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THE MONSTER CALLED COMPASSION

EMALEIGH KITCHEN

It comes out of nowhere. When you're not looking for it, that's when it'll strike. That's what they tell you, when you are growing up with fire in your veins and a lump of coal for a heart. They tell you to watch out for the monster called compassion. They say that it will ruin you, corrupt you, and your tiny soul that still believes in a thing so silly as trust, believes it.

You believe everything they tell you. It's what you are meant to do. To listen to those who know better, to believe what they tell you, and do as they say. And you do. You do everything they say, to the letter. You are without fault.

As you grow, they trust you more. They stoke the fire you carry, and ensure that none of its warmth touches your coal-heart. They give you a reason to battle, and watch over you with smiles as you train, push yourself harder every day just to gain one of those rare congratulations. You become the best.

Because even a child raised without love craves praise. Even a child taught to fear the monster called compassion craves the feeling that accompanies a "good job". Even a child like you wants to be told you are enough.

No, that you are more than enough, that you are perfection, that you will be unstoppable.

You want to be the best for them.

Before they know it, you're an adult, one of them, watching over children just like you were. You watch as they train just like you did. You teach them to beware of the monster called compassion. The monster that can strike at any moment, so they have to be on guard. You describe it to them in the best way you can, tell them the warning signs. You ensure that they know how to avoid it.

You're pulled away from working with the children before long. They say you're too volatile. You have too much fire running through your veins, and your lump of coal heart is too cold. You're confused. This was what they wanted you to be, wasn't it? What you were brought up to be?

But no matter. You still did as they said. They sent you out, out into a world you hadn't seen since you were-

You can't remember how young you were when you came to them. You have no memories outside of their world. No memories of any rules outside of their rules. No memories of

anyone but them.

You were seven in your first clear memory with them. Seven years old, with thin straw-colored hair plastered to your forehead and clothes that didn't fit right. There had to be something before that, with them or someone else - what is the word? family? - but you don't remember. You try, more because you feel like you have to than because you really want to, but no answers come to mind. So you push it out of your head.

The world is not what you expect it to be. It is something other.

You see the monster everywhere, and you don't know how these people can live with it. The monster lives inside of them, like a parasite, and they don't even notice it. Or they do, but they don't see it as the monster you do.

You shudder every time you see the monster in action, squirm every time it extends its claws. There's no escaping it, in this world. You hate it. You're not sure if you mean the monster or the world.

You swear to yourself that you will never become like them. That you will never embrace the monster like they have. You repeat what you were taught: it is a monster. it sucks life out of everything. it is to be avoided. don't let it take you. And you don't.

Sometimes, they look at you like they expect you to embrace the monster. You don't. You sneer and glare and make everything better - worse in their eyes, of course, because they let the monster take over and rule them. They are the monster, you think, but they don't realize. They never will.

They watch you, and they think you're broken. They look at you, and they think you're lost. They listen to you, and they know someone hurt you. They know you, and they know you are the monster.