

Elaine J Daniels



Pinned by Love

Author's Note

This story takes place in a fantasy monster realm. Humans exist in this realm but only because they have slipped through the cracks that separate humans and monsters. As a result, different aspects of each era of professional wrestling overlap and intermingle.

Pro wrestling is widely known to be scripted now, but the most important thing you should know is that for years, there was a culture of never breaking character (also known as kayfabe), and even to this day, some pro wrestlers choose not to break kayfabe or pull back the curtain too far.

I want this story to be accessible to everyone, even readers with little to no wrestling entertainment knowledge. Here are a few terms in wrestling entertainment that you need to know:

- **Babyface/face:** the hero
- **Heel:** the villain
- **Stage name:** the name a wrestling entertainer uses when performing. This is different from the legal name they use in their personal lives
- **Promo:** a dialogue-heavy segment that's meant to advance the storyline
- **Heat:** a negative reaction from the crowd toward the wrestlers

Character Appendix

Hopefully, throughout the story, I have made clear the different names, stage names, and nicknames for the wrestlers. But just in case I haven't, here is this little character appendix for reference.

Iris

- Harpy
- Heel
- Stage name: Athena “The Snatcher” Rainstorm

Lena

- Minotaur
- Babyface
- Stage name: Helen “Mother” Stronghorn

Daphne

- Satyr
- Heel
- Stage name: Fauna “The Dancer” Piper

Gianna

- Wolven
- Babyface
- Stage name: Luna “The Alpha” Thrasher

June

- Dragon
- Babyface
- Stage name: Eileen “The Empress” Waterclaw

Pan

- Demon
- Heel
- Stage name: Lil “The Temptation” Nightheart

Chapter 1

Iris

“ATHENA! ATHENA! DO YOU HAVE time for a few words?”

An overeager voice shouts from behind me as I make my way down the barren hallways toward the arena’s staging area.

I inhale a deep, calming breath before turning around, offering what I hope is a winning smile to the camera being shoved in my face. The goal is to look cool and confident, but on the inside my stomach twists and my heart pounds. Today’s match has been predetermined, like all matches in Elite Monster Wrestling, and yet I still have to pretend I don’t know who will win. But that’s not what upsets me.

It’s the fact that I’m about to step out into that arena and listen to the crowd boo and hiss as the announcer calls my name. Unfortunately, that’s the burden a heel must bear.

Hazel, the blonde wood nymph in charge of backstage interviews, holds a microphone to my mouth, her overpowering perfume tickling my nose. “Athena Rainstorm, the last time you faced Eileen Waterclaw, you almost tasted defeat. What did you do to prepare for a win in tonight’s main event?”

Squaring my shoulders, I glare down the lens of the camera. “The biggest difference between the Athena Rainstorm who faces Eileen Waterclaw today and the Athena Rainstorm who faced her last time is that I’m no longer holding back.” I snap my wings to drive home my point. “Waterclaw better watch out because she is in for a world of pain.”

I've been a heel since I started my career, and playing one comes naturally to me. But what started as a fun and cheeky way to claw my way up the ranks of the EMW has lately turned sour.

Hazel's forest-green eyes sparkle. "But The Empress has been taken under the wing of Helen Stronghorn since your last match. Aren't you at all afraid of a dragon who has been trained by such an unstoppable force in the EMW?"

My eye roll is genuine, but I play it up for the camera. Fuck Helen Stronghorn and the pegasus she flew in on! But I can't say that. F-bombs on live television are a big no-no.

Instead, I respond, "And you think I'm scared of Helen?" I tap my temple. "That minotaur has nothing going on between the horns but open range. I would take on her and her little protégé, Eileen, at the same time and still come out on top."

"Bold words from someone who hasn't faced Mother in years." Hazel smirks, knowing she's hit a sore spot both in and out of storyline.

Most of us on the roster get along off-screen. Heels and faces may not be allowed to comingle anywhere publicly—to maintain the illusion that the rivalries and drama are real—but we can all be friendly behind closed doors.

But it's no secret among EMW's wrestlers and staff that Lena—also known as Helen "Mother" Stronghorn—and I don't get along. In fact, you could probably say we downright hate each other. At least on my end; I don't bother talking to Lena long enough to find out how she really feels about me.

I flash my fangs. Hazel is pissing me off, but that's part of her job. She's supposed to "fire us up" before matches to sell our rivalries to the audience, but it sucks that it's actually working.

The good news is that, as the heel, I'm allowed to be a bitch to anyone and everyone, even the innocent (and not-so-innocent) interviewers.

With a menacing glare, I jab my index finger toward Hazel's chest. "Mark my words, wood nymph, destroying Eileen Waterclaw puts me one step closer to taking down Helen Stronghorn and all she stands for."

Hazel's eyes dance in the shitty fluorescent lighting; this promo will be well received. But she has to sell it, so she sucks in a breath and leans away from me, playing the role of uncomfortable interviewer. I use this opportunity to end the conversation.

"Now, if you'll excuse me"—I curl my lips, baring my teeth—"I have a match to win." Flipping my hair over my shoulder, I glare at the camera once more before sauntering down the hall with my head held high.

As soon as I turn the corner, safely out of the camera's view, I lean my back against the cool concrete wall and let out a long sigh. Thank the goddess that's over. Every time I do one of those promos, where I'm forced to pretend to be cruel, it chips away at my soul. It's exhausting pretending to be that vicious.

"Hey there, Iris." I'm greeted by the soft voice of Pan.

I glance toward the approaching demon, known widely by their stage name of Lil Nightheart. Their red skin glistens with sweat, and their chest heaves. They just lost a match against the werewolf Luna Thrasher, a very grumpy yet kind Woven.

"Did Gianna kick your ass?" I ask with a grin, referring to Luna by her legal name.

Pan grits their teeth, rubbing their left shoulder. "She may have pulled a little too hard during her armbar, but no real harm. She already apologized."

My brow furrows. "Do you need a medic?"

"Nah!" They wave me off. "But I didn't come over here to talk about me."

"Ugh!" I exclaim with a groan, fisting my hair. "I'm just trying to relax before I have to go out there."

My friend holds up their hands and takes a step back. "I hear you; I hear you. I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

I narrow my eyes. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because it's obvious how burned-out you are." They cock their head to the side, their short, inky black bob brushing against their chin.

My wings sag. "You're right. I don't know how much longer I can do—"

“Iris!” A sharp and urgent voice interrupts me. A troll with a clipboard and headphones rushes down the hall toward me.

“Oh shit,” I murmur, looking around for a clock. I must be late if the EMW producers sent an assistant to find me.

“‘Oh shit’ is right!” the troll huffs, out of breath from his sprint. “We gotta go! You’re on in three minutes.”

Pan shoots me an empathic half smile. I straighten my back and lift my chin before following the flustered production assistant.

Like it or not, it’s time.

Let’s do this.

Chapter 2

Virginia Lavender

NIKOLAS THISTLE AND I SIT at the commentator table, peering at the screens that give us the current camera view for the audience back home. Sometimes I wish I could just watch the match organically, but the biggest part of my job is to commentate on what's happening for our television audience, which means speaking into this tiny mic and paying attention to these tiny screens.

The bell rings three times.

"Introducing first, from the mountain of the Harpy Clan, Athena 'The Snatcher' Rainstorm!" The voice of the orc ring announcer, Ivy, echoes throughout the stadium while jeers from the crowd rumble the floor.

The harpy smirks at the spectators, unbothered by their obvious disdain. With a flip of her dark-gray hair over her shoulder, she saunters to the ring, her black, low-cut spandex leotard gleaming in the arena's bright lights. I have to admit, she looks hot. Athena is a total smoke show.

"A woman on a mission, Athena is ready to prove she can earn the Elite Monster Wrestling Championship. What do you think, Virginia?" Nikolas says with the enthusiasm only a professional wrestling commentator can muster.

I lean toward Nikolas, a burly griffin, who dwarfs my small moth-person frame. "It won't be easy for The Snatcher," I point out, my delicate wings fluttering behind me. "You have to put in the effort

and prove you're ready and capable of a championship match. She has quite the roster to run through first, starting with tonight's fight."

Nikolas cocks his head. "Do you think Athena has what it takes?"
"We'll certainly know more after tonight's match."

Athena finishes her stroll to the ring, looks into the camera and licks her lips before ducking under the ropes to enter. She stands, opening her wings, patterned like that of a gray hawk's, with a sharp snap, showcasing her impressive wingspan to the audience. They boo, drowning out her intro music, a heavy metal song with melodic vocals.

"Hate her or love her, you can't deny Athena's near-perfect physical form. She's a true athlete," I remark.

Nikolas tuts. "Do you hear the crowd? There's no love there."

The music changes to a bubblegum pop song with cutesy vocals, and Athena rolls her eyes, crossing her arms over her ample chest.

"And her opponent," Ivy's voice blares through the arena speakers. "From the oceans of the Dragon Clan, Eileen 'The Empress' Waterclaw!"

The tall and lithe dragon dances out from behind the LED walls, flashing her sharp teeth with a large smile. She glides to the stage, slapping the hands of her adoring fans as they reach for her over the barricade.

"Listen to the crowd!" Nikolas exclaims. "They want to see The Empress take down Rainstorm."

I nod, my antennae twitching. "It will be tough. Eileen is a flier as well, but she doesn't have the power behind her dives that Athena does."

"It's the lack of wings." The griffin tsks. "If only dragons had wings instead of floating on air."

"That doesn't stop her from being a formidable foe," I snap, playing the role of babyface enthusiast, even though personally, I'm more of a fan of Athena's wrestling style. "Athena can't underestimate her."

Eileen floats over the ropes and lands in front of Athena. Her jade-green scales and golden locks shine, contrasting against the glittering deep-blue spandex of her hot pants and crop top combo. She stares down the harpy, a confident gleam in her onyx eyes.

"The last time Eileen and Athena were in the ring together, The Snatcher came out on top," I explain. "But Eileen hopes in tonight's

match to showcase her hard work and dedication to becoming a better wrestler by destroying Athena.”

A short yet muscular human official with a shaved head joins them, checking that both wrestlers are ready.

“Let’s do this!” Eileen pumps a clawed fist in the air.

Athena just nods, never taking her violet eyes off the dragon.

The bell dings three times.

Eileen snaps her long, tufted tail against the ring’s floor, causing Athena to bounce a few inches in the air before she comes slamming back down in a fighting stance.

“Are you sure you can take me on?” Eileen taunts. “You may have won last time, but Helen has been training me since then. You think you’re hot shit, but your reign of terror ends here tonight.”

“You talk too much,” Athena growls before charging Eileen.

The two monsters collide, gripping each other by the back of the necks.

I clap my hands. “And here we go.”

Eileen slips to the right, ducking out of Athena’s grasp before driving her knee into the harpy’s gut.

Nikolas winces. “Ouch! A knee by The Empress into the gut of The Snatcher.”

Collapsing to the ground, Athena clutches her stomach and groans. The crowd cheers, clearly thrilled Waterclaw got the first hit.

Eileen grabs Athena’s hair by the scalp, lifting her so that the dragon can send a fist flying straight into the harpy’s face. Athena stumbles back at the punch, clutching her nose.

“That took some of the wind out of Rainstorm,” I remark. “She looks unsure on her feet.”

“Oh!” Nikolas jumps to the edge of his seat as Athena takes a back-handed fist from Eileen and flies into the ropes. “Can Eileen capitalize on this turn of events?”

Eileen runs to the opposite side of the ring, presses her back against the ropes, and uses the momentum to sprint toward Athena, but the harpy ducks, narrowly missing the elbow aimed for her face. Eileen looks around with knitted brows, and Athena uses the opportunity to snatch Eileen’s horns.

Nikolas snaps his beak in excitement. “Athena is setting up.”

Athena scoops Eileen by the armpits before rolling the dragon over her chest until Eileen straddles her shoulders.

“Here it goes!” I leap from my chair, anxious to see one of Athena’s powerful displays of strength.

Athena slams Eileen to the ring’s floor.

“Powerbomb!” Nikolas and I exclaim at the same time.

Eileen doesn’t move, her head lolling to the side. Athena drops to the ground and presses all her weight onto her opponent before hooking her elbow behind one of Eileen’s knees and leaning back. She’s pinned the dragon’s shoulders to the floor.

At that, the official kneels, slamming their hand as they begin the count. The audience happily joins in.

“One! Two! Thr—!”

The crowd cheers as Eileen kicks out.

I scoff. “Rainstorm should know better than to think she can take down Waterclaw that easily.”

Athena lets out a scream through clenched teeth as she slams her fists against the ring floor, clearly lamenting the win that slipped through her fingertips. Meanwhile, Eileen struggles to stand. She reaches for the ropes to assist her recovery.

“The Snatcher better watch out,” Nikolas says just before Eileen drops an elbow on the back of Athena’s neck.

The harpy lands face first, a pained groan escaping her throat. But Eileen doesn’t allow her any reprieve; instead, she assaults the back of Athena’s head with an onslaught of quick stomps.

I flap my wings. This match just got interesting. “Athena’s in trouble now. When Eileen gets going like this, she’s nearly unstoppable.”

Then, as if a fire is lit under her, Athena rolls out of the way, sending Eileen’s claws crashing to the ring floor without even the cushion of a body underneath her. Boos from the crowd drown out the dragon’s howls, as she clutches her paw, hopping one leg away from Athena.

“What a devastating blow.” Nikolas winces. “Eileen may be enthusiastic about taking on Athena, but she has to remember her opponent’s experience—and that maneuver Athena just pulled shows it.”

While Eileen tests her weight on her injured paw, Athena ascends the ropes, her back to her opponent. Once at the top, she extends her feathered wings and arms wide. The crowd roars.

I feel my brow furrow. "What is Athena doing now?"

With a wink to the displeased crowd, Athena bends her knees, shoving off the top rope into a backflip. Looking magnificent and graceful, she flaps her wings, giving her the air to arch over Eileen's head before slamming her talons into the dragon's face.

"Athena connects!" Nikolas snaps his wings. "Will this be it for Waterclaw?"

Eileen stumbles back, hands covering her nose. The harpy lands gracefully on her taloned feet, baring her teeth at her opponent. The crowd boos as Athena grabs Eileen by the mane, dragging her to the edge of the ring. With a hard kick to Eileen's hip, Athena sends the dragon tumbling over the top rope.

"Eileen's been sent to the outside by Athena, and she's landed right in front of our announcer table." I fidget, ready to jump out of the way to avoid collision with the wrestlers. They would never hurt us on purpose, but they often get so involved in the match that they don't pay attention. It's up to me and Nikolas to be vigilant.

"And here comes Athena!" Nikolas whoops as the harpy dives out of the ring and straddles the writhing dragon.

Athena slams her fists into her opponent's temples. Eileen throws up her hands, attempting to block the onslaught. With a roar, the dragon bucks her hips, knocking Athena off balance. Athena flaps her wings, scrambling to flee Eileen's reach, but Eileen snatches Athena by the throat.

"Waterclaw won't let Rainstorm escape!" I shout. This aggression from Waterclaw is new and exciting.

Keeping her grip on Athena's neck, Eileen uses her power of dragon levitation to hover off the ground, hauling her opponent back toward the ring. She tosses Athena under the bottom rope. The harpy pins her wings and rolls into the ring, now desperate to escape the dragon.

Another of Eileen's impressive dragon roars rumbles the arena, and the crowd goes wild, fans cheering her on as she leaps between the ropes, reaching for Athena.

“Eileen has Athena right where she wants her.” Nikolas flicks his lion tail, nodding toward Eileen, who’s now lifted Athena above her head.

The dragon lets out a shriek of laughter before slamming the harpy onto the mat face-first. Athena’s wings droop to the floor.

Nikolas grips my shoulder in anticipation. “I think this is it for The Snatcher.”

Eileen drops to the mat, folding Athena’s legs toward her chest to pin her opponent’s shoulders to the floor. The official kneels and begins their count.

The crowd counts along with each slam of their hand.

“One! Tw—!”

But Athena kicks out, sending Eileen onto her back.

“Eileen is unable to bring it home,” I grumble as the crowd boos, despite being secretly excited the match is continuing.

While Athena drags herself to the ropes to recover, Eileen stares at her, mouth agape and breathing hard.

The fans begins their signature chant for Eileen, spurring on their heroine. “Lucky! Lucky! Lucky!”

Eileen stands, holding her paws in the air, offering the crowd a winning smile. She’s so busy preening for the audience that she doesn’t see Athena recover and come running at her, elbow cocked back. Eileen notices her opponent too late, and Athena’s fist slams into Eileen’s nose. The dragon falls back, crashing onto her back with a groan.

“That has got to hurt.” Nikolas looks away. “But once again, Eileen forgot she was up against a veteran like Athena.”

Athena claws herself up the ropes with slow and deliberate movements, her chest heaving. When she reaches the top, she closes her eyes momentarily, as if gathering herself.

I point to Eileen, who is still rolling around on the floor. “Eileen Waterclaw needs to move, or she will face the wrath of Rainstorm.”

“Will she escape Athena’s warpath?” Nikolas fidgets, eyes trained on Athena as she crouches on the top rope.

Athena inhales before springing upward with a scream, beginning her descent toward Eileen with her wings tucked behind her, her forearm out in front .

Nikolas clenches his claws. “Here comes the flying elbow!”

A slam reverberates through the arena as Athena crashes to the floor, elbow connecting with Eileen’s chest. Eileen’s head lolls to the side as Athena grunts and repositions herself to kneel before her opponent. She then drapes Eileen’s legs over her shoulders, pinning the dragon’s back to the mat.

Eileen doesn’t react, still disoriented from Athena’s brutal elbow, and the fans roar, leaping to their feet as the official begins their countdown yet again.

“Will Eileen Waterclaw kick out of this one?” I ask, also rising from my chair, adding a thread of worry to my voice for the viewers at home.

“One!” the audience counts when the official connects their hand with the mat.

Another slap. “Two!”

But Eileen doesn’t move. Athena smirks as the official’s hands smack onto the mat for the third and final time. I put my hand over my face to hide a smirk of my own.

“Three!”

“Athena Rainstorm for the win!” Nikolas roars.

The bell dings three times, announcing the match’s end. She drops Eileen’s legs before flapping her wings and soaring into the air over the ring, fist pumped above her head. The crowd screams in awe and disappointment at their heroine’s downfall. They had hoped to see Athena’s reign of terror come to an end.

“Just listen to the people!” I shout over the crowd’s roar. “They’re going to bring down the arena!”

Nikolas snorts. “They’ll just have to get over it. Athena’s athletic ability is unmatched.”

“You’re forgetting about Helen Stronghorn,” I narrow my eyes at him. “Do you really think Athena can take down the EMW Realms Champion?”

I look back at the action. Snapping her wings, Athena dives for the exit, flashing her fangs with a toothy grin. The crowd boos, throwing various lewd gestures toward the victorious harpy as she flies out of the arena.

Nikolas ruffles his feathers. “After Athena’s performance tonight, I think she will give Mother a run for her money.”

Chapter 3

Iris

THE MUSCLES THAT CONTROL MY wings strain as I descend, doing my best to make my landing graceful. You never know where an interviewer might be lurking. My eyes dart around the staging area as I search for any signs of cameras. The coast is clear. It's just the crowd of production assistants and medics clamoring to make sure I'm okay.

I finally let go of the breath I've been holding and allow myself to suck in the cooler air. The arena lights are always hot, and I'm drenched in sweat, not only from their scorching heat but from the exertion of the match. No matter how much I train and practice, putting on a good show for the audience is no walk in the park. Every stunt takes a toll on my body, even with textbook-perfect execution. On top of that, we have to *act* because while hits and bumps still hurt, we have to play it up for the crowd.

It's a lot to handle at once, and I'm always impressed with my fellow wrestlers. It takes years of training to excel at it all.

My chest's deep and rapid heaves finally start to dissipate when June, or Eileen Waterclaw as the world knows her, appears, dragging herself into the staging area. When she sees there are no cameras, she lets out a sigh of relief and straightens her posture.

"Hey, Iris," she chirps, offering me a tentative smile. "Great match!"

I return her grin, genuinely happy she's unharmed. Sometimes freak accidents happen. Sometimes we get sloppy.

“Thanks! I’m glad we practiced that powerbomb.”

She barks a laugh, shoulders relaxing. “Oh, my goddess! Yes! That could have really hurt otherwise.”

The same troll production assistant that fetched me earlier approaches and clears his throat. “Iris, Mr. Palmer wants to speak to you.”

My heart skips a beat. “Now?”

“Not right this instant,” the troll huffs. “No need to bring your sweaty feathers into his office. He expects you within the hour.”

And with a curt turn on his heel, the troll dashes toward the other production assistants, ready to break down the arena now that the main event is over.

June grimaces, exposing her sharp fangs. “Yikes. I wonder what that’s about.”

Charles Palmer is like some sort of genius cockroach. He slipped into our realm, the ‘monster realm’ as he calls it, from the human one roughly thirty years ago with two things: a dream and a tenacious determination to succeed. With surprising speed, he charmed investors and secured the funds and the power to build the EMW into what it is today. While he’s a total slimeball who only cares about money, no one can deny his ability to manage a successful entertainment business.

And I’m not looking forward to meeting with him at all. It means my career is about to change—for better or for worse.

It’s a bit of a bummer I have to rush to get ready as the locker room in this arena is spotless and smells of lemon cleaning products. It would have been nice to participate in some self-care after such a grueling match.

I speed through my shower and preen my feathers instead of taking my time as usual. I want to get this conversation over with as soon as possible. As I twist my damp hair into a long braid, I concentrate on my positive traits as a professional wrestler.

For one, I’m a safe opponent. I haven’t accidentally hurt anyone since my developmental days. For another, I put on a good show. The crowd loves to hate me, and they pack the arena whenever I’m headlining, eager to see my demise. Too bad for them, I’m on a winning streak.

By all means, I should be hopeful. Charles has no reason to demote me. But I didn't get to where I'm at now in professional wrestling by being all sunshine and rainbows.

I got here by working harder than everyone else because I had to. Not only is training and schooling expensive but you also have to dedicate a lot of time. And I didn't come from money or an established wrestling family.

Unlike Lena, better known as Helen Stronghorn.

The Minotaur is the doll of the EMW, all because of her legendary daddy, The Mighty Minos. He was a hero of mine growing up, so when I met his daughter, I expected to respect her as much as I respect him.

Nope. Lena sucks.

She didn't spend her time on the independent circuit paying her dues. Instead, Lena waltzed right in, gaining a babyface persona, immediate upward trajectory, and instant stardom.

It also doesn't help that she's a total brat.

I'm talking entitled, bossy, and downright snooty. The first time I witnessed Lena throw a fit, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. She straight-up lost it on the hair and makeup artist for not giving her russet curls enough bounce.

"I need to sell the hits!" she snarled, bringing the werecat artist to tears. "Do you think I can do that with this flat hair?"

Thankfully, the lead production assistant smoothed things over before I could stomp my way over there and give Lena a piece of my mind.

I shake my head. Time to stop stewing about her. I slip a silky, blue blouse over my shoulders, custom-made to accommodate the wings above my hips.

With a deep breath, I step out of the locker room. I hold my head high as I navigate the bustling halls to Charles's office, avoiding eye contact so I don't get sucked into any small talk with my fellow wrestlers. Everyone lets me pass. Probably the word has spread that the owner wants to see me. How irritating.

As if on cue, validating my suspicions, Daphne prances toward me, her hooves clacking on the concrete floor.

“Hey, Iris!” The satyr smiles, her brown skin and fur sparkling from all the glitter she applied before her smack-talking live promo against Lena earlier in the evening. “Good luck at your meeting with Old Man Palmer.”

While I want to avoid most of my peers, Daphne is one of my best friends. She never fails to make me feel better with her infectious positivity.

The smile I return is genuine. “Thank you.” I nudge her with my elbow. “How did your promo go?”

She’s a newer addition to the roster, her storyline focusing on her overinflated ego and carefree attitude. Surprisingly, both characteristics apply to Daphne’s real-life personality, but in a charming way I adore.

“It ended with me flat on my back thanks to a chokeslam from Lena, but it was worth it to be in the face of that fine piece of art sculpted by the goddess herself.” Daphne winks.

I wrinkle my nose. “Ew. Can you not talk about Lena that way?”

“You just hate her too much to see how perfect she is.” She cackles “Those beefy arms, that peach of an ass, and not to mention those big horns. How often do you see a female minotaur with horns like *that*?”

“I am once again asking you not to talk about Lena that way—especially about her ass.”

Daphne waggles her eyebrows. “Just give her a good once-over the next time you see her and tell me I’m wrong.”

I groan. “I’m no longer happy to see you. Please go away now.”

“Oh, hush. You love me.”

“You know I do,” I respond with a soft smile.

Daphne stops in her tracks and lowers her voice. “Oh shit. We’re almost at Charles’s office. Drinks with me and Pan after?”

I nod. “Sounds great! I’ll probably need it.”

“Alrighty, then!” She blows me a kiss. “Talk to you later. And good luck!”

With a nod, I continue the last few feet to Charles’s office door and nod to the human assistant standing outside. His name is Zach, and I’ve always thought he looks a bit like a weasel with his greasy dark hair, smudged glasses, sickly white skin, and beady black eyes.

He knocks on the door for me, alerting the boss to my presence. I brace myself, mentally preparing for whatever is about to happen.

“Come on in,” answers Charles Palmer in his heavy southern accent.

I slowly open the door and step into his impossibly immaculate office space. It doesn't match the gray, dreary halls of the arena's backstage. No matter where we travel for shows, Charles always ends up in the cleanest room—one that looks like it was recently renovated and is always in his preferred colors of blood red and black. “Power colors,” he boasts whenever anyone mentions the aesthetic.

Palmer leans forward on his desk at the sight of me, his large and imposing frame swallowing the flat surface. “Ah! Iris, my dear Athena Rainstorm!”

Charles likes confidence. Squaring my shoulders, I take the seat directly across from him. The man calls himself a proud Texan, and from what I've seen of human media, he looks like some sort of stereotype.

A bushy, gray, and perfectly manicured mustache sits above his thin lips, currently pulled back into a smile of dazzling white teeth that stand out against his healthy tan. He brushes a speck of invisible dirt from his tailored powder-blue suit with a matching ten-gallon hat that somehow complements his steely gray eyes. Top that all off with a head of thick, salt-and-pepper hair and you have yourself a handsome human.

Too bad he's a total skeeze ball and I don't trust him.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” I force a grin, willing myself not to flinch when his smile somehow becomes even wider, like a shark circling their floundering prey.

“Cutting right to the chase. I've always liked that about you.” Charles chuckles before nodding to the CCTV mounted to the wall behind me. “I enjoyed your match against June.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He reaches beneath his desk and pulls out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. “Drop the ‘sir.’ How long have you worked for me?”

“About ten years now.”

“That makes you, what, in your mid thirties?” Charles asks, pouring three fingers of whiskey into each glass.

I nod. "I'm thirty-five."

"You're in your prime, especially for a monster. Harpies live about two hundred years, right? Can you believe that some humans start struggling with their physical health at your age." He hands me a glass.

"Thank you." I grip the glass in my hand. "What's this for?"

Charles laughs. "There you go with that directness. It's to toast to your success." He raises his glass. "I want you to headline MonsterMadness."

My composure falls apart as I begin to tremble. Me? Headline MonsterMadness? Could this really be happening?

This has been my dream since before I could fly. I can't believe I'm sitting across from Charles Palmer, a glass of celebratory whiskey in my hand, with an offer on the table to headline the biggest event in monster wrestling entertainment.

"Well?" Charles swirls the amber liquid in his glass. "Are you just going to gawk at me, or are you gonna say yes?"

Oh shit. In my disbelief, I forgot to say anything. "Of course! I would be honored to headline MonsterMadness, sir; I mean, Charles."

Charles reaches his glass toward me, signaling to me that it's time to toast. I meet him a little more than halfway with what I can only assume is a goofy-ass smile. My heart soars, and I fight back a giggle as I bring the glass to my lips.

The liquid burns my throat as it goes down. Despite that, this might be the best thing I've ever tasted. At this point, toilet water would be like fine wine. This moment is too sweet, too triumphant, for anything to spoil it.

"I anticipate this being the biggest MonsterMadness to date," he says. "When I came over from the human realm all those years ago, I dreamt that monster wrestling would one day be as big as the human version. Now, I haven't been back over, but the reports lead me to believe we're doing pretty good; but we could do better."

I lean forward in my seat, eager for any information about the human realm I can get. Humans and monsters can access different realms, but it's usually by accident or by very powerful magic. Information, culture details, and media gathered from the human

realm are very rare and coveted. There are some who make a living traveling between the realms, but it takes a lot of effort.

I open my mouth to ask more about the human realm, the drink making me bold, when he cuts me off.

“Of course, you’ll be going up against Helen Stronghorn,” Charles announces before placing his empty glass on the desk with a soft clink. “And, of course, she’s retaining the championship.”

My stomach twists, the liquor suddenly sour in my stomach. No. This can’t be. I’ve finally made it to MonsterMadness, and I have to lose.

To Lena.

I school my features, hoping Charles doesn’t notice the roaring fire raging inside me. This is still an amazing opportunity for any wrestler in the industry. But not for me. Not like this.

The dazzling smile fades from Charles’s face; his lips become a thin, flat line. “It’s no secret how much you don’t get along with Lena. It’s my job to know what goes on with my staff and my athletes. I just didn’t expect you to be so ungrateful, considering your background. Did we celebrate too early?”

I blanch. I’m totally fucked if I don’t get this situation under control. “I’m not ungrateful, sir,” I assure him. “I’m still in shock at even being offered this amazing opportunity.”

“That’s what I like to hear. You’re quite the talent, and I would hate to see your career come to a halt because of a little grudge. I expect some maturity from my wrestlers.”

I nod. “Of course, sir. No grudge here. Consider it water under the bridge.”

He shoots me another one of his oily smiles. “Excellent, because you start training with her tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” My question comes out as a squeak.

I was looking forward to a day or two off after tonight’s match, not only to relax but also to cool down from the news.

Charles twirls his mustache between his thumb and forefinger. “When was the last time you faced Helen Stronghorn?”

“Our storylines haven’t crossed in a few years.” *Fuck*. I see where he’s going with this.

“Exactly. I know you and Lena are both amazing improv wrestlers, but when was the last time you suplexed a minotaur?”

He’s right. It’s been a long time, and Lena is *tall* and much bigger than me. Unfortunately, I need the practice.

I hold my chin high, unwilling to let Charles know how upset I still am by the outcome of this meeting. “What time do we start tomorrow?”

His smile is warm—as if he didn’t just threaten to end my career. “Now, I understand you need a little rest and time to fly back home, so I’ll be generous. I expect to see you both in the practice ring by no later than noon tomorrow.”

“Understood.” I give him a curt nod. “I won’t let you down.”

“Of course you won’t. Place your glass on the bottom shelf of that bar cart on your way out.”

“Yes, sir.”

He waves a dismissive hand. “It’s ‘Charles.’ I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

I don’t bother responding. The conversation is over. My fate has been sealed.

With a soft click, the office door shuts behind me. I close my eyes, suddenly exhausted. Going from the highest high to the lowest low has really taken it out of me. Do I even want to have drinks with Daphne and Pan at this point? Honestly, I kind of want to head back to my hotel room, order room service, and watch whatever human anime they have on cable. I hope it’s the one about the magical girls.

“Uhh...hey, Iris. I need to get in Charlie’s office,” says an all-too-familiar and annoying voice.

Can I catch a damn break?

I open my eyes to glare at the towering reddish-brown minotaur. Lena is still dressed in her match attire of sparkly sky-blue bikini bottoms, a triangle crop top, and chaps with silver accents. Why didn’t she change into something more professional for a meeting with EMW’s owner? Daphne and Lena didn’t have an official match tonight, but they still exchanged a few blows and stunts. I know she’s sweaty.

She frowns and waves her hand at the door in short, irritated movements.

I puff out my chest, standing as tall as I can. It does nothing against Lena's six-and-a-half-foot frame, but it does make me feel a little better. "You could ask politely, you know?"

"Like that would make you any less unpleasant." She rolls her eyes. "You would just find another stupid reason to attack me."

"Stupid?" My face and neck flush. How dare she call me stupid!

Lena smirks. "You heard me. Now, move. I need to talk to Charlie."

I roll my eyes. Of course she would be on a nickname basis with Charles Palmer. She's known him since she was a kid, thanks to her dad. Why would she follow the same rules and standards as the rest of us?

"Are you going to explain to him why I'm late?" she asks, crossing her arms over her chest.

My gaze rakes over her, sizing her up. It's been a while since I took a *really* good look at the great Helen Stronghorn. Proud curved horns sit atop a mound of bouncy curls the same color as her fur. Poking from between her russet strands are two long, sloping ears. Large brown eyes with impossibly long lashes are the star of her face, which ends in a round snout. Her figure is all curves and muscle with sculpted biceps, abs, and thighs contrasting her soft breasts and hips.

I remember Daphne's remark from earlier about the minotaur being a 'fine piece of art,' and my cheeks heat for a brand-new reason.

Fuck! My friend is right. Lena is gorgeous. And I hate it.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Lena glares down at me.

I force a sneer. "Just making sure I can still take you on."

Lena takes a step back, her hooves clacking against the cement floor. "What do you mean by that?"

I flip my braid over my shoulder, not looking back as I saunter away, my tail feathers quivering. She'll know exactly what I mean in a few moments. For now, I'll take the victory of catching her off guard.

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Pinned by Love

BY ELAINE J DANIELS

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