

The dead did not dream.

Astra Mortis knew this because she had been one.

For ninety seconds.

Long enough for the heart to stop.

Long enough for machines to begin screaming.

Long enough for frightened hands to reach toward a body that could no longer reach back.

Long enough to discover that death was considerably less empty than advertised.

The In-Between remembered her.

There was no sky tonight.

No floor either.

Only black stretching into black, interrupted by hundreds of small lights suspended throughout the endless distance.

Some burned brightly.

Some flickered.

Some were barely there at all.

Astra walked among them barefoot.

No championship rested upon her shoulder.

No black lace.

No violet warpaint.

No bone rosary.

Only the pale hospital gown she had worn the first time she came here.

There was still blood on it.

Astra looked down.

Her fingers found the hole beneath her ribs.

She remembered the knife.

She remembered falling.

She remembered someone screaming.

She remembered trying to breathe.

Then—

Nothing.

Astra continued walking.

The lights moved around her.

Not randomly.

They gathered when she passed.

Small clusters of warmth drifted through the darkness until Astra found herself surrounded by them.

Women.

Not bodies.

Not faces.

Impressions.

A hand clutching another beneath fluorescent hospital lights.

A teenager crying quietly into a borrowed blanket.

A woman staring at an emergency room floor while Astra cleaned blood from beneath her fingernails.

Someone whispered that she could not go home.

Someone else asked whether the door was locked.

Astra stopped.

One light drifted toward her hand.

She held her palm beneath it.

Warm.

“Warmblood.”

The word echoed much farther than it should have.

Something moved in the darkness.

Astra did not turn.

She already knew she was no longer alone.

There came the faint sound of fabric moving across something that did not exist.

Then flowers.

Their scent arrived before their colour.

Marigolds.

Thousands of them.

Orange petals began appearing beneath Astra's bare feet, spreading through the black until they formed a narrow path between the wandering lights.

At the end of it stood a woman.

Still.

Patient.

Watching.

Astra stared.

The woman did not introduce herself.

She did not need to.

Astra looked instead toward the lights.

“They still glow.”

“They always did.”

The answer was quiet.

Almost gentle.

Astra's eyes narrowed.

“We did not know that then.”

“No.”

“We thought we were hallucinating.”

“Perhaps you were.”

Astra looked toward her.

The woman's expression offered nothing.

Astra disliked that.

“You are irritating.”

“I have been called worse.”

“We are certain.”

A faint smile.

Then silence.

Astra looked back toward the lights.

For a while neither spoke.

The In-Between did not hurry conversations.

Time had very little authority here.

Eventually Astra lowered herself onto her knees.

The hospital gown pooled around her.

Her fingers moved through the marigold petals.

“We made a promise here.”

The woman watched her.

“Yes.”

Astra picked up one petal.

Turned it between her fingers.

“We were frightened.”

“Yes.”

“We dislike remembering that.”

“I know.”

Astra's jaw tightened.

The petal tore between her fingertips.

“We could hear them.”

The lights around her seemed to grow brighter.

“The women.”

Astra swallowed.

“The frightened ones.”

A pause.

“The hurt ones.”

Another.

“The ones who believed nobody was coming.”

Images moved through the darkness.

Hospital corridors.

Bruised wrists.

Split lips.

Hands shaking around paper cups filled with water.

A locked treatment-room door.

Astra standing on the other side of it.

Watching.

Waiting.

Protecting.

“We promised that if our heart started again...”

Her voice faltered.

Only once.

“...we would do better.”

The woman said nothing.

“We promised we would stand between them and whatever wished to hurt them.”

Astra looked toward the lights surrounding her.

“We promised we would recognize them.”

Warmblood.

Little lantern.

Living.

Worth protecting.

The words had changed over the years.

The promise had not.

Astra slowly rose.

Something had changed in the darkness.

One light now stood farther away.

Not extinguished.

Not corrupted.

Not altered.

Simply separated from the others by an empty stretch of black.

Astra stared at it.

The woman followed her gaze.

“You brought a question.”

“No.”

Astra stepped toward the isolated light.

“We brought a correction.”

The woman tilted her head.

“Those are often the same thing.”

“No.”

Astra stopped.

The light remained beyond her reach.

For the first time since entering the In-Between, another name passed her lips.

“Necra Octavian Kane.”

Nothing answered.

No thunder.

No supernatural proclamation.

No voice from beyond declaring what Necra was.

Only Astra.

Only the promise.

Only the woman who had made it.

“She is a woman,” Astra said.

“Yes.”

“She is our opponent.”

“Yes.”

“We believed those classifications could coexist.”

The woman remained silent.

Astra's eyes stayed fixed upon the distant light.

“They cannot.”

“Why?”

Astra finally looked at her.

“Because we hesitated.”

There it was.

No metaphor.

No excuse.

No attempt to rewrite what had happened.

“We saw her.”

Astra's voice lowered.

“We understood what stood before us.”

Her fingers slowly curled into fists.

“And somewhere between recognition and violence...”

Astra stopped.

Her expression hardened.

“...we left room.”

The In-Between became very quiet.

Astra remembered the impact.

The sudden hook around her throat.

The canvas.

One.

Two.

Three.

Necra Octavian Kane had defeated her.

Cleanly.

Astra did not look away from the memory.

“We lost.”

The words hurt.

Good.

They should.

The woman approached.

“And so you came here to change what happened?”

Astra's eyes snapped toward her.

“No.”

Certain.

Immediate.

“We cannot change what happened.”

Astra stepped closer to the isolated light.

“Necra defeated us.”

Another step.

“She earned that.”

Another.

“We will not steal it from her.”

Astra stopped at the edge of the darkness separating them.

“But we will learn from it.”

The woman studied her carefully.

“What did you learn?”

Astra looked toward the light.

For several seconds she said nothing.

Then—

“Protection requires consent.”

The woman raised an eyebrow.

Astra continued.

“We spent years believing otherwise.”

The admission came slowly.

Painfully.

“We saw women in danger and decided they required us.”

A hospital corridor flickered through the darkness.

“We saw pain and called intervention kindness.”

Another image.

Astra standing between someone and a locked door.

“We saw vulnerability and assumed protection was ours to give.”

The images disappeared.

Necra's name remained.

Astra's voice became quieter.

“Necra has asked for none of those things.”

The woman watched her.

“No.”

“She has not asked us to shelter her.”

“No.”

“She has not asked us to save her.”

“No.”

Astra tilted her head.

“She has asked us to fight.”

Silence.

And then the first trace of something dangerous crossed Astra's face.

Not rage.

Not hatred.

Relief.

“Very well.”

The isolated light flickered.

Astra raised one hand.

She did not extinguish it.

She did not touch it.

She simply withdrew her own hand.

“Necra Octavian Kane remains a woman.”

A beat.

“She remains living.”

Another.

“She remains deserving of every dignity she claims for herself.”

The woman said nothing.

Astra's black eyes settled upon the light.

“But she is no longer protected by our promise.”

The marigolds stopped moving.

Every wandering light became still.

The words seemed to travel outward through the In-Between until even the darkness had heard them.

Astra breathed.

Once.

Slowly.

The woman finally spoke.

“You believe you can suspend a promise made to death?”

Astra turned toward her.

“No.”

That answer seemed to surprise even the darkness.

Astra looked again at the distant light.

“The promise remains.”

Her voice softened.

“Necra is the exception.”

“And who gave you the authority to make one?”

Astra stared at her.

For the first time, uncertainty appeared.

Not fear.

Something older.

A memory.

A dying woman lying beneath fluorescent lights.

Blood spreading beneath her.

Her heart failing.

Her mind reaching desperately toward anything that might exist beyond the ceiling.

Please.

Someone.

Anyone.

Let us go back.

We will do better.

We will protect them.

We promise.

Astra's expression changed.

The certainty disappeared.

The woman watched her carefully.

Astra looked down at the old hospital gown.

At the blood.

At the wound.

Then slowly back up.

“When we died...”

Her voice was barely audible.

“...we prayed.”

The woman said nothing.

Astra's eyes narrowed.

“We thought no one answered.”

The marigolds shifted.

Just once.

Astra looked at the woman standing across from her.

Really looked.

At the flowers.

At the stillness.

At the impossible patience.

At death wearing neither cruelty nor kindness.

Something cold moved through Astra.

Not because she finally understood.

Because she didn't.

"We made a promise."

"Yes."

"We never asked who heard it."

"No."

Astra stared.

"Did you?"

The woman's smile was small.

Unreadable.

She stepped backward.

The darkness accepted her immediately.

Astra followed.

"Answer us."

Marigold petals lifted into the air.

"Did you hear us?"

No answer.

"Did you send us back?"

The lights began disappearing.

One by one.

"Did we promise ourselves to you?"

Nothing.

Astra's voice sharpened.

“Santa Muerte.”

The name stopped everything.

For one impossible second—

The In-Between became perfectly still.

The woman stood at the edge of sight.

Astra could see only her smile.

Then came her answer.

“You have a wedding to plan.”

Astra froze.

The darkness collapsed.

The lights vanished.

The marigolds disappeared.

And somewhere very far away—

A heart monitor began to scream.

The heart monitor screamed.

Then—

“Absolutely not.”

Astra Mortis opened her eyes.

Rosalie stood across the dining table holding two pieces of fabric.

One was black.

The other was also black.

Astra stared at them.

Then at Rosalie.

Then back at the fabric.

“We require clarification.”

“They're different.”

“They are black.”

“One is charcoal.”

“It is black.”

“The other is midnight.”

“It is also black.”

Rosalie lowered both samples.

“You've been staring at them for four minutes.”

“We were comparing them.”

“You called them both black.”

“They remain black.”

From somewhere to Astra's left came the faint scratch of pen against paper.

Astra stopped.

Slowly—

She turned.

Dr. Octavia Vale sat at the far end of the dining table.

Black mourning gloves.

Broken Victorian stopwatch resting beside one hand.

Notebook open.

Pen moving.

Astra stared at her.

Octavia continued writing.

“Do not.”

The pen stopped.

Octavia looked up.

“Do not what?”

“Document us.”

“I am taking notes.”

“That is documentation.”

“Yes.”

“Stop.”

“No.”

Astra's eyes narrowed.

Octavia's pen resumed.

Scratch.

Scratch.

Scratch.

Rosalie covered her mouth.

Astra looked at her.

“You are amused.”

“A little.”

“You invited her.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Because you two have a match together.”

Octavia turned a page.

“And because she returned from wherever she went approximately fourteen minutes ago, stood in the kitchen for thirty-seven seconds without speaking, selected marigolds for the wedding, rejected three shades of black as insufficiently black and has now become hostile toward stationery.”

Astra stared.

Octavia wrote something else.

“What did you write?”

“Nothing relevant.”

“Show us.”

“No.”

“Little Lantern.”

Rosalie immediately shook her head.

“Don't drag me into this.”

“You brought the scientist.”

“You like the scientist.”

“We tolerate the scientist.”

Octavia glanced up.

“Statistically, those statements are becoming increasingly indistinguishable.”

Astra pointed at her.

“That.”

Octavia waited.

“That is why we tolerate you reluctantly.”

Another note.

Astra made a low sound in her throat.

Rosalie laughed.

For several seconds the apartment became something Astra had once believed impossible.

Normal.

Or at least—

Their version of it.

Wedding brochures covered half the table.

Venue photographs.

Fabric samples.

Catering menus.

A notebook Rosalie had labelled—

WEDDING THINGS ASTRA WILL PRETEND NOT TO CARE ABOUT.

Astra had objected to the title.

Rosalie had underlined it.

Twice.

The AWS Women's World Championship rested against the wall nearby.

Not hidden.

Not displayed.

Present.

Astra glanced toward it occasionally.

Confirmation.

Proof.

Still here.

Still hers.

Rosalie slid another photograph across the table.

“Venue.”

Astra looked down.

An old stone chapel stood surrounded by trees.

“No.”

“That was fast.”

“Too many exits.”

Rosalie blinked.

“For a wedding?”

“Yes.”

“Why are fewer exits better?”

“Guests wander.”

Octavia's pen moved.

Astra turned.

“Do not.”

“I said nothing.”

“You thought loudly.”

Rosalie pushed another photograph forward.

A converted greenhouse.

Astra studied it.

“Too much glass.”

“Why?”

“Structurally vulnerable.”

“It isn't WarGames.”

“We know.”

A pause.

“We would still prefer structurally defensible matrimony.”

Octavia stopped writing.

Rosalie stared.

Astra stared back.

Octavia slowly lowered her pen.

“That phrase is going in the notebook.”

“No.”

“It has already entered the historical record.”

Rosalie collapsed forward laughing.

Astra waited patiently for the betrayal to end.

Eventually Rosalie wiped her eyes.

“Okay.”

A breath.

“Okay.”

She reached for another photograph.

“What about this one?”

Astra looked.

An old estate.

Dark timber.

Wide gardens.

A long stone path.

And along the edge of one photograph—

Orange flowers.

Astra went still.

Rosalie noticed.

“Baby?”

Astra touched the photograph.

“Those.”

Rosalie followed her finger.

“The flowers?”

“Yes.”

“Marigolds?”

Astra said nothing.

Across the table—

Scratch.

Astra's head turned.

Octavia was writing again.

“Stop.”

Octavia did not.

“Octavia.”

Nothing.

“Doctor.”

The pen finally stopped.

Octavia looked at Astra.

“Why marigolds?”

“They are flowers.”

“So are roses.”

“Rosalie is already attending.”

Rosalie made a tiny delighted noise.

Octavia stared at Astra.

Astra stared back.

“Was that humour?”

“No.”

Rosalie pointed excitedly.

“That was humour.”

“It was an observation.”

“That was absolutely humour.”

Astra folded her arms.

“We regret speaking.”

Octavia looked toward the photograph again.

“Why marigolds?”

This time Astra did not answer immediately.

The room quietened.

Rosalie's smile faded.

Not completely.

Just enough.

Astra's fingertip remained against the photograph.

Orange petals.

Thousands of them.

Spreading through endless black.

A woman waiting at the end of the path.

“You've seen them before,” Octavia said.

Astra looked at her.

Not a question.

Octavia rarely wasted punctuation.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

Astra's eyes lowered.

Rosalie reached across the table.

Her hand settled over Astra's.

Astra did not pull away.

“The In-Between.”

Octavia's expression changed.

Barely.

The scientist disappeared.

Something else listened.

Rosalie squeezed Astra's fingers.

“You went back?”

“We believe so.”

“When?”

Astra looked at her.

“Fourteen minutes ago.”

Octavia glanced at her notes.

“Thirteen minutes and forty-eight seconds.”

Astra stared.

“You are becoming intolerable.”

“Accuracy frequently is.”

Rosalie ignored them both.

“What happened?”

Astra looked toward the championship.

Then toward the marigolds.

Then toward Rosalie.

“We remembered something.”

“What?”

Astra's fingers turned beneath Rosalie's until their palms met.

“When our heart stopped...”

The words came slowly.

“...we prayed.”

Rosalie's expression softened.

Astra rarely discussed those ninety seconds.

Not because she could not remember them.

Because she remembered too much.

“We did not know whether anyone was listening.”

Octavia remained silent.

“We asked to return.”

Astra swallowed.

“We promised that if we did...”

Her gaze dropped to Rosalie's hand.

“...we would do better.”

Rosalie waited.

“We would protect them.”

“The women?”

“Yes.”

“The Warmbloods.”

Astra nodded.

“We had spent years watching women arrive beneath fluorescent lights carrying injuries someone else had given them.”

Her voice flattened.

“Broken fingers.”

A pause.

“Split lips.”

Another.

“Bruises shaped like hands.”

Rosalie's thumb moved across Astra's knuckles.

“We could patch flesh.”

Astra looked toward nothing.

“We could document.”

“We could call the police.”

“We could lock doors.”

“We could sit beside them until morning.”

Her jaw tightened.

“And sometimes...”

Nothing.

Rosalie waited.

“...they went back.”

The words hurt differently.

Not failure.

Helplessness.

“We hated that.”

Rosalie whispered, “I know.”

“When we died, we promised whoever was listening that if we were permitted to return...”

Astra looked at her.

“...we would stand between women and the things that hurt them.”

Octavia finally spoke.

“And you believe someone accepted the bargain.”

Astra looked toward her.

“We do not know.”

“But you suspect it.”

“We suspect something heard us.”

“Something?”

Astra remembered the smile.

The flowers.

The answer that wasn't an answer.

“You have a wedding to plan.”

Her eyes returned to the marigolds.

“We never asked who was buying.”

Rosalie went very still.

Octavia's pen stopped.

For once—

Nobody made a joke.

Astra looked down at Rosalie's engagement ring.

The stone caught the light.

“We made the promise anyway.”

Rosalie squeezed her hand.

“Do you regret it?”

“No.”

Immediate.

Absolute.

Astra looked at her.

“Never.”

Then—

A pause.

“We misunderstood it.”

Octavia tilted her head.

“How?”

Astra leaned back.

“We believed protection was a classification.”

Octavia's expression sharpened.

Astra continued.

“Woman.”

One finger touched the table.

“Living.”

Another.

“Not predatory.”

A third.

“Therefore protected.”

Octavia watched the pattern forming.

“Deterministic.”

“Yes.”

“Binary.”

“Yes.”

“Incorrect.”

Astra stared at her.

Rosalie whispered—

“Oh boy.”

Astra's eyes narrowed.

“Explain.”

Octavia folded her hands.

“You already did.”

Silence.

Astra waited.

Octavia did not rescue her from it.

Rosalie looked between them.

Eventually Astra spoke.

“Necra.”

Octavia nodded.

Astra's mouth tightened.

“We hesitated.”

“You said that?”

“In the In-Between.”

“To whom?”

Astra looked at the marigolds.

Octavia followed her gaze.

Interesting.

Very interesting.

But she left it alone.

For now.

“Because Necra is a woman,” Octavia said.

“Yes.”

“And therefore your framework required protection.”

“Yes.”

“But Necra was simultaneously attempting to defeat you.”

“Yes.”

“Your categories produced incompatible instructions.”

Astra's expression darkened.

“We are aware.”

“You lost.”

Astra looked directly at her.

Rosalie tensed.

Octavia did not.

Astra answered.

“Yes.”

No anger.

No denial.

No excuse.

“Necra Octavian Kane defeated us.”

Octavia nodded.

“Cleanly.”

“Yes.”

“And you've accepted that.”

“Yes.”

Octavia reached for her notebook.

Astra's eyes narrowed.

The pen did not move.

Instead Octavia flipped backward through several pages.

“What are you looking for?”

“Something you said earlier.”

“When?”

“Before the match.”

Astra waited.

Octavia found the page.

Read.

Stopped.

Then looked up.

“What did you do to Necra?”

Astra blinked.

Rosalie looked confused.

“We fought her.”

“Before that.”

Astra frowned.

“We prepared to fight her.”

“No.”

Octavia closed the notebook.

“What did you do to Necra?”

Astra's expression sharpened.

“Clarify.”

“Did you attack her?”

“No.”

“Cost her a match?”

“No.”

“Interfere in one?”

“No.”

“Threaten her associates?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Disparage her family?”

“No.”

“Mock her beliefs?”

“No.”

“Deny her accomplishments?”

Astra's head tilted.

“No.”

“Claim she wasn't dangerous?”

“No.”

“Claim she wasn't what she says she is?”

Astra paused.

“No.”

Octavia nodded.

“Then what did you do?”

Silence.

Rosalie looked toward Astra.

Astra looked toward Octavia.

“We do not understand the question.”

“I know.”

Octavia opened the notebook again.

Her finger settled beneath something written there.

“Necra said you crossed her.”

Astra stopped moving.

Rosalie's eyebrows rose.

There it was.

A sentence Astra had heard.

Processed.

Filed.

Accepted as hostility.

Never examined.

Octavia watched recognition arrive.

“She did.”

“Yes.”

Astra stared at the table.

Octavia waited.

Astra's fingers slowly curled.

“How?”

Octavia smiled faintly.

“That was my question.”

Nothing moved.

The apartment seemed suddenly much quieter.

Astra looked toward the championship.

Gold.

Leather.

Proof.

Necra had wanted the match.

Necra had received the match.

Necra had defeated her.

One.

Two.

Three.

Astra remembered every second.

She remembered Necra's arm across her chest.

The referee's hand striking the canvas.

The third impact.

The bell.

She remembered looking across the ring afterward.

No excuses.

No denial.

Necra had won.

Astra had lost.

And yet—

“You crossed me.”

Astra's eyes narrowed.

“We are the women's champion.”

Octavia answered immediately.

“That is a condition.”

Astra looked at her.

“Not an action.”

Rosalie slowly sat back.

“Oh.”

Octavia's eyes remained on Astra.

“Did Necra explain what crossing her meant?”

“No.”

“Did she identify an offense?”

“No.”

“Did she identify something you took from her?”

“No.”

“Did she establish a debt?”

“No.”

Octavia leaned back.

“Then you have an accusation without an event.”

Astra said nothing.

The sentence landed somewhere deep.

Not supernatural.

Not prophetic.

Simple.

Clinical.

Evidence.

Rosalie looked at Astra.

“You never thought about that?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Astra's gaze remained fixed upon the championship.

“Because we were busy asking why Necra was inside our head.”

Octavia nodded.

“And now?”

Astra looked at her.

Now—

Something had changed.

Not the classification.

That had happened already.

Something else.

A question had found teeth.

“Now we would like an answer.”

The stopwatch ticked.

Once.

Wrongly.

Then stopped.

The room was darker now.

Wedding brochures had been pushed aside.

Fabric samples remained scattered across the table.

The marigold photograph sat near Astra's hand.

The AWS Women's World Championship occupied the centre.

Octavia sat opposite her.

Rosalie remained beside Astra.

Nobody had planned this.

Perhaps that was why it felt important.

Astra stared into the camera.

For several seconds—

Nothing.

Then:

“Necra Octavian Kane.”

No poetry.

No whispered threat.

Just the name.

“You said we crossed you.”

Astra waited.

As though Necra might answer through the lens.

Nothing.

Her head tilted.

“We have been thinking about that.”

Octavia said nothing.

Rosalie said nothing.

This belonged to Astra.

“We have been thinking about many things.”

Her fingertips touched the championship.

“You defeated us.”

A pause.

“Cleanly.”

Another.

“One.”

Her finger tapped the gold.

“Two.”

Again.

“Three.”

Again.

Astra looked down.

“We remember.”

Her gaze lifted.

“We will not tell you that victory was luck.”

“We will not tell you the referee made an error.”

“We will not tell you that some external force stole the match from us.”

“We will not diminish what you earned simply because losing hurts.”

Her voice softened.

“You defeated the AWS Women's World Champion.”

A tiny nod.

“Congratulations.”

Silence.

Then Astra's expression changed.

“But victory does not answer our question.”

Her hand left the championship.

“You said we crossed you.”

A beat.

“How?”

Nothing.

Astra waited.

“Name the offense.”

The words were quiet.

Almost polite.

“Was it the championship?”

Astra looked down at the gold.

“Did possessing this offend you?”

Her eyes returned to the camera.

“Was it because we did not fear you?”

A pause.

“Was it because we walked somewhere adjacent to death and returned carrying language you did not give us?”

Another.

“Was it because our dead do not resemble yours?”

Astra leaned slightly forward.

“Was it because we did not kneel?”

Nothing.

“Or...”

Her voice dropped.

“...did we simply fail to move?”

Octavia's stopwatch ticked.

Once.

Astra did not look away.

“If the championship is what you want...”

Her fingers curled around the centre plate.

“...say so.”

No anger.

“If you desire this because it is beautiful...”

A pause.

“...say so.”

“If you desire it because it proves supremacy...”

Another.

“...say so.”

“If you desire it because you believe defeating us once means you can do it again when this is at stake...”

Astra smiled.

Small.

Dangerous.

“...say so.”

Then the smile disappeared.

“But do not call ambition injury.”

Silence.

“Do not call desire vengeance.”

Astra's voice became softer.

“And do not tell us we have committed some invisible sin merely because we occupied a space you wished to enter.”

The room seemed smaller.

“We have spent enough of our life being told that existence itself was an inconvenience.”

Rosalie's eyes shifted toward Astra.

There was something underneath that sentence.

Something older.

Astra continued before anyone could touch it.

“You crossed me.”

She repeated Necra's words carefully.

“Very well.”

Astra spread her hands.

“Here we are.”

“Show us the crossing.”

“Name the moment.”

“Identify the act.”

“Tell us what we took.”

“Tell us what we broke.”

“Tell us what debt remained after you pinned our shoulders to the canvas.”

Her eyes darkened.

“Because if defeating us did not settle it...”

Astra leaned closer.

“...what exactly do you believe we owe you?”

The stopwatch ticked again.

Wrong.

Astra's expression remained perfectly still.

“And if your answer is simply that we possess something you want...”

Her hand settled on the Women's World Championship.

“...then stop calling it vengeance.”

A pause.

“Call it hunger.”

Another.

“We understand hunger.”

Octavia Vale closed her notebook.

Astra looked sideways.

“You have finished documenting us?”

“No.”

“Then why did you close it?”

“Because Necra isn't our only opponent.”

Astra considered this.

Then nodded.

Correct.

Octavia looked into the camera.

“Avery McCullen.”

The name arrived without menace.

Without contempt.

Merely acknowledgement.

“One half of the AWS Women’s World Tag Team Champions.”

Octavia’s fingers rested atop the broken stopwatch.

“Which means this match contains an interesting error.”

Rosalie glanced between them.

Astra remained silent.

Octavia continued.

“Everyone keeps discussing Astra Mortis and Necra Octavian Kane.”

Her thumb clicked the stopwatch.

Nothing happened.

“Past.”

Click.

“Present.”

Click.

“Future.”

Still nothing.

“As though August twenty-fourth exists merely to measure the distance between their previous match and whatever comes next.”

Octavia looked toward Astra.

“That would be mathematically convenient.”

Then toward the camera.

“It would also be wrong.”

Astra's mouth twitched.

Barely.

Octavia noticed.

Of course she did.

“Avery is not punctuation attached to Necra.”

Astra nodded.

“And I am not reinforcement attached to Astra.”

Octavia folded her hands.

“That distinction matters.”

Astra picked up the championship.

Settled it across her shoulder.

“The last time Necra stood across from us...”

Her voice remained calm.

“...we had a contradiction.”

Octavia corrected her.

“You had a contradiction.”

Astra slowly turned.

Octavia stared back.

Rosalie immediately reached for her tea.

This seemed wise.

Astra considered the correction.

Then—

“Yes.”

Octavia nodded.

Astra looked back toward the camera.

“We had a contradiction.”

Octavia sighed.

Astra ignored her.

“We attempted to classify Necra simultaneously as someone protected by our promise...”

Her expression hardened.

“...and someone we were required to hurt.”

A pause.

“That contradiction no longer exists.”

Octavia's eyes shifted toward Astra.

No surprise.

She had already calculated this.

“Necra remains a woman.”

Astra spoke carefully.

“She remains deserving of dignity.”

“Autonomy.”

“Choice.”

“Respect.”

Astra's black eyes settled upon the lens.

“She does not remain protected from us.”

Silence.

“No hesitation.”

“No instinct demanding that we leave room.”

“No confusion between kindness and restraint.”

Astra's hand tightened around the championship.

“Necra asked us to fight.”

A faint smile.

“We finally understand that respecting her means believing her.”

Octavia opened her notebook again.

Scratch.

Astra turned.

“Really?”

“That was useful.”

Astra stared.

Octavia continued writing.

Rosalie laughed into her tea.

Astra sighed.

Then looked back toward the camera.

“August twenty-fourth is not our opportunity to erase what happened.”

A pause.

“Necra defeated us.”

Another.

“History remains history.”

Her smile returned.

“But history is evidence.”

Octavia finally looked up.

Now they were speaking the same language.

Astra continued.

“Necra knows she can defeat us.”

Octavia's voice followed.

“And certainty alters behaviour.”

Astra: “Confidence creates repetition.”

Octavia: “Repetition creates patterns.”

Astra: “Patterns create openings.”

Octavia: “And openings...”

The stopwatch clicked.

For the first time—

It started.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Octavia smiled.

“...have consequences.”

Astra looked toward her.

Then toward the camera.

Necra.

Avery.

Four women.

One ring.

Not prophecy.

Not destiny.

Not gods deciding whose mythology mattered more.

A wrestling match.

And suddenly Astra seemed happier about that than she had in weeks.

“Necra.”

A pause.

“You wanted us without hesitation.”

Astra's smile widened.

“Congratulations.”

Tick.

“You have us.”

Tick.

“And Avery...”

Octavia's eyes narrowed.

“We have not forgotten you simply because everyone else appears fascinated by death.”

Tick.

Astra glanced toward the wedding brochures.

Then toward Rosalie.

Then toward the photograph of marigolds.

For the briefest moment—

Warmth.

Then back to the camera.

Cold.

Certain.

Alive.

“We have a wedding to plan.”

Octavia's stopwatch continued ticking.

Astra touched the championship.

“And before that...”

A beat.

“...we have questions.”

Tick.

“Necra Octavian Kane.”

Tick.

“You accused us.”

Tick.

Astra's smile disappeared.

“Now substantiate it.”

The stopwatch stopped.

The first sound was metal.

Not music.

Not voices.

Metal.

A slow scrape dragged through the darkness.

Once.

Stopped.

Then again.

SCRAAAAAPE.

A single fluorescent light flickered overhead.

The room beneath it was long and narrow.

Concrete walls.

Concrete floor.

No windows.

At the centre stood an old examination table.

Not medical.

Mechanical.

Steel.

Scarred by years of use.

Around it rested objects that did not appear to belong together.

A broken Victorian stopwatch.

A black mourning glove.

A length of athletic tape.

A torque wrench.

An anatomical model of the human knee.

The AWS Women's World Championship.

And beside it—

A photograph.

Avery McCullen.

Dr. Octavia Vale stood at one end of the table.

Her sleeves were rolled precisely to the elbows.

Black mourning gloves covered her hands.

A piece of chalk rested between two fingers.

She drew a line across the concrete wall.

Then another.

Numbers followed.

Angles.

Percentages.

A crude representation of a knee joint.

A clock face without hands.

Then three words.

PASSION.

GLORY.

GOLD.

Octavia stepped backward.

Studied them.

Tilted her head.

Something bothered her.

Behind her—

SCRAAAAAPE.

Astra Mortis sat in a steel chair.

She was sharpening nothing.

That was the strange part.

The sound came from one thumbnail slowly dragging across the edge of the AWS Women's World Championship resting across her knees.

SCRAAAAAPE.

Stop.

Astra looked down at the gold.

SCRAAAAAPE.

Octavia continued writing.

Astra's black eyes lifted.

“You are enjoying this.”

Octavia did not turn.

“I enjoy inconsistencies.”

“Why?”

“They are informative.”

Astra's nail dragged across the edge of the championship again.

“Contradictions irritate us.”

“They shouldn't.”

“They do.”

“They are often more revealing than consistency.”

Astra considered this.

“Explain.”

Octavia underlined the first word.

PASSION.

“Avery McCullen loves wrestling.”

Astra waited.

“She claims victory is secondary.”

Octavia wrote beneath it.

WINNING DOES NOT MATTER.

Then she moved to the second word.

GLORY.

“She is obsessed with winning.”

Underneath:

DEFEAT IS UNACCEPTABLE.

Then—

GOLD.

“She desires championships.”

Underneath:

VICTORY IS THE OBJECTIVE.

Octavia stepped away from the wall.

Three statements.

Three versions of the same woman.

Astra stared at them.

“Those cannot all be true.”

Octavia smiled faintly.

“Of course they can.”

Astra looked toward her.

Octavia finally turned.

“They simply cannot all govern the same decision.”

Silence.

Astra's thumbnail stopped moving.

Octavia approached the table.

“A human being can desire contradictory things.”

She touched PASSION.

“She can love the experience.”

GLORY.

“She can despise failure.”

GOLD.

“She can covet proof.”

Octavia folded her hands behind her back.

“The interesting question isn't whether Avery McCullen contradicts herself.”

Her eyes settled upon the photograph.

“The interesting question is which Avery appears when contradiction becomes consequence.”

Astra looked at the photograph.

Avery McCullen.

Five feet eight inches.

One hundred thirty-one pounds.

Technician.

Submissionist.

Brawler.

Babyface.

Sometimes cheats.

Doesn't care about winning.

Obsessed with winning.

Wants championships.

Astra tilted her head.

“Messy.”

“Human.”

“Same thing.”

Octavia almost smiled.

Almost.

Astra's eyes remained on Avery.

“She has survived much.”

“Yes.”

“She changed herself for her daughter.”

“Yes.”

“She returned.”

“Yes.”

“She fights because she desires to.”

“Yes.”

Astra slowly stood.

The AWS Women's World Championship came with her.

She placed it across one shoulder.

“We understand that.”

Octavia watched.

Astra stepped toward the photograph.

“We understand choosing violence.”

Her voice had changed.

Lower.

Rougher.

Every syllable seemed dragged upward from somewhere beneath the floor.

“We understand entering a ring because something inside you becomes quieter when someone hits you.”

Astra touched Avery's photograph.

Not violently.

Almost gently.

“We understand the strange honesty of impact.”

Her fingertip moved along the edge.

“A fist does not pretend.”

A pause.

“A knee does not flatter.”

Another.

“A submission does not care who you thought to become.”

Astra's eyes darkened.

“Pain is very honest.”

Octavia watched her.

No notes.

Not yet.

Astra continued.

“We spent years around dishonest pain.”

Hospital corridors flickered briefly across the concrete wall.

Not literally.

Memory.

Bruises hidden beneath sleeves.

Broken fingers explained away.

Split lips blamed on doors.

Women insisting everything was fine while their bodies testified otherwise.

Astra's voice dropped.

“Pain accompanied by excuses.”

The memories disappeared.

“We prefer wrestling.”

A tiny smile.

“In here...”

Astra tapped two fingers against the championship.

“...everyone consents to the violence.”

Silence.

“Everyone knows why they came.”

Astra looked directly into the camera.

“Avery knows.”

There was no contempt in the statement.

That somehow made it colder.

“You are not fragile.”

A pause.

“You are not helpless.”

Another.

“You are not prey.”

Astra's head tilted.

“And we will not insult you by pretending otherwise.”

Octavia's pen moved.

Scratch.

Astra looked toward her.

Octavia stopped.

“Continue.”

Astra's eyes narrowed.

Then returned to the camera.

“Avery McCullen.”

Soft.

Almost affectionate.

“You made something very easy for us.”

Astra stepped closer.

“You chose.”

A beat.

“You chose Necra.”

Nothing else.

No condemnation.

No accusation.

No explanation of what that choice supposedly meant inside Avery's mind.

Only the fact.

“You stand beside her on August twenty-fourth.”

Astra's fingers curled around the championship strap.

“Therefore...”

A pause.

“...you stand across from us.”

Her smile disappeared.

“We have learned recently that protection without consent is arrogance.”

Octavia's eyes lifted from her notebook.

Astra continued.

“We will not make that mistake with you.”

A beat.

“You do not require our shelter.”

Another.

“You do not require our mercy.”

Another.

“You do not require us to soften the violence simply because you are a woman.”

The fluorescent light buzzed.

Astra stared directly into the camera.

“Today...”

Her voice became almost a whisper.

“...you are an opponent.”

Something about the word felt final.

Not permanent.

Not moral.

Not condemnation.

Classification.

For this match.

For this moment.

For this choice.

Astra's hand rose.

Two fingers touched Avery's photograph.

Then withdrew.

“You are not protected from us.”

Silence.

Octavia looked toward the wall.

PASSION.

GLORY.

GOLD.

Astra followed her gaze.

Then something unexpected happened.

She looked down at the AWS Women's World Championship.

A long time passed.

Octavia noticed.

“What?”

Astra's thumb moved across the centre plate.

“We have been thinking.”

“That is usually expensive.”

Astra looked at her.

Octavia's expression remained completely serious.

Astra decided to ignore it.

“We like this.”

Octavia glanced toward the championship.

“Yes.”

“We enjoy being champion.”

“I had inferred that.”

“We enjoy carrying proof.”

Octavia's eyebrow lifted.

Astra noticed.

“Your word.”

“An accurate one.”

Astra looked down again.

Gold caught fluorescent light.

“We have spent considerable time pretending desire requires justification.”

Octavia said nothing.

“We tell ourselves championships represent responsibility.”

Astra's thumb moved across the plate.

“Protection.”

Another movement.

“Authority.”

Another.

“Proof.”

She stopped.

“Sometimes...”

Astra smiled.

“...we simply want them.”

Octavia's pen immediately moved.

Scratch.

Astra looked up.

“Do not.”

“That was significant.”

“We know.”

“Then allow documentation.”

“No.”

Octavia continued anyway.

Astra sighed.

Then looked back toward Avery.

“We want your championships.”

There it was.

No metaphor.

No supernatural proclamation.

No prophecy.

Desire.

“We will take the AWS Women’s World Tag Team Championships.”

Astra smiled.

“We think they would look beautiful beside this one.”

Her palm rested against the Women’s World Championship.

“We think Octavia would look unsettling holding one.”

Octavia glanced up.

“I would.”

“We know.”

A beat.

“We think the In-Between should possess them.”

Octavia’s pen stopped.

Astra’s voice lowered.

“And Avery...”

Her eyes settled upon the photograph.

“...you are the first measurement.”

Click.

The fluorescent light disappeared.

Darkness.

Click.

Another light came alive.

Octavia Vale now stood alone.

Different room.

Or perhaps the same room viewed incorrectly.

A classroom.

Old.

Wooden desks disappeared into shadow.

A blackboard stretched across the wall behind her.

Someone had written a single equation across it.

WANT $\neq$ NEED.

Octavia looked toward it.

Then erased NEED.

WANT $\neq$ WIN.

She considered this.

Erased WIN.

WANT $\neq$ BEHAVIOUR.

Better.

Octavia placed the chalk down.

“Avery McCullen.”

Her voice was soft.

Articulate.

Almost pleasant.

“You present an interesting problem.”

She folded her hands.

“You love wrestling.”

A pause.

“You do not care whether you win or lose.”

Another.

“You are obsessed with winning.”

Another.

“You will stop at nothing to avoid defeat.”

Another.

“You desire championships.”

Octavia's expression remained serene.

“Those statements are not insults.”

She glanced toward the board.

“They are data.”

A small smile.

“And data does not become rude merely because someone dislikes the conclusion.”

Octavia picked up the chalk.

She wrote:

PASSION = FIGHT

GLORY = WIN

GOLD = POSSESS

She stepped aside.

“Three motivations.”

Her eyes moved across them.

“Three definitions of success.”

Then she drew a vertical line through all three.

“One body.”

Octavia turned.

“That is fascinating.”

No sarcasm.

She genuinely meant it.

“Because eventually a match requires you to choose.”

She walked toward the first desk.

“If you love fighting regardless of outcome...”

Her fingertip brushed the wood.

“...then defeat should not disturb you.”

Second desk.

“If glory requires victory...”

Another touch.

“...then defeat becomes intolerable.”

Third.

“If championships establish value...”

Her eyes lifted.

“...then losing possession becomes something else entirely.”

Octavia stopped.

“So which variable governs Avery McCullen when the others become inconvenient?”

Silence.

She smiled politely.

“I don't know.”

A beat.

“And unlike some people...”

Her eyes briefly flicked somewhere beyond the camera.

“...I find admitting uncertainty useful.”

Octavia returned to the blackboard.

“But I can observe.”

She wrote:

LOW BLOW.

EYE GOUGE.

BACK RAKE.

FOOT CHOKE.

Then beneath them:

BABYFACE.

She stepped back.

Her head tilted.

“Interesting.”

The chalk tapped against the board.

“Again.”

Tap.

“Not hypocrisy.”

Tap.

“Data.”

Octavia turned.

“You are permitted complexity.”

A pause.

“You are permitted contradiction.”

Another.

“You are permitted to be kind and still gouge an eye when necessary.”

The faintest smile.

“Human beings are wonderfully inefficient machines.”

She placed the chalk down.

“But your contradictions create something I can use.”

Octavia walked toward the camera.

“Pressure.”

One step.

“Pressure does not create character.”

Another.

“It reveals priority.”

Another.

“When winning and enjoying the fight become incompatible...”

She stopped.

“...which survives?”

Silence.

“When glory requires you to violate sportsmanship...”

A tilt of the head.

“...which survives?”

“When retaining gold requires you to become someone your daughter would not recognize...”

Octavia stopped.

No smile now.

No cruelty either.

The question was allowed to exist without accusation.

“...which survives?”

Silence stretched.

Octavia stepped backward.

“I do not know.”

Then—

A smile.

“But August twenty-fourth may provide useful evidence.”

She turned toward the board.

Three motivations remained.

PASSION.

GLORY.

GOLD.

Octavia stared at them.

Then slowly—

She drew a circle around GOLD.

“Astra wants your championships.”

The sentence was almost conversational.

Octavia looked over her shoulder.

“So do I.”

She turned fully.

“The In-Between desires the AWS Women’s World Tag Team Championships.”

No theatrical emphasis.

No raised voice.

No threat.

A statement entered into record.

“This match is not for them.”

Octavia nodded.

“We know.”

“You cannot lose them to us on August twenty-fourth.”

Another nod.

“We know that too.”

A faint smile.

“That is what makes this useful.”

She returned to the board.

Under GOLD she wrote:

STEP ONE.

“The first experiment rarely produces the final result.”

Her chalk moved.

“First...”

OBSERVE.

“...you establish behaviour.”

Second word.

PRESSURE.

“Then you introduce stress.”

Third.

REPEAT.

“Then you determine whether the result can be reproduced.”

Final word.

FAILURE.

Octavia stopped.

“And then...”

She turned.

“...you know where the structure breaks.”

Silence.

The fluorescent lights above the classroom began switching off.

One row at a time.

Click.

Darkness swallowed the rear desks.

Click.

Another row.

Octavia remained illuminated.

Click.

Closer.

Click.

Closer.

Until only the light directly above her remained.

“Avery.”

Her voice softened.

“You are a technician.”

“You understand joints.”

A pause.

“You understand leverage.”

Another.

“You understand that the human body possesses limits which confidence cannot negotiate.”

Octavia raised the broken stopwatch.

“You and I may understand each other better than you expect.”

Click.

The stopwatch started.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

“You call your finish the Four Leaf Clover.”

A tiny smile.

“A figure four.”

Tick.

“A lovely mechanism.”

Tick.

“Four points creating pressure through one vulnerable structure.”

Octavia looked down at the stopwatch.

“Simple.”

Tick.

“Elegant.”

Tick.

“Predictable.”

Her eyes lifted.

“Everything breaks somewhere.”

Tick.

“The knee.”

Tick.

“The ankle.”

Tick.

“The hip.”

Tick.

“The rhythm.”

Tick.

“The partnership.”

The stopwatch stopped.

Octavia looked toward the darkness beside her.

For several seconds—

Nothing.

Then Astra stepped into the remaining light.

Women’s World Championship over one shoulder.

She said nothing.

Octavia looked at her.

Then toward the camera.

“Necra defeated Astra.”

Astra did not react.

“Avery is a champion.”

Nothing.

“Necra wants Astra's championship.”

Nothing.

“We want Avery's.”

Astra's eyes remained fixed somewhere beyond the camera.

Octavia studied her.

“Astra?”

Nothing.

Octavia waited.

The silence became uncomfortable.

Five seconds.

Six.

Seven.

Astra finally looked toward Octavia.

“We heard you.”

Octavia nodded.

Then—

“Nothing about Necra?”

Astra stared ahead.

“No.”

One word.

Octavia's expression changed.

Not surprise.

Recognition.

Perhaps that was more disturbing.

Astra's fingers tightened around the championship.

She did not mention Necra's victory.

She did not mention the accusation.

She did not threaten her.

She did not promise revenge.

Nothing.

For someone who had spent weeks talking about Necra Octavian Kane—

Nothing was suddenly very loud.

Octavia looked into the camera.

“Interesting.”

Astra's eyes shifted toward Avery's photograph on the table.

Then toward the chalkboard.

GOLD.

STEP ONE.

Her voice returned.

“Avery.”

Soft.

Raspy.

“We respect what you survived.”

A pause.

“We respect that you changed.”

Another.

“We respect that you returned because violence still called your name.”

Astra smiled.

“We understand.”

Her hand rested against the Women's World Championship.

“But respect has never required surrender.”

She stepped forward.

“And admiration has never required restraint.”

Another step.

“You stand beside Necra.”

Another.

“You stand across from us.”

Astra's smile slowly disappeared.

“So for one night...”

Her head tilted.

“...we will give you something much kinder than protection.”

Silence.

“We will believe you when you say you came to fight.”

Octavia moved beside her.

Not behind.

Not ahead.

Beside.

Astra looked toward her.

“We want their championships.”

Octavia nodded.

“Yes.”

“We are agreed?”

“We were agreed before you finished asking.”

Astra seemed mildly annoyed.

“We enjoy confirmation.”

“I know.”

Astra looked back toward the camera.

“The AWS Women's World Tag Team Championships.”

Her voice lowered.

“We want them.”

Octavia raised the stopwatch.

“And wanting something changes probability.”

Astra smiled.

“We do not understand probability.”

“I know.”

“We understand taking.”

Octavia considered correcting her.

Decided against it.

For once.

Astra continued.

“August twenty-fourth does not give us the championships.”

“No,” *Octavia said.*

“It gives us Avery.”

“Yes.”

“It gives us Necra.”

Silence.

Astra's smile vanished again.

Octavia noticed.

Astra continued before the name could settle.

“It gives us evidence.”

Octavia's expression softened into something almost proud.

“Yes.”

Astra looked toward Avery's photograph.

“You say you fight because you love fighting.”

A pause.

“You say you will do anything to win.”

Another.

“You say you desire gold.”

Her black eyes lifted.

“We believe you.”

Octavia tilted her head.

“All three versions?”

Astra considered it.

“Yes.”

“That is mathematically inconvenient.”

“We are not mathematics.”

“No.”

Octavia smiled.

“You are usually the thing that happens to mathematics.”

Astra accepted this.

Then looked directly into the camera.

“So bring all three, Avery.”

The fluorescent light flickered.

“Bring the adventurer.”

Flicker.

“Bring the fighter.”

Flicker.

“Bring the champion.”

Darkness nearly swallowed them.

“And we will discover which one survives the others.”

Octavia's stopwatch began ticking again.

Astra looked down at the Women's World Championship.

Then toward the empty space beside it on the table.

Enough room for two more belts.

She noticed.

Octavia noticed her noticing.

Neither woman said anything.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Finally Octavia spoke.

“I have one question.”

Astra looked toward her.

Octavia did not look at Astra.

She looked directly through the camera.

At Avery.

At Necra.

At whoever happened to be listening.

Her voice was gentle.

Almost kind.

“If Avery McCullen does not care whether she wins or loses...”

Tick.

“...but will stop at nothing to avoid defeat...”

Tick.

“...and Necra Octavian Kane has already proven that defeating Astra Mortis is possible...”

Tick.

Octavia smiled.

“...which one of you becomes afraid first when the match begins going wrong?”

Silence.

The stopwatch stopped.

Astra slowly looked toward Octavia.

Even she appeared to consider that.

Octavia's smile remained.

“I don't control fate.”

She closed the stopwatch.

“I simply help it arrive on schedule.”

Astra looked toward the empty space beside her championship.

Two absent belts.

For now.

“We want them.”

Octavia nodded.

“Yes.”

Astra's eyes returned to the camera.

No ambiguity.

No metaphor.

No apology.

“The In-Between wants the AWS Women's World Tag Team Championships.”

Octavia picked up Avery's photograph.

She placed it beneath the words:

STEP ONE.

Astra stared at it.

Then—

Very quietly—

“Playtime begins August twenty-fourth.”

Octavia looked sideways.

“That sounds like Mixie.”

Astra froze.

Silence.

Octavia waited.

Astra stared at the camera.

“We withdraw the statement.”

For the first time—

Octavia laughed.

Once.

Quietly.

Then the final fluorescent light went out.

Black.