northern side of the castle, my confidence had begun to wane. I’d never performed a stealth mission before but that wasn’t the real concern. If the visitor did have something useful for the Nightmaren army, was I supposed to force him into assisting with their conquest? Or was I supposed to capture him and let Wiseman do the talking? I hovered down one of the central hallways puzzling away, now thoroughly less enthusiastic about my future task.

A pattering of feet went by me, unnoticed at first, until a bold squeak piped up not too far away. "Oh! Akila!" A squat, mouse-like Nightmaren waddled up to me from one of the rooms and I smiled warmly down at him.

"Hello, Lolly-Boo." Many of the castle’s occupants thought Wiseman had finally gone of the deep end a few years ago after creating this Nightmaren and his twin sister. Often times I would hear gossip in the hallways involving the second-level’s appearance as being an insult to our kind. Yet this lack of scary didn’t affect his Ideya input. Cuter could be creepier they say. Once that had been...
my tactic when I was younger.

"So, what'cha up to?" He asked, blinking cheerfully up at me. His eyes were large. Large enough to cast the illusion of innocence. Which wasn’t much of an illusion at any rate, he was pretty damn feeble.

"Fantastic actually, you?"

Lolly-Boo hesitated, then sighed, looking significantly less courageous than usual. "Claws tried to eat me again."

I stared at him dumbly for a moment before giggling. "Lovely. You know, I could help again if you're being bullied." I patted him on the head and his strange, blue ears submissively lowered. Countless times I had come to his rescue before. It was how we had met and become close acquaintances. Rarely did a Nightmaren assist another of its kind unless ordered to. More commonly if one did, they would do it for personal benefit. The pathetic creations were left to fend for themselves in most cases, but I guess I was a strangely kind soul. Over the years, many Second-level Nightmaren had come to trust me more or less because of this; and trust was a challenging achievement when working under Wiseman the Wicked.

"No, No! It's fine, honest. I've got my dignity to uphold you know." He laughed as well, but nervously.

"Alright, alright." Drifting off towards the central hub, the younger Nightmaren followed me on pattering feet. I initiated some small talk once more. "Where's your sister?"

My companion sighed, "No clue. I'm looking for her actually. 'Was going to ask you."

"I see. Well, I need to get going. Just got reassigned. I'll see you tomorrow."

A fleeting look from the tragic mouse had me smiling again apologetically. He stopped at the next intersection of castle tunnels but I continued onward. "Aw, Okay. See you."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the mouse shudder, even from this distance. A small, “Yeah, to you maybe.” mumbled from the smaller Nightmaren and a proud smile graced my lips. The story behind this conversation was a shocking one indeed, especially to newer models. It was an even greater scare for the elders.

Two years after the corruption outbreak left Akila the only survivor. Eluding discussions on the topic had become a specialty of hers and eventually no one bothered to inquire about the incident. Around that time, as an amnesia victim, she had been re-taught the ability to speak in full sentences and relocated to her own residence in the Second-level wing.

Without any company her age, distractions were welcome whenever loneliness reared its ugly head.
Exploring Nightmare to pass the time had become the most popular. Whenever a new door had been discovered she would open it to observe its owner going about their business. By the end of her long exploration, Akila had seen almost all the interiors of every room in all three wings. Finally, it had come down to two final doors.

The first one, located in the First-level corridor, was blocked and couldn’t be entered. The second door Akila was forbidden to open, but that didn’t stop her.

"Where does this go?" Akila stood at the foot of the door, staring upward. Blue and red panels shaped the door as it towered thirty times over the curious little Nightmaren. Golden trim held all the edges together and her claw ghosted along the metal procautiously.

Interest won out over the trepidation of getting caught. She was a good little Nightmaren, but it wouldn’t hurt to break one measly rule, right?

It took a good deal of strength to push the panels apart, but she succeeded to make a crack large enough to slip through.

The room inside had the appearance of a warehouse. She took a few airborne steps into the heavy lake of mist concealing the ground, removing her fingers from the large handle in the process. The heavy rungs of oxidized chains slopped down from the high ceiling at every angle and Akila regarded them tensely. Many crisscrossed in front her view, like a trap created to alarm the room’s occupants of intruders. This arrangement was enough to put Bella’s web nets to shame.

She had no choice but to land on the misty ground and crawl under them. Being as small as she was, Akila had no problem slipping under and shortly stood up on the other side. Taking to the air again would’ve been a hassle, as similar obstacles lay in her wake, so she remained on her feet.

A couple more steps forward and the toe of Akila’s boot caught on a hidden mass under the fog. Her arms slapped the ground to cushion the fall and it scattered the powdery white clouds.

Recovering from the shock, Akila looked down at the accused object behind her trip. Suddenly wished she hadn’t. A small pile of carcasses and bones lay at her feet.

Gasping in fright, she hurriedly straitened herself up. Maybe this room was better left unknown to her, was the little Nightmaren’s frantic conclusion. Slightly more fear addled, it didn’t occur to Akila what was hanging innocently over her head until a weight thumped against her hat and a metallic rattle hit her ears.

A guttural snarl lashed about the room and the little Nightmaren’s body locked in place.

Akila slowly lowered her head enough to get away from the chains and turned to come face to face with a set of narrow, violet eyes and a snout the size of three of her. It raised its large, blue head and its narrow jowls opened into a livid, fanged growl. Another identical, crimson face rose out from the mist beside it, equally infuriated.

Though Akila’s body remained devoid of movement, her eyes hadn’t. She noticed the chain connecting the two at the back. Alarm continued to trickle down Akila’s back in sickening spirals, but not as potently as before.

Her legs felt rubbery as the snouts drifted closer, but no longer were they sounding off warning growls. A waft of air puffed from the first dog's nose. Akila stared at them, not daring to move until they pulled away. They actually weren’t all that scary when curious.

After finishing with their inspection, Akila felt a moment of courage. Slowly she let a hand rise to
touch one of the snouts, not breaking her gaze with the blue giant. Staring it in the eye, it didn’t pull back or snap at her hand. The canine’s spiky form relaxed as Akila’s fingers made contact with its large nose. Tenderly, she pet the blue fur just above the black patch and a timid smile tugged at her lips. When it whined a bit and laid its head at her feet, it gave Akila a better access to its pointed ears; her claws went to work scratching behind them.

The red one, previously watching from the sidelines, began to seem interested with his twin’s strange new treatment. The blue one’s brother lowered its head inquisitively down to Akila’s level and it flinched when the small Nightmaren offered her other hand.

As if ending off an initiation for her acceptance, the blue canine brought out its tongue and licked the jester up the left side of her body. It managed to nail her face, arm and everything else with saliva in the process causing the youngling grimaced. Letting out a loud “ew” and giggling at the slimy feeling, Akila lost track of time spending it in the home of her new friends.

An hour or so into Akila’s visit, the earlier adrenaline running through her system subsided, allowing a heavy wave of drowsiness to wash over her. Both dogs had relaxed as well, lying close together with muzzles nearly touching. Accompanied by the soft, manes and burning body heat of both canines, she dosed off on a red paw.

When Reala finally peered into Cerberus’s lair, it was nearing the end of the day.

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Many times I had heard my superior talk about it with others. That was when I realized just how outstanding my luck was.

All of Nightmare knew about Cerberus and his reputation. Even the First-levels had no control over the wild animal’s rage, so everyone steered clear.

From what had been gathered through gossip, a few Nightmaren had been sent out to search for me. Exceeding expectations even further, my odd luck seemed to have placed Cerberus’s lair on Reala’s list of last resorts. The general was about to leave the doorway, in fear of waking the beast up, however he noticed a small blue figure contrasting against the red dog’s paw. At first, he assumed it was a toy but when he managed to get in close enough to look, the shock nearly knocked him dead.

There was Cerberus, protectively curled around me, who in most normal cases I would’ve been the perfect size for a snack.

Even Wiseman had to pause and process the information after being informed. After everything had been sorted out, the master hadn’t given me any trouble. In fact, he treated our newly found companionship as an asset for his forces.

A loud scream from across the hall tugged me away from my thoughts.

A swarm of Second-levels crossed over into the rarely used infirmary now far from where I hovered, dragging a hysterical Nightmaren along for the ride. I dashed over to the group in attempt to assess the commotion, but wasn’t fast enough. The closing door cut me off, as well as the unlucky Second-level attempting to escape. I knew better than to force the door open, any interference could make the situation worse. I turned my back to the infirmary and my eyes caught sight of the bright trail of blood painting the stone floor of the foyer. My brow creased, disgusted and concerned.

“What the hell was that about?” I murmured out loud, not noticing the presence behind me.

"This is all thanks to that one kid. A Second-level finally made it back alive." I jumped when hearing
the voice so close. Bomamba was behind me but I hadn’t heard the door open.

My response was obtuse, but not censoring the range of my knowledge would only get me in trouble. At least the Visitor’s dreaded presence wasn’t a total mystery to everyone. "The Visitor behind the killings?"

A deep grin parted the witch’s lips. "Wiseman’s going to crack this one open for information once he calms down. I dunno what the Visitor did, but this guy’s arms were sliced clean off.” The cat lady cackled. I wasn’t sure if the trigger had been my strained expression or the delightful image of missing limbs. Bomamba left the foyer, bounding off on the top-like point she used as a foot. One of the witch’s many balled cats uncurled from her arm as she hopped and it grinned at me from under the bloodstained sleeve. I gulped. That green one still made me uneasy, even after nine years of knowing her. The news Bomamba offered hadn’t changed my opinion of the Second-level.

This Visitor however made me feel even worse. Perhaps this mission was a little more then I bargained for.

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Today was the day. The day for a suicide mission.

In a pessimistic state of mind, I left my quarters. All due to one stupid mission no less. ‘Suck it up and do it for the cause.’ I kept telling myself, ‘Get it over with so you won’t have to worry about it.’ Regardless of what I thought, my nerves were running thin.

Earlier that morning I had visited Cerberus to quell his fouling mood. I also hoped it would soothe my own anxiety, but it didn’t do much good. Cuddling with the hound usually did the trick, but I had to leave on short notice. It was wholly unsatisfying, but procrastination wasn’t going to get the job done.

While on my trek back down the corridor from the dog’s room, I took notice of an odd vacancy crawling about the hallways. How unusual for the mornings. Others were usually bustling about at these hours, but there was no one in sight. Had I missed something? I blinked as a frantic patter of feet on stone interrupted her observation. I gasped when a startling jolt from my left pulled me forwards. The next second, I was being tugged along awkwardly in the opposite direction. At first I didn’t struggle against the pull, but when I looked down at my feeble capturer I frowned.

"Boo! What are you doing?" I pulled back with little effort, succeeding halting the mouse in his tracks. Lolly-Boo pulled at my arm fruitlessly and I stared at the second-level as he continued with his futile attempts. After a few seconds I decided to speak up again, interrupting the sad display. "I don’t have time for this. Why are you in such a hurry?"

The mouse stopped in his tracks and his eyes widened as if in realization. "Oh! Sorry. I forgot that Wiseman can’t send you mind messages. Aki, there’s new arrivals!" Lolly-Boo tugged insistently at my hand again and I surrendered, letting him guide me to our new destination. It was a pain that I couldn’t connect to the master’s frequencies just as everyone else could. There hadn’t been a new creation in a good few years. This was actually fairly exciting. Maybe the scouting mission could wait a little while longer before leaving?

The tugging became greatly insistent and I found myself being pulled low to the ground. "Good god, calm down already!" I could hear the mouse laugh as he pulled me in through the tall doors and into Wiseman’s Abyss.

Every creation was there from every level. I scanned the audience. This must be an important
revealing, it was a good thing Lolly-Boo caught me when he did. My gaze landed on my guardian not far from the entrance. With her hovered Lord Reala, glaring spitefully at the rowdy lower levels. I joined them mutely, catching the tail end of Coget’s words.

"… must be major for the master to call all of us." On cue, Wiseman the Wicked rose from the depths of darkness below. Everyone quieted down as his booming voice echoed off the wall-less darkness.

“Silence! This new addition will change our progress ten fold! After almost a decade of work, a new class of Nightmaren has been formed!” Many gasped after the god’s announcement and a wave of rambling began among the Nightmaren in harsh whispers.

Jackle, of course, was the first to loudly respond. "That's impossible! One’s the highest number!..." He trailed off, “wait− is it?” The second level began to count his digits to confirm and the others surrounding him muttered agreements.

“Now! I give you, Level-Zero!”

Two Nightmaren rose from the depths in front of the looming god. Most of the other creations awed in amazement and others gave each other skeptical glances. I hadn’t realized how close I had gotten to the crowd’s border until I looked back behind me. There were many other Nightmaren between myself and the First-Ranks.

My attention went back to the first Nightmaren on display. Its appearance appeared to be fairly unisex but it had feminine twinges in its physique. Very few edges lay smooth as its armor consisted of many silver points and sharp metals. Its hands were large, weapon-like in their design. They reminded me of my guardian’s retractable claws, only hers were needle sharp and thin. The state of its mouth caught my attention the most however. It was covered by cloth and stitched shut.

The second one reminded me of a lizard, but nothing like Chamlan. It was muscular and pale, but also covered in scales and bone. A lengthy alligator’s tail swayed behind it like a snake, back and forth and around its clawed feet. Unlike this one’s sibling, who had rounded protrusions decorating its head, this one had curved bone horns curling in a way that resembled my own headwear. Beady eyes swept the crowd from its ugly face and I grimaced. This one looked perilous, and most frightening.

I looked away for a moment, curious to see how my superiors were taking everything. When I finally caught sight of them between the four Goodles behind me, I instantly began to regret my actions. Reala looked about ready to kill anything that moved.

I swung my attention back towards the new high officers, but when I did, I was put on the spot again by the frightening Nightmaren’s stare. Shivering at the looked, I directed my attention towards my boots, retreating back into the crowd a bit. This was uncomfortable.

"Naer," Wiseman gestured to the one glaring me down, “ValkU.” and then the other. “They are now your new superiors! All ranks will now answer to them, and myself as of today. You are all dismissed.”

Right after Wiseman’s signal to depart, the lower level Nightmaren rushed from his throne room as if their life depended on it. I managed to squeeze my way from the crowd to get higher above the mass of scrambling forms. It took a while for the room to clear enough for the exit to be usable, but I eventually got through. Waiting for me outside stood a fuming Reala and my guardian twittering away at him.
"Unbelievable! He replaced us! – ME!"

"Reala-san! Master Wiseman knows what he’s doing."

"He’s lost his mind! How are those brutes going to change a thing, they have no experience. We’ve been demoted to nothing but the common rabble. I’ve been in the field for hundreds of years!"

The next burst of movement between the two had me gaping stupidly. Coget yanked the side of his hat, Lord Reala’s hat, and jammed the end swiftly and violently into his mouth, effectively muffling him into silence. It was an outrageously humiliating thing to witness, but even more devastating the next second when she snapped.

“Urusai! Old man, you’re outdated and your work ethics haven’t been at their peak in years! Get over it!” She shrieked.

Sure, just pour more gasoline on that fire. Things were getting ugly and I knew that if I didn’t act now, a brawl would break loose. So I stepped in, or tried to anyway.

“Hey, HEY!” With one foot, and the opposite arm, I pushed between my superiors. At that moment Reala’s claws flew for Coget’s face. Everything froze when a large, bladed appendage interrupted his blow, grabbing Reala’s extended arm. I hadn’t noticed anyone approach us, but when I looked up my eyes widened.

The Nightmaren introduced as VaIkU stood a few feet over us. From a distance it was hard to tell the height of the new models but now I was close enough to see each individual red stitch sealing the material over its mouth.

~Is there a problem here?~

At first, I thought it had spoken to me, but nothing on its face moved. The question repeated and a response stuttered out of my open mouth.

“uh– No?...” Nervousness spread through me and I glanced uncertainly at my guardian. Coget had her eyes peeled on the Nightmaren’s bladed hand, holding Reala’s claws inches away from her face.

~What level are you?~

"Hm?” My eyes darted around the other figure for a moment before landing on the strange, inverted pupils of the– speaker? “Second Rank,” I gulped and continued on carefully. “I apologize for this, just a disagreement. We were leaving.” It came out timidly, slowly dwindling with confidence under VaIkU’s neutral gaze. Reala chose that moment to speak something confusing.

“Is it, talking to you?”

~Yes, I am. I only chose to speak with her.~ Its tone was smooth and even, while also being deep and calculating. ~My method of communication is through telepathy, as I have no other alternative. I may choose who gets to hear me.~

“I heard her loud and clear.” Coget spoke. When I looked up, my Guardian’s eyes lay dead set on the taller figure. Our group uncoiled awkwardly from our tensed positions and hovered close to each other. Reala snarled, pulling his captured arm away from the other’s grasp. They kept their distance from the newest creation after that, waiting for it to make a move.

~Please refrain from making a scene again. I will not cause trouble for you if the same is returned.~ With that bluntly stated, VaIkU turned to leave. All three of us remained silent until the Level Zero
“Pompous little prick.” Reala hissed bitterly. “Who does he think he is?”

“He? Sounded more like a she to me.” Coget noted lightly after his slight. “I swear I heard a feminine tone through that mind-meld.”

“What does it matter?” He snapped, turning sharply to take his leave. “Those fools better not interfere with our business again.” And then he was gone, leaving myself and Coget silently to ourselves.

My eyes darted over to my guardian when the other sighed heavily.

“He’s going to be pissy now and a ton of joy to work with. I’m not going to touch that, and you shouldn’t either. Let him cool down.”

I was quick to respond, “I wasn’t planning on confronting him anyway.”

“Good. Damn that crank-case is so hormonal. Where’re you heading?” Her question wasn’t answered strait away, but I had made up a good alibi for my soon-to-be whereabouts during the previous night.

“The master wanted me to perform some Ideya sweeps in the farther regions for the next few weeks. I don’t think I’ll be back until late.” Coget chuckled at this and winced.

“Ouch, what did you do to piss him off?”

“I didn’t. Sweeps aren’t that bad.”

“They’re soooo boring.”

“I enjoy the scenery.”

Our dialogue met to another silence. Maybe now was the time to leave? I thought, head hung to the side. I was unaware of how pitiful the stance made me look until a soft hand on my shoulder had me looking at Coget once more.

“Ogenki desu ka?”

“I’m fine.”

“Nothing’s bothering you?”

I huffed, “No. Why are you so concerned?”

Coget frowned, removing her hand. She hovered a meter away or so before stating, “You’ve been acting distant, distracted. Like something’s been bothering you.”

“Yes, that’s because I’ve been busy.” I sighed and approached the first-level.

“You sure?”

“I swear it. I need to go. Wiseman’s watching you too remember?” This won me a laugh from the other.

“Unlike me, you don’t need to worry about that, now do you?” I smiled at this and both of us parted
ways. Coget waved me off before heading down the main hall. “Take care of yourself kodomo, see you soon.”

I released a breath of air caught in my chest when my guardian left my sight. Now it was time to get down to business. I dashed off in the opposite direction and took the hall my acquaintance had dragged me down. Master Wiseman had given me specific instructions to open a window in a one part of the castle, or else I would not be able to get through.

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Depending on the amount Ideya a visitor possessed, the barriers of their Nightopias would vary in strength. Also, if a visitor experienced any negative life-changing incidents in the waking world, it would reflect in the state of their Ideya’s light. Whenever it was in danger of dimming or flickering out, the walls would weaken, allowing Nightmaren to enter without a conflict.

Apparently this visitor in particular had a nearly impenetrable wall protecting their realm, yet Wiseman had been able to detect some soft spots in its fortification. I knew that even with the opening in close reach, I would still have trouble severing through the void. It took a long time to get a handle on opening the gateways. Reala had to thoroughly drill me so I would be able do it on my own, but it took a few years for me to make the slightest indentation in a barriers surface.

Now at my destination within the farthest corner of the castle, I was happy to find no one there to witness my humiliating efforts. The fourth time my hand searched to find a tear, my claws brushed against the right energies. Gracelessly ripping away a window, I gasped out a loud "Finally!" in frustration.

As the window filled in with the murky skies of a Nightopia, I vaulted on through.

Now entering the new, gloomy atmosphere I halted. For some reason, it didn’t feel so new.

The trees bellow were tall, ancient willows blanketing a dying forest floor. The clouds took up the entire sky, blotching out every hint of clean blue. I lowered my altitude and ducked under the high tree line. A subtle mist hung over the ground, though it did not hold the bone chilling dampness I expected. Where had I seen all this before? It was on the tip of my tongue, but it just wasn’t there.

I propelled myself through the trees, avoiding the brittle boughs and the lowest hanging veils of branches. After passing over a shallow creak with murky currents, I stopped at a bush.

My head tilted slightly when noticing the odd flora perched against the bleak green. It was a small violet rose, poking its budding head from under the leaves. My claws plucked it free and I turned it over in my palm, silently marveling at how lovely it was.

I’m supposed to be scouting for information on a dangerous visitor, and here I am picking flowers.

I dropped the dead organic and continued on, not wishing to be spotted while idling un-alert.

I traveled a little further into the wood and noticed that a clearing sat up ahead. I made sure to approach it cautiously, and when I reached the edge of the tree line a very large black object captured my eye. It was a box, positioned in the very center of the dirt circle. Looking around me, I drifted towards this curious box. No one seemed to be in the area, I observed. Maybe the visitor was in another part of the Nightopia? It looked like a very vast world from above.

I landed on the dirt floor and walked around the box, only to find a bench and a long row of black and white rectangles. Did they have a purpose? Were they important? Many questions passed through my mind as I brushed a claw across the white rectangles, the shapes dented inward. A sound
jumped forward at me from the box and I jolted in alarm. The keys were flat again.

My hand, a little braver now, pressed another rectangle near the center of the box and it produced a clear, crisp note. Fascinating. My fingers explored some of the other keys, testing them to find that they all sounded different. The melodic noises also sounded familiar.

A shuffling sound in the dirt just behind me, startling myself from the distraction and I twirled around. A large limb swung at me and I ducked with an alarmed shout. Whatever was attacking me was much larger, but adrenaline had me back on my toes. I blocked a hit, grunting at the solid impact and then tried to duck out from my attacker’s constricting arm as it tucked me into a firm hold.

The flash of an orange light and scalding heat near my face made me freeze. The struggling ceased and a wicked gurgle of fear pooled in my gut.

Oh shit.

My eyes darted down to the blade at my collar. The long sword was translucent and I could feel the raw power in it pulsing, ready to dig into my flesh. I traced it to the hand of my attacker and found that the weapon jutted out of their hand.

"You." The fear flooding my insides solidified at the sound of the voice. It was male, deep and chilled. I finally looked up at the visitor’s face. A young adult human gazed down at me from high above, swathed with a short mop of dirty golden curls framing his pale face. A set of steel grey eyes locked intently on me. This male was once a boy. A boy, who startlingly came back into my memory. He was not a child anymore.

I stammered, "Y-you're−" and then lost the words again. This day had been full of stammering.

The visitor drew away from me, disengaging from the inhumanly strong grip he had me locked in. I observed the blade cautiously before it disintegrated, vanishing back into the man’s skin.

"I-I can't believe this. You're actually−" He sounded breathless before he paused in his sentence, but I paid no mind to his speaking. My focus lay elsewhere. The visitor gave me a strange look, realizing that I had been gawking wordlessly at him since he pulled away.

I couldn't believe it. I had never laid eyes on a visitor this old before. Most adult visitors did not have Nightopias, as their hearts were no longer developing or they were corrupted by reality. Standing beside the visitor I felt even smaller then I usually did. Smaller then when placed against my new superiors. Even VaIkU didn't stand as tall as he did.

Stupidly, I stated, "You’ve... grow."

A small chuckle came from the man, "Yes, I know. Too much. So have you." He offered back and suddenly I felt very lightheaded.

Was this really the right visitor? Was he really the one killing off the Nightmaren? I suddenly didn’t want it to be true, but more questions kept piling on.

What the hell just came out of his hand?

“So are you here to steal Ideya from me? Or are you here to keep me company?”

I inhaled deeply, “I was curious. Many of my kind have been killed off due to this troublesome visitor and I wanted to know who was doing all the damage. Not more than that.” He laughed
quietly at the emphasized title, but still regarded me warily.

“I see,” He sat down at the bench, long limbs stretched out and back hunch forward. “So, I never got your name last time.”

“I scarcely remember last time.” I responded carefully. My eyes remained trained on the visitor’s figure. His relaxed position looked submissive enough. He would need time to get up from his spot in order to reach me and this would give me a fair enough warning to evade any impending attacks. “I’m going to ask you first.”

"I thought the saying was ladies first?” The visitor prompted.

A sly smile pulled the edge of my lip at the tone of his voice. Clever. "Well, I’m not a lady.”

The man shrugged after a brief silence, showing his compliance. “Kurtason. Kurtason Cartwright.”

"Akila."

"Akila. So I finally know the name of the mystery Nightmaren.” He smiled lightly, pivoting to face the piano. "You've come to take my Ideya, haven't you?” He said it so calmly it caught me off guard.

"You seem very convinced—"

And then another laugh.

“It’s fine. I won’t mind, it’s quite boring here actually. Nothing’s changed since you last showed up.”

“Wh- why do you say that?” I couldn’t see the visitor’s face. His eyes were examining the little white keys not far from his long fingers.

“Because before there was no one to talk too.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Kurtason’s words were empty. Haunting.

“How long have you been here?” It was an appropriate question to ask.

“Since before you first came. Since before I can remember.”

Nine years ago. I grimaced. My mind slowly began to recall how I came to discover this Nightopia in the first place. I passed off the thoughts, knowing what other memories lurked there.

“I need to leave soon.”

“I know.”

“Can I ask you one more question?” I knew I was taking a risk, but I still needed information to bring back.

“Go ahead.”

“What was that blade that came out of your arm?”

There was a nasty silence following my question and I held my breath. When Kurt spoke again it felt as if the world had been lifted off my shoulders and replaced with the entire human solar system.

“I don’t know.”
It didn’t take long for the visitor to disappear, as I no longer had the entire day to fact-find due to the earlier interruptions. It was easier to open a window when exiting the world then when it was to enter, much to my relief. I soon discovered just how exhausted I truly was. Master Wiseman could wait until morning for scouting information. I needed to recharge.

Closing the door to my quarters, I dropped gracefully onto the surface of my bed. An assortment of hanging dolls swayed along the high ceilings to greet my arrival. Some of them were similar to my first ragdoll, others were made of wood, but most of them were crafted out of porcelain.

Porcelain was a beautiful material. Smooth and pale– perfect in every light and yet a very fragile element. This was an unhealthy obsession, I know. Dolls use to be a part of my hunting routine, and I still used them on occasion. They were my old trademark after all. Most of the second-levels knew that. Whenever I came across a new doll abandoned within the confines of a Nightopia, I would carry it home like a trophy. A new addition. A new friend.

My mind wandered back to the visitor. He was a baffling piece of work. Something that I probably would never wrap my mind around. And his flesh was as pale as the models above me.

The top floor of the west wing was blocked.

Damnit. Since when did that get here? Reala looked over the wall of energy. This kind in particular was only known to be placed in an area to obstruct trespassers. What a strange spot too, he observed. Now the First-level had to take another route to get back to his quarters. It figures.

Anyone residing in Nightmare’s domain would gladly admit that the castle was a labyrinth. The corridor’s all looked the same with the exception of light globe placement and door labels. This didn’t matter much to Reala however, this was no problem. Not at all.

Gritting his fangs together, he headed back to the nearest intersection of tunnels.

The demoted Nightmaren Lord’s prior location had been in the training room. It felt great, having his claws shred into whatever his arms could reach; his fists and feet pummeling everything in his range of attack to dust.

This was said figuratively and literally. Anybody who had the audacity to enter the room during this time paid a price. There were six Mamu’s piled up in the left corner of that training room, probably a sparkling heap of nothing by now. Woops.

Despite all the steam that session let off, it hadn’t been enough to quell his mood. Reala still felt outraged, betrayed and downright miserable; but what else could you expect? Even though it was a revolting thing to admit, Coget was right. This had been coming for a while now and yet here he was, behaving like a sulking child. Reala just never imagined himself being put out of position so easily. Like a broken puppet, or a pawn.

He was the Master’s right hand man, his most loyal creation. Reala’s memory wandered back in time, to the many moments when NiGHTS gave him warning. Reala chuckled, humorlessly. Irony, what a fickle thing.

The First-level’s mood continued to sour further after an orange figure abruptly screeched around the corner. Of course, they weren’t watching where they were going and both Nightmaren crashed into each other head first. Reala nearly toppled over. Snarling curses at the imbecile who dared to cross
him in this state, he then paused at the sight of the lower rank. Boy, was he in luck.

Jackle fell due to the impact. He must have been in quite the hurry to get to his destination. It was unfortunate that the Second-level wasn’t aware of his new odds of reaching it. Jackle peered up to see a familiar, murderous face. The bodiless Nightmaren then screamed, high and shrill.

"DON’T EAT ME! I DON’T TASTE GOOD!"

Reala grinned maliciously at the partially invisible figure as it scrambled backwards to get away. He stumbled over his vibrant cape and fell again. The red jester chuckled darkly as he sensed their terror, how invigorating it felt. This was going to be fun. Before Jackle could get up, Reala hovered over and caught a hold of the orange atrocity the ‘Maren called a garb.

"You caught me in a pleasant mood today, you half-minded cretin,” His voice dripped with carefully veiled rage. The other struggled in his grasp, yelping and hollering out as Reala held him back with one powerful fist. “Screaming for mercy, won’t help you now.” The First-level Nightmaren was about the jab a punch at the Second-level’s head when a slippery voice tutted just within hearing range.

"My, my. You’re a feisty one, aren’t you? Reala, am I correct?"

The red jester hissed spitefully, crooking his head to look down the hallway. Not far from the intersecting corridors stood Naer, leaning causally against the stone. His reptilian tail curled around one of his long, bone claws. The Nightmaren grinned, letting the dull illumination of the orb across the hall reflect against his armed fangs.

“I don’t care who you are. Or your status position. Fuck off.” Reala spat. This was it. The culprit behind his rage and humiliation was right there. Jackle had already struggled free under his slackening grip. In his peripheral vision Reala watched the lower rank abscond in the opposite direction.

No matter, there would be other times.

"I need to speak with you. ‘An urgent matter."

“Urgent, is it?” The First-level barked out a cold laugh, “Already need my assistance I see? You new creations are useless. You can take your urgent matter and shove it down your filthy throat. And if you don’t leave me be, I’ll do exactly that for you.” The other’s back left the wall and hovered closer, coming just within reach of Reala as the red jester’s octave hissed low with his threat.

"Just a chat." Naer laughed with feint innocence, “I must inquire you hear me out. It will be for your own good, as well as your associates—” he was about to say something more when the First-level suddenly growled, lashing out with his claws at the superior officer. Naer looked only slightly surprised, easily grasping the attacking hand in a crushing hold. A lecherous grin parted the no-level’s lips as his captive cursed in alarm, struggling to pull his arm free. “Déjà vu, hm? Do you greet all newcomers the same fashion? I witnessed the little skirmish you dared to inflict on my sibling—and I must say, I’m impressed with your courage. However, you First-level models don’t measure up to our power. ” The snake crooned.

His bone-plated arm twisted Reala’s limb downward and it effectively jostled him hard against the stone. A flash of agony ricocheted from Reala’s arm and into his side, causing him to fall to his knees and choke on a gasp of pained anger. Naer released him for a moment before casually reaching down to seize Reala’s vest, the butch lizard lifted him up and slammed him against the wall. The First-level snarled loudly, attempting to kick the other. Things were looking bad at this point. Reala
couldn’t recall the last time he had been at such a disadvantage before.

"This restraining tactic seems to work for all of you, doesn’t it? Now, getting down to business,” The more powerful of the two spoke, “I’m aware of your little secrets game Reala, and every scrap of information that goes on behind the scenes. Wiseman gave us his gifts; we no-levels possess a part of his very soul. I know everything that our dear creator does. Even the things you don’t.”

Reala’s movements began to slow as Naer’s claws dug uncomfortably into his skin. The First-level still kept alert, but knew struggle would be futile beyond this point.

“I’ve made a discovery,” Naer continued. “A nasty one. Your little procreation has been assigned to scout a visitor. One with abilities beyond our measure. This visitor is a threat to Nightmare and if he is not destroyed, then our cause will be for nothing. What is more alarming, is that I have located another visitor with a similar power. I’m not entirely sure what Master Wiseman has planned for their fates, but I do know that he is unaware of the second female.”

Reala listened, not sure exactly what the snake spoke of. There had been rumors of a strange visitor lately, but two?

“Why the hell should I care about any of this? It’s no longer my place to know.”

The other purred at the sound of his doubt, “I purpose an alliance.” Before, Naer was an arm’s with a way to avoid Reala’s flying kicks, but now only a foot of distance separated them. “Assist me in apprehending this other visitor. If you do, I will make sure your status and honor is redeemed. Especially after your many failures.”

That struck a nerve. Reala’s resentment began to build up once more, coming to life with a vengeance.

This time, Naer wasn’t ready and a blue fist hammered into his scaly jaw.

The no-level’s grip gave away, releasing Reala from his hold. The back of the lizard’s claws touched his assaulted left cheek and he looked up at the other Nightmaren in surprise. Reala noticed something very particular then. The scales of Naer’s arms looked damaged and raw. How did that damage happen? At the moment though Reala was too enraged to care, an his current thoughts sprang forth.

“I do not serve you! I only answer to Master Wiseman. Take your petty requests of loyalty elsewhere!” With that said, Reala turned his back to leave with his head held high, only to realize his mistake too late. Before he could respond to the roar behind him, Reala’s side was slammed into the rock once more, arms pinned painfully next to his head.

“Unhand me!”

Once again he was struggling against the other’s tight grip. A cold, sinking feeling caught up with him at that moment, clearing his mind to reason. There was no way to break free from here, the position was too restricting for him to attack or defend. Naer’s face lowered closer to the back of Reala’s head, hissing a set of words that he never thought he’d ever hear.

"Then I’ll make you obey.” The snide voice lowered an octave, just like his own had before. “I wonder how you’ll act if I strip that pride of yours.” Suddenly it was only one arm holding Reala securely to the wall. The other one began to slide lower.

Neither of them noticed the approach of another Nightmaren who had chosen that moment to turn the corner.
“Reala!”

A familiarly disfigured First-level hovered across from the spot where Naer had first appeared. It looked as if Coget had been paralyzed by the sight, plain shock clear on all her features. It was obvious that she had no idea how to approach the situation laid out before her.

As luck would have it, his partner’s horrified exclamation was enough to distract Naer just in time. When Reala felt the other’s hand make contact with his leg, he flipped his shit.

Out of personal desperation and using every ounce of strength he had, the red jester twisted himself enough to get a foot between their bodies. His boot side-kicking the other in the gut and when the claws came loose enough, Reala was out of there flying for his life.

He had forgotten about Coget until she appeared over his shoulder, dashing along with him.

A distant roar ricocheted off the walls of stone from the no-level as Reala and his timely savior raced away.

To where exactly? Anywhere, as long as they were far away from that lunatic.

“Reala! Slow down, we’ve lost him. What the hell happened back there?” At the sound of the sound of his partner’s voice, the older First-level realized just how correct she was and began to slow down. When they came to a halt, he braced a hand against the foyer wall, gasping for air. Reala could sense the other’s looks of concern and intercepted her next question bitterly before she could speak it.

“I’m fine. Just— just fine.”

“Was he trying to—“

“DON’T. Don’t— Just, shut up.”

Coget sealed her mouth shut as the other re-gather himself. Eventually, she had to break his request and murmured, “You’re bleeding.”

Reala’s harsh breathing had almost leveled off into a decent tempo by the time she spoke. He looked up at her puzzled and the other Nightmaren pointed a white finger at his left leg. Examining the area, an angry pair of slashes appeared on the inside of his thigh. Blood trickled in a steady stream down his scarred knee, soaking into the red boot below. It wasn’t a significant amount of blood, but enough. Reala cursed, breathlessly.

“Marvelous. That fucking bastard.”

“What was he trying to do?”

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

Reala explained the encounter to the best of his ability before silencing entirely. Coget pondered over the No-level’s new discovery and her ward’s involvement. It disturbed her just as much.

“Another visitor? Just like the one in the rumors? Aki was assigned a mission like that? Well, that explains why she’s been acting so weird. I wonder why she didn’t tell us.”

“The Master must have ordered her to keep the assignment secret. It’s no ordinary task for a Second-level.” Reala winced, brushing the cuts behind his knee and lifting his shaking hand to observe the vibrant fluid.
Coget’s brow creased, observing this uncharacteristic display, “Can you get back to your room?”

The other laughed bitterly, “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I can. I’ve endured worse.” Her abrupt concern was irritating and it rubbed him the wrong way.

“Good. We should probably get out of here before anyone walks by. Certainly don’t want to ruin your image.” She spoke curtly and the other hissed. Reala wanted to give her a piece of his mind for talking back like that, but right now he couldn’t muster up the energy. Dodging a missile like this one hadn’t been on his to-do list for the day. Or ever even.

“Of course.” He muttered instead. Reala released the wall and his leg stung sharply. It was a good thing First-levels could fly. Now he just hoped the blood wouldn’t leave a trail.

~~~~~Earlier~~~~~

Coget left the Ideya vaults, recently unloading her stash collected over the evening. These assignments given to her had been small lately, but there were many of them. Each of the six visitors had at least one or two Ideya for her to swipe, most of them red, and because of this she made it back in no time.

The stitched up First-level crossed over the foyer housing the main doors into Wiseman’s Abyss. Coget trailed close to the wall, nearly brushing against the tall, carved entry. Right before she passed the knobs of the door, the golden orbs turned and the panel gently swung open, blocking her path. Coget’s rosy eye widened at the figure who walked out right in front of her.

VaIkU, staring lifelessly ahead tilted its eyes to the lower left, noticing her instantly.

“Oh. It’s you again.” The words left Coget’s mouth before she could stop them. She waited tensely for a reply, or even some form of movement from her cold superior, but nothing came.

~I’m looking for my twin. Are you aware of his location?~

Again, that cool, soothing voice.

Despite its calmness, Coget still jerked at the sound of words in her head. She tried to respond in the same way, curious to see if the other could hear her thinking, but the other didn’t show any response to them.

~’Haven’t seen them. I could help you look if you wish?” This new creation fascinated her from the moment VaIkU held a bladed hand next to her face. It was amazing how much control the Nightmaren had. Of course, it was a risk in asking to assist them, but hey, that was all apart of the excitement.

The Nightmaren towering over Coget didn’t say a word, but its expression changed as its brow creased in confusion and the bags under its eyes sunk in further. After a long moment’s pause, it finally replied sounding slightly flustered. This clashed with its stoic tone and it made a bubble of mirth danced in the other’s chest. ~Very well. I will search the North and West sides of the castle. You shall take the East and the South.~ It turned and headed off for its self-assigned destination. Coget remained where she was, thoroughly surprised. How cute.

She hummed silently, muddling about with her thoughts. Before carrying out her new task by heading back in the opposite direction, Coget wondered how different VaIkU’s partner was. Maybe he was also nicer on the inside then the outside too? Now she was pushing her luck.

Coget had already been down the main corridors when on her way to the foyer, so she turned off
into the smaller tunnels. It took her a few minutes of traveling down endless hallways until she heard another voice.

Another two voices actually.

She pressed herself up against the stone corner, dividing the intersections of both hallways. Coget didn’t want to interrupt the bitter exchange just around the bend, but it wouldn’t hurt to snoop a little, right? One of the voices she instantly recognized. Just who was Reala talking to?

All of a sudden, Jackle ran past her in a hurried retreat. It startled her but she managed to stay quiet. He hadn’t seen her there, much to Coget’s relief, but the poor psychopath seemed to be terrified. She listened closely, but unfortunately failed to catch everything.

Something about, a visitor?

The different voice rolled her insides the wrong way. It also kept on raising and lowering in its pitches, adding to the difficulty of her eavesdropping. Coget heard a crack of something hitting flesh and Reala’s resentful tone rang out clearly, refusing whatever offer the other attempted to make.

It sounded like the conversation was taking a downward spiral around the corner. Coget swallowed thickly, not sure if it would be wise to step in. Reala could take care of himself. He wouldn’t do anything too stupid. Coget jumped at the sound of a loud roar and a thud against the rock. Reala cried out for the other to release him.

Well, she had been wrong before. Coget inhaled deeply before twisting around the corner.

“Reala!”

Naer had her partner up against the wall, front first and it wasn’t in any innocent fashion either. Holy shit.

The disfigured Nightmaren found herself utterly speechless. This wasn’t something she expected. Naer looked equally shocked at her appearance and this distraction seemed to become the No-level’s mistake. Her apprehended partner preformed a wicked stunt to dislodge the attacker, but he looked more like a frightened animal trying to escape then a berserk Reala. Before she could show any real reaction, the red jester dashed past her, leaving a trail of dark red sparkles. It took the jarring movements of Naer and his otherworldly roar to convince her to split.

Coget raced off after the other First-level. It didn’t take long for her to catch up, but she almost lost her balance a couple of times. Having only one eye still served as a pain in the ass for her, but she managed to adapt quickly.

She found herself lagging a bit behind her partner’s panicked speeds and the younger First-level looked behind her. They had lost him.

Coget spoke up, informing Reala, and as they slowed down and began to discuss what had happened, the rest came at her in a blur.

~~~~~

It was strange seeing Reala so off his mark as they traveled the back corridors in order to find their wing. Coget hovered behind him the entire way at a good yard’s length and this made it awkward.

Sure, Akila was use to her being a mother hen, but Reala looked very uneasy. Even she felt out of sorts. Their abrasive companionship had something seriously wrong with it today, but she guessed
that any exposure to sexual assault could be blamed for that.

Luckily they encountered no one on the way there and when they finally reached the rooms, both of them were relieved. Reala gave her a tight nod before closing the door to his room. She could tell from his uncomfortable expression that this was his rendition of saying ‘thank you for saving my ass.’

Now alone in front of Reala’s door, a frown stretched the stitches holding Coget’s cheeks together.

Her Akila had been assigned a mission that could very well get her killed. It was frightening to imagine and Coget wished she could find a way to change this. Instead, she silenced her qualms. The First-level had already become aware that her attachment to the Nightmaren had gotten too strong. Coget witnessed her ward grow and develop in many ways. She had seen her vulnerabilities, her strengths, passions, fascinations and this showed Akila’s unimaginable trust – it was supposed to be unnatural for someone of her kind to think like this. Now her emotions were getting out of hand.

Akila was not hers. She was Reala’s procreation and Wiseman’s asset. Coget was just the caregiver.

~ There was blood. I followed it here.~

Coget leapt into the air, stifling a shriek with her hands. VaIkU somehow found a way to sneak behind her, and there the grey figure stood. Coget’s voice came out in a muffled squeak, “Y−yes. Your partner, I saw him in the south wing.”

VaIkU tilted its head to the left, staring at the floor by Coget’s feet. When the stitched Nightmaren glanced down, hopelessness dropped onto her gut like a fifty ton weight.

There was blood, not much, just a few drops here and there. They trailed to the entrance of the staircase. God only knew how far that trail led.

There wasn’t much she could say to explain that. Her eye remained focused on the floor, the other Nightmaren’s gaze staring her down, waiting for an answer.

“He attacked someone I know. I was only helping them to their room.” It was an honest answer and she didn’t sound very confident when admitting it.

~I see.~ The No-level paused briefly, expression still unfazed. ~I will take care of this at once.~

Coget lifted her head to witness the retreating back of the taller Nightmaren. VaIkU paused before exiting down the stairs. ~I warn you to keep clear of my sibling. It will do you well, Coget.~
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Authors Note: This chapter’s bit rough and also an emotional rollercoaster. I’ve got some damn hormonal characters. I’ve actually been taking Taekwondo for 7 years now. I’m going to be getting my black belt in the summer before I go off to college. ^^ I’ve also been working at the doe-jahng as an assistant instructor, so I have a fairly good understanding of what goes on. It was interesting to incorporate my knowledge into the story. I didn’t want Morisa to be to be a stereotypical Japanese Oc. Ta-kwondo is Korean and fairly useless when it comes to actual self-defense combat. (In my opinion) It more focused towards sport.

Woowooords Translated

Kakatte koi- Come at me
Juchum seogi- (Martial arts) Horse Stance

Any form of acknowledgement is always greatly appreciated, whether it be a fav, follow or review. I’ve given up on hoping for them, so I’m just happy with whatever you guys grace me with. Until Next time. :)

Birthdays only came around once a year and from my standpoint, a year never felt that long.

So what was my excuse for forgetting one visitor’s creation date? Nothing. Despite it being hard to believe, Maurisa’s birthday sat just a few months before mine.

Now, I can calculate questions in my mind like no human can and I can aim any projectiles flawlessly with the right amount of observation. I had a strong understanding of musical concepts too and over all, not to brag or anything, I was a sharp individual– and yet I couldn’t remember a birthday?

There was something wrong here.

I plunked myself down on one of my favourite branches. It sat not far from the largest waterfall and hung just above the ground. Shaped like a smooth, wide hammock, it was the perfect perch for sleeping… and nothing much else. There wasn’t more you could do in a place like this. Now that I thought about it, there wasn’t much you could do for someone’s birthday here either. No ideas were coming to me and it was at that moment I really found himself in a deadlock.

So here Renhet sits, pondering away.

Wasn’t 18 suppose to be a special number? She talked about it a lot. Something to do with− being classified as a fully grown in her world? Doubtful. Maurisa couldn’t pass as an older teen let alone an adult. Then again, I couldn’t say the same for myself.

Even after all my years growing up with a visitor at my side, they were still confusing. Regardless of this, I had still learned a lot. Actually, more than Mum or Owl probably knew.
I’ve grown to respect their diverse tastes in music. Humans were a very creative species. Sometimes a visitor’s most treasured belongings would travel with them into the dream world and I was just lucky that Maurisa loved music as much as I did. I had a reason to fight her for that song-playing-device called a phone. There was always something new and exciting for me to listen to.

She also taught me how to speak her language quite fluently and I tried to help her with pronunciation at times in return. Her accent still needed some work.

Slang, human fraises, martial arts, pop culture, otaku culture—as she referred to—, it was a breath of fresh air greatly foreign compared my own. I enjoyed it.

Unfortunately, not all the things I learned about visitors were positive.

Maurisa taught me about the concepts of school, where you had to sit in a chair for hours while adults taught you things. I almost pitied her for it. Almost. I also became aware of things that still didn’t make sense to me. I found out the most disturbing thing about humans in probably the worst possible way. It was an embarrassing incident and a prank gone too far. Ever since I was little I enjoyed the adrenaline rush scaring others gave me, Hell I still do, and many times I got my fix out of the closest source. That source being Maurisa herself.

My plan played out like usual. I wasn’t sure why I did it, but at the time, Maurisa was using a fallen log to cross over one of the many hot spring ponds. I came swooping up from under the girl without her notice and flipped up the knee-high skirt she wore.

The next thing that happened was the shrieking. This confused me, it wasn’t the usual shriek I was expecting. She moved too quickly for me to keep up. Maurisa’s foot, shoe and all, nailed me square in the eye, while it was open. I ended up on the ground, screaming just as loudly.

Now, I have come close to dying a few times in the past, but that had to have been one of the worst pains I had ever felt.

What followed this incident came a talk from the wise old Owl, which both Maurisa and I found equally disturbing to this day. The concept of human biology had been weird to grasp and I really didn’t want to know how the bird discovered this knowledge.

The most important thing I realized from the talk was that Visitors were born, they lived a short life span, and then they died. They were fragile and one wrong move could easily put them in the ground. Maurisa was different though. Hell, we use to spare against each other when she took Taewkondo. In strength we were equally matched. After all my time spent around her, Maurisa had become my ideal image of a visitor. It was easy to forget how extraordinary she really was.

Distracting me from these less-than-pleasant reveries, a giggle beside my perch convinced me to open an eye and investigate. It was a Nightopian who disturbed me. It fluttered at my side, tiny hands gripping onto the bark near my knee. I craned my head a little to look at its purple wings. Surely enough, it was Gimpers.

“Oh, it’s you. I thought Mori’d be playing with you.”

It chortled and its eyes lit up happily.

“That’s because I’m over here.”

I sat up a little too quickly not noticing the leaves of the tree until they slapped me in the face. Cursing and brushing them out of the way, sure enough there she was. Maurisa sat on the hill not far from my spot and I frowned.
Fucking hell. I hadn’t even heard them arrive. I couldn’t even blame Maurisa’s music-player this time.

“Oh, Hi.” I had to play it cool. *Keep looking around*, I told myself. *There’s bound to be something you can use.*

The girl smiled awkwardly at me and my skitterish approach, “Hi.”

“You’re here early.” As a matter of fact, very early.

Maurisa shrugged and Gimpers stumbled over to where she sat. “I had a headache. Probably fell asleep on the couch or something. I know I won’t be getting up until morning.”

A headache. *Better than what’s happened in the past.*

I rose and went to join them both in the grass. Was it a horrible thing to hope she’d forgotten about her own birthday? Naw, not really. I’d hoped for worse things before. “Cool, so, what’s up?”

Mori raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You’re up to something, aren’t you?”

*Typical Maurisa.* Just to get her paranoid, I would have said yes, but I resisted. “What? Why do you say that?”

“You’re all jumpy. Pretty damn obvious. So spill, *what’s up* Ren?”

Her playful suspicion was a little too quirky, so I laughed. “You’re thinking *way* too far into this. Nothing’s up my sleeves this time.” Sure. Nothing up my sleeves. I concluded that it was time for a distraction, “Feel like going flying? I almost fell asleep down here waiting.” I offered a hand to the visitor on the ground, challenging her with a smirk. The girl looked up at me and hummed thoughtfully.

“Well sorry. Okay, fine, but you better not try anything funny.” The girl huffed and grasped my hand. The familiar feeling of dualization calmed my nerves a little, it always did now. Fully fused, I didn’t waste any time before taking off.

Once we were up in the air we had a full view of her Nightopia, the highest peak of the world caught my eye. Maybe improvising would work this time.

~Close your eyes for a second.~ It was easy to hide what I was thinking. Before, when we were younger, both of us were like open books to each other’s thoughts. It took many years of practice, but eventually I figured out the trick of blocking. It was around times like these when I was thankful for that knowledge.

~Why? Lier, so you *were* going to do something.~

~So much distrust!~ I chuckled, diving sideways and cutting through the clouds.

~Okay then. So where are we going?~

~You’ll see.~ The truth was, her *birthday surprise* wasn’t the only reason why I kept her eyes shut. Despite trying to help the visitor conquer her fears, Maurisa still had much to work on. She still refused to fly with Mum, or for us to do any free-flying.

That was probably why she refused to fly with my creator in the first place actually. That’s sort of what he lived for.
The last thing I wanted to deal with at that moment was one of her panic attacks. This year had to make up for the last one and it was better to avoid as many problems as possible.

~Ren?~ Oh right, we’re here already.

I reached the top of Flat Peak, a nick-name we had given to the rock as kids for its leveled plateau. We rarely went up here, or at least Maurisa did for obvious reasons. We usually stuck to the forested sections as there was much more to do there.

Once we were up on the highest platform, I landed.

~Reeeennn.~

~A little patience wouldn’t kill you. Fine, open up.~ When she did, Maurisa’s emotional response confused me at first. At one moment she showed fear, the next wonder, than joy. Human females were hormonal rollercoasters. Relieved when she disconnected from our bond, I watched her walk a few feet to the ledge to gaze out at the view.

“Wow, we haven’t come up here in a long time. So this was your special plan?”

“As good as it gets. Happy birthday by the way. Hopefully nothing horrendously wrong goes down like last year.”

“Thanks.” She turned to face me, smiling sadly. “Yeah, that wasn’t the best time to get news like that. I always seem to have the worst luck.”

“It’s no big deal.”

Only it had been for her.

The previous year on her birthday, Maurisa arrived but ran past everyone in a hurry. We were all concerned for her so I left to find her. It took me hours of searching and it got to the point where I almost gave up. If I hadn’t heard her muffled sobs, I wouldn’t have found her hidden in the bushes.

It turned out that Maurise had come back from a doctor’s appointment earlier that evening. She assumed that her body had healed from her nasty childhood experience. After the tears stopped, she told me that because of the accident, she would never be able to have kids.

This became a sickening reminder for me. Procreation was very important to visitors. Maurisa told me that I’d probably never understand, because our race was never meant to reproduce in the first place. I could still remember her catching herself before she could continue but regardless of how cruel the statement was, it was true. Maurisa was right, I was a freak accident. At least I could admit that honestly.

We spent the next hour up there, sitting on the overhang and chatting away about aimless things. For once, I assumed we were in the clear for the day, until Maurisa asked me an odd question.

“What is that?” Her index figure jutted out at something down the mountain slope, effectively catching my awareness. Mori looked fairly disturbed and slightly frightened. I came up behind her and looked over the edge of the rock in the direction she indicated. I tensed up when something below— actually, two something’s flew past and disappeared around the left side of crag.

"Mori. Get away from the edge." She did as I ordered and stood, backing towards me slowly.

"Ren. Where those Nightmaren?"
The nodded out of her peripheral vision to confirmed her suspicions. “Probably.”

Besides the two rouges who could pass as family, Maurisa hadn’t come face to face with another of our kind before. The vine monster and the shadow from nine years ago, didn’t really classify as a head-on encounter in our opinion. She knew I was in the same boat.

_How did these ones get in? Why now of all times?_ These were good questions indeed. After a period of stillness and silence, Mori spoke up again.

“How did these ones get in? Why now of all times? These were good questions indeed. After a period of stillness and silence, Mori spoke up again.

“Do you think they’re—”

"Shhht!”

Maurisa held her breath and clamped her mouth, watching as I kept alert for any sounds or movement. I then whispered, ”Okay. Take my hand. We’re getting out of here.” Doing as instructed we becoming one entity again and she allowed me take the lead.

I paused to check if the way was clear. This was exciting and horrifying at the same time. I wasn’t sure how she felt about this. In any other scenario, I would be pursuing them. I wanted to know about the rest of my kind, even to challenge them if possible. Unfortunately I had little miss.

Deadweight with me. While I was perfectly aware she could defended herself on her own, we still had less of an advantage above ground level and out in the open.

~Shut your eyes again. I’m going to get us some cover.~ I spoke through the mind link, just in case the enemy was nearby and Maurisa silently agreed. I then jumped from the rock face, clinging close to the cliff as I descended silently. Relieved, I saw nothing as we dropped. When we met the bottom, I slid under the forest canopy.

Slowing to a halt, I then gave her the signal. ~You’re safe. Open your eyes.~ Mori sighed gratefully, thankful to be near solid ground once more probably. The dualization ended and her feet touched the ground. Around us sat scattered wood, metal, rails, destroyed structures. It wasn’t like this before.

“Do you think we’re both crazy? Or do you think there’s actually something out here?” She asked, sarcasm evident. Of course there had to be something there, unless a typhoon wiped the area out. I responded with a bit of humor but my expression remained grim.

“It’s eccentric. Not crazy. And I don’t think this is over yet. Notice how quiet it is? The Nightopians are hiding.” The girl paused to listen and frowned.

“I hate it when you’re right.”

"Well what do you know! ValkU, it looks like the rouge has made an appearance. How bothersome."

The raspy voice had both Mori and I whipping around to locate it. There behind us hovered a reptilian Nightmaren who stood taller then then us both and had a bulkier build. Its creepy, golden eyes stared us down, a wiry smile stretching at its scaled lips. Another Nightmaren stood just behind it composed of grey pigments. It looked just as ominous with its bladed hands and dull, inverted eyes.

I used myself to block the path between the intruders and Maurisa, a defensive stance at the ready. "Found us did you? Don’t believe we’ve met.” I made sure to sound flippant when addressing them. These characters looked powerful, but I wasn’t going to let them get the better of me. Mori twitched uncomfortably behind me as the green reptile continued.
"Have a lot of spunk, don’t you? You shouldn’t be making our job harder for us. Hand over the little girl.” At first its voice was oddly friendly but the end of his sentence curled into a cold threat.

I smirked and laughed outright, "Over my dead body, scales. You won’t get rid of me that easy." I raised his fists, ready to go.

The larger Nightmaren sighed, unresponsive towards my attempt with intimidation. It tilted its horned head back while rolling its shoulders before speaking again.

“Very well, pest.” I blinked and the other Nightmaren was already in front of me, lashing a set of heavy claws at my face. Oh fuck. The blow sailed over my head as I ducked away. Countering with a left swing, I struck the perpetrator in the jaw, effectively putting them off. It only took the other a moment before they were back to swinging punches.

One hit managed to land into my chest and the impact nearly sent me flying into the rocks. This bastard was stronger then me and a lot more agile to boot.

“Ren!” I glanced over to the location of the cry.

Shit, I’d forgotten about the second one. It approached Maurisa slowly, cornering her against the cliff wall.

There wasn’t much I could do at the moment. It took everything I had to keep this one occupied. If my opponent was already a challenge to take on, then Mori was in trouble. There was only one option for her right now.

“Run!”

She hesitated when I yelled, looking conflicted with her choices, but darted for the trees anyway. The other Nightmaren followed her in hot pursuit.

Before I could turn back around to face the enemy, I received a hard blow to the gut. This time it was powerful enough to knock me out of the air and into the rocks. I hit the jagged surface hard and a shout jumped from my mouth. Son of a- A clawed hand reached down before I could recover and it grasped my collar. The arm lifted me from the ground and as he did my head lulled to the side in a daze.

“You’ve proven to be troublesome. I warned you to stay out of our way.” My back slammed into another object, eliciting another grunt. The reptile grinned, “Let’s see if this will teach you a lesson.”

My eyes flew open as the Nightmaren’s hand flew up. A long, sharp metal pipe held in one claw. They brought it down, piercing me through the right shoulder. I cried out and snarled, lashing at the other only to find that they had already released me. The green monster had me pinned to one of the trees and I couldn’t get free. I struggled fruitlessly, growling in pain and shouting curses at the other. Maurisa was really in trouble now and they knew I couldn’t do anything about it.

“That should hold you. First-levels can stretch like rubber, but stab wounds are another story, hm?” The reptile smiled gleefully at me, like one would admire a pinned bug specimen on display. “It’s time to find your friend.”

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Maurisa couldn’t recall the last time she had ever run this fast. She leapt over fallen logs and dodged pot holes like a frightened deer, knowing that if she paused for a moment it could be the end of her.
The whole time Morisa ran the knowledge of Renhet left behind bothered her. She wanted to turn around and head back, but what was she suppose to do when she got there? Jump the scaly Nightmaren on steroids and hope to God he didn’t kill her? Both ideas were horrible. Her happy day had taken a downward spiral for the worst.

Their best bet was for her to find NiGHTS, he would know what to do.

The adrenaline pushing her forward vaulted up a level when she looked over her shoulder. The enemy Nightmaren was still after her. It’s cold, lifeless eyes stared intently on its target. That target being her. It darted through the trees just a little faster then the pace that Morisa ran. Eventually they would catch up. Where the fuck was NiGHTS hiding?

When Maurisa switched her gaze to what lay ahead of her, she shrieked.

There waiting in front of her stood the other intruder, waiting patiently with a filthy grin on his face. Maurisa was close enough to see the splatter of pink dotted his bone armor and claws. The sight of the blood and what it suggested caused her stomach to drop.

If he was here, then where was Ren?

Maurisa tried to avoid the Nightmaren by lunging to the left, but her grey pursuer had caught up to her. They grabbed her right arm, using the softer palms of its hand instead of the sharp edges of their fingers. Their extra precautions stumped her, but now was not the time to be analytical. She had to escape by any means necessary.

“It’s no use struggling, girl. Your friend won’t be coming to save you. Your Nightopia has a nearly impenetrable barrier, did you know that? You must have some impressive Ideya hidden in your heart.” The green one snarled, approaching to an arms distance. “Now that we have you, I guess it’s time to discover what treasures you conceal.” The Nightmaren reached out his clawed hand to mockingly brush Maurisa’s cheek. Before he could make any contact, a familiar voice rang out over the sound of her frantic pulse.

"Hey!"

Everyone looked up. Maurisa felt a numb sensation sweep through her when she spotted a purple jester lounging above them.

"NiGHTS." She wanted to sob in relief but instead she held her ground. She still couldn’t lose the grey Nightmaren’s grip, but kept up the struggle in spite of it.

The green beast floating beside her looked shocked for a moment, before they let out a loud burst of laughter.

"Well, well. We’ve heard about you. I thought for sure you were the other one back there. My mistake." The reptilian one snickered. "So you're the one they gave up the chase on a decade ago. The notorious NiGHTS. Who’s the new addition? I thought it took two to make one."

"Well, I haven’t heard of you. New run-of-the-mill I presume?" NiGHTS scoffed back down, completely ignoring the other while they tried to pry into Renhet’s origins. "I'd prefer that you'd let her free. That girl won't be losing any Ideya tonight, thank you.

"Oh, of course, how rude of us. We forgot to introduce ourselves." The other sneered. "I myself am called Naer. This is my twin, ValkU. Now that we are all acquainted, it’s time for us to get down to business." Maurisa was aggressively torn from ValkU’s grip, their carful claws slipped along her arm and sliced into her skin. At that moment, Naer lurched an arm through her chest.
NiGHTS hollered out to her, panicked. He hadn’t seemed to expect the other Nightmaren to go through with the Ideya extraction so quickly.

To Maurisa’s shock, the appendage went right through her body like a ghost passing through. The feeling that came along with it was a sickening, cold pain. Another overwhelming emotion followed that didn’t seem natural. It was fear in its purest form.

A sizzling sound became audible to all of their ears. Her attacker’s hand slackened and his expression transitioned from spoiled glee into horror.

Naer screamed, wrenching his arm free. A flash of violet light followed its retreat like an angry burst of fire.

Maurisa collapsed. The experience only lasted a couple of seconds, but it felt like hours of agony and terror. Her eyes closed without her realizing and when she opened them again, NiGHTS was at her side and looking down at her. Maurisa couldn’t distinguish much sound. His lips moved but his words were too muffled to distinguish.

Suddenly the volume dial in her head twisted up and everything came back in one solid rush. NiGHTS was holding her up under the arms while Naer cursed and yelled. The intruder Nightmaren clutched at his arms and ValkU stood back away from him. Time leapt forward again and both of the figures were gone, two portals leading into the ground shrunk into the grass until no evidence of their presence remained.

“Are you alright? That was quite the scare.” NiGHTS helped the visitor walk to a tree stump not far from them. Maurisa sat, bracing her vertigo-assaulted brain with her hands.

“Yeah. I think so.” The sound of her voice surprised her a bit. It was groggy.

“I didn’t know he was going to pull a stunt like that. Were you really scared?”

“Yes and no.” She answered honestly and NiGHTS frowned. “I felt like I was going to die when he had his arm in my chest though.”

“That’s normal. He shouldn’t have been able to do that though. You have to be at a certain level of scared to death in order for an extraction to take place. But your Ideya– Oh, your Ideya.” NiGHTS derailed from the topic, suddenly enraptured. “That violet light, that was your Ideya?” The purple Nightmaren looked onward in awe, “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Head finally steady, Maurisa stood up. “Yeah, it’s always been like that–” She paused, her mind jumping back to where it was when she fled the fight. “Ren! We need to find him. I’m not sure what that freak did, but I know where they fought last.” NiGHTS was suddenly up and alert, now aware that there may be even more problems ahead.

“Alright, lead me there.”

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Renhet’s hands scrabbled against the metal pipe again. It was slick with blood at this point, making the task of removing it nearly impossible. He still needed to get free though and Ren was losing a lot of blood in the process of trying. His ego had taken quite the beating today, no, that was an understatement. The one thing that bothered him though, other then his hurt pride and the pole jutting out through his shoulder blade, was the thought that Maurisa might not have gotten away.

He growled in frustration as his hand slipped again, the movement jostling his injury. Today was not
in their favor.

Renhet heard a patter of shoes approaching him and relaxed, knowing exactly who it was. Maurisa sprinted into the clearing clumsily, stumbling at the sight of him.

Her thick eyebrows knit together and tilted up in horror, “Ren!− Oh, holy shit. Don’t move.”

“Yeah, because I can.” He grumbled. Maurisa, still in shock, quickly approached him and examined the metal pipe. NiGHTS came rocketing into the clearing as well and was instantly at his side.

The purple jester gaped silently before choking out a common question, “How the hell did this happen?”

“I’d rather not answer that− Now can somebody pull this out, please? I’ve been impaled here, if anyone’s noticed.” Ren spat, his hand reached up again to grasp the pipe.

Maurisa’s hand jumped out to grab his and pushed them away. “Woah, woah! Okay, let me do it. I’ll be careful.” Her small hands took hold of the metal pole. “This is probably going to hurt−” She warned and then added, “A lot.”

“I don’t fucking care. Just get it out!” Maurisa yanked, her strength performing the task easily. Renhet tried not to holler out as the movement detached him from the tree trunk, but a hoarse yell did escape. Maurisa instantly dropped the pipe and her hands came up to enclose over the gaping hole in his chest. He new exactly what she was about to do before it even started, but it still didn’t prepare him. A burning warmth against the agonizing wounds told Ren that she was re-knitting the flesh.

Along with the insane strength Maurisa possessed, she had another strange ability that they had discovered. Her ability to heal.

They all knew she was different. It had been painfully obvious for a long time of course. The light of her Ideya was abnormal and many questions still remained unanswered.

NiGHTS knew not to worry about his son’s safety. Renhet had already gone through many near-death experiences and if Maurisa hadn’t had her ability he would have been dead long ago.

The girl had gained their trust, at this point she was like family to them. Her Nightopia had served as their safe-haven for many years and it hadn’t been until now that its walls had been breached. They hoped that this wouldn’t happen. Whatever power Maurisa possessed had just been discovered by enemy Nightmaren. Now that these Nightmaren had escaped, the only thing to follow would be trouble.

They had to help protect this special visitor in any way they could.

NiGHTS crossed his arms and spoke up over Renhet’s cursing. “We need to talk to Owl, Wiseman probably already knows we’re here.”

Maurisa turned to look at him, an uneasy frown on her face, “As in, the Master Wiseman, you talked about before?”

“Yes.”

“Great, so they got away then, didn’t they.” Ren grumbled, Maurisa removed her hands covering holes through his back and chest. Nothing remained there except for a circular scar. Ren stood up and examined the mark through his torn and bloody clothing. “Well, that’s another one to the
collection. I didn’t see that coming at all. The guy’s power levels were—*Over nine thousand.* Maurise wacked his good shoulder and Ren swayed off balance. The blood loss made his head fuzzy.

“Ow, *what*?”

“Don’t reference human culture when you’ve never watched the show, or read the books.”

Ren smirked playfully, “Aw, but I thought it fit.”

“Children, enough!” NiGHTS huffed, irritated. And visitors complained that he wasn’t as childish and careless as he used to be. It was amazing what being a parent could do. “Okay, Maurise is in serious danger. Those Nightmaren were powerful, maybe even more than you say Ren.”

The air beside Maurisa fluctuated and out popped Owl from one of his teleport sequences. "Hoo, NiGHTS! There you all are. You dashed off in quite a hurry, did something happen?"

“Our position’s been exposed and Wiseman knows exactly where we are. Other Nightmaren can get through Maurisa’s barrier,” NiGHTS nodded his head in the girl’s direction. “I bet anything that he’s going to be interested in our girl here. Especially after that burn she gave one of them.”

“Hoo, this is bad news.” The birds concern became ever more grim, “What do you mean by, burn?”

“He tried to take her Ideya, but during the extraction he was burned by a violet flash.” NiGHTS stated.

Maurisa chose that moment to speak up, “It’s kind of like that one time. When that shadow monster attacked Ren and I.”

"Alright. So we know that Maurisa has an Ideya that can heal stuff, burn things, make her just as strong as we are and it can also form a Nightopia like *this.*” Ren threw his arms out, emphasizing the forest around them, “Her Ideya’s also purple, which is painfully obvious. So what I guess I’m trying to say is, *Owl,* do you know anything about this?” The bird and everyone else stared at him, not at all surprised by his negative attitude.

Landing on a branch above them, Owl spoke softly, “Well, if I had such knowledge I would have shared it. Stories have been told of this kind of phenomenon, but they’re foggy in my memory.” He shrugged. “I may be old, but not *that* old.”

"Please Owl, tell us what you know." Maurisa stepped in front of Renhet, a subtle warning for him to back off.

"This is a bit out-of-the-blue, but alright.” The old bird cleared his throat.

"They say that every millennium, two legendary Ideya appear amongst two dreamers.”

“Legendary? Every millennium? Jesus Christ, it’s going to be one of *those* stories.” NiGHTS beat Maurisa at her own game, smacking the red jester’s arm and shushing him loudly.

Owl started again, glaring disapprovingly at Renhet’s mind-set, "It is said that these Ideya were meant bridge and balance both the corrupt and the pure, in order to keep both of the worlds stable. In all honesty, I’m not sure what these Ideya’s are capable of exactly, but most of this knowledge has been lost.”

"Why haven’t you said anything before?” Maurisa interrupted. “I know I’m a freak of nature already,
but it’s only *one* Ideya. I don’t have any others supporting me and Ren and I have tried to find others. They just aren’t there.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous. Every visitor has the five base Ideya. Some are harder to find then others. I am not sure what to tell you, my dear. Before, NiGHTS and I had our suspicions that something was different about you, but it just never seemed to be the time to bring up the subject.”

Ren cut in once again, clearly confused by this development. “Wait. So aren’t Ideya supposed to be the pieces of a visitor’s heart? How can there be other things besides Hope and Courage and— well, you know what I mean.”

“Again, I’m not sure if I’m the right one to tell you. All I am aware of is that this Ideya is very complex to maintain and very uncommon for a visitor to receive.”

“So I’m an extremely rare phenomenon. That’s cool.” Maurisa wasn’t sure whether or not to be excited or disturbed by this news. She’d always thought that her abilities were normal for a visitor. The healing thing did come by as strange to her though and the purple light had always been a mystery to her.

NiGHTS’ voice dropped and octave, worry seeping into his words. "Rare, yes. Valuable? Definitely. I know Wiseman would want to know more about this. He’s always power hungry. We’ll need to be careful from now on. Okay?"

Both Maurisa and Renhet nodded grimly. None of them ever thought it would come to this, but no risks were to be taken.

An awakener teleported not far from where Maurisa stood and she sighed, saying her goodbyes before leaving for the night.

"We’re going to be seeing a lot more of those guys, huh?” Ren muttered to the adults. Both Owl and NiGHTS nodded.

"Let’s hope that we discover the source to her Ideya’s power soon. If the barrier’s weakening, then that must mean there’s something wrong with it.” NiGHTS crossed his arms, hovering over to Owls tree.

Renhet frowned, looking down at the bloody pipe against the dirt. That discovery was soon to come.

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The little Nightopian flopped over the side of my leg and struggled to lift himself up again. This was the sixth time he stumbled. I leaned over to pull up one of my vibrant knee-socks a bit after his stubby little fingers tugged it down.

I was off on my own, close to the west side of the falls. Renhet and NiGHTS hadn’t appeared yet, but it didn’t bother me too much. It had been almost been two weeks since our first encounter with the burly Nightmaren and by a few nights ago, others began to show their ugly heads. It was only a small cluster of third levels who’d spread themselves throughout the wooded areas. It was nothing that we couldn’t handle the least. As a visitor I could be self-sufficient alone. Renhet, NiGHTS and myself took them out together, or most of them as far as we knew. we even made a competition out of it, seeing who could get rid of the most. NiGHTS won that one, but he had better agility and experienced under his belt.

I could easily assume the possibility of them running into something like that at this time. Oh well.
Gimpers, on the other hand, was there to greet me. He was still such a cute little guy. I always thought I was a good judge of character—no, that would be a lie. I once assumed that Renhet was the devil himself during the first five years of knowing him, but in all reality he wasn’t bad. With NiGHTS I thought he was a she. The whole Hermaphrodite thing still fucked me over.

The Nightopian squealed loudly and babbled a bit of gibberish, catching my attention as we lounged in the grass. Gimpers fluttered his useless wings desperately, his sparkling eyes stared up at me close to tears. That’s something new.

“What is it Gimp-kun?” I crooned, lifting the little creature up into my lap to cradle. He hadn’t acted like this before. The poor guy looked as if he had seen a ghost. I frowned as the egg-headed fairy cuddled into my neck, crying out. I yawned and looked around me, checking for any sign of my friends. Nothing. Not even the other Nightopians wandered about.

Something bright landed on my knee and faded. I jumped a little at the sight of it. Sparkles? Maybe it was just my imagination, the colour of the spark looked darker in colour, but I scarcely saw it out of the corner of my eye anyway. I looked up behind my shoulder and once again nothing stood there. I’m losing it.

The Nightopian in my grasp suddenly shrieked, startling me enough to release him. I clambered to my feet and watched my companion scramble for the bushes.

I pressed a hand to my chest as if to restrain my heart from leaping out.

Okay, I’m freaking out a bit. I inhaled deeply, trying to calm the racing pulse under my palm.

Maybe Renhet was here playing one of his dirty tricks on me again? The guy use to torment me when we were little; he still did every once in a while. One would think he would’ve learn his lesson by now, huh?

“Who’s there?” I croaked. Well, that sounded intimidating. “Ren, if that’s you doing that, I swear to God.”

Suddenly there was a loud snap behind me. My head swung around to look over my shoulder. No one.

"Who's Ren?"

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“What the hell was that? A punch?”

Renhet ducked to the left when Maurisa swung at him again. It had been a while since they spared, but now was a perfect time to start again. He stepped back, feeling the ground’s traction under his feet. It was an awkward sensation not being in the air, but Maurisa always refused to fight him unless they were on equal ground.

Ren went along with her movements. The girl was predictable whenever she was about to attack. Maurisa’s left foot would shuffle forward if she was about to kick and her shoulders would move before the punches flew. Renhet didn’t even need to lift his hands.

He slid to the side when she sent a round-house skimming past his head and Renhet’s arm hooked her leg. The girl yelped careening to the side as she lost her balance. He used that moment to take her down. After her back end hit the grass, Renhet sighed.
“My turn.” His hands went up.

Maurisa got to her feet and huffed, placing her right leg back at the ready. “Fine, Kakatte koi.”

Renhet took a few running steps at her and lashed out with his left arm. The girl move it before it could reach her and deflected the punch it with two middle blocks on the inside of his arm. Maurisa grabbed the appendage with her left hand and swiftly twisted under it to get around him.

Whatever she learned in her martial arts classes became fairly useless after meeting Nightmaren. Normal pressure points were non-existent on First-level models. There was however one spot that she found a few years back.

As soon as Maurise was behind his back, her index and middle finger jabbed Ren’s shoulder, pressing relentlessly into an area on his shoulder blade. Renhet squawked and went rigid. The jester at her mercy struggled for a moment before quickly tapping out.

“Ow ow, let go!” She did as he demanded and Renhet took a few uneasy steps forward, deeply rolling his shoulders. Shooting the girl a squeamish look, Maurisa laughed out right. “Where the fuck did that come from?” He stammered.

“Remember the last time I wrestled you to the ground when we fought over my phone?”

Ren appeared confused, “No.” Then after a couple moments his face lit up, “Wait− Oh yeah, you had to sit on my fucking back to pin me down… This is relevant how?”

“That’s how I kept you from pushing me off.”

The Nightmaren rubbed the back of his shoulder, eyes narrowing contemplatively. “Jesus. So that’s why I couldn’t move.”

Mori quirked an eyebrow from under her bangs, “You couldn’t feel me pushing my fist into your back?”

“No, I was more preoccupied with trying to figure out why my arms and legs weren’t working.”

The visitor opened her mouth and then closed it when her mind analyzed just what they sounded like. To anyone else their conversation would suggest… wow. Maurisa’s face scrunched up, trying to hold back her giggles. She really needed to get her head out of the gutter.

Ren observed her reaction skeptically, oblivious to how obscene their chat sounded in the girl’s head.

“Is it better if I don’t ask?” The girl nodded sharply and he sighed. “Can we keep going? I feel like knocking you on your ass again.”

“Hah, good luck.”

And they were at it again. Move after move, Maurisa met his attacks with an equal amount of vigor. She knew he wouldn’t hit her too hard, but after the next half an hour Maurisa had to place a lot more effort into her blocks. A nasty grin flashed along Renhet’s face when her feet skidded along the ground against the force of the next blow.

Maurisa growled, not appreciating the other’s gloating. So she faked her next kick. Renhet didn’t see the punch coming until it nailed him in the solar plexus, his eyes so focused on her legs. This set him backwards in a stumble and he nearly fell over. With a snarl, Renhet lunged forward, tripping her feet over with an extended foot. The visitor landed on her side and yelled, “Hey! That was cheap!”
“You have to be ready.” Renhet glared down at her and she rose again, only to be placed back on her side once more by the push of his foot. She grunted when the impact jostled her hip.

Maurisa scuttled and rolled over to get out of the Nightmaren’s reach. She stood up, patting her skirt down as the other watched her silently. The stern glare in his eyes told her to stop messing around. This sudden change of attitude irritated her. What’s his problem?

Maurisa dashed for him again, planning to take him down at the right, but it was as if already pre-calculated her strategy. He shuffled out of the way.

She growled and went for jester again, and then again. The bastard even had his hands behind his back. The fourth time she threw a punch he stepped around her.

A sharp pain at the back of her skull had her yelling out. Ren had her hair and he pulled her over to the edge of the clearing. Tears sprung to her eyes and she followed in with the not-so-gentle tug.

Now she really wanted to hit him.

Surprisingly, he let go and the visitor whipped around to face him. There was his smug face. Mori lashed out with her right arm in a blind rage so it would land in the center of his wide grin.

Ren’s head moved six inches to the left.

A loud crack rang out through the woods as her knuckles collided with the tree behind her friend’s head.

Renhet stood there frozen with his back against the tree, eyes wide. When the wood splintered beside his face and the blood spattered his cheek, the Nightmaren snapped out of his volatile disposition.

As soon as it happened, Maurisa’s face contorted in front of him as if in slow motion. The visitor screamed, clucking her forearm.

Instinctively, Ren quickly reached out to grab her by the shoulders. “Shh. Okay, okay, calm down.” The girl was gritting her teeth and biting her tongue. Not a good sign. Maurise must have really damaged herself judging by her reaction.

When Renhet peeled away from the tree to look at the damage, he wondered why she also hadn’t moved her arm away. When he saw the results of the attack, it blew him out of the water.

Her hand had gone right through the tree trunk.

Lovely. She couldn’t move because it was stuck.

There’s only one way to deal with this, he concluded. Ren pulled her close and gripped her blood splattered wrist. She sobbed when the pressure caused more pain and he hushed her.

“Bite down on my sleeve.” Maurisa silently took his warning to heart and dug her teeth into the white material against his shoulder.

“On three. One, two, three.” The visitor in his grip struggled and a muffled shriek sounded off as he yanked her fist free.

The appendage came loose, bloody and mangled. This was new. Before she could punch a rock and it wouldn’t do much more than bloody her knuckles. The girl in Renhet’s hold wobbled, probably feeling queasy, so he gently sat her down on the grass. Mori was still staring at it when her body
plunked down, looking almost as pale as him.

She was perfectly fine watching him bleed out, but herself? The visitor looked like she was going to faint. Renhet glanced around for something to wrap around the wound. He chewed his lip when nothing around seemed suitable. He offhandedly wiped a hand down the side of his face, smearing a bit of the red off. Blegh... Tasted like metal. Maurisa moved, placing her head between her knees. Ren’s eyes darted to the pleated cloth holding the girl’s braid together. Perfect.

“Hey, ’mind if I ruin your hair a bit? We can use those to wrap it.”

Maurisa nodded silently. The girl probably didn’t want to speak, lest she threw up. That was something Ren didn’t feel like witnessing ever.

He took hold of her hair and began to unravel the white and violet ribbons. Estimating that there was enough to do the job, Renhet tore the pieces with his hands and knelt by the visitor. Taking her broken hand carefully, he started wrapping the base of Mori’s wrist, all the way up to her knuckles. She gasped sharply before Ren could finish and he glanced up in alarm.

“Are you going to puke on me? Please say no.”

The girl gave him a sour look before responding. “No, asshole. I’m not going to puke. My hand feels weird.”

“Well no shit. You sucker-punched a tree.” Renhet’s expression lightened. She sounded just fine.

“No, like, it’s not hurting. It’s all tingly.”

Huh... weird.

The material around the wound wasn’t white anymore not long after he tied it off. So much for that plan. It was a good thing that a visitor’s clothing would regenerate by the next night.

“God damnit. It’s already soaked through.” He huffed.

“Wait, take it off.”

“What? Seriously? I just put it on.” Maurisa frowned. There was a stern glare in her black eyes, also known as the ‘do what I say, or I’ll find a way to make you suffer’ glare. He didn’t like swimming in those waters.

Irritated, Ren grumbled to himself as he unraveled the bloodied material.

“It’s healed.”

They both stared oddly at her stained hand. The bones were set back in place and the cuts had been healed, leaving subtle white lines under the coagulated mess.

“I feel stupid.” Renhet deadpanned. Maurisa giggled and patted her friend’s shoulder with her clean hand.

“Thanks for the help anyway. I felt like the world was ending.”

The Nightmaren scoffed, taking to the air again. “That’s what I’m here for. Apparently it’s my job to put you back together.” He paused for a moment, before adding, “In a real fight, you can’t let something like pain stop you. No sacrifice no victory.”
“Seriously, stop referencing human media.” Maurisa chuckled softly, but knew he was right. No pain no gain. If she let something like a little hand wound affect her, she might as well lay herself down on the cutting board. It’s hard to be strong.

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The voice whispered directly into my ear. A biting hiss against the cold silence.

Arms fastened around my chest, locking my arms firmly against my sides. I shrieked and lashed against the restraints. This wasn’t happening again. How could I let one of them sneak up on me so easily? It didn’t matter now, I needed to stay strong and keep moving. Get free.

I shifted sharply, thinking overtime on how to play my next set of moves. I bowed forward, nearly flipping the aggressor over my back. It was clear by the others astonished yelp that they weren’t expecting such strength.

I still had a few surprises for them. My eyes darted down to see the feet of the Nightmaren were on the ground. Perfect.

I slammed my foot down on the red and purple boot, effectively distracting them enough for their hold to loosen. I jumped into a juchum seogi, opening the Nightmaren up. A swiftly elbowed to the gut was all it took.

The feminine voice of the other hollered out and it released me.

I would have patted myself on the back for remembering my self-defense later. I turned to face the enemy, fists raised and right leg back.

What I saw surprised me.

The other Nightmaren had the same model type as one of my friends. Slender, like NiGHTS’ figure, but it had a purplish complexion and wore little to no clothing. The markings, of identical colour to its lips, sat on the Nightmaren’s large eyes and when it blinked, two treasure map X’s would appear. This one had a wickedly gothic look about them and if I wasn’t fearing for my safety, I would’ve found it cool.

It was the NIGHTS from opposite town.

This NiGHTS duplicate stared at me from its crouched position, as if analyzing me. It probably wasn’t expecting a smack down like that. I smirked internally.

I kept a ready stance and waited, watching the other closely for any movements. The Nightmaren remained silent but finally began to shift. It still looked startled as it examined me, features stretched taught like an alert predator.

“What’s wrong? Never seen a girl who can defend herself?” I had to break the ice; this silence unnerved me.

The eyes of the Nightmaren, also identical to NiGHTS’, drifted to my hands poised at the ready, then back to my face.

“No. You’re strong. I wasn’t expecting that.” Its voice was cool, crisp and barely above a whisper; maybe a few octaves lower than... Okay, I needed to stop doing that. I couldn’t help but compare the similarities though. This was the first time I’d ever seen a different first-level type other than the ones she knew.
“You won’t be getting anything from me,” I once again spoke abrasively, I couldn’t let the other see her as anything but assertive. “I’ve got nothing to give. Sorry to disappoint.”

The Nightmaren straitened a bit, a smile pulling at the corner of its small lips.

“I see. I found your world by accident actually. I couldn’t help but investigate. The scenery’s lovely, but I might as well bring something back while I’m here.” It spoke slowly, confidently. Fuck pronouns. This was a chick, balls or no balls.

It was time to put my skills to the test.

Don’t mess up.

I suddenly ran forward, watching the other’s face. They didn’t seem to expect me to launch at them and the jester just barely avoided a swift kick. After that, they jumped into action, or in other words, the air.

“What’s the matter? Can’t reach?” A musical giggle from the blue figure above had me growling deep in my throat. The enemy Nightmaren shot upward and then dove, aiming for me below. At first, I panicked. The other looked like they were going to run me into the ground, but at the last second the Nightmaren slowed and flipped backwards over my head, landing behind me. By the time I turned the Nightmaren’s leg swung out and hit me square in the back of the leg. Damning the workings of human joints to hell, I fell forward to my kneels.

A hand grabbed my ankle and suddenly I was off the ground.

Double fuck.

Shutting my eyes tightly as I swung upside down, my impending fears skyrocketed, clouding my brain and chilling my body into numbness.

A sound of surprise squawked from the jester holding me up, but it barely registered through the fuzz of my rising panic.

Another set of hands grabbed me around the middle and I felt the sharp tug of myself being yanked from the other’s grasp. The next moment, I was on the ground, unable to see anything besides the oh-so-familiar shades of purple, green and black. A familiar growl reverberated above me, letting me know exactly who was there.

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Renhet bent protectively over the girl, glaring down the new intruder as they floated there stupidly, empty hand outstretched. He wasn’t sure if Maurisa could hear him or if she was having one of her attacks, but he called her out.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” The hiss in his voice made the girl’s stomach drop even further. Ren was pissed, obviously, but at the moment it wasn’t making her angry at all. She felt terrible. Shaken to the core.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry! You’re stupid. Now stay out of the way.” That shut her right up.

Renhet stood as straight as he could between the girl and the other Nightmaren. They still hadn’t moved, looking at him as if Ren was a ghost.
“You’re still standing there, huh? What are you waiting for, get out of here.” The tone of the red jester’s voice would have sent any normal person running, but the blue one didn’t move a muscle.

Eventually it spoke, eyes as round as dinner plates, “You. You’re— What?”

“Last warning. Leave.” Ren’s eyes narrowed further and the feminine Nightmaren winced seeing the look.

Before it even had the chance to avoid him, its back was slammed against the ground. Renhet had the other Nightmaren pinned to the dirt using the one side of his body. The blue jester lashed out with its claws but Ren caught one arm, holding it down in place. In the meantime, his other fist lifted up to strike the other’s face.

The figure struggling under him dug claws into Ren’s upper arm and didn’t release. He snarled, but the pain served as a well enough distraction, allowing the other to flip Ren over and tug free their arm. The other Nightmaren poised itself above him like a cat and it struck out with its claws again, only to come to a stop when hearing the familiar sound of flight.

NiGHTS entered the clearing mid-dash and came to a stop. He hovered high above the ground looking down at the paused scuffle.

The air became thick with silence as the violet Nightmaren stared at the frozen intruder.

NiGHTS began to drift forward a little, the sorrowful expression in his eyes throwing everyone for a loop. He reached out a hesitant hand, as if not sure what to do with it.

"Akila?"

The Nightmaren's eyes widened fearfully. It jumped up off of Renhet before he could move to catch them. "Wh-wait!" NiGHTS took a few hopeless steps forward, but stopped after the third. The trees swallowed their view of it.

Renhet sat up and groaned. Maurisa hadn’t moved from her spot on the ground, too out of it to react properly.

"What the hell was that all about?" Renhet looked to NiGHTS. His mother’s mouth still hung agape and didn't respond to the question. Ren hadn’t seen this look on him before and it greatly unnerved him.

"NiGHTS?" Maurisa stood. From here, the girl could see him trembling.

The violet Nightmaren suddenly darted for the tree tops and was out of sight before Ren could get up. His son jumped into the air and dashed after him but stopped, lingering at the edge of the canopy. NiGHTS was gone.

"Mum!" When no response came back, he huffed lowering himself back down again. Just what the hell was going on?

Back to being only a few feet from the ground, he turned back to the visitor. Maurisa looked sheepishly off to the side, clearly avoiding his eyes.

“You’re lucky you’re still here. Why did you fight them on your own?”

“I’m not a damsel in distress.”
“She had you hanging from the air by your foot.”

“I had it under control.”

“Bullshit. You’re lucky I got there in time. They know whenever you’re afraid of something.”

Maurise stopped after that, taking in his words. “What do you mean it already knew.”

She finally turned to face the Nightmaren, his posture stoic. At first, Renhet didn’t say anything, they just stared each other down. Then he spoke, “We can sense fear. It’s instinct.”

“So you’re telling me you could tell whenever I was afraid of something, after all this time? Why-what.”

Again, silence. If he was telling her the truth, many more questions could be posed about his interactions with her from the past. If he knew, then why would he have gone as far as he did?-“Yeah. We’re programmed to like it.”

“But NiGHTS—“

“Still pulls tricks and still misunderstands human emotions. It’s the Idea that made him see the things differently. He’s still a Nightmaren too, just like me. That won’t change.”

That statement hit Maurisa like a block of ice to the stomach.

An awakener, appeared between them as they both continued to stand there awkwardly. She silently thanked the little guy for coming to her rescue. Maurisa glanced from the little white ghost to Renhet, whose glare had softened.

“See you tomorrow.”

Maurisa nodded, not breaking eye contact as she touched the back of the specter. When the visitor vanished into nothing, the leaves of the trees around them wilted a little, not enough for anyone to notice.

A tiny lizard scuttled out from under a bush, scaling the nearest tree behind Renhet while the jester stood there, palms covering his face.
Chapter 4

For once in her life, I was glad to be a defective model. The entire eight minutes and thirty-seven seconds of the first report back to the master, seared the insides of my brain. If Wiseman did have the ability to read my mind, he would have had a seizure—oh, and also the knowledge that I was lying through my teeth. That didn’t help.

I gave him information on how the weapon looked and how it seemed to take on a different form whenever it emerged. How raw energy made up its configuration and what the colour of it was. Under the assumption that I had not directly talked to the visitor, I supposed it would suffice for now.

Being a poor liar by nature, I even astounded myself at how easily the fabrications evolved as I spoke. It was a wonder how the gigantuous figure looming above me couldn’t see my fidgeting hands, but the God seemed convinced.

“**You may go.**” My chest deflated. Thank goodness.

I left the room, making sure that the speed of my retreat wouldn’t cause suspicion. When the sound of the chamber’s massive doors knocking shut graced my ears, I leaned against it with a shoulder, mentally exhausted.

Now it was time to go back again.

At least the visi—Kurtason, didn’t seem to want to kill me. I was fortunate to have that peace of mind. Unnerving as it was that the boy felt unconcerned about my motives, I felt the swell of dread rise again. It wasn’t as if I could assume his reaction was alien in nature, after all, I hadn’t come across a visitor his age before. There was the possibility that all humans became immune to fear and intimidation as they grew. Right?

Going on in the fringe of my vision bustled action in the hallways. The rest of the castle seemed to be entirely unaffected by my personal problems as my mind wandered, feeling smaller than usual.

Stop thinking like that. I inhaled deeply, resting my eyes for a moment. The stress of the week was really getting to me. I hated stress. Wiping my mind for now, I composed myself before peeling away from the wall and joining the traffic.

I received a couple nods in my direction and returned the acknowledgement with tired smiles. Jackle zoomed past through the intersecting halls, tugging along a reluctant Chamelan. Cards slipped from the lizard’s fingers as they whipped around the corner and slammed into Bella, who skittered along in front of me. I giggled lightly, mood lifting a little when the spider began to scream at them, throwing silken balls after their retreating forms for good measure.

Eventually getting through the daily chaos, I reached a familiar red and blue door, taking the large golden knob in hand. Originally I was going to pass the door and be on my way, but the temptation was too great. Tugging the panel open, a familiar sight of misty tarmac and chains greeted me. Metal rustled across the room, summoned a smile to my face as I released the door.

It thudded gently as I called out. “Where are you boys?” Both halves of the dog suddenly sprung up on its feet at my summons, towering over the one who entered their domain. Ears twitching, both active and alert, their tongues danced out happily at the sight of me. They bounded over to my
grinning self and didn’t stop before plowing into me. The air temporally left my insides at the impact.

“Hah! There you are.” I laughed outright as the blue one nuzzled his wet nose into my belly. I reached my arms around his muzzle, returning the embrace. “I’m sorry I couldn’t visit you for very long last time, the master’s been keeping me busy.” The red canine joined in with the cuddles after shaking its mane. He was the most aggressive out of the two, or as I defended, the most hyper. If anyone else watched this display, they could’ve easily assumed the dog was mauling me to death. Of course this was nothing of the sort. If anything these two were the most protective friends I knew.

“It’s going to be a quick hi again I’m afraid.” Blue sat down in front of me and let out a short whine, understanding the situation. Red on the other hand hadn’t changed from his previous actions of violent head-nudging.

From my gained understanding, the other Second-levels had the ability to understand and speak language but for some reason, Cerberus’s situation differed. It was as if the dog was created to be more physically powerful than the others, but also less intelligent. He couldn’t speak and it took a great deal of patience and clarity to communicate. Blue always seemed to have a better understanding in language compared to his brother.

Showing tender control, I placed my hand on the jumpy, crimson dog’s nose, gesturing with body language for him to settle. He did after a few seconds of jerking and submitted under the stroking claws.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be, but I’ll try to be back soon.” My smile deepened suggestively, “I’ll make sure to bring back a treat next time, okay?” At this favored word their ears perked. Typical. I shook my head as they both came at me again with loving intent. Maybe a few more minutes wouldn’t hurt.

By Night Dimension standards, it was too early for any visitors to arrive just yet. When I finally approached the section-off hallway, I still had plenty of time to kill. Such a shame it was for the others to disagree. Many found my routine unreasonable, but minded their own opinions.

Now without any further distraction, it was back to the fun part.

My hands went up, searching for the familiar threads of energy so troublesome to locate. It took a good five minutes before any result came and I couldn’t deny the frustration. Why couldn’t this be as easy as Lord Reala made it look? Eventually my hand snagged on something and my eyes lit up, but—

“This isn’t the right one.” I muttered to myself, brows creased with building annoyance. This ebbed off a little when I inspected the powerful field. It was an unfamiliar signature, one I hadn’t felt in the area before. That however wasn’t the only feature to catch my attention. It was similar to the Nightopia Kurtason possessed, with enforced walls beyond my experience.

If I let the snag go, I might never find it again.

1. Chewing the inside of my cheek thoughtfully, I tore a hole open between locations. I couldn’t help my curiosity when an image of the world greeted my gaze. It was exceptionally green, lush and vast.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt.” I mumbled before sliding through to the other side. Humid air washed over me instantaneously contrasting sharply with the castle’s cool chill. A warm spray of moisture ghosted
over my body making me shiver.

Nearby, a waterfall rose decorously above me, cascading downward to make the billowing mist-clouds. I admired it for a moment before drifting cautiously along.

Many words came to my mind to describe this world: majestic, endless, ancient by normal standards, it was a work of art more than any other Nightopia I had seen.

I hovered above the grass, running a hand down the solid trunk of an old tree. A little further in, I caught the familiar sound of Nightopians in distress. Surely enough, a family of eight fluttered away in fright from a bush to my left. Of course this was normal for the little creatures, but sometimes a little voice in the back of my head wished they wouldn’t fear.

I froze when a brilliant pattern of colours poked through the veil of bushes. Drifting forward a little and stopping in a crouch I discovered the back of a visitor sitting in the grass of an open clearing. A sad little Nightopian struggled to stand on the girl’s legs and it fell. The mangled wings on its back forced me to blink. That was unusual sight.

The girl was very small, with short black and blue hair. A long pleated braid ran down her back, contained in a case of ribbons. Also unusual. The girl also wore really bright clothing on her arms and legs. Arm warmers and tall socks, none matching at all whatsoever. Unusual again.

I smirked, successfully restraining a laugh. The girl’s wardrobe reminded me of some of the Nightmaren I knew. Gazing thoughtfully at the heartwarming spectacle, I then remembered my earlier commitment to bring something back for my friend. Some extra Ideya couldn’t hurt and the little fairy was the perfect size for Cerberus’s treat, so why the hell not?

I left the bush and the Nightopian instantly caught sight of me.

It was surprising that the girl didn’t turn around, even with the little creature protesting in her arms.

“What is it Gimp-kun?” The girl spoke, her voice was high, but too mature for someone of a younger age. The visitor looked around, but not behind her.

Observant thing, isn’t she. I sighed, Too easy.

I rose a little higher over the girl. A red sparkle from my hands dusted the visitor’s knee and it made the human jump. I could sense the pulse of the girl rising—finally the dimwit’s noticing something amiss.

I moved out of sight as the girl peered over her shoulder and the Nightopian jumped ship, scrambling for the bushes. Damn, sorry Cerberus. The visitor got to her feet and my mind reanalyzed the noticeable curves on the figure.

Oh, so you’re an older girl. That’s new.

By this point the visitor was ripe enough for the picking. Time to advance and stir things up, I concluded.

“Who’s there.” The visitor croaked. “Ren, if that’s you doing that, I swear to God.”

I snapped a branch making the heart rate jump. Who was this Ren she talked about, I wondered fleetingly, before focusing back on my task.

The girl’s head snapped towards the sound but I had already took up a spot behind her, arms
extended to attack. I then spoke, game-face on.

“Who’s Ren?”

The girl screamed when I seized her around the arms, locking them to the visitor’s sides. What I wasn’t prepared for though, was the force of the girls struggling. After the first shocking pulls of the visitor, I had to tighten my grip, tripling the force. The human bowed forward and I gasped in alarm when the motion nearly flipped me over. Visitors were not this strong. Suddenly there was a sharp pain in my foot and I cried out. I suddenly realized that I couldn’t keep up with the girl and an elbowed stabbed me in the belly, confirming this. My pink claws slipped on the captive and the visitor was free.

The girl turned to face me, hands raised at the ready for any sign of combat. She looked very surprised after taking in the sight of the new Nightmaren before her.

I wasn’t anything short of astonished either.

We stood there for a long while, just staring each other down until the visitor spoke. “What’s wrong? Never seen a girl who can defend herself?”

No, I hadn’t. “No. You’re strong. I wasn’t expecting that.” I responded calmly. The visitor was twitching with nervousness but tried to keep up a strong front.

“You won’t be getting anything from me, I’ve got nothing to give. Sorry to disappoint.”

“I see. I found your world by accident actually. I couldn’t help but investigate. The scenery’s lovely, but I might as well bring something back while I’m here.” Might as well be honest. The kid held up a strong front, but internally a hurricane of panic raged below the surface. There were a few things in there I could play with, but instead decided it would be okay to take my time. This girl’s abilities seemed familiar to another certain someone and it perked my interest. The master never mentioned anything about this girl before. Did he even know about her?

The visitor lunged at me, catching me slightly off guard for a moment. The high kick narrowly missed my side before I took to the air. The face of the visitor fell and a new wash of terror trickled over my senses. The jester laughed at this.

“What’s the mater? Can’t reach?”

The human’s face contorted with frustration as I shot up into the sky and dove straight back down. Aiming for the visitor’s head and using my speed to intimidate the target, this worked effectively. I slowed and performed a flip, landing gracefully on the grass behind the girl. I swung a foot out and knocked in the human’s knee.

Now, if my assumptions were correct, the rest of this would be quite simple.

I took hold of the visitor’s ankle and lifted her effortlessly up into the air. Horror, fresh and unadulterated sprung up like a geyser from my prey below. Acrophobia, or maybe batophobia? Whatever works, this’ll be over quī– What?–

I yelped when a red blur shot up out of the blue and roughly shunted me. The mystery Nightmaren grappled their arms around the girl’s waist and pulled her free from my hand.

I hovered there, stunned into silence.

All I could do was watch numbly as the new arrival, a first-level model like myself, placed the
shaking visitor gently on the ground. The other jester bent over her protectively and looked up with a cold ferocity in his eyes.

_WAIT a minute._ I recognized those eyes, and the colour scheme of its outfit, but the recollection refused to come out, hidden within the butchered memory I had.

“What the _fuck_ were you thinking?”

_Woah,_ whoever it was, it wasn’t happy either. It had a raspy deepness to its voice, catching me off guard again.

The girl trembled; her pale skin looked even paler then before. Her fears must be chronic, or at least very severe, I concluded.

The human in the grass apologized weakly, but the red jester snapped back, silencing the girl entirely.

When the unknown Nightmaren’s fury redirected towards me again, my brain stopped working. “You’re still standing there, huh? What are you waiting for, _get out of here._”

My body refused to move, petrified by the fury blazing in the other’s eyes.

Nobody ever said anything about _other_ Nightmaren being in Nightopia. Nightmaren who went against the codes of loyalty. _He_, as I concluded it to be, was protecting a visitor. This was one of the biggest taboos out of them all.

I attempted to speak with confidence, but only a stutter emerged. “You. You’re− _What_?” The bafflement didn’t seem to hinder the other’s rage.

“Last warning. _Leave._” Its eyes narrowed further and it was clear that he was losing his patience. I winced away at the look; it felt all too identical to one of my mentors’ glares. Suddenly my mind returned from the void of shock.

I had to retreat.

Before the rest of me had a chance to catch up with this input, the other Nightmaren was on me already and my back struck the ground. How I got knocked out of the air was entirely lost to me but now it didn’t matter. Defending myself from the new adversary became top priority.

The red jester pinned one of my attacking arms down and rose a fist to strike. I gripped his shoulder tightly, stabbing the other with my opposing set of claws. Using a burst of adrenaline to aid me, I turned the tables by pitching the rogue onto his back and twisting the arm free. My legs came up, heels driving down sharply into his chest, nails lashing at his face− only to stop when I heard the sound of flight.

I looked up to see another First-level model drill their way through the leaves and into the clearing. This one again was _unfamiliar, yet familiar._

Now I was outnumbered. There were two unknown rogue Nightmaren of my model type. The one under me seemed to be just as surprised by the new jester’s appearance and didn’t struggle any further beneath my boots.

At first, I expected the newest arrival to attack, but they hovered there instead looking slightly mortified. _Funny, so was I._
Finally the purple-clad Nightmaren spoke and it wasn’t something I expected.

“Akila?”

The sound of my name from the others lips tipped the glass off the shelf. When it hit the floor *everything* crashed around my ears. I was out of there, flying for sanity’s sake.

Branches smacked me around a few times but I let nothing deterred my escape. Horrified to think that one of them could be following me, I rocketed through the woods, hands searched frantically for an opening, a tear, a pinhole—it didn’t matter. Luck was in her favor when my hand snagged on a frequency. Not bothering to discern where the portal lead or its stability level, I advanced on through.

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To my relief, it was Kurtason’s Nightopia, exactly where I *should* have been this entire time. When I emerged from the half-formed tear, I was inhaling air so rapidly it neared hyperventilation. I slumped down under the nearest willow tree, one hand pressing tightly to my chest and the other to my forehead.

Curiosity was officially going to kill me one of these days.

Calming myself, the many events of the morning caught up with me again. "One of them knew my name." Frowning, I rubbed the markings over my eyelids in small circles. I didn’t know what to think of it, or how to even approach it. Everything I saw in that Nightopia had been unpredicted from start to finish. This realm was known for being haphazard but... *Good, Lord.*

The Nightopia, the girl, the strange Nightmaren. Maybe they were from my past and the amnesia distorted everything? How come no one mentioned about them before though? What was I missing?

I inhaled deeply when a sharp throbbing ran through my forehead. Massaging the area again it passed leaving a dull pulse in its place. It hurt too much trying to remember.

"Akila?"

I jolted back to awareness. Being so busy muddling with my thoughts I hadn’t noticed the visitor’s approach. Kurt knelt down beside me, tall and gangly when I faced him. His grave appearance looked the same as last time, but more with concern then with hopelessness. "What's wrong?"

"Oh—" I paused, cutting myself off. Right now I was no better than those other Nightmaren when talking to Kurt. I had lied to the Master and unintentionally befriended the boy, but it wasn’t something I just could help. If word of this got out I’d be incinerated on the spot for sure. Self-loathing clawed at my insides when I thought this. After the mission—if I could even accomplish it now—I would need to cut the ties between myself and the boy. All my life had been spent trying to get noticed and appreciated by the other creations, but to get to the level I’d only dreamed of I had to do the exact opposite. *Damn everything.* I could do this.

“Nothing.”

His frown drooped further at my forced reply, fair-haired brows knitting together. "You could talk to me about it. I’m not going to judge, even if you’re planning my unfortunate demise. In fact, I’d probably be fascinated."

It took a long moment for his words to register. All the while I stared at him, brow raised incredulously until it hit me. The boys twitching brow served as the trigger and I erupted into a fit of
laughter. Lord have mercy, I’m doomed.

“Good God, what is wrong with you? You’re so blunt it’s ridiculous.”

“I try my best. I’m not exactly the most charismatically inclined human being in the world. Half the time people are surprised I can even talk.”

“You don’t say.” I sighed, resting my head on my arms. “Did you know that I’m breaking a lot of rules having a casual conversation with you?”

The boy smirked, “You don’t say.”

I covered my mouth in time to hide another laugh and I redirected my attention to ground.

“A lizard.” This odd statement drew my awareness back instantly. A lizard? I looked to where the visitor pointed and sure enough, there it was. It was a tiny little thing, black all over and—Hold on…

“That’s a Verol, I think.”

Kurtason glanced over at the jester, puzzled. “Verol?”

“It’s a type of third-level Nightmaren, the lowest rank. They look like that but… its colouring. I’ve never seen a black one before.” It crawled over to them and abruptly plunked itself down in front of me. After it not even twitching for a few seconds later, a sickening feeling rose in my chest. “I don’t like this.” I whispered, when suddenly the entire shape of the Verol collapsed into a black mass of—oh God.

I shrieked and jumped up, gaining a good few yards distance away from the blob. Kurtason instantly rose as well, startled by my reaction.

“What? What’s wrong?” I couldn’t move my eyes away from the black substance and in my peripheral vision I could see the light of Kurt’s weapon being drawn. Without thinking, I dashed quickly over to the visitor’s side.

“It’s— it’s,” God damnit, I couldn’t even articulate properly. “It’s corrupt. The infection— oh God, it’s not all contained. We can’t—“

“Akila! First of all, calm down. Second, explain. Slowly.”

I froze up again under the pressure of his words, “I can’t. It’s classified— Kurt I can’t be here!”

“It hasn’t moved. Whatever it is I don’t think it can harm you or me.”

“But I know what it is.”

“Why won’t you trust me?”

“Because I can’t!”

Kurtason sighed and I hoped this signaled that he’d dropped the issue. I hadn’t planed to have a yelling match with him, but I couldn’t help it. The mysterious remains of the Verol in front of us stoked up some very nasty pictures from the past. In a moment they were suddenly flashing in front of my eyes, like an old horror film full of memories.

“Akila, I think we need to move.” I glanced up briefly from the black fluid which had mostly sunk into the ground. The visitor was looked up at something in the sky as an unwavering figure, still and
silently waiting. My eyes gauged his new object of interest and what I saw frightened me more than the Verol.

It was a pack of five Goodles. My breath quickened when I saw the blackened eyes of the birds, the taint in their feathers—

“Kurt they are not in the right mind. D-don’t let them touch you. I don’t know what they can do to visitors.” My voice trembled. The boy had already seen my fear and at this point there was no point in trying to fool him. This was trouble.

“No problem, but I still think we should move.”

Suddenly he darted to the left. Before I had time to process his motives he stepped quickly in order to guard my back, whisking his weapon through the air.

Without any control or composure in my actions, I shut my eyes tight. Like a helpless child. Pathetic. I’d been trained to deal with physical combat, to become one with Nightmare’s element of terror. That’s when I knew I’d lost control, just as I did back then.

I heard the blade hit something, but felt no pain myself. It snapped me out of the momentary paralysis and I forced an eye open. A bird fell to the grass and died, its decapitated body fading into the gray soil.

I stared at it remains, in total disbelief of what just transpired.

"I think we're surrounded." Kurtason stated calmly. I scanned over the forest of trees to re-asses our challengers, seeing that it was true, but then went right back to ogling the visitor’s miraculous accomplishment.

“How did you do that?” I rasped. How— with a single hit? Master Wiseman couldn’t even damage them. About twenty, maybe thirty infected Nightmaren were closing in rapidly. We could both hear them chattering and hissing away, and I knew the two targets in the center probably looked awfully appealing. I laughed to myself dourly. Now wasn’t the time for questions. Despite Kurtason’s clear advantage, he was stuck to the ground level. The Goodles could still fly, much to my distain and it inconvenienced me as well.

"I can fly away from this and lead them elsewhere. If you don't wake up−" 

"Look up."

I did quickly and realized the sky was mostly free, besides a few strays hovering at the ready. Confusion swept over me. "What are you?−"

"I won't have time to wake up."

"I don't know what you’re saying."

"Take my hand." He ordered firmly, a lilt of annoyance in his voice. Clueless to the boy’s idea idea, I didn't move, so instead he grabbed my smaller hand making me jolt backwards. “Calm down.” Still greatly perplexed, I tried to slow down my breathing though it was getting hard to with the infected closing in around us. They probably witnessed Kurt’s display of power and felt too anxious to attack. Doubtful.

Something sparked between our hands. I gasped at the odd sensation and suddenly, I was alone on the battlefield.
~Kurt?~ I looked around frantically and finally one of the Nightmaren lunged at me. I avoided it with a little shriek and climbed higher into the air. ~Kurt! Where are you? What just happened?~

~I said calm down. I’ve done this before, we’ve just dualized.~

As I zoomed along in a panic I tried to analyze the word, drawing a long blank. ~Dua~ What?~ I could hear the boy’s voice in my head but couldn’t see him anywhere. I felt strange, a feeling I couldn’t describe that felt neither great nor uncomfortable.

~Okay. Look at your hands– and don’t freak out.~ I did as the visitor suggested, stopped and screamed. What I saw was the ghost outline of Kurt’s hands silhouetted against my own, like a mirage.

~I don’t get it! What the hell’s going on!~

~What happened to not freaking out?~ The visitor droned, a little peeve by my shrill yelling.

~It’s a bit difficult when you’re talking in my head!~

~Never mind, at least you didn’t drop me.~ I felt my body slide to the side sharply against my will, dodging a Goodle as it rocketed by. ~Pay attention to the sky.~ Nope. Nope, I wasn’t even going to think about what just happened there. Just fly and get out of here. ~I think we can take them out, otherwise they may come back for us later. Didn’t you say they were infected or something? Shouldn’t we take care of it before it spreads?~

~No! We are not facing them head on and I don’t care if you have the glow sword of destiny jutting out of your arm!~

The boy laughed out right as I tried to screech him down to size. Avoiding another collision I shot up even higher into the sky. ~You’re really something, Aki.~

~Shut up!~

Unfortunately, to my dismay the visitor was right. If he could kill them off—which was astounding in itself– then we should be able to exterminate the problem. I didn’t want to be anywhere near the infected creatures, that was certain; but if we did nothing...

~Okay, obviously this is new to me~~ I stuttered out as one of the birds rushed at us from out of the tree tops. I felt my arm move but it was not at my will. The visitor's blade sliced clean through it, but the weapon jutted from my own arm instead.

Okay, maybe we definitely had a chance with this.

~If we don’t retreat now, then we’ll have to fight.~ Kurt hummed, ~Made up your mind yet?~

I breathed deeply. These fears needed to be faced. ~You fight. I fly.~

~Deal.~ I launched myself into the air like a viper, catching a few more of the Goodle flock off guard. Kurtason puppeteered my arms, taking out the shadowy figures as they came forward. The third-levels were no match for my speed. I knew I was more agile than my experienced mentors and the boy was fairly skillful with his abilities.

I was amazed at how the visitor moved me. Did he have any fighting training like the girl did? How was it that we were synchronizing so well? To Hell if I knew.
A few minutes later, we sliced down the last of them. The final Goodle’s head plummeted to the earth below, spatters of tainted purple following before it sparkled and vanished.

~Satisfied?~ The visitor asked calmly and chuckled when I huffed.

~Yes. Show off.~ I grumbled as we flew farther away from the blackened grass. ~Now, how do we separate?~

The visitor didn’t speak for a moment. I could hear the echo of his mind working and I sighed. ~You have no idea, do you?~

~Like I said, I’ve only done this once.~

~Marvelous.~

I slowed, lowering our altitude to hover above the ground. A murky creek ran off to the side of the glade, gurgling along with our thoughts. ~All I know is that our minds have to be in sync to duelize.~ The boy muttered.

~Well, then we have to break...~ A tingly sensation washed over me and an awkward yelp graced my ears. Kurtason landed on his side below me with a heavy grunt. I stared down at him, a little astonished.

“That was easy.” I piped.

The boy groaned, “And yet no less painful.”

As the visitor gathered himself, I crossed my arms, mind wandering elsewhere. “I'll probably be in a lot of trouble when I get back.”

"I figured as much."

"Pardon?"

"I forgot about a little detail. With the duelizing that is. I knew what you were thinking the entire time."

Dead silence dropped over the clearing. I felt faint.

“Stop. Stop right there.” Completely aware of my horrified expression, I inched backwards. “What did you see?” The words bit at the boy harshly, but at this point it meant little to me what the other visitor thought. I hoped this was all a trick. That he was only playing with my head as a joke. He was bluffing right?

“’You’re a spy, though you’re questioning your ability to pull off this mission. You’ll be given a higher status if you succeed. It’s something you’ve always dreamed about and my cooperation is your ticket. And with your affiliation with those infected, I saw—”

“Enough! I don’t want to hear it. This wasn’t supposed to happen. None of this was.”

This was bad. Very bad. I backed away further, but knew I couldn’t run from this. He knew the plans, knew my secrets. Especially the secrets no one else knew. This day couldn’t get any worse, could it?
An Awakener materialized at Kurt’s side. He stared at it for a fleeting moment before mumbling, "I guess it's time for me to leave then."

Okay, maybe the day was looking up. A little too late for my tastes though.

The visitor reached out to touch the ghost before pausing. Without looking at my apprehensive exterior, he sighed. “I’ve seen a lot of things in my life too. Most of them as unpleasant as yours. I’ve already told you, I’ve have my fun here. Tomorrow, just finish the job. I’ll be waiting here.”

With that said, the boy was gone, my sanity closely following.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Well, I tried to make that as painless as possible. I’ve been under a lot of stress lately with driving lessons and the test that I passed! :) (Got ma G2, HAHAHA) Black belt promotion is coming up too, so I need to study for the exam and my social life has gone to hell. All this crap makes me want to type. That, and as I’m also getting into the faster parts of the story, so my interest has been holding out for longer periods of time.

Wow, I seem to enjoy torturing my characters. Akila gets bombarded left right and center in this one. She has not a clue what’s going on anymore and in this chapter she snaps in a few places. :/ This is not a happy fanfiction at times but I’m not going to spoil anything. I’ve never posted the end before even in the old story and that’s what I’m pumped to type the most. :)
Chapter 5

See you outside. I need to talk to you. It’s important.

The note fell out of my locker before I left for home. It was a peculiar thing, wedged tightly into the crack of the door frame. When I picked it up and read it, I assumed it to be a practical joke.

Thinking nothing of it as usual, I tossed it into the trash and proceeded for the exit.

I always trekked the home route alone. Lucy, of course, had the privilege of taking the bus because she lived in a further district. I didn’t mind. It was a good time to think and drown my sorrows in music. I hadn’t even taken a step through the doorway when Jacob Torren appeared and held the door. This boy was in my grade; actually, he was in one of my classes too. He was a popular face and easy on the eyes to most.

In order to state my reaction vaguely, I was floored at this gesture. There was the possibility that he didn’t recognize me and held the door only for gentlemanly purposes, but before I could stock off, he asked me to wait up.

It was indeed him who planted the note, I discovered as we walked home together.

At first, I couldn’t even summon up the thoughts to start a semi-decent conversation. He spoke confidently to me, as if not knowing my unloved reputation. By the time we arrived at my place, he stopped me again to ask me a devastating question.

Would I go out with him?

Holy fuck. Yes.

And now here I was. Standing numbly at head of the Dreamgate.

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Some distant part of her wondered if it all just happened in her imagination. It was a miracle, an anomaly in her hellish life and yet, it happened.

Maurisa walked over to the ledge of the fountain hopping precariously onto the stone. To make matters worse, she didn’t know what to feel. Or even how to feel. She was excited, giddy but also shocked and unbearably nervous. If there was an oxymoron to describe this emotion, she would’ve used it.

There was also another problem that nagged at her and she dreaded the idea of approaching it.

Maybe I should tell the others?

Her foot chose that moment to slip and the girl let out a squawk, nearly falling into the basin. It was a close call, but she righted herself, continuing on with the endless venture. Going around and around in circles. This motion was distracting. It forced her concentration on keeping her footing instead of the thoughts that plagued her. The patter of Converse shoes faded when Maurisa came to a sudden stop.
This was stupid.

She hopped off, landing drunkenly. What’s wrong with me today? It was always the best feeling in the world to be noticed, positive acknowledgement or not. Since when did the anxiety of judgment creep in?

Fluttering wings warned the girl of Owl’s arrival, but Maurisa didn’t bother to turn or greet him. The clink of talons on stone also suggested him landing.

“You look troubled,” huffed the old bird. The visitor didn’t move, not sure how to advance. “Has something happened, Maurisa?”

“Well,” She could trust Owl. The old bird was like the wisest grandparent out of any. Not that she had anyone left to compare him to. Hers were long dead and their urns sat on her the living room shelf as a grim reminder. Tradition and her mother could be creepy sometimes. “I’m not sure I’m ready to say. I don’t want the others to know yet.”

Owl’s head bobbed silently, confirming that she had his word of secrecy.

“A boy asked me out today. He left a note in my locker. I never imagined something like this would really happen.”

“It is only natural for a visitor of your age.” Owl hooted.

“I know, but I thought that this cliché stuff never actually happened to people. It doesn’t feel real.”

The bird was silent for a moment, cocking his head slightly to the side. He didn’t seem surprised at all by the news. “Are you happy?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Then why are you troubled?” Maurise was taken aback by this. She didn’t respond because she was lost for an answer. Owl shook out his wings and once more opened his beak. “I will let you tell the others when the time is right. Don’t doubt yourself. It isn’t in your character to do so after all.” A smile shone in his eyes, but that was the last they spoke on the topic.

NiGHTS shot through the narrow gap between where they stood, rudely announcing his arrival. Owl was gracelessly knocked backwards into the water by the motion and Maurisa snuck away a bit, watching the pathetic display of the bird as he floundered around in rage. Quickly greeting NiGHTS, she was off, heading for the ancient door at the edge of the cobblestone.

It wasn’t hard to find Renhet today.

The girl heard a low humming and as she walked further into the woods it escalated and rolled in a full motioned melody. Distinguishable lyrics became of the sound, taking on the form of something abrasive and beautiful.

As soon as Maurisa was close enough to hear without strain, she knelt low behind one of the trees. It had excellent coverage. He wouldn’t find her there.

It was a rare experience, hearing Renhet sing. It was a treat, though Maurise never really let on that she listened in secret. Being the music hoarder she was, the girl listened to everything she could get her hands on, but like anyone she preferred specific genres. Alternative music was always her mix. The voices of Tyler Connolly, Ian Thornley or Chad Kroeger always sent shivers up her spine and Ren’s caught just in between. Sometimes she wondered if Ren knew how talented he really was, but
his insecurity was clear. He was a loudmouthed, egoistic asshole, with stage fright. How ironic. Regardless, it was interesting to hear soprano or alto songs sung at a raspy, tenner level.

It was better to enjoy it while it lasted, but it never lasted too long.

The squeal of a Nightopian in her ear shocked a yelp from her throat. Gimpers ruined the moment. The singing stopped as abruptly as the noise she made. A few seconds of silence later and Maurisa wondered if he brushed it off. Right when her heart began to calm, Renhet roughly parted the branches, discovering her with a scowl. She squeaked out in fright and jumped on the spot.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Loitering.”

He stared at me for a good few seconds. Was it the light or was he blushing? I smirked, aww poor baby.

"Reeeeeeennnnnn-kuuuun." She whined, using my accent to its fullest. With the puppy dog look, she would make him crash and burn.

To her pleasure, his eye twitched and the blush deepened. “I don’t care what you want. You ain’t getting anything.”

Ouch. Cold.

“But you sing so pretty.” Maurise cooed. Oh the look on his face. It looked like he was about to crawl into a corner he was so embarrassed. Adorable.

“No.”

“But-“


“Wait, Wh-“ Renhet blasted up into the atmosphere, forcing the visitor to eat sparkles. Served her right. He could hear her yelling from below. He wasn’t in the mood for this today.

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"Haven’t been in there before."

Helen’s glass Nightopia felt like a good place today. It wasn’t like I was hiding from Maurise. I’m not a coward. Hell no. There are times where I don’t know how to respond to her motives though, this would be one of those times. It made my face burn and my insides turn upside down. I’ve always hated the feeling, it pisses me off and it’s uncomfortable. Today we needed a break from each other. She was digging too deep.

I hadn’t been to Crystal Castle in years. Despite Helen’s odd disappearance, it still remained like her other worlds. After meeting Mori and spending so long with her, I guess her world grew on me. I don’t usually venture far from there. There were still portions of Helen’s world which I hadn’t bothered with.

Like this extremely narrow cave full of crystal stalagmites and stalactites.

The only problem was that I wasn’t the best at morphing. Even squeezing through tight areas felt like a challenge. It amazes me how Mum can pull it off no sweat, and he’s not even fazed. Hey, I can’t
be perfect.

Nightopians giggles and fluttered along with each other below my feet. Unfortunately, that’s where I also saw an intruder.

I third-level Nightmaren again. I wasn’t clear on all their names. This one looked unfamiliar to me. Of course the little egg-heads hadn’t noticed yet until it nabbed one. The others went ballistic. How sad. I dropped down to their level and grabbed the creature by the… Propeller? Who the hell designed this guy? Oh right… and wrenched it free from the screaming fairy. It gnarled its teeth at me before I easily crushed its head in.

Why the hell were they still whining? I got it right? "Jesus Christ! What do you want from-" I turned. "Oh."

Shit is weird in Nightopia, according to my human buddy. I’ve lived here all my life. It’s not so bad. But now I’m reconsidering.

Is that reflection making me look like a Smurf? Wait, is that even a reflection? No… No it’s not. I’m looking at its back.

It was another Nightmaren. Its outfit was a little different and the colour- but other than that… I stared at the back of its head, probably looking like a complete idiot. It had a Nightopian in its claws holding it by the head. Mumbling something that I could barely make out. Something like, "I'll get this to go..." Had it noticed me at all?

Trying not to flinch, it lifted the shrieking Nightopian up to its face and right before it could sink its teeth into the creature's neck, my hand lashed out and grabbed its vambrace. Keeping a strait, bitter face, the other turned to me, until we were face to face. Then, we were at a stare off.

The clone wore black makeup, just like the other before, but he also wore a golden mask. Our eyes were exactly the same. It freaked me the fuck out.

And then he spoke. Holy shit.

"You? You're alive?" My clone mumbled, eyes just as wide as mine. I was still a gaping fish. Great impression Ren, so intimidating. I inhaled deeply and hardened my expression.

"Drop it." I said sternly. The other didn’t move for a moment. Instead, he looked at me curiously, then glanced at the Nightopian wailing in his hand. The shock dissipated quickly and he then narrowed his eyes with contemplative amusement. This looked like one sly motherfucker.

"Give me a reason to?" His dark lips pulling slowly back in a smirk. I could still tell the guy was baffled, but I had a feeling he was trying to one-up me. Shit, it looks like we both cheat at this game huh?

"Do you want a reason?" I shot back at him smoothly, a venomous look in place.

A few long seconds passed and our powerful battle of wits commenced. We didn't move, didn’t blink. The others lips turned up in an amused sneer. He was laughing at me. Before I could growl, the enemy chuckled and straightened up.

"Calm down boy." With a controlled flourish he lifted the Nightopian’s little body to the side of his face.

“I bet you've never tried Nightopian before. It's a nice treat."
"You deaf?" I hissed. This guy was good.

"hmmmmmm... No. I just don't feel like listening to a mama’s boy."

The fuck.

What. The. Fuck.

I suddenly had a grip on the other first-level’s collar. "Sorry? I didn't quite hear you. Say that again?"

The red and black Nightmaren, again, laughed at me. I knew this was all a part of his game but, that took me off guard a bit. Clearly he was playing with my head.

"Oh, spare me!" He howled. “I'm actually in quite a good mood today."

"Shut Up!" I threw him at the crystal rock of the hill, but he rebounded from it and righted himself.

"Temper, temper. Reminds me of someone I know." There was a bit of irritation on the edge of his voice now. Fabulous! I hoped I was ruining his good mood. The blue clone flexed his clawed fingers. I was going to wreck his shit.

I had launched myself at him, giving him no forewarning and he slide out of the line of fire with a shout. It was close miss for me, which only riled me up more.

"Not bad!" The other giggled. He looked too thrilled for my comfort while he jeered at me.

Eventually I ended up getting a few hits in, being a slightly faster flyer and the fight turned into an all-out brawl. After a while, it began to feel invigorating. I could go all out and smashing this guy’s face in felt great.

Soon we had switched roles. I was having fun, and I made him know it. He was running out of energy and patience while I was laughing like a little kid again, flying circles around him.

"Hurry it up old man!" I taunted sticking out my tongue around from another. We had taken this fight inside. The enemy Nightmaren shot a glare of hatred at me as I popped out from another corner. He was back to chasing me through the castle again. Making another sharp turn and going through my newest Paraloop, I ended up on the opposite side of the wall. This tactic was greatly amusing for me, but he could do the same trick.

I few into another haphazard room, planning on fazing through the wall again but it was a room that I was familiar with. I was going to make sure this guy hated me.

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Reala halted as he came to the next room and looked about frantically for any warped energy signals. Renhet hadn’t opened any portals in here. He was still in the room. The kid was slipperier then he seemed at first. His ability to open Portals so easily astounded Reala at first and of course, the irony. Akila couldn’t transport herself out of a paper bag.

Every wall was a mirror, or completely transpar- he smacked face first into the glass. A deep laughed leaped off the walls. Reala cursed wildly, holding his face and saw a flash of violet and red on all the mirrors. Damn, the kid had the advantage here, he probably knew the terrain better.

"Done yet old man?" Reala could hear the voice close to him, taunting.

"Shut Up, You Brat!" No matter where he looked, he still couldn’t pin-point the other’s location. It was nearly impossible with the many reflections. Which was the real Renhet?
"Awwh, that's Harsh." The chuckles still echoed off the walls. Reala had enough of this. Time to cheat.

Swiftly, just as Renhet predicted, the older Nightmaren began to smash the mirrors one at a time. He, however, was above and high out of reach, but made it not seem so. Renhet sighed and shook his head. With a wide smirk he closed his eyes. Might as well just sit back and enjoy. He hummed and changed his sitting position in the air. Sadly though, he didn't gage his distance from the glass chandelier hanging from the ceiling. His foot knocked into it. That's all it took for the light fixture to fall, shattering to the ground about five meters from his caged foe’s back.

They both froze. Renhet was wide eyed staring at the mess he made and his clone had gone still and completely rigid.

The piles of glass on the floor sat around Reala’s feet where they landed. Some were a couple inches off the ground and propped up by debris. He shoved his boot under the sharp, broken pieces, turned and kicked them up making them fly over his head at the hiding spot above. "SHIT!" Ren yelped, taken off guard as the shards hit him square in the face, luckily missing his eyes.

The older Nightmaren, now locked on, slammed him against a mirror, shattering it behind Renhet’s back to free up the walled surface underneath. Hanging by his collar, not bothering to struggle, Ren kept his expression neutral, maybe slightly dissatisfied which surprised the other first-level. "And?..." Reala still hadn't caught his breath, but managed to raise a brow curiously. "And… What?" He asked back. "You gunna kill me? Or take me ta tall, dark and creepy?" Ren had to suppress a laugh. Reala gave him an odd look. "Not sure. Good question." The blue skinned Nightmaren tapped his chin thoughtfully, and after a second his face lit up. "I'll do something different this time. If you find your way out, do tell your mother, NiGHTS that I said hello." Renhet felt a cold chill go up his back. What?

Suddenly the wall gave away and he sank further backwards. With a cackle, the other Nightmaren had opened a window behind him. "Have fun in the dark, Renhet!" Before he could protest, Reala shoved him through the portal and into darkness. He was then sealed off from all light.

"Wh...What the hell?" Horribly disoriented, my eyes were trying to adjust to the lack of light. Believe it or not, I hadn't really been in total darkness before. Feeling around, I tried to find a wall, an object, anything- Okay, there was a floor. I can manage with that. Finally, my eyes adjusted. Cat pupils were a wonderful thing. It was great to be a Nightmaren. I could see clearly now. Looking around, at the encompassing walls I deciphered my location, but didn't like the out-come.

A cave... really? ...It REALLY had to be a cave? And with walls so narrow, it gave the illusion of being constricted into a tiny box. I hate it in here already.
"There’s no light to show me the end of the tunnel either. This'll be a fun hike." The ceiling was too low to fly. At least I could move. And I wasn’t underwater. Some warm fluid dripping down my cheek. I brushed at it with the side of my hand to take a look. I wasn't surprised to see blood glowing in the dark. That crazy bastard carved some nasty gashes into my face with that glass. Funny how they were sharp enough to do damage. I trudged on, pulling my self through tight spaces. I thought about opening a window, but the energies down here were so muffled I couldn’t find any snags.

That Nightmaren with the gothic make-over had no problem opening this place up. It bugged me a little for some reason. "Cocky son of a bitch." It was amazing how quiet it actually was when in here. My voice echoed. The guy knew Mum. Knew me. It freaked the living hell out of me when the guy said my name. This was weird.

Then my foot slipped.

I fell strait into a deep pool of water. I yelled out, grappling so hard to a stalagmite on my left that I broke the damn thing at the top and fell back in. Scrambling for something else was the next thing I did.

I hate water. I hate it I hate it I hate it! If I went under, I wasn’t going to come back up again. I couldn’t morph into something buoyant. I would just sink. Then I’d be stuck at the bottom and I wouldn’t be able to move and- If Maurisa knew about this, she’d probably never let me live it down. Fortunately for my sanity’s sake I grabbed the edge of the pool and pulled myself up.

On my knees, trying to calm down, I felt like shit. My legs wouldn’t stop shaking either. Paying more attention to my surroundings was now high on my priority list.

My boots squeaked along as I trekked onward but the shaky feeling never left. Finally a glowing blue light caught my eye from down the tunnel. It was faint and ghostly but it was still something other than this personal hell I was in.

I entered a cavern. The walls where rough and gouged out. The egg-shaped area was fairly huge. The light came from an opening in the ceiling and suddenly I felt less claustrophobic. Two other tunnels connected to the cavern as well, but that wasn't what had caught my attention.

"A mirror?" Honestly, I'd had enough of those today, but this one was different. The plane of glass was narrow and half my height. As it sat in the middle of the room on a stone pedestal, its complex silver trim glowed a faint blue.

I walked up to it in interest and stepped within its reflection. Yep, I was a mess. When the surface rippled I jumped back a little. Woah. "Weird..." I suddenly had a strong temptation to touch it, but knew it was better not to. But then again, "Mori would freak out sooooo bad." I chuckled and grinned at my reflection, picturing her face. She didn't like the dark much more than heights. Then I frowned. The night was almost over and I hadn't come back yet. Knowing her she would probably be waiting for me.

The glass rippled again violently.

I jumped, hovering back off my feet.

My shredded face was no longer in the mirror. A different image formed in its surface.
An image of my visitor lying on a couch peacefully. "What the-

Then it moved. Maurisa turned on her other side, facing away from my view. What was this? My eyes were wide again. "No way..." A short woman with black hair walked by her, stood at her side, looking slightly annoyed and threw a blanket over her before walking out of the screen. "Is this, for real?" That was it, I was touching this mirror. I cautiously reached out and the surface broke under my fingers. It didn’t hurt, but a powerful energy buzzed up my arm. Similar to-

Holy shit. That was *Reality*.

I was excited. At any given moment I could jump in there. I smiled eagerly, looking down at my friend under the half strewn blanket. "Still asleep huh?"

I felt something cool blow against the wet part of my cheeks. I turned my head upward towards my escape. Silently I looked back at the mirror. I needed to tell her first. Before I did anything stupid. And that other visitor was in there. Probably her mother.

*I really need to remember this place.* I concluded.

I made my way up through the opening and out into the light. The sudden brightness blinded me for a moment and I swerving a bit. It hurt like a bitch and the headache remained even after I re-adjusted. When I focused into the distance I found Crystal Castle not too far away.

"He didn't send me far did he?" I snorted in disappointment. "I guess I owe him."

88888

When he arrived back at the Dreamgate, he decided not to mention about what happened to anyone. Maurise noticed the cuts on his face first and demanded answers. He made an excuse up and said he was jumped by another third-level. After his explanation and good acting, he was off the hook for now. But from that time forward, he began to question his mother. NiGHTS was hiding more things then he thought.

88888

I arrived at the gate. The secret was killing me. I had to tell them. I had to tell *him.*

It was no big deal, I shouldn’t be fazed but, why was this so hard?

I jogged for the door but came to an abrupt halt right after the old bird appeared. He came to greet me again, but I almost ran him over.

"Oh! What's the rush?" Owl hooted, flapping his wings to move out of the way. Thank god for that.

"I can't take this anymore." I answered, hoping he would understand my meaning. He was the only one who knew after all.

"It would seem so." He nodded

"Can't take what?"

Another voice flitted out from behind me. When I turned, NiGHTS was upside down and right in my face.
"Kuso!" He grinned widely as I jumped in fright. I felt way too nervous right now for his antics. “NiGHTS, not fair.” I breathed. In a way, I was thankful it was just him for now.

“So, what can’t you take? You know I can’t handle suspense!”

“Apparently I can’t either…” I muttered.

"And why is that?” There was a pause, my eyes inadvertently darted to the treetops and back. I whispered.

"I got a boyfriend."

“Dear God—"

“No.

“Yep.”

Suddenly NiGHTS had his arms around me tightly and was spinning me around like a doll.

“Finally! This is great! You’ve been looking forever! What’s his name? What’s he look like? Damn it Maurice give me details!”

Woah. Dah fuck? I was not expecting something like that. I giggled at the absurdity of everything.

“Ow, NiGHTS. You’re crushing me.” His face straitened in surprise and I was placed gently on my feet. Holy crap I was dizzy now.

“Sorry about that.” He chuckled, “But I’m so happy for you! First beau! Soooo do I get answers?”

I couldn’t stop laughing. NiGHTS was squealing and acting like a little girl, it was hilarious. This seemed to do the trick for my nerves and I relaxed. “His name’s Jacob, tall, dark and handsome. He’s in one of my classes actually.” I grinned sheepishly. “He left a note in my locker and we walked home together on Tuesday.”

“Wait. You haven’t told me and it’s been two days already? Maurisa!”

Owl butted in then, “She wasn’t comfortable yet.”

“Awww, but we’re practically family!” And now the Nightmaren was pouting. Wow.

“Can I ask where Ren is?”

NiGHTS blinked and hummed in thought. “Your Nightopia probably. He looked like something tried to eat him yesterday. What did he tell you?”

“A third level jumped him by surprise. Apparently.” I shrugged. Yes, last night was a little strange. He came back less than an hour before she woke up, looking slightly more disheveled than usual. “Thanks, I’ll go rain on his parade.” We smiled in unison. I hoped it wouldn’t be literal.

Running through the trees, I glanced around for red tights and a purple ringed hat.

Tree branches were his favourite hangout spots. Maybe it was because I couldn’t climb without giving away some sort of sound? It was crafty, but I’d already found a way around the strategy.
Finally, I came across the low hanging branch near the springs. Pushing past a few bushes I spotted the back of Renhet’s head. He was lounging in hammock branch. I crept up behind him and took a deep breath but froze when seeing his face. His breathing was too mellow, and he should have noticed me by now. Exhaling quietly, I walked around to get a better look.

He was fast asleep. The urge to wake him up quickly subsided as it came. I sat down on a neighboring branch. It creaked slightly, but he hadn’t stirred. To be honest, I’d never seen him asleep before. Usually he was awake by now. I watched his chest rise and fall and then saw that the cuts on his face were still there. Yesterday he wouldn’t let me touch them. He said they could heal on their own, but they were pretty deep slashes. I hadn’t believed him when he showed up. The slashes were too smooth to be made by teeth or claws. What really happened?

I nudged a little closer, to get a better look. His silver lashes literally glowed as the light bounced off them. His eyes were always amazing even when closed like this. I trailed a finger lightly over each gash, healing them gently one by one. It surprised me when that didn’t wake him either. I thought NiGHTS said he was a light sleeper? It must have been rough yesterday.

My index trailed over his left cheek, and then above his right eye, sealing up the last of the cuts. His face looked whole again. It was nearly white in comparison to my tanned hand. Taking a risk, I scooted further forwards, and had the desperate urge to touch his eyelids. Out of all the years I had known him, suddenly everything sharpened into detail. He was so inhuman, and yet so real. It was quite breathtaking.

What am I thinking? I looked around briefly to make sure nothing was spying and decided to go for it. Carefully, I slid my fingers under a part of his hat. Silky hair met my fingers. Then, ever so slowly, I pulled it off. Short, white hair tumbled out into the open. It was a shaggy mess, maybe a few inches longer then the last time I’d seen it. Even though Renhet hated his hair, it felt so calming to touch. Running a curious hand through the locks I was careful not to put too much pressure into the strokes. The albino strands twirled through my fingers and I smiled.

Just how far could I go without waking him up? I was about to test that.

Continuing with a new motion, I hear a small noise. Was it a purr, or a growl? I couldn’t tell. Looking around, I heard it again, its source more clear.

I held back my own hair and leaned my head closer to his. While listening I continued to pet the top of his head. Hearing it again, I almost burst out laughing but I caught myself. The noise was coming from him. He was purring like a bloody cat. And it was way too adorable to make sense. I knew one thing for sure.

I pulled my phone out and started to record. I was going to be dead to him for a while after this…

With new blackmail material, I began to feel a little ridiculous.

There was still some of his branch exposed so I leaned on my elbows to get comfortable. This was relaxing me quite a bit. Not having to be on my guard at every given second. I unconsciously laid my head on his chest, being mindful of the jeweled buttons of course.

Ren groaned.

Not realizing I had closed my eyes, he shifting slightly under me. Fuck. I looked up to see if he was awake, trying to be as still as possible. He was staring down at me with the most awkward look.

I couldn’t move. I was scared to. In my head I was cursing a mile a minute. How the hell do I
explain this? Renhet’s eyes didn’t waver, head craned forwards and making it impossible to break eye contact. I wasn’t expecting him to open his mouth first.

“Explain?”

Suddenly I was up, ramrod straight. “I, uh- fell.”

Wow. Trying that one again.

“Uh, I was going to scare you awake but, uh… yeah. Tripped.” Holy God, this was embarrassing. I was utterly horrified.

He didn’t move on his back as I got up. He was still looking at me like I’d gone green or something. After a minute of dumbfoundedness between us, he blinked, sat up and yawned.

“So um,” I was really trying to not look at the fangs in his mouth. “You really slept in.”

He stretched a bit and stopped when something silver fell in front of his face. Oh yeah. Crap. Ren’s hands shot up to find his messy hair out in the open.

“Where is it?” He glared my way. I was the only suspect after all.

“Under your ass, moron.” Ren frowned like a pouting child and leaned over as far as he could to look under the tree branch. Sure enough it was there. From that position he looked back up at me suspiciously.

“I know I didn’t take it off…”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s a hat.”

“It keeps chaos in place.”

“What? The hair?”

“Yes.”

I sighed. Whatever, it was a hopeless cause. I watched him curl forwards as he reached underneath for the headwear and strangely, the arm holding him up was shaking. Suddenly it gave out.

It happened very quickly, but he flipped off the branch with a yelp and stopped himself a few inches from the ground, arms and legs spread like a spider. He looked just as dazed as I did shocked.

“Safe!” He stated confidently and finally got a hold on the jester hat, placing it firmly where it belonged.

“Are you… okay?” I tried slowly. That was weird. He saw my unsure look and brushed me off.

“Yeah, yeah. Just tired still.” Tired? More like shaky. I began to notice the slight quiver in Ren’s hands before he shook his arms out and righted himself up.

I let out a nervous chuckle. "And you call me a klutz?"

“That’s because you are. That’s not going to change in my opinion.” Keeping the most blank face I could, I threw a rock. It hit him in the forehead and he winced. "Ow! See? This is why I like to wear a hat. It keeps my hair hidden, AND it's a good helmet."
"Sure." I growled through clenched teeth as Ren repositioned his headwear. Yeah. He was fine.

After a good minute or so, Ren grunted and flew over to me. Suddenly my braid had been grabbed. God Damnit.

"Hey! Whu-" I tried to retaliate but his pull was insistent.

"Come along, pull-toy." I couldn't help but bicker as he gently tugged me along. She knew that once he had my hair, he was taking me somewhere that I usually didn't want to go. After many more curses and the disorientation of walking backwards, he led me into the clearing where NiGHTS popped out of nowhere, hovering with a bold smile on his face.

I knew that if I stopped moving I'd get a yank, so I continued on with a huff.

He suddenly stopped.

"Oh yeah. And-" He looked devious suddenly and he pulled me over. With his large hands, he messed up my hair.

"HEY! What the!-" I yelped and tried to pry them of my head.

"So, you were trying to scare me awake, huh?" He gave an evil grin and I glanced over at NiGHTS.

Oh. Wait.

"Oh Ren, Don't bully her!" His mother sighed, "So! How'd he react?" The violet Nightmaren continued slyly. That's right, I forgot!

Renhet gave us a puzzled look and my chest suddenly locked.

"How'd... I react to what?" He looked at me. His curiosity burning holes through my head.

"Ah, Oh..." Oh great. "Well... I got a..." Why is it so hard to say? This was stupid!

"A, what?..." He prompted, looking slightly irritated now. Suspense wasn't his thing.

"a..." I took a breath and it came out, loud and blunt. "I Have A Boyfriend." Why did I shut my eyes?

Slowly, I forced one open and looked. He looked... surprisingly calm? No... wait... I actually couldn't read him at all.

The smile he gave me was delayed a few seconds. "Cool!" and voice was monotone as well. "Took you long enough." This is awkward. Fuck.

NiGHTS' eyes darted between us two, noticing the tension. It seemed he was thinking the same as me. And so, he broke in.

"Well! Hope you two last, he sounds like a good guy!" The flamboyant Nightmaren wasn't doing a great job. I flinched and answered cheerfully.

"Thanks." I guess only time will tell.

"True enough! Oh look!

It was an awakener answering my prayers.
When she was gone, NiGHTS turned to his son.

"What was that all about?"

"I don't know what you mean." He answered quite harshly and they paused for a few minutes. Ren stared at the ground and NiGHTS studied his face seriously.

Right before he turned to fly off, the older Nightmaren spoke up.

“It’s good for her. She’s not going to be young forever.”

He stopped mid takeoff, “I know.”

NiGHTS frowned at the cold answer. “Renhet, you need to get used to change.”

When he didn’t respond at first, NiGHTS bit his lip.

“Whatever.”

He let his creation fly off, feeling confused and yet understanding at the same time. Perhaps he shouldn’t have introduced Renhet to a visitor so early? But Maurisa had been perfect company for him after his sister vanished. Renhet had become miserable, out of sorts, and he couldn’t understand why. They had been bound on the day of their birth. A twins bond. It would always feel as if a part of him was missing. NiGHTS understood this. No matter how many friends he made in Nightopia, it never truly filled the void.

They were both fairly alike in a sense, Renhet and his sire. Change for them never came easy.

I hadn’t really felt the same. My hands shook more than before and I was tired again. To be honest, I was rubbing it off on the whole situation in front of me. If I was going to let her mahhhhhhhhh. Couple with this human, I had to know if he was trustable. I really hated this idea. The whole thing. She didn’t know this guy at all. Maybe, just maybe…

I stopped for a moment. What if I could split them apart? Maybe convince her to reconsider? But it would hurt her and to be honest, I did want her to be happy. She was important. Sometimes he could watch it the whole night. Lately, he had been having troubles sleeping, yet he was tired all the time. Could maren get sick?… No. It was impossible. Right?? Well, that was what he was told anyways. It all started a couple days before he was mentioned.

My head plunked against the glass surface. “I am pathetic.”

Might as well admit it to myself while no one else is watching.

Finally the name that was haunting him found its way back into his head. “Roy Burks.” The image of a boy with dark hair and hazel eyes came onto the screen. Ren could feel his anger boiling as he stared.
'What’s to like about him? What did he like about her? Was he just using her? Aaaaaaaand why the hell am I doing this?!’ Ren slapped himself across the face hard. Really?! Why was he?! This was friggin’ ridiculous! The maren then rested his head on his hand and continued to stare a little longer.

“Boy, how pathetic am I…..” He groaned in defeat and stood from his spot on the pedestal. He then put the mirror back where it belonged, on his temporary chair… ‘Maybe I should head for the Dream gate. If I’m gone for too long they might suspect something.’ The last thing he needed was for Morica to find out what he had been doing here. I stood up and myHis head swooned a little. Why was hle so dizzy? Must be the stress of all this bullshit I’m putting myself through for no reason.

And then I had an idea. Maybe Jacob had a Nightopia? Maybe he didn’t? What would I find if I went there? There was only one way to find out. ‘Maybe I should ask mum later…. It isn’t so bad, but it’s still annoying…’ He concluded.

It took absolutely everything I knew to locate him. Sometimes,Mum told me that if you pictured a face and their energy hard enough, you’d be able to open a gateway to that individual from where you are. It wasn’t as difficult as he made it out to be.

The only problem was that he wasn’t anywhere near a Nightopia. He was in the Void.

I’d never been there myself. It was a risk I had to take though. The Void was a Nightmaren’s hunting grounds. The kid had no Ideya.

I sensed his presence as soon as I passed into the space. It was dark, city-like, a bit apocalyptic and baron. I stuck to the shadows as I flew, searching. Someone was at work here. There wasn’t any specific way to know, but I could feel their presence here. He was being hunted. The terrain of a scare field could tell thousands of thinks about a visitor. So far, I didn’t like where this was going.

It took methe visitor almost twenty minutes to find him. Ren skipped a stone across one of the larger hot springsher and glanced at meNightopia’s hot spring and glanced at her when Ishe approached.

“Hey…..” Ishe hesitated and softly and sat down beside him.

“Mm.” He had another stone in his hand and began to examine it. I watched him as IMorica brought myher knees to myher chest, trying to read his expression. He was uncomfortable.

“Sooooo….What’s been up with you lately?...” IShe asked while looking backstaring out towardsat the waterfall. For once in all the time that we’d known each other, it was hard to make even small conversation. The discomfort of the silences between usthem disturbed methem both quite dramatically.

“Nothin’ much. Just the usual.” Renhetnin responded and threw the rock hard, making it bounce off the overhang of the waterfall with a clack. Stillness continued to haunt ourtheir presence and IMorica was close to losing myher mind. IShe couldn’t contain herself anymore and if I triedshe di tod, IShe knew half of myher brain would lose cells.

“Are you… mad?…. mad?...” IShe did it. IShe opened myher mouth and said those three words
with rapidly forming regret. Ren dropped his third rock casually. The question was still hanging in the air.

“Why would I be?...” he uttered softly. IMorica noticed his lack of eye contact. The whole time his eyes were glued to the waterfall.

“You’ve been avoiding me since yesterday.... then...” With that said, he flinched.

“Not avoiding. Researching.No...I haven’t.”

MyMorica’s eyes widened a little, catching onto something. “Researching what? Are you jealous?” IShe inquired in astonishment. His body tensed a little and his lips tightened in disgust.

“Jacob.Why would I be?.....” He muttered coldly again. Silence laced between them once more, but it was a scary silence.... IMorica glared at him. I wasn’t sure if he was kidding or not For once, she could tell it was a lie.; Why was it his business? and most of the time she couldn’t tell the difference. He’d also said the same answer twice.

“I’m surprised that you care....” IShe continued, hinting that IShe saw through him. Distress was what I was feeling right now. Distress was also showing in her voice.“Why do you anyways? You’ve never met him before.”

“I don’t. Who said I haven’t?! he snarled, finally meeting myher eyes, “He has no Ideya. I don’t think he ever has.”

“The fuck are you talking about?-“

“He’s bad news. You don’t need the details.”

Excuse me? “Actually yes. Yes I do! Why the hell are you being so secretive?”.

“Because it’s better if you don’t know!”

“Then why are you yelling at getting mad at me?! It shouldn’t matter to you at all!”

“.....” He stopped his advancing. Suddenly looking unsure. But he woke the beast, and the beast he was going to get. and just stared. Inner Morica was suddenly released and going for his ears at full force.

“Huh? Why? Can I not live a normal life because I see shit when I’m dreaming? You know what? I’m probably just crazy and thought this whole world up in my dreams ‘cause I’m fucking in the head! Everyone who knows about in in the real world thinks so, and you know what? I’m starting to believe them! This is my chance to fit in to my world and Jacob is the ticket! I believe that he cares!” HUH?! WHY?! IF YOU’RE NOT MAD, THEN WHY ARE YOU ACTING LIKE I DON’T EXIST?!!! She cried, “I’VE TRIED TO ACHIEVE THIS FOR YEARS! YOU KNOW THAT! I DON’T GIVE A FUCK IF YOU DON’T CARE! HE LOVES ME! AND HE’S THE ONLY ONE WHO’S EVER TOLD ME SO! SO—“

“How can you know about that if you’ve just met him? For fucks sake. Are you even listening to yourself?” Ren interjected in monotone. He almost flinched against the gaze I shot him, but instead of hollering at him again, I held in the fire n when the girls face turned red, but she contained the rest of her furious rant.

“He’s taking me to prom tomorrow night. It’s my last chance to do something with my life and I’m sorry, but you can’t stop me.”e to the prom dance tomorrow night, as a matter of fact!” She With that
said, I left no room for him to reply and stalked off, making my statement final.

88888crossed her arms under her breasts and scowled.

“You’re making a mistake, Mori.”

She was gone already and there was no point in chasing her. I knew better.

IWell! Isn’t that nice to know!” he sarcastically drawled. “How do you know if you can trust him?” The visitor had reached her limit. She stood abruptly and stomped around to face him with her hands on her hips.

“You’re Not My DAD Ren! And you know what?! FINE! Don’t trust him! It’s not your business anyway!” With that said, she stalked off into the trees.

Ren stood at there for a few minutes more, before floating over to the rocky side of the water fall toand smacked my his head off it.

“Idiot, Idiot, Idiot!” IHe repeated the violent motion a few more times and groaned, knowing fully well that abusing myself was stupid andhimself wouldn’t get mehim anywhere. All it gave me was a head ache. With his I flipped overhead throbbing dully, he with my flipped over so his back against was to the stone. After another moment of calm silence and tryin g to think of a new solution, maybe wasn’t so stupid after all. He squeezed my his eyes shut in anguish and purposely smashed the back of my his head off the rock, hard, and let out a wail. “Waaaaahhh! WHY AM I SUCH AN IDIOT??!!!--- AGH!!!!”

That was when the first pain came. It was something I couldn’t describe but it felt more real than the throb in my skull. MyHis hands clutched myed his chest. It was a sharp throb, As if something was jabbing the insides of my chest with nails. The thing that made me panic though it began to get worse as I breathed. My back slid down the wall into a crouched position, holding myself tightly as the spasms began to pass.

Holy fuck. That was terrifying. I sat against the wall panting as if exhausted. And I was actually.

When I finally deemed it safe, I slowly stood. My hands wobbled as if the earth was quaking. I still couldn’t control my breathing either.

I laughed a brokenly, even my voice had taken an impact. “Maybe I just hit my head off the rocks too hard.” After a few minutes of catching my breath, a couple Nightopians flew by squealing and giggling. For once it was less annoying and more soothing so I smiled and sighed. Lucky guys. Not a care in the world. My boots left the ground experimentally. Thankfully nothing drastic happened. It was probably a fluke.

The void Jacob was stuck in housed the living dead. There women roaming the streets of the city. Rotting and slumping about looking for victims. Or possibly the one who killed them. Revenge? Guilt? Cowardice? I could feel so many emotions in that atmosphere. He’d done some horrible things.

Then there was a man who roamed about. He was short, faceless, with dark hair. I couldn’t help but think to myself. Who was this guy hunting for Jacob? Or was he simply watching from a perch and waiting in the sidelines?

It was bad news. I couldn’t let Maurisa get involved with it no matter how careless I got. I needed a
way to get her away from him, or at least convince her using another method. I honestly wished I could just jump into her world and-

Hold the phone. I haven’t told her about the portal.

Originally I planned to head for the Dreamgate but another destination sounded much more practical. I could enter the real world but I would need a disguise so I wouldn’t freak people out. Mum had done it once. So why couldn’t I.

I opened a window when I hovered and grinned. I’m a fuckin genius.

“It’s the same fuckin’ dream again.” A brown haired boy sat against the ally wall of yet another nightmare, cursing to himself. With shaking hands he picked up a broken piece of glass and used an old trick to see what was down the street. Tilting the slab, he saw around the corner.

Another female corpse lurked down the ally diagonal from him and wandered through the abandoned trash heaps. Another walked down the street to the left, also heading in the opposite direction.

“They’ve lost me…” he sighed and put the glass into his pocket. Getting up carefully, he tiptoed over to another balcony ladder. He grabbed the first rung and began to climb.

When he reached the top of the building, he sat down and rested on the roof.

Another story to the building greeted him overhanging most of the flat roof with shadow. The dead couldn’t climb though. He was safe.

“Well. I would say it’s nice to meet you, but I’m not here to kiss your ass.”

The boys head snapped around, his heart rate got quicker. He didn’t recognize the voice at all. Was the nightmare finally taking a downfall for the worse? He wasn’t sure, but he also didn’t like the sound of the hidden being in the backdrop.

“Who are you?” He yelped. The deep voice was silent for a moment and replied, “You scared? Wow, doesn’t surprise me. Maurisa knows how to pick ‘em.”

“Maur- what?” The boy looked around waiting for it to speak again while reaching into his pocket.

“Don’t bother. I know what’s in there.” The vulnerable mortal whipped the glass from his pocket towards the voice. He stared as it stopped abruptly and floated stationary in the air.

A figure appeared from the dark and the boy’s heart almost stopped. A pale, violet and crimson clad jester was now outlined by the darkness. It was floating cross-legged and held the glass between its middle and index finger only inches from its face. If it had any eyes, the boy was unable to see them because of the shadows.

“Good aim for a blind shot, but I’ve dealt with this stuff enough in the past.” It admitted, or, maybe he?

“What the hell are you?!?” The brunette demanded.

“A friend of your girlfriend.” It said bluntly. The boy’s mouth unhinged.
“M… Maurise?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to cut to the chase.” The mystery creature informed him, “I would like to borrow something from you.” It uncrossed its legs and came closer.

“What the fuck!” The boy was white in the face with fear. The jester smirked, revealing his fangs. Perfect.

“I just need to take it off your hands for tomorrow. Hope you don’t mind.” And with that, it reached for the boy. “Jacob Torren.”

The next morning, I woke up in shock. Did it work? This rooms unfamiliar so I think it did.

I turned onto my side to see I was in a familiar bedroom. This was Jacob’s room. Getting up, I looked in the full length mirror on the back of his door. My image took on the form of the boy, but I could still see a ghostly sheen of myself faintly over lapping the other.

“Well,” I stated. “This is officially the stupidest thing that I’ve done in my life.”

The plan was simple. Get in. Humiliate the fuck out of Jacob in front of Maurica so she’ll drop him without letting her know I’m piloting his body. Then get the hell out.

Phase one complete. I jacked the body.

Back when I was younger, Mum had told me that First-levels could steal human bodies as a host for a one day cycle. Nightmaren, compared to those of reality’s beliefs, could be classified as souls without solid bodies. Whenever a visitor, or in other words a person’s soul, wandered into the dream realm, their connection to their solid body becomes weak, allowing for intruders to cut their spirits off and take their place when they awake. This would leave the previous owner to wander through the dream world and the opposing soul to travel around in their physique.

“Oh…” I breathed. Ready to roll and now- I have no clue what to do.” My esteem lowered just a little. Shit. To be honest now that I was here I had to make it through a full twenty-four hours before I could leave. I realize that I know quite a lot about reality for someone from the Dream realm, but not enough to make this convincing. I would have to wing it.

“Crap.” I sat back down on the disorganized bed. The room was a mess, clothing lay everywhere in piles and the floor under my feet was dusty and cluttered

“JACOOOOOB!” I almost hit the ceiling. The voice sounded like it was right in my ear, but it wasn’t. Automatically I stuttered a, “w…WHAT?” in reply. They screamed again, “GET YOUR ASS OUT OF BED! IT’S A SCHOOL DAY!”

Shit! Don’t panic, don’t panic- I know!

“I’M NOT FEELIN’ SO GREAT!” I hollered down the stairs. Thank God for Maurisa’s teachings. There was a long pause of silence. I waited literally on the edge of my seat. I was pretty sure it was a female who shouted up. I was pretty sure…

“Too Bad! You’re Going Anyway!” I rolled my eyes in repulsion. God damnit.

“Shit!” I swore and kicked the bedside table. Pain shot up my leg and I hollered, grabbing my foot- his foot, who the hell cares.
Mortal body, Ren. Rule one, you can’t fly. Rule two, can’t lift really heavy objects. Rule three, you are a squishy sack of flesh and bones that can feel pain really easy. I needed to remember that last one.

Someone burst into the room and it almost forced me to get friendly with the ceiling again. Yep! This human was a female!

“GET DRESSED ALREADY!” She shrieked. It was a larger woman with sparse black hair. She held a flyswatter in one hand and a few articles of clothing in her other. She threw the cloths at me and slammed the bedroom door.

I listened as she stomped down the stairs and then looked at the shirt in my hand, completely baffled.

“Well. Um, Shit…” I stood and put the articles on the bed. It probably wasn’t any different than normal, right? My body was humanly shaped so no big deal right.

“Ok… shirt.” I struggled with the baggie tee I was wearing and nearly choked myself. Taking off clothing I learned, was like a game of Jenga.

After about twenty minutes I was stark naked. Curiously I glanced back at the mirror.

“So this is what a male body looks like.” I clucking my tongue against the top of my mouth. Not so different. A First-level can form their body in whatever way they wished. Hahah, except for me; oh the irony. The thing between my legs was- uhhhh. It reminded me of June. The vulnerable, extremely sensitive month of hell that tortured me. Being hermaphroditic has its down falls. But does it just… hang out like that?

It was disturbingly hilarious and annoying. No wonder humans wore pants all the time.

I examined the other parts of the body closer. Jacob was probably half a foot taller than myself, tanned, with a lengthy torso but was a little less muscular. I looked in the mirror and sighed. To be honest, the female body looked much more interesting. Their soft skin, the curves that sculpted them so distinctively. Maybe it was the result of growing up with a girl who fit that description? Maybe.

After getting undressed, getting redressed wasn’t as difficult. I just had to remember that I had a neck now and that the head go’s through the hole. After forty minutes, I was ready and after confirming it I ran down the stairs and almost made it to the door. I nearly killed myself with how small my feet had gotten.

“Where do you think you’re going?” The woman was sitting at a small table reading a piece of paper. She was in a room with a tiled floor and strange boxy appliances. “Eat something first.” She gave me a strange look when I grabbed a random apple off the counter.


“I thought you didn’t like fruit?” She proclaimed curiously. I froze, thinking a mile a minute. Act, natural…

“Meh…” I shrugged and turned to brush her off as I took a bite. It tasted great and I chewed through it quickly.

I found shoes by what I could guess was the house’s entrance. I slid on a pair that looked like they fit and opened the front door.

“Jake! Don’t forget your bag!” The woman hollered once more. “Whatever, Mom!” I yelled back a
little annoyed. Oh shit! I realized what I did.

The woman went quiet and I grabbed a bag from beside the door. Apparently that was his mother. I bolted from the house. My cover hadn’t been blown yet. I stopped sprinting after I got around the corner of the building. What was I thinking when I thought of this idea? I’m completely fucked!

From there I walked, hoping to catch my breath once again.

With no clue where I was going, I decided it was best to hide somewhere until it got dark. I looked over my shoulder to find no one was watching and then strayed quickly off the sidewalk toward an apartment complex.

“Maybe there’s a tree around here that—AHA.” In midsentence I spotted a large maple tree. Swinging the bag onto my back, I began to climb. It was a lot more difficult now since gravity was working against me.

Finally, I was hidden enough by the leaves to sit on one of the branches. After adjusting myself so I was comfortable, I swung the backpack over to me and placed it on my lap. Curiously, I took the zipper and pulled it open, not realizing that the bag was upside down. Half the supplies fell out and I cringed as a few pencils and paper pads fell through the leaves and landed noisily on the ground.

“oooooooppssss…” I hissed, timidly and flipped the bag right-side up.

“Hey!” A voice from underneath me made me jump and drop the sack completely. I almost lost my balance and grabbed the nearest branch to steady myself. “

“Whatcha’ doin’ up there Jake?”

Oh God. I know that voice. Very, very slowly, I looked down.

Maurisa stood at the base of the tree gazing up at me. She looked different to me. Maybe it was her uniform, or how her hair was styled. I wasn’t sure, but it was her regardless.

She grinned at me and giggled, “I never knew paper and pencils fell from trees.”

“I know right?” I rubbed the back of my head, feeling a little out in the open with nothing there to cover it. Act natural. Jacob’s human heart began to beat rapidly under my reaction. So this is what a nightmare felt like. Lovely to know!

“You coming to school or what?” She raised a brow at me, questioningly.

“Um… I forgot to finish a project due today. I was thinking of skipping?”

“Seriously? Hah, good luck with that one.” She sang out in the mocking way she sometimes did. She was being sarcastic.

“What?” It meant something would come to bite me in the ass later.

“Your Mum.”

OOHHHhh.” I let a nervous laugh through clenched teeth. In more than one way, I understood what she was getting at. “Right.”

“Well? You commin’ or not?” She bent down to pick up the school supplies.

Do I? Or don’t I? Pick Ren, pick something!
“Yep!” I confirmed. Crap. Cursing internally at myself I climbed back down the tree. Thank God I remembered not to jump down instead.;

Once my feet met the grass I turned to look down at Maurise and tried not to laugh. The top of her head came to just above my shoulders. Served her right.

“Well?” She stared up at me curiously and I snapped from my thoughts.

“Uh-”

“Wow, you’re spacey today.” She raised a brow and smiled again. It was charming in a way. I had a desperate urge to pull on her hair, but resisted due to the fact that it was a personal trademark.

“Are we going or not? There’s like, five minutes left.”

I tried to sound exasperated and gasped, “Fine, fine!”

She laughed and took my hand. I jolted in surprise and looked down at our hands. As we began to walk back to the street I started to feel increasingly awkward and slightly warm. This wasn’t so bad. She did this all the time. Holding her hand was quite comforting actually. A familiarity in a world I knew nearly nothing about.

We walked like that for around ten minutes until a large brown building came into view. When we turned the corner, it was baffling. I had never seen so many visitors in my life and I couldn’t help but let my jaw dropped. There were swarms everywhere. All of the students wore identical uniforms depending on gender and most of them looked nearly the same to me excluding the hair colours. And actually… I looked down and found myself wearing the same as they were.

Human customs were strange. I mumbled to myself a little and Maurisa gave me a look.

“Huh?” she nudged my arm with her shoulder.

“Oh! Nothing.” I smiled sheepishly and followed her to her next class.

88888

My three word description of school… Way too easy.

Math was first. Thankfully Maurisa had the class with this guy, otherwise I’d be insanely lost. Apparently it was against Jacob’s nature to be intelligent, because every time I gave out an answer to the instructor’s easy equations, Maurise would look at me as if I’d grown another head. So I shut up after that point. Then the boredom set in. I was right about sitting in an uncomfortable chair for so long. It was losing my mind. When a bell rang, interrupting the human’s long winding speech about parabolas, the entire room sprang to life again. People were packing up and getting out of their seats. Finally.

I got a hug from Maurisa when we got to the doorway. It threw me off for a moment. Just as suddenly as she sprang on me she jumped back, hands held behind her. “I’ll see you at lunch.” With a smile she bounded off. I stood there trying to catch up with what happened. I was not going into another classroom ever again. Time to bail.

“Jacob!” Oh shit. I didn’t recognize the voice beside me or the hand on my back. I turned abruptly to face a blond human girl. She was thin, tall with her hair up in a swirly bun. Her eyes were heavy with colour. She looked like the cheekiest piece of plastic I had ever seen.
She fluttered her eyelashes at me and smiled, it was not an innocent smile. “Hi?” I attempted.

The girl giggled and grabbed my arm pulling herself against my arm like a fucking damsel. I tried to ignore it, but it made me horribly uncomfortable. What the heck did she want? Who was she?

“So, I heard you’re going out with the lunatic. How’s that going for you? Never thought weird was your kink.”

“Fabulous.” I bit the inside of my mouth to keep my expression strait. “I’ve got class. Get off my arm.”

This statement whipped the giddy look right off her face. I felt accomplished. She let go abruptly and stared down at me coldly as I walked away. I could feel the eyes in my back. Crazy bitch.

It was an hour or so before the bell rang again. I had escaped to the freedom of outside. The sun was warm and it was much nicer being out in the fresh air. When people began to pour from the doors of the building, I decided to chance venturing in again.

I hoped to find Maurisa again, but she found me. I made sure to stick to her like glue this time. Occasionally groups of humans would pass and attempt to separate me from her but I bluntly refused their offers. It was around then that I met Lucy. I instantly approved of her when she slinked over to Maurisa, signaling for me to be quite. Mori hadn’t noticed a thing out of place and the girl behind her was grinning like a retarded predator. After getting close enough she grabbed Maurisa’s muffin and bolted like a maniac for the door, laughing like a villain the entire way. My visitor yelled and chasing after her frantically. It was amazing. I got a good laugh.

Then I was dragged to another class. I had no idea Jacob had more than one class with her but apparently he did. It was English, my worst enemy.

When I said before that I couldn’t write, I really can’t write. My q’s look like capitol r’s and my e’s like… I have no idea. Once or twice I caught Mori glancing at my paper in question. Thankfully the class didn’t spend forever on the written response.

When the end of it all finally came, I had never been more relieved in my life.

I walked home with Maurisa after the last bell. Once again, our connected hands sending pleasant jitters up my spine. Mori pulled me with her to the complex of apartments housing the lawn of the maple tree. Hers was on the bottom floor and we walked up to the back balcony. The address said 135. It was small, but a homey looking place for two humans.

“Thanks for walking me home.” she smiled at me cheerfully after opening the door. She also still had my hand in hers. The way she was looking at me right now had me flummoxed. Dispite the fact that I knew she wanted something, what, I didn’t know, the human heart in my chest sped forwards again.

“Uuhm…” I raised an eyebrow, breaking the unfamiliar tension. The addictive smile faded a little. She looked disappointed. Was I supposed to do something?I wondered as she said goodbye and shut the apartment door behind her. I really wasn’t sure.

With all of that over with, I worked my way back to Jacob’s house.

When I finally got there, I ran upstairs –just in case the hag was home—and shut the bedroom door. I was now alone in the room. I breathed deeply and separated from the exit.
“Okay. Time to roll.” I went to the closet to find whatever the kid planned to wear. The outfit was black, boring and just… Was he really expecting to wear that? No I wasn’t going have any of it. I rummaged a little further into the back and I struck gold.

“Well, aren’t you lovely?” I grinned widely and pulled out the almost neon pink suit from the back rack. It looked like the kid had been hiding it, which made this all the better. A dark laugh rumbled from my throat as I stripped and put the flamboyant atrocity on. “Beautiful…” I murmured, this guy’s wardrobe was contributing to the future breakup fantastically.

Now then. What else to embarrass the fuck out of his reputation? I left the room and listened from the top of the stairs. When I hear nothing I headed to the other rooms, searching around for anything else to use for my dastardly creation. I found myself in the adjacent bedroom when I found just what I was looking for. Maurisa often talked about the stuff and I knew how lowly she thought of it. Hair Gel.

This had me laughing even more as I smeared the cold goop into the poor soul’s hair making it stand up at the front. I stopped to look at myself, or, himself in the mirror. Holy shit. No way. I couldn’t help myself and burst out into uncontrollable laughter. It was glitter. I couldn’t be any more amazed by my success.

After slowing the painful giggles that still escaped my mouth, I looked at the mirror again smirking. This work was really going to pay off now.

The dance was going to start at seven, from what I heard from many a passerby’s at the school, but I promised that I’d meet Maurisa at the doors. Maybe it was for the best, my inner self grinned at the thought and then my brain began to reel in the other direction. I looked away from the mirror, fixing one of the cuffs on the suit.

Sure, I felt bad for her in a way, but I was doing it to protect her. It was for a good cause. Right? I brought my eyes back to the mirror. I saw a face beside Jacobs, but it wasn’t mine. It was a dying grey, cracked and demonic glowing holes stared back at me. I blinked and it disappeared, showing my own startled reflection.

Suddenly I was on the floor. Everything hurt and my chest felt like it was about to explode. I was in shock. My human lungs wouldn’t work and they restricted as I lay against the bedside. A yell tried to rise from my throat but when I opened my mouth, nothing came.

No air to breath, meant no air to scream.

This continued for what felt like hours, but thankfully they were only minutes. The pains dissipated and aftershocks were singeing my spine enough to make me flinch sharply. Air was finally accepted into my lungs once more and I drank it like I was going to die without it. I probably would in this body too. One fist slowly unclenched from the bed sheets and the other from my jacket. My hands were shaking again and I didn’t want to move. Something was wrong, but I wasn’t sure what. It didn’t seem normal.

Panting heavily, I felt fluid drip down my face. Sweat, ew. I wiped it away quickly. Maybe the pain was just magnified in a human’s body? It was mortal after all but that didn’t answer any questions.

This time I knew that I couldn’t ignore it, but I still had the remaining hours to make things here count. I couldn’t leave the body until I slept. What a party this was going to be.
It was a good thing I left the house a half an hour early for two reasons… One, Jacob’s mother still wasn’t home yet. It was probably better for me if she didn’t get an eye full of her son’s current attire. Two, it took me that whole half an hour to find the damn school again. Humans and their lack of flight. Navigating from the ground was a brutal punishment.

Though it wasn’t easy to find the actual school, it was easy to find the entrance of to the prom. It was already getting dark outside when I joined the crowd of people around the double doors.

A lot of students were giving me sideways looks and snickers. Perfect. I could handle ridicule when in the right circumstances. This was the whole point.

Other flamboyancy’s also stood out from the crowd. A burgundy suit –which to be honest I liked more than the one my host was in-. Most of the males wore darker suits, but the girls’ dresses ranged from all shapes and colours.

“Now that, is fuckin’ hilarious!” I whirled my little puppet body around to face two males. They were familiar from the school. In fact, they asked if I would join them for lunch but I declined. They both wore black and looked like normal students… well, normal idiots actually. They didn’t seem very bright, but they still gave me a bad feeling.

“Thanks, man. Not too bad yourself.” I acknowledged them slowly and quirked an eyebrow under all the hair jell.

One of them scanned the crowd with his eyes before speaking, “So, is it still going down Tuesday? Kenta hasn’t changed anything right?” The tallest one asked, just low enough so no one else could hear except myself and his accomplice. I knew something was up. Time to play my cards. I concluded curiously and decided that playing dumb wouldn’t be a good idea, but what other choice did he have?...

“Changed?” I looked at them clueless and the taller one rolled his eyes.

“Moriko took to you easy man. It should be a synch. How much was he paying again? Couldn’t really hear him with that accent of his.” They knew her real name. A family reunion. Accent. I didn’t like where this was going.

“So what’re you thinking he’ll do with her?” I pried a little further and the shorter guy face-palmed while the other gaped at Jacob’s visage.

“The hells been wrong with you lately? You keep clingin’ to her. Don’t tell me you got into her pants, man. Think of the cash.” I felt like screaming at them, tearing their heads off and then---

“JAAAAAAAKE!”

Something short jumped on me from the back and wrapped its arms around my neck, pulling me backwards gasping for air. When her feet touched the ground behind me I felt the boy’s lungs cease function.

“Mu… Mori!... Ow… back… neck! Air!” I gasped for whatever oxygen I could get and she unhooked her arms in alarm. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea for me to be taller after all. That was bloody dangerous. Lungs working again, Maurisa lapsed into frantic apologies. I laughed and put an arm around her shoulders telling her it was no big deal, playing the roll. I just had to deal with a neck for the dance. That’s all.
I looked at the two guys in front of me while Mori babbled off into my ear. They weren’t looking at me; they were looking at my human… This definitely wasn’t the best situation. This whole boyfriend thing was a ruse and I was the only one aware now. It was all a lure just for her father to get his hands on her again. The son of a bitch.

“We’ll talk… Later.” Just by hissing those three words, they hightailed it out of my sight before I could blink. Good. Maurisa remained as oblivious as ever as she began to usher me into the crowd. Once we were under the faint glow of an outdoor wall light, she giggled.

“What’s with the suit?” she asked, reaching up to play with the open jacket.

“My own personal swag.” I grinned smugly. I internally cheered until after Maurise responded.

“I like it!” she gave an equal grin and my success fell into a nosedive. Shit. Well that part of the plan failed. She loved flashy colours. What the fuck was I thinking? That was a no brainer considering what she wore to Nightopia every night. It wasn’t just the knee-high socks and the arm warmers that gave it away. I should be more aware of this crap. I shook my mind of thoughts and cursed.

A sudden warmth snuggled into my chest and I let out the most undignified squeak known to man. Maurisa pressed against me, wrapping her arms around my torso to meet at my back. “It’s cold…” She murmured into the crisp fabric of my collared shirt. Really? At the moment I couldn’t tell.

I tried to look down but all I could see was the top of her head. Sighing I decided to wait until they were in better light, but now I was a bit curious to what she was wearing. It was too dark to see much outside. Even if she wasn’t clinging to I wouldn’t be able to see her clearly.

The doors were finally unlocked by a Student Council member and everyone crammed their way through the door. I was happy for this. Feeling Maurisa’s breath through my shirt was driving me insane; but not in a bad way… Which made the situation all the more confusing? We parted and made our way through the mob. It was then that I noticed green paper in the student’s hands. I looked over the many heads and saw that the paper was being distributed to other humans at a table. I wondered in panic if they were needed and began to rummage through the kids jacket.

“Lookin’ for these?” A hand flew up inches from my nose and held two green squares, identical to the ones on the table beside the door. I looked down at the owner’s face and she smiled up at me.

“You gave them to me, remember? You said you didn’t want to lose them.” Relief washed over me.

“I already forgot that they weren’t in there.” I laughed sheepishly. That was a really close call. She approached the table to give a girl the tickets and I finally got to see what I wanted to. I wasn’t expecting this new transformation of hers at all.

Her dress was a dark aqua colour. It had one strap holding and a slit ran down the center of her chest laced together by a darker ribbon. The torso was formfitting and filled with tiny ruffles that made intricate patterns down the middle. The rest of it came to her knees and had folds running diagonally from her hip. It suited her very well. I felt really jumpy suddenly, nervous was a good way to put it. She was just wearing a different outfit, nothing more.

I walked up to her and the door which led us to the dance area. I could hear the Black Eyed Peas very clearly through the thin metal and echoing down the hall. I wasn’t just nervous, this was exciting. The base of the music pounded through everything in my reach and literally through my body. It was amazing. I had never heard music this loud before, and the iPod could only get so
deafening. It made me eager to get in there.

When we entered, I couldn’t find the right words to explain my surroundings. The lights that flashed around us gave off every hue in the spectrum. Bodies moved in tight packs as the room literally danced. The heat in there was rising like a sauna.

Just like I had fantasized, the music made everything vibrate, I smiled with enthusiasm at the feeling.

From then on, everything blurred together. Sweat, music and colour. I recognized almost every single song played by the DJ, and for once I let my voice slip out a few times. It wasn’t the familiar tone of my own voice but it wasn’t like I could hear it over the blast of sound. Actually, I could barely hear anything at all. Everyone had to yell at each other even at a close range.

Maurisa looked to be in the same boat I was. It was obvious by the elation on her face as we danced.

I began to feel my confidence return once again. That was, until the music slowed. Our feverish movements followed the swing of the rhythm as I glanced clueless around the floor.

People were beginning to cling together in an embrace and began to move together in a sluggishly motion.

“Well?” Mori looked up at me hopefully. I could hear again, but my ears still rang. This ‘Well’ from her seemed to make it worse.

“What?” I did a double-take from her to the couples slow dancing. She lifted her arms and nodded downwards, trying to get her point across with actions. The heat of the room was finally getting to me. It wouldn’t hurt to… right? I could always fuck things up later. My face felt warm when I rubbed it, then the back of my head nervously.

“Uh… I don’t know how.” I mumbled. Pathetic, but what else was I supposed to say to her?

Maurisa smiled gently. I felt like a three year old again. “This is your first dance?” she asked incredulously.

“Ye-yeah…”

“Um… Okay then.” She moved closer and took a hold of my hands carefully. What she did with them had my mind reeling.

Placing them on her hips, her own arms were then free to wrap around my neck. When she was finished adjusting, I felt every bit of my body lock up. I felt humiliated and horrified. This was some scary shit. I had hugged her before. I kept reminding myself that, but right now it felt way different.

Her breasts pressed soft against my chest. I tried to breath calmly, but every time I tried, it got caught in my throat.

She then took the first move. Slowly we shifted. One step, a second, a third.-- “Ouch!”

“S…Sorry!” My foot work was completely horrendous. The slowness of our movements was throwing me off balance and the slight lean of my back threatened to either let me fall over into Maurise, or unwillingly force my feet to step on hers. Even with my head down in concentration to look at the blasted appendages, I still couldn’t control them if they bumped once or twice with hers.
Maurisa, of course was amused by it. Oh, god forbid! She giggled and dogged me; giving reassuring looks as I pressed on.

One thing for sure. My plans were tumbling. This right now had to be one of the most embarrassing moments of my life in a nutshell. Honestly… If my poor ability to dance didn’t break her and Jacob apart, then nothing would. However, she already proved me wrong on that one.

I thanked every deity in existence when the song finally ended. I needed a break and told Maurise I would be back in a few.

The washrooms. I guessed right when I looked at the symbols on the doors and entered the men’s room with no problems. School had taught me something today at least.

I went to the mirror and leaned over the counter with locked arms.

“Holy, shit.” Pressing my forehead to the cool glass I closed my eyes. The heart in my chest felt like it had traveled into my throat as it continued to beat at its fast pace.

That was the worst and best experience of my life. There was something very wrong with me.

I opened my eyes, expecting to see the hazel ones of Jacob’s staring back with mine glimmering behind in a silhouette. But I didn’t. It was there again.

I muffled a gasp and stepped back quickly. No one else was in there at the moment. “I’m hallucinating. Right? It’s just another hallucination.” I quickly turned the taps of the sink and they blessed me with cold water. I splashed it into my face. “Wake up Ren! The nights not over yet, you’re just still nervous, that’s all.”

After cooling off bit, I rummaged through the pockets in the jacket. Thirst was overpowering me, but I didn’t know anything about human currency let alone had any money with me. Finally, I dared to reenter the sound-blaring madness of the floor.

Someone grabbed my wrist as I wormed my way through the crowd. I looked back in alarm. It was the bond girl. Her makeup seemed a little heavier than before and she still had that heavy eyed gaze.

“Hiyah Jake…” She swooned, “You alone?”

Once again, the bad vibes came. “Sorry?” I attempted to pull my arm away but she held on fast.

“You alone? Or with the schizo?” Her face had somehow gotten closer to mine and I pulled back in alarm.

“Why should you care? Back off Blondie.” I hissed. This girl definitely knew how to get on my nerves.

“Awh! Cummon Jakey! What do you see in her? I don’t get it!” I had a feeling I knew where this was going. Maybe I should have gone along with it, for the sake of the mission. The way she was speaking though about my friend infuriated me.

“HEY! Back off Liz!” Another girl shoved in-between us two before I could truly make up my mind.

“Lucy?” I gave the girl a dumbfounded look. She’d literally came out of nowhere, spreading her arms between me and the irritant like a shield.
“There’s no way in HELL I’m going let you take another guy away from her! She’s worked for this one, so shove your slutty hands up your ass and leave them alone!” She growled and the blond girl, Liz, stuck her nose in the air.

Well said, girl.

“And what’re you gunna do about it Lucy? That freak doesn’t belong with Jacob he’s way too good for her. Besides, if you two say anything about it, I can make you girls a lot uglier on the outside then you already are.” That’s it.

”Hey! What the hell’s your problem?” I lashed at the girl with a snarl, “I don’t know what kind of history you have with her, but leave my girl the fuck alone, you sleazy bitch. You don’t deserve shit.” Liz looked at me in disgusted shocked and Lucy seemed speechless. I stared the girl down, fire burning through me.

“What did you just say to me?!” She gasped in rage. His hand reached out quickly towards me, probably to strike at my face. I caught her wrist in a bone crushing grip and pulled her forwards. Leaning in close to her face I hissed venomously in her ear, “If you touch them, or hurt them, in any way, I’ll give you the nightmares for the rest of your sorry life. I’m not afraid of hurting you. Consider the warning.”

She struggling to get away from me. Despite being trapped in a mortal body, I knew she was terrified. I released Liz’s hand and she bolted through the mobs of people until she no longer could be seen.

“Wow! What did you do?” Lucy awed. The beast-like ferocity passed after the girl was gone, but realized that there was an attentive witness waiting for an explanation.

“I just gave her a warning. I don’t think she’ll bother you two for a while.”

“Jacob, I swear, you’re a bloody miracle worker.” She sighed happily.

“So, what’s the story behind that?” I asked curiously and the brunette frowned.

“Apparently Maurisa and her went to elementary school together. I wasn’t around then, but I heard that one of her crushes rejected her because he found Maurisa more attractive. I think that’s where the shit began to fly between the two, but Liz now has a permanent grudge on her. She made it her job to turn everyone against her. I know Maurisa was really eccentric when she was younger, but rumors began to spread and well… you can probably put two and two together.

It turned out she wasn’t making anything up. Now I felt a bit more like an ass.

“I honestly had no idea.” I replied, not entirely lying either. Lucy nodded and we pushed our way back to the opposite side of the room.

Soon enough, we located Maurisa against one of the walls. She looked slightly disheartened before seeing me. Her face lit up when she did.

“Hey! You alright?” She gave me a worried look and approached us before Lucy pulled her off to the side. She began to speak to her low enough so I couldn’t hear.

As her companion grumbled in her ear, Mori’s brow began to wrinkle and her eyes became much more reflective. She looked like she was about to have a fit, or cry.

Her expressions changed drastically for a bit until Lucy finally pulled away.
“Right.” Maurisa looked at me anxiously and I would be lying if I said it didn’t disturb me.

If Everyone Cared started to play through the speakers signaling the start of another slow dance. The lights dimmed again, but I could still see her just as sharply.

My resolve was cracking. You know what? Fuck this. Fuck everything. I’m done.

Extending my hand to her, I asked.

“Care to dance?”

She flinched ever so slightly and tilted her head up a little to meet my eyes.

Mori’s eyes alone probably could devour souls, or at least see through them. They were literally two voids, reflecting the lights, and my reflection.

Her hand reached out and took my palm cautiously.

Last time was a practice run. I was able to pinpoint her steps a little better now, but the nerves remained. I encased her body with my arms, almost like a security blanket. Maurisa’s hands were open against my back and occasionally gripping my shirt.

As the song went on, we got lazy and I became less like a skittish wreck. Her hair smelled good. Like apples.

“You’ve changed.” Maurisa was the first to say anything. It was a hum buried against my chest.

“Really? How?”

“I don’t know. Familiar.”

Resting my chin on her head I finally asked.

“Why didn’t you tell me about that girl?” She paused before answering.

“I got myself through, I’m used to it. I have other—” her voice trailed off.

“hm? I edged her on. I wanted to know everything, it was eating me alive.

“I had- friends. That I knew she couldn’t touch. But they live very far away and we were very different from one another. There was one in particular. We’ve been friends for the longest time but- he found out… a-about you…” I bit my lip.

I’m a worthless, fucking bastard and I want to die.

Not only because I realized she’d started crying because of me, but because I really feel terrible about it. I hate this girl. She makes me despise what I am; and yet- it’s not enough for me.

She sobbed and I pulled her in as close as I possibly could.

“He should be happy for you, because you’re happy, right?” I cooed and rubbed her back.

“I don’t know… he’s been wrong so far about you.” Maurisa raised her head to look me straight in the eye again.

She looked drowsy and a little dazed.
Her face came closer to the point where I could see everything. On her long lashes, tears glittered, catching the flashing lights. Maurisa’s heavily lidded eyes closed. Our lips brushed. I couldn’t breathe and everything moved far too quickly.

My eyes shut tightly as our mouths connected in a kiss.

This was paralysis. This was melting. This was-

It ended.

So did the song, which announced to end of the dance. None of it mattered from then on.

It was at that very moment that I knew what I felt.

I am in so much shit.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

AN: Too lazy to edit right now. If there’s errors please point them out to me if you can. Thank you for the views!

Chapter 6.

It was her. That suspicious little procreation. I never liked the look of her since the beginning. Timid, and delicate, not like her sire and horrendously curious. It was sickening to see a visage like that being used in such a way. Not only that, but she was learning too much more quickly than any of the others. Before this thorn digs any deeper, I need to pull it out.

I had to say something. Just a few hours ago I was attacked by Nightmaren both rogue and infected. My personal space has been violated from the inside out and amongst all this, I fought alongside a visitor to kill hordes of mentally deranged third levels.

I just- How do I even? How do I deal with this? How do I explain?

“Akila, why are you present? Do you have something to report?”

Is it funny for me to be thinking all this standing before my impatient and vengeful creator? No. How the hell do I begin? Maybe at the most important points.

“Master,” I started. My everything shook. “Today, while I was in the visitor’s Nightopia. I was attacked by infected third-levels. Over fifty of them.”

Master Wiseman, Floating ominously above me was silent for a moment before a deep hum echoed about the room. “Infected? All was contained after the outbreak. This is a serious claim, but I cannot see through your eyes as proof.”

That was… what? “Master, please. You know you have my word. These Nightmaren were infected, they showed all the signs we’ve observed in the past.” Why was he not taking this seriously? Trust was never an issue before. I was loyal. Hell, why was a first person witness really an issue?

“Akila, if you can bring proof of this, precautions will be raised around Nightmare.” The master stated, almost bluntly. 
"But master. These were feral, Stage Fives. If the word isn’t spread out it may be too late to act! Last time we barely got lucky!"

“Akila!”

I hadn’t realized I was yelling until he roared above me. I recoiled like a kicked puppy.

"That is enough. Informing the army would cause for panic and paranoia. I do not need any of
this until there is proof of another outbreak. Return with this and action will be taken. Dismissed!"

Honestly, I was speechless. Backing out of the room, my hand found the doorknob and attempting to look unfazed by his outburst, I fled the master’s void.

Outside the doorway, I began to feel light headed and I slumped down against the wall eagerly swallowing air. For me it was a comforting mechanism. The tension in that room was too much to handle. As any other time I had gone in, it was a bargain of a life and death. Believe it or not, sometimes Wiseman didn’t let others leave if they mess up bad enough.

Christ. I rested my head on my knees. Needed to keep breathing here. I could hear a few Second-Levels coming down the hallway. It seem like forever until they passed by, but I didn’t look up when they did. I hadn’t realized one stopped beside me until a voice spoke up over my spot.

"Akila? Are you okay?" I knew who it was. Someone I could tolerate right now. I looked up.

"Chamelan." Whenever I saw him he was usually looking for something he lost. Either that, or just wondering the halls like the introvert he was. Usually it was his cards missing, but right now he had a full hand of them clutched loosely in his claws. To be honest I really liked him. He was a sweetheart outside of work.

"Yeah," He offered me a free hand and I smiled, taking the offer. "Is the Master giving you a hard time?"

"A little, but I need to follow his expectations right? Regardless of how strangely he was acting." I mumbled the last sentence to myself, not entirely for my audience.

The Second-level’s bulbous eyes blinked and swiveled in their sockets. “You’re not the only one lately. I’ve been hearing different thinks around. He’s become- I really don’t know how to describe it.” He fixed his hat in thought, “Sluggish? No, antisocial? Unproductive? Something like that.”

“Funny you mention that.” I frowned. Something was up. “Maybe he has things on his mind but- it is a little strange for him to be nonchalant.”

“That word, thank you!” The lizard giggled, “There’s that and the new Levels. Naer creeps me the heck out and the other-“

“ValkU?”

“Yes, that. He’s way too quiet. Maybe it’s because he’s got no mouth but. Blegh.”

“I agreed with the first statement, the second, I’m not sure.”

“It’s the silent ones you have to watch for though, right?”

He bumped my shoulder playfully. I managed a smile for him.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Hey! You’re living proof of that. Silent, but can be hella scary when you want to be. You really surprised us.” He smiled widely. I almost wanted to hug the guy. The flattery was too cute.

“Thank you, Cham. I’m going to head out. I need to find something to prove to the master that I’m not crazy.”
Chamelan nodded, dropping a few card accidentally. He cursed silently and bent over his tail to pick them up. “This is why I keep them in my hat. Good luck, and don’t worry. It’s not like you’re Jackle, right?”

That got a laugh out of me. “Right.”

Chamelan left, but I still stood at the door.

I wasn’t sure where to start right now. How the hell was I going to prove anything? It wasn’t like I could capture a specimen in a jar. They could go through glass. Only Wiseman’s containment seals could keep them in one place. Now what?

e left I began to drift away from the door. Despite being deep in thought I began to feel uncomfortable standing there. The feeling that eyes were staring at me. The corridor was dark in both directions. Maybe I needed rest and I was actually losing my mind?

Finally making a decision, I headed in the direction that would take me to the First-Level wing.

The feeling didn’t go away even as I turned the corner. It was quiet. There wasn’t anyone nearby. Then again, it was late and most would be recharging at this time.

I heard nothing out of the ordinary when I took the path of wider hallway. This is probably why I didn’t expect the force that collided into my back, grabbed my shoulder and threw me face first against the wall.

Despite myself being a creature of fear myself. It scared the ever-loving fuck out of me.

My body had been pinned to the wall. I shriek and struggled, but the grip was unbelievable. My arms scrabbled uselessly against the stone of the wall, trying to push myself away, but it was useless.

"Hello, Aki dear." The hissing voice so close to my head sent a nauseating shiver down my back.

"Wha- what." I gasped, still trying to struggle away from the attacker’s grip. In my peripheral I saw a scaly green flicker. It was a tail, and I knew who it belonged to.

“Naer-”

"I hope you don't mind, but I've been keeping an eye on you." He snickered and leaned even closer to me, "So far, I haven’t been liking what I’ve been seeing. You have too much knowledge in that damaged head of yours."

"What the hell are you talking about? What do you want? Is- is this really necessary?" I squeezed the questions out under the pressure of Naer’s hand. No one was around to help me out of this one. It hadn’t been the first time anyone’s gotten hostile with me, but this time I didn’t know how to deal with this.

“Unfortunately, yes.” He said it as if he wasn’t crushing me into the rock. “How does this sound, my dear? The visitor found you and when he did, he finished you off. It sounds believable enough to me.”

“I don’t know what you-“ I knew exactly what he was implying. I wasn’t feeling the bravest anymore.
"But first-" I wasn’t expecting the sharp pain in my shoulder and gasped. My arm began to num
and I could feel the sting of fangs pull out just as quickly as they struck. The bastard bit me.

Suddenly, I was flipped over and violently pinned to the wall again. In too much shock to think
rationally, I yelled and began to struggle for my life. He wanted me dead and he was perfectly
capable to finish me off. What I wasn’t expecting on his ugly mug was to be something other than
deranged amusement. The expression frightened me the most, everyone fears the unknown. Then, I
felt it. His tail slid under my shirt tearing the back of it. My arms were pinned by his one hand, and
my mind finally clicked in when the other began to slide up my stomach, under the vest, the shirt. He
wasn’t just intending to kill me. Fuck.

The claws dragged back downwards. My flesh tore, I could feel it ripping deliberately. I screamed
for someone, anyone within range. Naer picked the right spot at the right time for no one to be
around. I was screwed.

His face split into a satisfied grin and I choked back on my terror, the pain wasn’t as strong as it
should have been. Naer suddenly leaned in closer, and I shuddered, purely out of revulsion. “Same
skin, same face- Not an exact copy, but I’ll make it work.”

What he said only panicked me more. The claws traveled so low, no longer cutting and he cupped
me between the legs.

Oh god.

"NO, STOP!" I kicked out at his legs, but he was already between them. Naer grabbed one tale of
my hat and wrapped it across my mouth, holding it there in attempts to silence me.

"Now, don’t ruin my fun. I’ll put you out of your misery soon enough."

My muscles gave out. I was losing the fight-

"AKILA!" I wasn’t able to see it, but I heard and felt something hard hit Naer from behind, his legs
buckled inwards.

I was in a daze. There was yelling, a flurry of movement and then I eventually caught glimpse of
what was defending me. I sputtered and spat out the material from my mouth.

"Lolly-boo." I was crying and I couldn’t help it. He lunged at the No-level’s feet, going for anything
to get me loose. I shrieked, horrified as Naer finally locked onto him, slamming a foot down on his
tail to trap the faster form.

"Bloody Rat," He snarled, "Drop dead!" The mouse Nightmaren was kicked across the hall. The
squeal of pain frightened me. That caused a lot of damage.

"STOP!" The claws were lose enough for me to pull an arm from my sleeve. As soon as I managed
to free one hand I gave everything I had to maim whatever parts I could reach. It didn’t take long for
him to notice my return to the fight. My cheek had been gashed at one point, my leg and arm also
bled. He struggled to gain control and in the process it destroyed my vest entirely. I couldn’t have
cared less.

I finally got a grasp on his lower arm and forced it towards my mouth, biting down as hard as I could
past the armor. A bitter-sweet liquid rapidly flooded from the wound and began to run down my
front. I refused to let go until he did. Naer roared in fury, slashing me once more along the back, but
finally letting go.

Without a second thought, I dashed over to my savior, grabbed him up and shot off.
I was flying. Darkness, stone, walls, all of it compressing in towards me.

I didn’t care where I was going. As long as I kept out of Naer’s reach. He was on my tale. I could hear him with all my alerted senses.

Out of breath and horribly dizzy, I hadn’t realized the Second-Level in my arms was conscious.

"Aki, you're bleeding!" He whined. I didn’t care, who would in a situation like this?

Then I saw a door I recognized, a place where I always felt the safest. I fled into the room like a frightened child, ramming the door open. Suddenly I couldn’t stay afloat anymore, I was on my feet and instantly my legs buckled. Falling to my knees, I barely felt the ground under me. Everything was getting dark and colourful around the edges. "Akila, Hey! Get up!" I couldn’t feel the small hands suddenly on my cheeks. Boo’s arms shook, trying to keep my face steady with an injured arm.

I did however feel the foot in my gut that sent me flying into the fog. Chains rattled around the room. My arms were grabbed and pulled back. Naer was above me and I was petrified.

So, I screamed.

CERBERUS!

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I wasn’t able to do anything. Akila was cornered, bloody and I couldn’t do anything. I didn’t take the blow Naer gave me very well. I can move, but barely.

When she screamed it was alien to me. Akila was stronger, powerful and composed. There was something very wrong.

She fell completely limp with the monster holding her arms and he stood there, baffled and clueless.

It wasn’t until then that I realized why she came here. I should have noticed, but was in no position to. Naer however seemed confused.

The chains hanging from the ceiling shook violently and a deep snarl bellowed about the room. The snake dropped Akila like a dead weight, ridged in shock. This was sweet justice if I ever saw it.

In a raging storm of red and blue, two giant forms lunged up from the fog and one of them grabbed Naer from the air with its jaws. Both dogs fought at him, trying to claim the honor of tearing the bastard apart, but he was too slippery for them. Naer pulled open the jaw of the red beast before its fangs could spear him. The No-Level shot like a bullet out of their reach, glaring in fear and rage before escaping the room.

Now it was too quiet. The only sounds being the harsh, irritated huffs from the canines.

I was frozen, ironically, like a mouse in the corner. I didn’t want Cerberus to turn against me either. Silently the blue head bent down to Akila’s level to check on her. She still hadn’t moved even after it nudged her. It let out a low whine and nudged her carefully again, the red joining beside it. Cerberus was distraught. It wouldn’t leave her be and the whimpers began to escalate into howls.

“Akila?” I managed a timid whisper, braving enough to waddle a little closer. The blue one suddenly had his whole body over her, facing me enraged. The red one snarled and tread forwards, teeth bared. They wouldn’t let me near her. Why was I even trying?
I needed to get help. She wasn’t dead, but I had a sickening feeling that wouldn’t last long. I backed away from the dogs slowly and they watched cautiously as I crawled for the door. They didn’t attack me and I was thankful. Akila was right about one thing, they were very protective of her.

Once I was out in the hallway I began to run as fast as I could, yelling for help. My side was killing me and my arm wasn’t fairing much better. Finally, I came across someone. Considering who it was I figured luck was really on my side today.

“Coget! Coget help, Aki-“ I had her attention in an instant. The First-Level hallway was nearby and we were the only ones in the corridor. Coget slammed the door of her quarters and fully turned to me with an intense expression.

“What about Aki? What’s wrong? Why are you covered in- What happened?”

“What’s with all the noise?” Reala came from his quarters, looking less than pleased that I was there yelling. Yes, I probably looked terrible covered in Aki’s blood with a dented limb, screaming bloody murder.

I lapsed into a long winded explanation and before I could finish, I was whisked away to Cerberuses door.

They were flying quickly, but not as fast as Akila was ten minutes ago.

“I knew that bastard was up to no good!” Reala spat out, other obscenities following. A new voice joined into the mix, clear as crystal.

~Coget!~

We all heard it, but only the Nightmaren carrying me paused. I shivered in dread. It was the other one hovering at the edge of the second-wing.

~VaIkU! We need your help. Akila was attacked and Cerberus isn’t going to let anyone near her. We need to get by him.~

Before I could object or do anything, I was surprised once more by the creature’s response.

~Understood. If he’s done what I fear he has, we’re going to have a large problem on our hands. Lead the way.~

We were there not even a minute later. From the outside of the door we could all hear bloodcurdling howls. I was placed on the ground quickly and both Reala and Coget were on full alert when opening the doors.

“Akila!” There was Cerberus, wrapped around itself in a ball. With any indication, I assumed Akila was sheltered in the center. The beast cried out in bellows that made the fog itself shake. This was a disturbing sight for everyone.

Reala and Coget hovered cautiously within the doorway. “We need to get in there, but he’s not going to let us touch her.” The older superior muttered above me.

“Cerberus, let us pass. We can help her!” Akila’s guardian looked lost, there wasn’t much they could do without getting mauled. Only Akila had the magic touch.

VaIkU hovering just behind me came forwards to the front of our rescue group. It stared at the dogs, eyeing them with enough to get their full attention.
I have this. The Level-Zero’s placed a hand on Coget’s shoulder in reassurance, I think, before moving forwards. Its eyes closed in concentration and whatever he was doing, Cerberus didn’t like it. The red dog’s growl rose and he stood to oppose us before suddenly freezing. There was an intense silence and to all of our surprise he backed down. ValkU drifted forwards, piercing gaze not leaving neither of the dogs. The Blue made no move when the No-level landed at Akila’s side, just inches from the distraught creature. It uncurled silently, revealing our goal between its paws.

None of us knew what to say.

You can approach. I explained things to him. We need to get her to the medical wing at once. It looks like she’s been bitten.

At this, Coget lifted Akila into her arms and without a word flew with haste out the door, the rest of us following.

If I hadn’t encountered Naer in the same way, I wouldn’t have believed the mouse. For once in a long time I was truly afraid. My experience with Naer didn’t end as badly as this. We sent the Second-Level away after we got to the medical wing. The little rat wouldn’t leave us alone. That, and I guess he deserved a break for saving Akila’s life.

The venom was literally killing her. Her hands and feet became transparent before we even got her on the table. The kid was going to have a lot of scars after this if she pulled through, her face was losing colour. Akila’s eyes were open still, twitching just like the rest of her. This was all completely out of hand for me. For once I was glad Naer’s sibling was on our side.

I couldn’t believe Coget trusted this twin so easily in the first place. ValkU knew how to remove the venom from her body. To be honest, this was the only thing keeping me grounded.

The hulking figure beside Akila on the medical slab sat at her side. Its clawed hands doing strange motions, that apparently would force the toxin to accumulate into one center point. It was a medical magic apparently, but still disturbing to watch.

It still puzzled me to how this came about. Naer didn’t just want Akila to kneel for him. He wanted her dead. For what reason? Why was she now a target? Did this have something to do with me?

I didn’t want to go there to be honest.

Coget sat on the other side of the bed, brushing hair out of Akila’s face while I stood by the wall, watching.

Are you finished? I finally grumbled when ValkU opened its eyes.

Nearly. Its one hand pushed energy further along, finally coming to Akila’s bite wound. I frowned in disgust when a murky, grey fluid began to trickle out and collect in the air where ValkU waved its hand. It swirled there for a bit, ominously before it dropped into a container beside the bed. There, she should be safe now. Any longer and it would have done its job. It suddenly turned to me, looking me strait in the eyes. You think very loudly, Reala. I go by the title ‘she’ now.

That one actually surprised me a little. ‘Fascinating, but I really don’t care.’

I know. It’s you’re creation that you’re worried about.

Say what now?
“I- how-” God damnit, she had me by the collar. Her mind-reading crap was really starting to piss me off.

Then the brat shrugged, indifferent about the whole thing.

~Telepathy.~

No shit, that snooty little- No. This is not the time. There were more pressing matters to attend to right now.

“Reala, calm down. She’s on our side-”

“Coget, don’t you dare add your two cents!” I bit out and she silenced nervously, going back to stroking Akila’s forehead. VaIkU was standing now, towering over me, but I didn’t let it faze me. “How much do you know?” I demanded. “You’re his sibling, what the hell is that bastard up to? Tell me!”

She blinked, looking hardly fazed. ~I find my brother’s actions just as alarming as you do, but tell me. You have a sibling. Did you know he was going to defect?~

“Reala don’t!”

I was going to beat the living fuck out of her.

~I’m just making a point.~

This bitch was too stoic for my liking. If Coget wasn’t holding me back right now, I would have ripped out the stitches keeping her face together.

“Both of you, stop it! This is not the time!”

The room stilled when Akila’s hand moved. Coget was back at her side again in a moment, calling her named to get her to wake up. I watched awkwardly and her eyes finally blinked shut. She was shaking again. The removal of the venom previously had left her still and lifeless. I approached closer to the bed until I was beside her.

Suddenly Akila gasped and jolted, her eyes flying open. I was the first one she looked at. Her expression was crazed and it reminded me of when we ran into her during the outbreak.

“Aki. Akila, breath. It’s alright.” Coget tried to reassure her as she sat up, ramrod straight in panic, eyes darting about the room.

“Akilaow much do you know.” I tried. She needed to be brought back to her senses as soon as possible, so I sat on the edge of the bed. Instantly her legs shot up to her chest and away from me. It was a pitiable sight. “He can’t hurt you now.” Our eyes met and this was apparently all it took to break the shock. Tears came flooding down her cheeks and her sharp breaths lapsed into sobs. She was a strong youngling, I knew. It took something truly nasty to make her fall apart.

Silently, I slid closer and wrapped my arms around her, letting Akila cry it out. She clung to me tightly, not caring as everyone in the room watched. The kid was really far gone. The other two stood silently nearby and didn’t dare to approach us.

I came too with arms around me. My eyes were heavy and my face felt tacky and wet. Reala-sama. I
had no energy to move, and his embrace was comforting. I believed him when he said I was safe. I trusted him with my life.

Everything hurt. I could feel the shift of gauze coiled tight around the gashes over my body. I was alive, but by the skin of my teeth.

Reala was speaking to me. It was so close, right in my ear in fact.

“Your guardian left to address the issue with the Master. She’ll be back soon.”

“I- He tried to kill me.” I whispered. Even my voice sounded horrible right now.

“I know. Your lap-mouse told us all the details. We’re going to make that son of a bitch pay.”

I took in a shaky breath, “But, Wiseman. I don’t- I was just there. There’s something-“ Before I could finish, the door flew open.

“Reala, he’s gone!” It was Onee-chan. I couldn’t see her from my position.

~Gone?~

VaIkU was here? I hadn’t noticed.

“The Master can’t find him with the bond anywhere, it’s like Naer disappeared off the grid!”

“Impossible.” Reala growled, shifting slightly.

~No, she’s right. I- can’t sense him at all.~

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. He was gone? Vanished? Just like that? How was it possible?

“Onee-chan.” I forced out and instantly her face was inches from mine.

“Aki! Oh lord, you’re awake. Thank god! Take it easy, okay love?”

“Onee-chan, before I was attacked, I was ambushed by infected Third-levels. The master refused to believe me and I just- There’s something wrong going on. Naer’s a part of it, but I don’t know what-“

“Hold up! Aki, slow down. What are you talking about? The outbreak’s over.”

“No!” I forced myself from Reala’s hold to speak easier. He tried to object but I began to talk way too quickly. “It happened, and, and the Visitor slaughtered them all!”

“Have you lost your mind?”

They were all looking at me now. They thought I was mad.

“Akila, you need to lay back down.”

“No.”

I wriggled out of their grip, instantly regretting it because it hurt like hell. “Akila! You’re in no condition to-”

I didn’t let her finish. I was gone way before that. Reala and Coget were probably going to give it to me whenever I returned, but now was not the time. I needed to ask questions and find answers if my
Eventually I made it back to Kurtason's world. He was already there, playing on the dark wooden piano. I was a mess still. Covered in bandages and uniform destroyed; but this is where I wanted to be right now, despite the injuries. I stopped at the edge of the glade, panting from the exertion. Hopefully I hadn't disturbed him. The boy's music was just as lovely as I remembered and it calmed my soul ever so slightly. It was a welcoming feeling.

"What are you playing?" I asked softly, leaning on the lid of the piano with crossed arms. He hadn’t looked up at me yet.

"It's called Victor's Solo, by Danny Elfman." He smiled and continued to play, "I've taken a liking to his music lately."

"It's beautiful. As always."

"I'm glad you enjoy it. Thank you." A playful smirk spread over his lips, something which didn't happen often.

"What?" I raised a brow at the rare expression.

"You always say that Aki." He chuckled. I couldn’t help but smile, the slash on my cheeky straining.

I rested my head on the stained oak and shut my eyes. The lull of the melody was just strong enough to detour my disturbed thoughts. It slipped my mind just how I physically appeared.

"Akila." My eyes shot open after Kurt’s tone suddenly changed. It was lower and a little darker than before. I looked up at him curiously. The boy’s eyes were narrowed and fixed on my face, then on my damaged arms.

"What happened after that night?" He asked firmly. He was suddenly up on his feet. "What did they do to you?"

"Many things are wrong in Nightmaren right now. This was only part of it."

"Aki-"

"Let me finish. We’re the only two who saw the infected Nightmaren. They all think I’ve lost my mind, the master didn’t believe me either, but that’s not all." I paused, reading the boy’s weary expression. My voice faltered. “My higher up tried to… silence me.”

He reached out and I instinctively pulled back in alarm. I then realized he was just trying to examine the cut on my face. "W- well, if that answers your question. I'm just-" Suddenly I was desperate to leave his sight, so I backed up to gain a bit of distance. The close proximity no longer felt comfortable.

"Akila." I stopped dead at the edge of the clearing. My body stiff as his icy words ran up my spine. "Why are you lying to me?"

I turned my back to him, trying to block him out. I shouldn’t have said anything. I heard him approaching me from behind. I couldn’t move. I was paralyzed. My chest tighten uncomfortably while listening to the sounds of shoes padding against the ground. Coming closer. Jolting as his cool
hand grasped my shoulder, I spun around in alarm. Everything went numb as he stared down at me, equally startled by my reaction.

“You aren’t telling me everything. Aki, you can trust me.” His hands were suddenly on my shoulders again. One brushed the bite scar and I jumped, staring him in the face.

"Let go," I said, almost a whisper.

"Why won't you trust me?" His voice a growl now.

"I said LET GO!

My arms suddenly shot up against his chest and pushed violently. Surprised by the force of impact, Kurtason flew into a tree trunk about seven meters away. His body hit the wood as if a car had struck him. I winced, hearing the tall mass fall to the ground, back against the wood.

Uncomfortable burning grew quickly in the back of my throat and eyes. I lost control. I shouldn’t be out here right now after what happened. Onee-san was right.

Kurt's gaze was directed at my feet and at that moment I was thankful. The burning was unbearable, forcing tears out that I could no longer hold.

In retaliation, I lifted my hands to cover my face. The tears wouldn't stop gushing out. Whenever I inhaled, a shuddering sob followed making the flow increase and my resolve shatter further. I shouldn’t have come here.

I was then enveloped in a warm embrace. Larger than my mentor’s. Wrapping around me entirely. The contact caused me to crumble. I clung to the boy and literally cried my eyes out against him. A living, breathing, blanket. A shield, with a heartbeat through the fabric.

Cradling me in his arms, he sat us both down on the bench, unable to say a word.

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"Yes! Master Wiseman said yes!" Puffy was bouncing around the cafeteria room. It had been a good week after the attack and Naer’s disappearance. Waiting for him to be found was a painful process while the rest of us sat at one of the long tables. Everyone kept a close watch on me whenever I wasn’t on duty, especially my guardian. It was infuriating, but I knew they meant well.

When I returned after flying off, I felt slightly better. The visitor didn’t question me further, but I knew what had just happened was dangerous for us. Of course, I received the appropriate reprimanding from my superiors for running like an emotional idiot, but I was surprised at how some of the others regarded me now. Reala was a tad more lenient, which at first, startled me. Lolly-Boo wouldn’t leave me alone, much like my guardian. Master Wiseman was even a bit less demanding, which shocked me the most.

This example, being one of them.

We looked up as our food began to bounce along with the Second-Level as she passed us.

“He said yes to what?” Finally I asked the others.

I attempted to speak over the bangs of Puffy colliding with the floor. The large Nightmaren stopped bouncing and I realized she’d heard me by stopping at our table.
"Our Ideya count has reached over three million this year, the Master's letting us have a celebration!"

Really? I'd never heard of such a thing.

"Oh, really? I’m surprised, but far from disappointed." Bella cooed in excitement. Another Second-Level beside her squealed with joy. Then Lolly-Boo and I gave curious looks to the other two. Puffy laughed at this outright.

"Opps! I forgot. The last ball we had was around- Oh, a century ago. You weren't around then." She sang with a sigh, "Parties involve a lot of dancing and well- celebrating!" She positioned her chubby arms into a ballet position and gave a dramatic hum while reminiscing. "Ahhh... What a night the last one was."

"Dancing, huh?" It didn’t sound so bad to me, but very foreign.

"I usually come up with the themes! This time I was thinking of a Masquerade-"

"COOL!" Jackle cackled in excitement, sliding into the mix beside her. "Is there gonna be Plasma again?" Puffy gave him a concerned look.

"I don't know. Some weird things happened because of that." I shivered as the ball-shaped Nightmaren contemplated. Nightopian blood, or plasma as most called it, was known to impair and cloud the Nightmaren mind. It was common amongst special occasions. That was, whenever we had any. Reala offered me to try it once when I was younger. It was a small sip, but still far too much for me. I despised the taste to the point where I vomited.

"Puuuuff, the last time was great!" Jackle chortled on. "God, I remember when NiGHTS and Reala drank too much and they were all ov-"

"NiGHTS?" That was a name I'd never heard before. I looked at them confused, "Who's that?-"

Even Jackles mouth clamped shut. Puffy spoke up however quite suddenly.

"He’s dead. No worries, dear. The past is better off staying in the past."

That answered zero percent of my question. However, if this nightmare whom I’ve never heard of once in my life was an acquaintance of Reala, they must have been interesting.

It would be something to ask Onee-chan later.

Under the prevailing puppy-dog eyes of the bodiless Nightmaren, Puffy came to the end of her debate. With a sigh, she surrendered. "Okay, Fine! There'll be Plasma, but for you I’m placing restrictions." This had Jackle soaring around the room, cheering like a kid on Christmas.

Most of the others groaned.

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“Onee-chan? Did you ask anyone to the dance?” I laughed loudly as she jumped, gawking at me as I sat down on her bed. Her face said it all, but it still felt great to poke fun. Cogets jaw clamped shut again and she whipped back around. Unfortunately for her I’d already seen her bashful blush.

“Oh really now? Nope you’re not getting anything out of me kid.” Her hands fumbled for the third time on the material she was sorting through. I couldn’t stop grinning now. It was a few days before the celebration and my guardian had been bombarded with clothing requests. It was a formal affair
after all. She took it like any other prideful seamstress, disturbingly professionally. If one could call it that.

Despite being incredibly busy with commissions, she insisted on making me a dress. I never asked her, but my superior was hell-bent. Apparently she didn’t want me to look out of place.

“You did, didn’t you?”

“Iie! Why would I do that?” She squealed. Man, sometimes you could just open her up and read her like a book.

“Well, a lot of Nightmaren are going in pairs, and I’m aware you know that.” I pried, “Want me to guess? It’ll only take me one shot.”

Coget gave me a nervous glance, then glared suspiciously, “Go ahead and try, I dare you.”

“She’s tall, dark and mysterious.”

“Damn it.”

It became impeccably obvious, Coget’s affiliation with VaIkU. Maybe it was because she was a total contrast to her personality? God only knows. I only brought it up to bug her, but did VaIkU really say…

“Wait, really?” I giggled.

“What do you mean, really? Who are you going with? I need to know so I can beat them off with a stick.”

“Onee-chan!” I threw the empty pincushion at her playfully, “Behave. No one interests me. I asked no one and no one asked me.”

“So you’re playing hard-to-get?”

“Onee-chan.” I groaned. I look around the bed, “I’ve run out of things to throw at you.”

“Hah, good!” My guardian snickered before throwing a bundle of silk over her shoulder, hitting me square in the face. I sputtered and pulled it out of the way. “Try it on.” I unraveled it to get a better gauge of what she was subjecting me to. I shrugged, it didn’t look bad at all, so I proceeded to undress. It didn’t take much, I wore nothing on my lower body. It was all a matter of shucking off a vest and boots. The cool material slid over my shoulders and surprisingly fell perfectly just above my ankles. It was elegant, classy even. She also threw me a couple of foot wraps to match, humming with satisfaction.

“You’re in luck, you can take the hat off. It’s not mandatory.”

I gave her a look of relief and wasted no time. I flung the thing off, throwing it on the bed. Two black braids fell to my feet, past the dress line. “Thank God.”

Flattening my violet bangs down to cover my forehead, my guardian chuckled. “You never liked it, huh? The hat?”

“Nope. Never will.”

“And you’ve still never cut your hair? Isn’t it a little too- well. Heavy?”
“Again, nope.”

“Excellent, because it looks good with the dress.” She snorted and I raised a brow at her, pulling free the ties holding the ropes together. “It’s so silky. To be honest I’m happy you kept it.”

“More like it freaks me out when the colour of it changes.” Well, it didn’t change, but wherever I cut my bangs, the violet tips would crawl higher. I found it disturbing.

“Yes, well.” Coget sighed in admiration I guess, helping me with the other braid and smoothing it out. No creases ever showed up. “Eyaah, I’m jealous!” She whined running her fingers through.

“Your hair’s not bad, it’s just colourful.” I caught myself, knowing I probably set her off anyways.

Coget tore her own hat off her head revealing her hair, horns, and one closed missing eye. Just to prove her point in the boldest way possible. I couldn’t help but laugh. Her hair was literally every colour of the rainbow, short, and wild. The small horns were just visible between some strands. Why she had them were still a mystery.

“See! It’s hideous and you know it!” She cried out making a face that had me cackling louder.

“Ohhh, stop!” I groaned, trying to control myself. “At least it matches your eye.”

“Yeah, right. The only colour not a part of the spectrum.” She huffed and fell backwards onto the bed beside me. At times she could be more of a drama queen than Puffy. I shook my head, silently amused.

“You make this so difficult. You’re fine.”

“Okay, if you’re gunna be like that, you won’t get to see myyyyy dress!” Her face scrunched up childishly, crossing her arms.

“What? Hey, not fair!” I gave her a look of disbelief and Coget grinned.

“You’ll see it anyways in a couple of days.” She chortled. I sighed; obviously tired of the game she was playing. Fine, if she wanted to be like that then I’d humor her.

Coget sat down beside me and began to stare at the dress she had made. Uncomfortable, cleared my throat. “What?”

“You look so pure and innocent in that dress. I knew your flat chest would complement it.”

“Pardon me? I didn’t think you had the nerve. At least I don’t have to worry about them flying in my face.” I growled. It was true, what the hell would a Nightmaren need those for?

“Oh, didn’t mean to poke a nerve!” Coget laughed earning a swat from my hand. How ridiculous.

It was then that I realized there was a point to this whole conversation. I wanted to ask her some things. Hopefully she would react well. I looked over at my guardian twirling my hair between her fingers.

“Onee-chan?” I gulped slowly.

“Hm?”

“I’ve been wondering something.” Coget rolled onto her back with a smile and brushed the hair into her face like a duster brush.
“What would you like to know ma child?” The playful accent lifted my spirits a bit. She was in a good mood.

“I heard some of the Second-Levels mention a creation I hadn’t heard of before. Who was NiGHTS?” The atmosphere thickened bitterly when the look of ease fled Coget’s face. Her expression was as hard as stone. I realized too late just how bad of an idea this was.

“Why would you want to know?”

I averted my gaze, but dared to push further.

“I was just wondering, because it sounded like they were close to Reala-sama and-”

“It’s classified.” I flinched at her tone. This was unexpected, I almost felt like a child again.

“Why? Everyone else seems to know. What did they do that was so terrible?”

“It was a long time ago, Akila. Before my time even, alright? All I know is that the name is taboo and that I don’t want you going around and asking questions about it.”

My guardian was looking at the floor anxiously. It was a strange look on her. I knew she was hiding something. It was almost as strange as- Wait a minute.

“The rouges-“ I stopped short, choking on my words a bit. My guardian was staring fire at me. Fearful almost of what I was going to say.

“Akila.” Anger masked her always-friendly face and it told me to be silent and leave.

There was a knock at the door that made both of us jump. Coget grabbed her hat from the bed to hide the fury of her hair.

“Come in.” She droned and a Second-Level peeked through the door. Judging by how he was shaking, he was nervous about approaching the room. It wouldn’t surprise me if he got a little too curious and listened in on the door.

“Th-the master wants you, Coget.” After the stuttering approach, he quickly shut the door and scurried away. I watched silently and my superior stood without a word. She left without even looking at me.

Before closing the door again firmly behind her, she stated her final words for the evening.

“This conversation never happened. Are we clear?”

I nodded while still sitting on her bed, now with even more questions to solve buzzing around in my head.

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I couldn’t keep myself from shaking as I hovered down the hall. The dance had already started half an hour ago and I still felt the need to turn back. The twisting corridors were darker than usual. Not like it mattered to a Nightmaren, but it meant there were more Nightmaren at the ball then wandering through the castle. I still felt jumpy around every corner, wondering if Naer would appear again to finish me off. I’d never been so uneasy walking the corridors alone, but this was an opportunity I didn’t want to miss.

Inhaling deeply I kept my head up. It seemed that every time I looked down my esteem lowered.
At first the dress made me feel powerful and confident, but now I was self-conscious, no matter what Onee-chan said to me earlier to raise my spirits.

After an hour of fighting endlessly with my hair went by, I gave up and kept it down. The wraps on my feet refused to hide the older bite scars, something I hadn’t noticed until now. Not like it bothered me anyway. There were scars on my face now, so it was best to get over it. Still, I felt incredibly awkward without the boots.

When the door to the mess hall came in sight, I could hear chatter and classical music through the wood. A gulp escaped my throat, _Come on Aki._ I attempted to encourage myself and inhaled deeply when I reached the doorway. Before I could even touch the knob, I had been spotted.

“Akila?”

“Wow! Is that really you?”

My head snapped around to spot Chamelan and Lolly-Boo making their way towards the door themselves.

“Oh! Hi guys!” Sadly enough it came out a squeak. Composed yet, I was not. Embarrassed, I wrapped my arms around me and huddled closer to the doorway.

Chamelan’s hat and cape had been traded in for a pair that were professional and black. Lolly-Boo’s bowtie was now a plain crimson red and his bare hands were frantically trying to fix his grey attire. The smaller of the two looked up at me particularly strange and the grip on my arms became tighter.

“I don’t think I’ve _ever_ seen you without your hat!” He exclaimed, “Your hair’s so _long._” Emphasizing his point, he walked up to me as if mesmerized and burrowed his hands into the hair at my ankles. Involuntarily, I flinched. “Did Coget make your dress? It looks good on you—“

“Oh Shush. You’re embarrassing her, Boo.” Chamelan gave Akila a respectful nod and scooped up the mouse by the back of his bow. I stood in petrified silence as the younger Nightmaren squabbled in protest and continued to do so as the lizard went to turn the handle of the door. Before it opened, he paused to look back at me, grinning.

“You look gorgeous by the way.”

Oh god. I could feel the heat rising in my face. He smirk teasingly and I cursed the lizard as he entered the room. Before the door shut I took hold of it and followed.

It was definitely a formal event and I was out of my element. As I glanced around the crowded floor, most Nightmaren bundled together in small groups. The music was pleasant enough. Not too loud and that worked nicely for me.

The room itself seemed to give off its own paranormal sophistication. One could usually describe the mess hall as dark, cold and bathed in grime. Now it was almost blinding to look at the broken chandeliers. Everything never looked brighter. I knew Puffy to be a perfectionist but this was a bit baffling.

All too soon it felt awkward just standing by the door, so I passed by the decked up tables to mingle. It wasn’t before long until I was dragged into a circle of older Second-levels. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad after all.

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Jackle sat beside me on a stool, much to my own displeasure. His lizard companion, Chamelan I believe, rested against the bar table on the other side looking out at the crowd.

“This brings back memories!” Jackle sniggered and reached for the light blue bottle for his third hit, chugging all of the fluid in his cup between a five second interval. I couldn’t help but wince in disgust as he slammed it back down with a loud *Ahh* of satisfaction. “Man, I missed this!”

“That makes exactly one of us.” I glared at the bodiless Nightmaren through my persona and made sure to sip at my own glass. This idiot was only going to get louder and louder as the night progressed.

“Yer right!” Jackle admitted showing a row of sharp teeth in a demented grin, “We need a *new* drinking buddyyyy!” Before I could stop it, my hand had covered my face. I groaned as Jackle turned to Chamelan. His pathetic little gecko target flinched in alarm and I almost smirked.

“Hey, Chame! JOIN US!” Jackle gleefully swung his hands out in invitation.

What I hadn’t expected was the lizard to turn a horrendous shade of purple and slink away from the table in embarrassment. I chuckled, probably due to the influence of the plasma when Jackle turned back to me, pouting. “Strike one for the bumbling drunkard.” I stated.

Just then, a hand slammed onto the counter making us both look up. Oh dear Lord. It was my partner. What the fuck was she wearing?

“I’ll Join!” She declared and plunked heavily onto the counter by Jackle. I closed my eyes and braced myself for the unruly squeal of joy that came out of him. Perfect, as if he needs the encouragement. When I dared to look again I got an eyeful of VaIkU standing across the table from me and staring Coget down.

Noticing my attentiveness she glanced as me and ‘spoke.’ ~I guess she stayed true to her word. She said she’d go to the bar first.~

“You doubted her? She’s a beast. Why are you over here? You can’t drink.” I scoffed taking another sip.

“Mhm!” Coget grunted and wrapped an arm around the No-Level’s hips, pulling them together. I nearly choked and had to pause for a moment. I quirked a hidden brow at this display and Coget blinked at me as if expecting something. Does she think I’m an idiot?

“You can’t be serious.” I droned.

“Huhwha?” Of course Jackle had to add his two cents.

“Yes. Dead.” She chirped. I glanced again up at the taller partner. She wouldn’t make eye contact. Figures.

“Weeeeeeellllll! Grab a glass!” The insane one cackled impatiently and threw a couple glasses at them. Coget, I was impressed to say, caught hers. VaIkU ducked out of the way in a strange display of alarm. We all watched as they shattered loudly against the far wall.

~I think I’m happy with no mouth.~ The No-Level stated and looked over at Jackle, chortling away like a madman. I huffed, giving her an exasperated look.

“What are you talking about? He’s not drunk yet.”
Ba looked up at me sourly before turning abruptly and stalking off with clenched fists.

What was up with that? I pondered, because hell, that was confusing. Lolly-Boo’s sister was a chipper, yet annoying little thing. I wasn’t expecting her to approach me silently and glare up at me like that. I hadn’t done something to offend her right?

Bella chuckled abruptly beside me.

“Her brother can’t stop staring at you, that’s why.”

I looked over clueless, “What are you talking about?” I was then looking around for the small blue head of the mouse.

The spider cocked her head towards the back wall and I glanced over. Lolly-Boo sat against the stone with his eyes fixed on the cracked floor. Nothing seemed unusual, but he looked very awkward there alone twitting his thumbs.

“I- don’t get it. What did I miss?” I mumbled more to herself, but Bella heard regardless.

“The kid’s head over heels.” Bella nudge me with a spindly leg and grinned but I still wasn’t sure what she meant.

“I don’t-”

“Really? I thought it was obvious?”

For some reason it clicked right then and there. I wasn’t really sure how to react to this news. Was it obvious? I had no idea. I was always saving the little guy from near-death. Sure he was a friend but- that? “I had no idea but- to be perfectly honest, I’m not interested in anyone.” I laughed sheepishly and the spider began to look disappointed. Seeing this, I then addressed the subject a little more seriously, “Relationships seem pretty pointless in my opinion.” Bella shot me a strange look in response. I suddenly wished I hadn’t stretched it that far and cursed.

“It’s amazing. Reala said the same thing all the time.” Bella sighed, “I was hoping for a little drama to add to this drab atmosphere, but I guess not.” Losing interest, the pesky Nightmaren finally moved on to chat with some other Second-Levels. Much to my relief I moved to a different table. A little disturbed about what I just learned.

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Jackle was on his sixth drink, Coget on her fourth. I sat at the table idly playing with my first glass. They treated it like a race while I and VaIkU watched from the sidelines. Emptying the cup in her hand, Coget decided it was the time to speak.

“How’s the search going? Anything turn up?”

I grunted, that being enough to inform her that no, myself and VaIkU hadn’t found Naer or any trace of him. The search parties had all come back unsuccessful. “Reala-san? Can I talk to you by the way? About you-know-who.” Coget’s eyes rolled towards Akila’s position and mine followed.

What now? After all things. Maybe it had to do with Naer. Either way it sparked my interest a little. As I took a final swig at my drink, I motioned to the hallway door. Jackle didn’t notice that we left, considering his drunken state, so we weren’t followed.
Knowing how Akila can be when she’s curious, she’ll be persistent to find more answers.

I knew that for a fact.

Coget wasn’t fairing the best. She wasn’t expecting to be asked outright. I don’t entirely blame her for panicking. Akila wasn’t a stupid girl and she would have noticed something strange.

The secret of NiGHTS was almost out in the open. From now on, we had to proceed with caution.

Coget and I both reentered the room as if nothing occurred. VaIkU however had her eyes on us the moment we came into view. Jackle began to blabber about us vanishing like magic and the smack upside the head I gave him was well deserved.

I promised myself to speak with Akila later. At least I could make a lie sound convincing.

Half the room turned as Puffy bounced to the center of the room. The large Nightmaren cleared her throat and let her voice sing out.

“Now that everyone’s here, let the dances begin!” With that said and done, the calm clusters of monstrosities became a chaotic mess. All of them began to rush around, searching for a dance partner and taking up more room on the floor then before the announcement.

I stood where I was stiffly. Dancing was the one thing I was nervous about.

Lolly-Ba had already grabbed her brother’s hand and was forcing him to come to the floor and—Oh Lord. My guardian swished past me in a patchwork dress with VaIkU clinging on for dear life. She was intoxicated, that was for sure. What happened to drinking limits?

“Wow.” I murmured to myself as someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Akila?” I turned to find a very nervous looking Chamelan. Wait, he wasn’t going to— I smiled slightly as a form of encouragement for the poor Second-Level. Here we go…I braced myself for the question.— “Um, can I ask for some advice?” I blinked in confusion, as disappointing as it was to hear, I suddenly felt a little less panicked.

“Sure, Cham. Go ahead.”

The lizard’s hands began to fumble with his cape. An odd, but not uncommon gesture from him while nervous. Finally he stuttered, “H-have you ever had feelings for someone b-but were too scared to tell them?” Chamelan trailed off as my facemask slipped off a little. Fantastic.

“I wouldn’t think so.” Strangely enough, I began to feel giddy and lost control of the smile on my face. “I’m guessing you’re in that position?”

He remained silent, a faint blush spreading over his facial scales. “Possibly?” He muttered.

I couldn’t help let out a small giggle. Even though Chamelan was already a strange character for a Nightmaren, his bashfulness had me seeing him in a new light. It pained me to think so, but it was adorable.

“Well- Who?” I ushered him a bit, hopefully to help loosen his tongue and he flinched a bit.
“Well…”

“Please tell me, I won’t speak to a soul.”

“J-Jackle.”

It became very silent right then and there. The lizard hid behind his hands after speaking and I began to stare. At first I thought the Nightmaren in name had snuck up and Chamelan wouldn’t speak with him so close by. I realized we were entirely isolated in this section after looking over my shoulder. A few other Second-Levels glanced at us as I scanned the area before returning their attentions back towards the dancing.

Dumbfounded I attempted to break the silence, “Um… well. Wow. That’s-” How does one respond to a situation like this? That was the question of the night. So instead, “Wow…”

“I know. It’s embarrassing.” The elder murmured and lowered his hat to cover his heated face. I raised a brow at that.

“Since when?”

“Um- a while.”

I hummed in thought, tossing a piece of scattered hair back over my shoulder. This was getting uncomfortable. “So, you need advice?” He nodded urgently and I resisted the urge to groan in frustration. “Well, I’m not entirely sure myself. I’ve never had a relationship before. Everyone else seems to think I have all the bloody answers.” The confession was as honest as I could be.

“Approach him naturally. Don’t act like someone you’re not?”

“-And if he’s above the scale mark of impossibly intoxicated?”

I snickered at that. “Ah… Well, I won’t be that much of a help then. I suggest you wing it.”

“Wing it? But-” He glanced over at Jackle across the room who was now chugging down his ninth glass.

“Go! Don’t hesitate. If you get let down, well then- at least you tried.” The words I said sounded harsh to my ears, but this wasn’t my area of expertise. I gave him a gentle push but made sure it was hard enough to move him. This surprisingly fueled Chamelan a little more courage and he inhaled hovering over to the table with his head held high.

It was an accomplishment for me to see Jackle swinging the lizard around the next minute in drunken glee. Seeing the large balcony empty across the crowd it instantly beckoned me outside. I needed space. It was a little too active on the dance floor for my tastes. Maybe no one would bother me if I disappeared for a few minutes.

I squeezed through the mass of bodies and opened the doors leading to the outside. I was met with a dark sky and a chilly breeze. Nightmare was always dark, with no stars to decorate its atmosphere. Clouds hid its presence, but sometimes a dull red moon could be seen amongst and beyond them. To my amazement I could see it clearly tonight. The eerie glow cast pleasant shadows that made every dark corner more foreboding to stand in. All the same, the light was beautiful.

Leaning over the balcony I observed the luminous red orb as it hovered. It appeared a little more orange than red tonight. Taking note of that, my mind began to wonder back to where my mission left off. No matter how hard I tried, it was going to come back and haunt me eventually. Was anything really a secret anymore? Kurtason and his abilities being one of those things? I wasn’t sure
how to feel about the orange light at the moment. It was disturbing and unnatural, yet I was thankful. More than once he'd saved my life. For what reason, I think I was beginning to understand. He was lonely. It took one to know one.

Maybe that was the reason we were drawn together like this? I shook my head a little as if to jostle the thoughts around. The outcome wasn’t pleasant for either of our well-being’s. Despite us being natural born enemies, I can’t remember trusting anyone else more than him. Well, except Cerberus, but our bond consisted out of loyalty. Was this the same? I may never know.

I rubbed at my temple, the deep thinking taking its toll.

“‘Akila?’

I jolted in surprise, hearing the familiar voice so near. I hadn’t even heard the door unlatch. Reala-sama closed the door to the balcony behind him and I avoided his eyes as he approached the railing. The back of his vest came into view as he leaned against it, his arms crossed patiently beside me.

“Enjoying the party?” I asked and he sighed heavily.

“I wouldn’t say enjoy. I’m not the type to loaf around and mingle.”

“Ah.” Stupid question Akila. Reala eyed me suspiciously, I could feel it against the side of my head as I rested my chin on my hand. We hadn’t chatted since the incident with Naer. He’d been on search missions since then with VaIkU and a bunch of other second levels to locate the other Level-Zero.

“Something bothering you?”

The dreaded question finally reared its head and from Reala no less.

“Oh! Well, not exactly.” I reassured more myself than him.

“Either way, we need to talk.” Reala gave me a look that crossed between the: you’re easier to read then a book and the, I have you cornered expression.

Relenting under the gaze a little, I exhaled confessing, “Okay, a lot.”

My old mentor grumbled, straitening his back from the rail. “I see. I also heard that you were pestering Coget earlier about a rumor you heard. You aren’t the only one bothered right now.”

“Oh, she told you about that?” I sighed. It surprised me a little that my guardian would take something like this to Reala. Why was it such a huge deal? “I heard that you and he got along. I didn’t believe it at first, so I asked her if it was true.”

“Exactly how much did you hear? Because that certainly isn’t a fact. I hated him to the core.” The older Nightmaren gradually spoke.

“NiGHTS?–” The name left my mouth before I could clamp it shut. “Sorry…” Was all I could think to murmur. We both became serenely quiet for a moment. I was expecting him to flip out at the name like my guardian did, but he remained unmoved. After a few minutes or so I retracted from my tense position and Reala spoke once more.

“NiGHTS was a deserter and he died at the hands of the master for his insolence.” I looked up at him in surprise. So he had gone rogue? I’d never heard of such a thing.
“What do you mean? What did he do that was so bad?” Reala seemed to be pondering for a proper answer. At least, that’s what it looked like to me.

“He decided to go against the natural order. Began to help visitors, disobey orders, disrupt Nightmaren progress and hunts, disappear for days on end- the list could go on for miles. He was the first to do this and the last. We don’t speak his name because he never existed.” Had I ever heard Reala talk this much at once? I can’t recall, but I was fixated on his voice, soaking in the answers like a sponge. This explained things much clearer than I ever would have hoped for.

“You need to understand why we do this. We don’t want to inspire anymore mutiny.” Shocking me further, he placed a firm hand on my shoulder. I welcomed it, but a feeling of discomfort began to bubble in my gut. “We all must remember where our loyalties lie. Capeesh?”

Instantly I replied, “Capeesh.” He smirked a bit before patting me on the shoulder and heading back over to the door.

“Good girl. I’m going back inside.” He turn himself around completely, putting on his normal face of indifference. The rare moment was finished, I gave him a sluggish nod and he nodded back.

Turning the knob in his clawed hands, Reala opened the door a bit, “Coming?” He asked lightly and I shook my head, looking back up at the moon. I heard my mentor sigh, “Very well…”

NiGHTS wasn’t the only one who deserted. Who were the First-Levels in that Nightopia then? They were rogues too. The lone Nightmaren on the balcony heard the door shut as she continued to stare upward.

“What have I gotten myself into?” She whispered, “Of course I’m loyal to the cause, but- Kurt’s different from normal visitors.” Akila glanced down at the scars on her foot as they twinged with pain. Eyes narrowed, she bent down to rub at the spots. The marks were really old, so it was a wonder to her why they could still ache after nearly a decade. That incident hadn’t only left a physical mark on her either. That much she had let slip. Not even her guardian knew what came after the outbreak began. What happened to the remaining Procreations was a dire secret that only Wiseman and her actually knew.

Thoughts hollow eyes.

The cracking flesh off faces.

Akila found herself shivering at the thought, wishing that her amnesia would take those memories away instead of others. It was still a mystery to what the monster or parasite was. Even the master wasn’t entirely sure, the containment rooms still held the living specimens, but barely. Since then, no one had ever again tried for offspring. The experiment was terminated and pronounced a failure.

It wasn’t before long before the thoughts became agitating. Standing around wasn’t going to block them out again, so she found herself jumping over the rail.

The air licked at her face, closing her eyes in bliss as the currents tossed her hair into a tangled mess. Basking in the tension release, the fall seemed to last forever until her instincts kicked, in telling her to slow down.

After a graceful front flip, Akila began to control the speed of her drop all while pinpointing a tile on the jagged stone below her. Tapping it with her foot gently, she inhaled. Where she was now was the border of Nightmare. Akila knew the consequences for leaving without a real purpose but the urge to
escape felt overwhelming. With a hard push, she launched herself from the ground as hard as she could. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea though. She wasn’t exactly dressed for flight. Certain thoughts tried to burrow their way into her brain but they were ruled out by an abnormal, stronger emotion.

The momentous desire for freedom.

They wouldn’t notice her absence during the party… Right? It was too late to turn back now. Her mind was already made up. It was time to pay a visit to a friend.

Reala had a feeling he’d said too much. He left the balcony with an old weight off his chest, but a new one to replace it. The room was still alive with Nightmaren, completely unaware of all the stress taking place behind closed doors. He couldn’t help but hate them all for it.

Reala approached the makeshift bar again, hoping that another drink would help but noticed both his partner and the No-Level were missing. In their place, claws was lapping at a bowl on the table, filled part way with Plasma.

Perhaps they went off elsewhere to dance? It only made sense. He sat at the long table, grabbing the tall bottle and a new glass. His other one had vanished already.

Right before he could pour the bright liquid a yell and a crash pulled his attention away to the other side of the hall. Was that the window? There was a frantic cascade of action coming from the swarms of Nightmaren there. They scattered, frightened by something and there was another few screams. Within the chorus of chaos, Reala recognized one of them to be Cogets. As he stood fully, now at full attention. A large mass of shadows swirled overhead, dragging something solid along with them before shooting back towards the broken window, leaving as quickly as they came. Reala bolted to the scene happening right before his eyes. The panicked Second-Levels moved instantly for him, clearing a path. Coget was among the broken glass. Another few lower levels lay wounded nearby who had also receive the brunt of the attack. He landed by his partner and shook her unscathed shoulder in hopes to rouse her. Some stitches had snapped and her left arm was coming off. Nothing a good sew job wouldn’t fix. Reala blinked and Coget hissed in pain, turning over onto her side.

She glanced around, confused and then a look of alarm over took her.

“Oh God. The infected. The shadows, Reala. A mass of shadows.” Coget croaked. She forced herself to sit up and Reala didn’t bother stopping her. Everything he just saw actually happened. His partner stood, holding a limp arm to her side. “Where’s- where’s VaIkU? She was right next to me.”

She shot an anxious stare at Reala and the pieces came together. They took her.

It wasn’t long before I landed in a forest of sharp bushes and droopy trees. The area here I had practically memorized. In no time at all I found myself in a familiar clearing.

“He’s not here?” I couldn’t help but feel disappointed. In the human realm it would be approximately around the time of- nine AM? Kurtason seemed like the type to wake up early. Maybe he did the same on weekends?

I sighed and sat myself heavily on the black bench. Something caught my attention as my eyes wandered over the repetitive pattern of keys.
Didn’t he always close the lid before leaving? I wondered. It disturbed me how it was such a little thing about the human, but I’d noticed. A loud splash sounded not far from the clearing and I perked up in alarm.

There’s no water this close to here.

I froze and listened after the sound met my ears. There was a river in this Nightopia, but it was too far for even me to even hear it run.

“Woah!”

I found myself jumping up from the bench as I heard the boy’s shout.

“Kurt? Where are you?” I called back and heard another splash coming from my left. On impulse I headed for that direction.

Following the periodic splashes, it wasn’t long until I found something shocking.

“A- gate way?” It was a poorly opened gash in the atmosphere not three feet from the ground. My mind suddenly jumped into panic mode. Was it Naer? Was it the rouges? Holding my hair back, I glanced through the hole and a familiar Nightopia greeted me. It was that girl’s Nightopia. Damnit. Hissing curses under my breath I stepped through.

The forest was green, but not as green as it was before. That was the first thing I noticed. Maybe the girl’s Ideya was losing its power? Or, maybe it was the light just glaring me in the eyes again? Right now it was of no concern.

Golden light seeped through the trees making intricate patterns across the underbrush and earth as I drifted along. It was quiet and it unnerved me, so I kept my guard up. Glancing out of the corners of my eyes for any movement.

My claws twitched when I heard another splash and glanced behind a thick expansion of bushes. I instantly regretted it and a squawk left my throat at what I saw. Pulling away too quickly I realized it was already too late.

Kurtason was halfway through removing soaked boxers when he heard the embarrassed yell. He tilted his head curiously towards my direction, almost knowingly.

“Akila?”

I clung to a tree, back to trunk, nearly hyperventilating. I jumped as two arms parted the leaves of the bushes and a wet face peaked through.

Kurtason stared at me with an unfamiliar expression and I did the same back in a petrified manner.

“Hu-hi. Hu-hi” I stuttered dumbly. Trying to not stare wasn’t working. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Kurt blinked at me, seemingly baffled as well. “Well, I discovered a neat trick with those blades and as you can see,” He lifted his arms, exasperated. “I felt into a hot spring.”

“I see that…” I probably should have felt more surprised, but the moment was too odd for that. The boy was giving me a onceover and cleared his throat.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, what are you wearing?” As soon as the question left his mouth my arms
crossed over my chest self-consciously. The blood was rushing to my face. I could feel it.

“W-well, um. It’s hard to explain—Why are you laughing?” I gawked as a smirk broke over the boy’s face. Holy shit, he was giggling and it made him look alien.

“S-Sorry! Sorry! You look great, but why are you so embarrassed for?” My hands rose up to hold my burning cheeks. Not only to hide my face, but for some odd reason my head was beginning to spin. Ashamed was a good word to express how I felt right now. I was acting stupid. Kurt seemed to find the conclusion a bit faster than I wanted.

“Is it because I’m naked?”

The bold statement had me wobbling and I almost fell over in disbelief. I knew it was true and now so did him.

The visitor smirked deviously and his brows rose and fell suggestively, “Care to join me for a swim?”

Bastard. My leg felt numb and I placed pressure on it. This time I really did fall over. My leg crumpled under me. Kurt rushed forwards and grabbed my arms, steadily lowering me to the ground and asking frantic questions about my wellbeing.

I wasn’t so sure what was happening at the moment. I gave my ankle a slightly pained grimace and gripped it. The bites were burning now, but the rest of the appendage still flared up with pins and needles. His gaze landed on my foot with interest. “Is that what I think it is?” He asked, standing beside me. It didn’t register that he’d come out of the bushes until I received an eyeful of his genitals. I looked down at his feet as fast as I could, but the damage had already been done.

With a shaky laugh I asked, already knowing the answer. “You have no shame, do you?” With that said Kurt knelt down beside me.

“Apparently no. Should it matter? You never wear pants.”

“T-touché.” He placed a hand on my leg, just above mine and the bite. I pulled the foot covering off to get a better look. It was an angry red and purple, definitely concerning now to me.

“It looks swollen.” Kurt assumes and I dared to look up at him.

“Our feet are always this big.” I snorted and he laughed again.

“True, but it’s red. Especially around those scars. What did you do to it?”

“Nothing! I fly most of the time remember? I don’t even recall doing anything bad enough to damage myself.”

“I see.” He then paused to look back towards the hot spring. “You know, I wasn’t kidding about that swim. Maybe the water will help?” My eyes narrowed but a smile tugged at my lips. I couldn’t resist.

“You seem pretty determined to get me in there.”

“It feels great though. And, what if I am?” The amused look he gave did me in. What could it hurt?

“Okay, fine.” I groaned, and began to stand. I thought the leg would be fine enough to help me off the ground, but it refused to cooperate.
Something picked me up none too gently and I yelped, not expecting to be lifted. My hand slipped down a solid, wet chest and I froze up frightfully. Kurt carried me through the bush and towards water. Still in his arms, he sat down on the edge of the rocks and placed me on his lap. Oh God. He did not just carry me like a fucking princess. I knew he was grinning right now. I could sense it.

My feet broke the surface of the steaming pool below us and it felt heavenly.

The spring was a decent size and also very secluded. We both watched for a minute as large bubbles continuously broke the surface.

“M-maybe I should take this off so it doesn’t get wet…” I mumbled in self-conscious manner. I really did see the boy smirk wider out of the corner of my eye. Catching on to what he was thinking instantly.

“Oh, stop it!” Huffing at him in disgust I slapped the boy’s arm. Almost playfully.

He chuckled, “You said it, not me.”

“Right.” I got off his lap and sat down on the cold rock with my feet still in the water. “Is it deep? Because I’m not built for swimming. I don’t think I should even be submerging myself like this.”

“No, not really.” Kurtason’s eyes widened a bit when I began to tug the dress off.

Body bare, I shot him a smirk of my own. Two could play at this game.

“What? You invited me in. Besides, it shouldn’t matter. I am genderless after all.”

“I can see that.” He stated quickly, eyes trailing down my chest in a way that disturbed me. I did however grin at his darkening face. Hah, it served him right.

Teasing him with a bat of my lashes I slid into the bath.

Instantly I lost my composure.

“Holy shit! What do you mean ‘Not that deep’?!”” Hearing this, the boy fell into an almost hysterical fit of laughter. My head bobbled just above the water’s surface and my arms floundered about to get to a shallower area.

“F-for me that is.”

I scowled at him but was a bit taken aback by his outburst. This was the first time I’d ever heard him laughing this hard. Happy or not however, he was going to pay. Reaching under the water, I grabbed his ankle dangling under the surface. Watching as his cheerful expression alter to a shock I wrenched on it, dragged him under the water. I finally found my footing and managed to haul the upper half of my body above water. Releasing a triumphant cackle of my own, I waited for him to resurface. Worry began to coil in my gut when his head didn’t break the water. Was I too rough with him?

“Kur—AAAH!” I let out a shriek as my sides were pinched. I almost jumped out of the pool in fright. Kurtason embraced me from behind and held me still against him.

“Boo.”

“Jesus Christ, that scared me!” I chided, resting my arms on the larger ones around my waist.

“That’s quite sad considering that you’re the Nightmaren and I’m the dreamer.” I clucked my tongue in annoyance at that.
“So—“ I stiffened when the boy rested his chin on my shoulder and realized the strangeness of my position. I grunted in protest, I attempted to shrink away from his hold. It didn’t occur to me how clingy he was getting until now I wasn’t sure how to feel about it. It frightened me a little.

“Aki?” I jolted a little and gasped when his lips brushed me under the eye. His voice was deeper, and there was a sensual purr to the edge of it.

I shivered, but the water around me was scalding. Something odd was about to happen, I could feel it.

“Kurt?–”

Something against my mouth cut off my question. A hand ran through my hair and pulled at the back of my head. It pressing our lips even closer together and I swore our tongues touched.

The kiss only lasted for a few seconds and when we parted I was shaking uncontrollably. I stared at the visitor, trying to process what had just happened. Kurt searched my eyes for some sort of response while our faces were still inches apart.

My eyes began to widen, “oh… oh no. No…” I began to mumble incoherently and he brushed his thumb along my cheek. If he was trying to calm me down and reason with me it wasn’t going to happen now. The volume of my voice increased beyond my control. Now I was a startled mess. I forced the arms around my waist to release their hold and Kurtason thankfully complied with the request.

“Aki–”

“Why?” I wasn’t going to let him speak anything but answers now. For fucks sake I needed them now.

The boy snapped his mouth closed and avoided my demanding eyes. He was going to say it. “I love yo–”

“LIES!” I snapped but he didn’t flinch. My breathing was coming out in sharp angry puffs.

“It is not.” He reassured calmly.

“It HAS to be!”

“Why though?”

I bit my lip in frustration.

“First of all,” I started. “I’m not a woman.”

“Not all men are attracted to women.”

“I’m a Nightmaren and I’m supposed to destroy Nightopias as well as harm visitors.”

“Never cared. And you don’t seem to do a great job anyways.”

“That’s not true! I’m the top Second-level in Nightmare! You’re just–” I snarled defensively.

“Unbelievable!”

“Are there any other excuses you want to throw at me?”
“Of course!”

“Shoot.”

“I’M NOT REAL!”

I pulled myself out of the water, “I can’t give you what someone real can give! I only exist in THIS world! I wouldn’t be able to be by your side all the time! FOR GOD’S SAKE, I was even sent out to KILL you! I’m a Nightmaren, NOT a human, Kurt!—“

“And in reality, most people don’t think I am either!” My rant diminished when the visitor finally raised his voice. “Just because I woke up beside a dead sister, people see me as a freak. A murder suspect. I was eight fucking years old and the whole fucking world turned its back on me.” His hand reached out for mine as I sat perched on the edge on the spring. I let him take it numbly. “She was everything to me. The only reason I played was because she listened and then she died beside me because I was too afraid to sleep alone for one night.”

Kurt stared me down while he spoke. I never knew he had a sister. Who died beside him no less. It disturbed me, but I let him continue to speak.

“I almost gave it all up. Then you appeared, all those years ago. You listened just like she did and—” He stopped, voice breaking. I watched his face as the pain and tears began to well up. It was beginning to make sense now; the behavior when we met. It tugged a bit at my heartstrings.

“It doesn’t matter what I do to gain their trust now. It always backfires and I end up in the background again. The rumors are going to follow me for the rest of my life.”

Kurt watched my expression again and I had a feeling he was done with his story and back to reading me.

“Kurtason Cartwright.” I stated, in an official manner. I raised my head a little to observe him clearly. That little speech had defeated my logical side in one cold blow. For now, I wasn’t sure what to say. So without warning, I slide forwards and pulled him into a hug. “You’ve become a dear friend to me. I’ve been afraid to admit it until now. I am what I am and I’m sorry. I can’t decide.”

With that said I released him and left.

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