



Bound to Death (Brides of the Apocalypse #1)

Author: *Brianna West*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Asha

I never once thought I'd be attacked by a group of men, or that I'd then watch them be torn apart by the man of my literal nightmares. But he isn't a man. He's a monster, and it's impossible to escape him. Not when he controls the very shadows that cling to me. The gorgeous killer dominates my body with pleasure and kisses me like the world will end tomorrow. I know better, but I fell into his trap, and someday soon, Death will come for me.

Thanatos

As one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, it's my duty to end the world, and I have a month left to do it. She's all that stands in the way. What trouble could one little human cause? But the way she looks bound in my shadows, soft curves writhing and undulating, has me captivated. Spellbound. I'm desperate to keep my little raven, but my orders to deliver her soul are absolute, so she must die.

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Chapter One

Asha

If someone told me that one day I'd be the reason the world ended, I'd tell them they were full of shit and needed to lay off the sauce. But I couldn't deny it anymore as I struggled on the floor in a familiar dark room, my face and clothes covered in my own blood. Tomorrow, the world would end because I wasn't strong enough to keep my soul.

I woke from a dream I didn't remember, my heart an erratic thump against my chest. A shuddering breath left my lips as I sat up, relieved to be alive. I might not remember what happened, but my body sure did. Sweat pooled underneath me and my pulse raced in my ears. All the signs of a panic attack with no memory as to why. I wanted to run, but from what? What had been chasing me? Why did it feel like I still needed to get away?

Throwing my legs over the side of the bed, I checked the time on my phone. It was only minutes after three in the morning. Clicking the screen off, I wiped my wet forehead before stealing a look over my shoulder at the other side of the room. I could barely make out the door. For some reason, it felt darker. Like something waited in the blanket of night. I sunk fingers into my hair and breathed out the residual fear clawing at my throat.

It's just a dream. It's just a stupid fucking dream.

For months, every night was the same. I woke up in a state of panic at the Devil's

hour. Every time I fought the urge to run for my life—like I'd die if I didn't—but I couldn't understand why. I didn't know why it felt like something was chasing me. And every night I was covered in sweat, heart thundering, throat bone-dry as if I'd been screaming; all with the oddest sensation that someone was watching and waiting, ready to end the game we played. I'd always find myself peeking over at the same corner of the room, but no one was ever there.

No one was waiting.

On my feet, I headed for the kitchen. The only thing that made me feel better was a cold drink. I intentionally chose not to keep one next to my bed so I had to walk off the sensation of a nightmare I couldn't remember. I tied up my recently-dyed cherry-red hair into a messy bun, fixed my baggy night shirt and shorts, and made my way down the hall after tripping over the rug I insisted on buying.

The moonlight coming through the window in the kitchen was just bright enough to guide me over, and I went straight for the fridge when I finally turned the corner. I nearly jumped out of my skin when a loud rap shook the window over the sink. I gasped and jerked my eyes over to it, catching sight of a raven outside the glass. Or was it a crow? I couldn't tell the difference, but I'd decided it was a raven because it scared the crap out of me enough times for it to be a messenger of death.

The little jerk cawed at me before flying away.

"Don't you ever sleep, you damn bird?" I muttered angrily, chastising it with a glare even though it was already off to do whatever it was birds did at three in the morning. Birdy booty calls? At least one of us was getting some right now.

I'd somehow made friends with a raven over the last few months. Weirdly enough, Emily never mentioned it and thought I was certifiable for thinking a bird was stalking me. Every time I talked about it, she told me I needed to get fucked

down—because that was Emily’s solve-all suggestion for anything—and I’d pretty much stopped pointing it out to her.

But the damn bird was always somewhere nearby, in a tree or perched on a windowsill. It’d greet me on my arrival home or on my way out the door by either cawing at me in its “Look at me!” sort of way or tapping its beak on glass until I looked over. But this was the first time it came to me in the middle of the night.

Maybe Emily was right. Maybe I did need a good hot-and-heavy interlude with a stranger to take the edge off.

Calming my racing pulse with a few deep breaths, I turned to get a drink and then get the hell back to bed. I had to work in the morning, and my boss was unforgiving about yawning around clients.

Just as I leaned over to get the usual bottle of water, the door to our shared bathroom behind me creaked open before stopping. I shot a look over to it, catching the last bit of movement. Even the shadows around it seemed to shift and move on their own. Straightening my spine, I stared into the ominous darkness, the urge to run rushing over me again.

“I ain’t afraid of no ghosts...” I mumbled under my breath, humming the theme song of Ghostbusters to pretend I wasn’t scared. “Do your worst, phantoms!” I called out to the dark like I wasn’t crazy. Totally normal to yell at nothing. “Go haunt someone who cares,” I added when nothing responded, and it was just me—the crazy lady—standing next to a dimly lit fridge like it was a lifeline, convinced my ridiculous speech would scare off whatever poltergeist had wandered through our apartment.

A figure appeared in the kitchen archway, and I held my bottle out like it was a sword, stumbling backwards and screaming, “Get back, fiend!”

“Asha, who are you yelling at? It’s three in the damn morning,” my roommate complained, coming into the kitchen with her eyeliner smeared under her eyes and her lipstick smudged to one side of her face. Her blonde hair was defying several rules of gravity, and it was evident in her sleepy stare she’d only just gotten to bed.

I pressed the bottle to my mouth, hiding my grin. “Ems, what the hell happened to your face? Did my girl get lucky? Oh. My. God. Is he here? Did he just hear all that? Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Calm your tits, woman. I don’t think a nuclear bomb could wake this one up. He was practically dead after I was done with him, anyway,” my cute roommate gloated, cutting her mischievous eyes over to where her room was. “Wait, you screaming banshee, this isn’t about me. Why are you in here exorcising ghosts when you should be in bed? Bad dream again?”

Giving me the usual look, Emily came over in nothing but a big t-shirt and pair of socks before stealing the bottle right from my hand. Or weapon, depending on who you asked. She helped herself to a few gulps then handed it back to me. I’d complain, but it wouldn’t matter if I did. The girl did what she wanted, and honestly, I admired her for it.

“So, spill the tea? Do you remember it this time?”

Shaking my head, I downed the rest of my drink before tossing it into the recycling bin. “Not one bit. I’m starting to think I need therapy.”

Throwing her arm around my shoulder, Emily walked me back to my room. “Oh, Ash, that’s what alcohol and meaningless sex are for. I keep telling you, you need a night out with me. There’s no greater therapy than rubbing up against a stranger and getting white-girl drunk.”

“That’s what alcoholics say, Ems.”

She pinched my cheek before kissing it. “We’re not thirty yet. We can still pretend it’s perfectly okay. Come on, just do yourself a favor. Let loose. Leave the scary ghosts at home and come out with me tomorrow night.”

My eyes narrowed on my best friend, the much-too-old-for-it party girl. “Haven’t you been out the last three nights? Aren’t you tired? Don’t your bones ache from overuse? Are you hearing colors and tasting words yet?”

“I swear, I don’t know how we’re friends with you acting your age and all. We can sleep when we’re dead, Ash.” And with that final unhelpful nugget, Emily left me standing at my door so she could be late for her job another day.

I sipped the cocktail Emily bought for me before heading onto the dance floor to find herself a new victim. I leaned against the bar, a little uncomfortable with how packed the club was tonight.

I’d window shop for an hour and hopefully find someone decent enough to take home for a sexy romp to scratch the itch. If not, I’d head back to the apartment with a buzz and spend a little time with one of my book boyfriends. Either way, I’d make the most out of getting this dolled up to go out.

Tomorrow was my day off, so I didn’t need to worry about being late, or Mr. Big Boss Asshat complaining about how I looked like death walking. Mark really did know just the thing to say to woo a girl, always pointing out the flaws in my appearance or suggesting I try to wear more makeup or sexier clothes. Or my personal favorite, how I looked like I needed to sleep better. It was obnoxious, but he was the grandkid of the company owner, so if I wanted to keep my job, I needed to deal with his sexist bullshit.

The things a girl does for a paycheck.

The guy beside me tapped my shoulder. Mistake number uno. “Hey, pretty lady. You here alone?”

Pretty lady? Ugh, spare me this shameless playboy torment.

The second I looked over, I wished I hadn’t. The dude was a raving poster bro for every stereotypical version of a bad lay. The asshole was pretty, I’d give him that, but too damn arrogant about it. Guys like him didn’t have to work for it, and most times, they preferred their prey ignorant and barely legal.

I’d been told too many times to count that I didn’t look my age when I put effort into my looks. How sweet, right? Every girl dreamed about being told they looked two steps from the grave until they slathered on some concealer and eyeshadow.

Gross compliments and pet names aside, these narcissistic frat boys took whatever pleasure they wanted and didn’t give a shit about whether or not their partner got off. Which meant he wasn’t worth my time. I didn’t wear these ridiculous clothes and paint my face with expensive-as-shit makeup I stole from Emily to be some guy’s sex toy.

A girl had standards.

“Yeah, no.”

“What?”

I motioned to him, nibbling on my straw with a smirk. “You look like a walking red flag, and not in a good way. I’ll pass, thanks. I don’t have the bail money this month for putting you in your place when you forget what the word no means.”

The blonde bro opened his mouth, ready to argue, but I'd already taken my drink and my "pretty lady" ass the other direction. Safe from retaliation, I let loose a breath. It wasn't the smartest idea to insult a strange guy I didn't know, especially when I hadn't trained in over a year.

I used to workout daily and practice several styles of martial arts. After one of the girls in my fifth-grade class was attacked by a predator, my overly religious parents, worried I'd be tainted before marriage, put me in self-defense classes so I, the potential victim, could be burdened with the responsibility of keeping myself safe.

Probably the only time those religious zealots got it right.

I might not agree with the idea of putting the onus on young girls and women to do something instead of— I don't know —raising our men to see them as people rather than objects, but I fell in love with how powerful it made me feel. I even went on to compete in several tournaments during college.

But with my terrible work-life balance, I never had time anymore. Granted, the muscle memory of it never truly left a person, so if it came down to it, I'd still be better off than some poor, helpless woman without a history of kicking ass.

Once upon a time, I went through a vigilante phase. A few brushes with the law nearly put me in juvie. They didn't take too kindly to my approach of getting even in the name of justice. Said I needed to leave it to the law to punish the criminals. But their justice wasn't as just as they claimed. Guys like Bad Lay back at the bar always had their daddies pay off their misdeeds, or they got away with painting the woman as a drunk whore.

Our voices didn't matter.

I'd seen it enough to know that if he attacked me, I was on my own. Either I let him

take what he wanted, or I break a few ribs. The type of person I was, I'd break the ribs and ask Emily to sweet talk me out of a charge later. She was a damn good lawyer despite her partying ways, and I'd relied on her a little too often to step in when my mouth got the better of me. Of course, she was also my biggest fan and did it every time with a smile and wink. I was starting to think she enjoyed the drama of it all.

Peeking over my shoulder, I made sure Bad Lay wasn't following and made my way through the crowd. I'd finish my drink and get a much-deserved buzz. After, I'd dance away the horrible feeling of Bad Lay's eyes skating down my body. Then, I'd find someone who didn't talk— like, at all —and bang one out so I could get on with my life.

The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen came out of a sea of gyrating bodies when the music changed and the crowd started to yell their approval. Her ethereal blue gaze caught mine before she headed straight for me.

Her waist-length golden-blond hair was a wavy cascade down her pale shoulders, and every limb was gorgeously long and perfect. Every part of her body glittered beneath the strobe lights as she sashayed towards me. I didn't move the entire time she closed in on me like I was her prey. I barely caught what she said to me as she pushed past, but I could've sworn she told me to "Go home, Asha. He's looking for you."

Did she just say my name?

My drink splashed over my exposed cleavage when her arm swiped mine. Turning my head quickly, I lost sight of the strange woman. My skin prickled, left electrified in her absence like she dragged static with her everywhere she went. It didn't appear she'd been swallowed by the crowd. If anything, it was as if she disappeared into thin air. But that wasn't possible. People didn't just disappear. Maybe I'd already had too

much to drink.

Blinking away my confusion, I looked down at my chest. So much for finding a stranger to fuck. Apparently, I'd be washing my shirt as best as I could and then going home tonight.

I'd chosen a white, low-dipping top tucked into a high-waisted, black-and-silver flannel skirt, so my lacy bra was on full display. Some asshole would be convinced I was asking for it. So, sadly, my night was over. Whatever attention this wet-shirt situation attracted, I didn't want any part of it.

Guess the strange woman got what she wanted. This chick was heading home. I wasn't sure who the he she referred to was, but unfortunately, that guy would have to find someone else to set his sights on.

Cursing the heavens because I didn't want to be sticky and smell like booze for the walk back to my apartment, I headed for the bathroom after leaving my cup on one of the tables. Grumbling, I instantly regretted letting Emily talk me out of wearing a jacket. "For the plot!" she'd always yell whenever I'd argue that it wasn't sensible to be this cold or half-dressed for a one-time lay. But she was a lawyer, so Emily always won the argument.

I weaved through the crowd, dodging bodies and guys who thought I'd be a good target being the helpless maiden I was. But when I finally made my way through, I caught sight of someone who looked totally out of place. The second our eyes met, my pulse panicked, and I froze to the spot.

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Chapter Two

Asha

The strange man's startling light eyes were already on me, watching like no detail was missed, sinking into my goddamn soul for all I knew.

Is this bro wearing grey contacts? That color isn't natural.

From head to toe, he looked dangerous. Everything about him sung of repeat offender. He didn't look like some underling to a mafia boss; he looked like he ran the entire operation. Although, his clothes didn't immediately give that impression. Instead, it was the confidence in his stare that said he'd smash his fists on whoever decided it was a good idea to challenge him. And with how many rings he wore, just a bash with his fist was going to break bone.

But holy fuck was this dangerous dude hot.

The stranger's dark hair was pushed back to expose the strong lines of his face. Even with his powerful body leaned up against the wall, he was easily halfway, probably more, between six and seven feet. Maybe his father was a giant, maybe he drank a lot of milk growing up, but whatever it was, he easily dwarfed any man nearby. I didn't even know they made them this big, so I was both intrigued and wary.

His calf-high biker boots were crossed at the ankles, and his arms were uncomfortably large as he folded them over his chest, saying nothing but always watching. A wicked demon skull was painted on his shirt, and I noticed several of his

rings were variations of the same skull.

Metal much?

Loath as I was to admit it, he was obnoxiously delicious for someone who probably murdered for a living. The throb between my legs told me he wasn't scary enough to drive away my sexual urges. I hated how much I weighed my own safety against the desire to climb him like a tree and see if he rose to the challenge of sex god.

All I knew as I finished my much-too-long assessment of Mr. Killer was that I didn't want to catch his eye any longer than I already had. Better to keep moving and pretend he wasn't staring than to find out what sort of intentions swam in those unnaturally grey-white eyes of his. Something told me when he decided he wanted something, he took it. I'd already dealt with one of those, and I didn't need to walk right into another one. Not even if he was easily the most gorgeous guy I'd ever crossed paths with.

Because then I'd really be asking for it.

But when Mr. Killer's eyes suddenly flitted from my face to something behind me, I was forced to steal a glance over my shoulder in curiosity. Bad Lay was making his way over to where I was, the topography of his face twisted with rage. I didn't wait to find out why. I already knew I'd pissed him off enough to give chase.

Me and my damn mouth.

Better move some money over from my savings for bail because it looks like I'm going to be punishing a bruised ego tonight.

Passing the stranger whose eyes seemed to drive out all the air in my lungs, I headed for the bathroom. I'd camp out there to clean my shirt, then I'd make my escape when

the pissed-off frat boy gave up. With any luck, I'd evade another guy who couldn't handle hearing the truth. If not, I'd get a good hit in, knock the asshole to the ground, and run away before someone called the cops.

If I'd called Bad Lay right, he'd be way too embarrassed to press charges. His ego wouldn't permit that kind of shame. But just in case, I'd text Emily a quick message about damaging some toxic bro's ego, and she'd be on standby to get me out of jail. You know, as long as I gave her a play-by-play on how I punished him.

I dipped into the bathroom after cutting the line ahead of the other women waiting to use the toilets. I made myself busy with washing and drying my shirt. Emily's text came in only minutes after I sent mine, and I wasn't surprised that she'd already left with some guy.

Ems: Just head back to the apartment, chick. Evade the fight tonight at all costs. I've flown the coop for a sweet boy with desperate eyes and a penchant for being spanked by a domme mommy. I mean it. Do. Not. Engage.

Me: Roger, roger, El Capi-tan. I think he's given up, so I'll just head back home and see you in the morning.

I pocketed my phone and sighed at my face in the mirror. My elusive green eyes beamed an angry iridescence thanks to the shoddy lighting in this bathroom. Even I had to admit I gave all those hot punk girl vibes the guys went gaga for, but now I'd reap none of the reward.

What a waste.

It annoyed me that some guy with a fragile ego was the reason my night was over, but it was my own fault for running my mouth. I knew better. It never went well when I spat the facts they weren't ready to hear, and guys like him were particularly nasty

when I did.

I headed out of the bathroom after checking that Bad Lay wasn't waiting for me. When I didn't see him, I took the quickest route out of the club. Once free of the throbbing beat of the building, I inhaled a grateful breath and headed down the usual alley to go home. After turning the first corner, I was about halfway through the second alley when someone called out to me from behind.

“Hey, bitch. Where do you think you're going?”

I pivoted on my heels, the wrath of my female ancestors crowding my chest. Before I could bark something terrifyingly witty, I noticed the asshole hadn't come alone. In both directions, several guys who were practically clone copies of Bad Lay barked and howled, closing in on me like the beasts they were.

Great, he has friends just as psychopathic.

We weren't far from civilization, but this shortcut didn't face a main street after I turned the corner. It was also far too narrow to give me much dodging and dashing room. Which meant that they'd waited to get me here so they could act on whatever horror they'd contrived for me. If I called someone, they wouldn't get here in time.

I was on my own.

Like I was trained to do, any emotions I felt didn't surface in my expression. I didn't let the fear reach my chest. Doing a slow turn, I counted off the barking assholes. Normally, I'd laugh at the outright ridiculousness of their joint endeavor to appear intimidating while sounding like a bunch of house pets, but it was me who'd pay the heaviest price if I didn't focus.

Five. Shit . I could take two, maybe three if I was in better shape, but five wasn't

something I trained for. Street fights didn't compare to competition-level fighting. Guys like them played dirty. I'd need to be clever to get out of this unscathed.

This wasn't the movies. I couldn't pull a Jackie Chan no matter how much I wanted to. The fighter in me yearned to stick around and see if I could make any of them cry, but I knew I was better off running. So, that was exactly what I'd do once they gave me an opening.

No doubt, they'd underestimate me, so I was the one with the advantage, not them. They'd get cocky with their man-muscles and overwhelming number, but I was fast as shit and hadn't gotten the buzz I wanted earlier. Now I was starting to think that getting splashed with my drink was a blessing in disguise.

"Bitches like you need to be taught a lesson," Bad Lay growled, the charming mask coming right off.

I'd called him right from the start. What we had here was a full-grown, bona fide predator. Even his lines were right out of the serial rapist playbook. Worse, he'd found people as equally depraved and violent as he was. From the way they closed in on me, they'd done this before.

Someone out there had been their first victim. Someone was already living every day with unresolved fear and trauma because of this shitty group of beasts. So, for that victim and any others targeted by these bastards, I'd get a few hits in before I made my escape.

Funny how I'd been running from an unknown offender every night in my dreams for months, but now that I was surrounded by them, I wasn't panicking the same way. If anything, I was numb and terrifyingly calm. I didn't have a reason to think this would end well. To anyone else, I wasn't going to come out of this night alive. But for some reason, it felt like I wasn't alone. Like there was a force greater than myself keeping

me safe.

Before I could ponder the feeling, one of the assholes from behind made a grab for me. I evaded his reach and used his own weight to send the bastard colliding with the asphalt. He hit the ground with a groan. I drove my heel into his stomach, intent on puncturing it, and his cry told me I'd at least done damage.

His buddy ran at me next, far larger than the first. He wasn't strong in the sense of muscles. He just had weight on him. It'd be harder to lift his body over mine without causing substantial injury to myself, so I opted for assaults that crippled him quickly. I'd use his excessive fat against him.

Before the new asshole could get close enough to get his arms around me, I landed the flat of my foot on his kneecap to disable it. Without wasting another movement, I kicked my leg out and sunk my heel into his stomach. I used all my strength to push him back, because heavy bastards like him couldn't keep their balance at a certain point. He teetered, his own weight his greatest adversary, and fell straight back. When the fat bastard cracked his head on the ground, I recovered several steps to get space between us.

I didn't have time to worry if I'd killed him or not. With my exit cleared of attackers, I started to run the opposite direction so I could get to a more trafficked walkway. But one of the bastards on the ground snatched my ankle, and I lost my footing.

Protecting my head, I hit the asphalt on my side. The impact took the wind out of me. It'd been a long time since I landed on something hard enough to feel the echo of it in my bones, so it took me longer than usual to recover.

It was a mistake I couldn't afford to make.

Bad Lay was already flipping me onto my back, his confidence that I was subdued

lifting his mouth into a sinister smile. I got my fingers on him, ready to rip his face to shreds, but the other two pack members held my arms down while the first two I'd taken out recovered from what I'd done to them.

Not dead. Unfortunately.

“That’s better. You put up a good fight, but you’ll be crying when I put this massive cock inside you. You’ll hate how much you like it.”

I spat in my attacker’s face, grunting and fighting off one of the guys who tried to slide his hand up my leg. “Your micro-penis has never satisfied a woman, which is the entire reason you’re here forcing it on one, you sadistic shit.”

Murderous rage burned in my attacker’s eyes before he wrapped his hands around my throat and squeezed until I couldn’t take in air. “I think it’s better when you can’t talk, slut. Let’s hope you don’t die too quickly. I want you to feel every single cock that rips you wide open everywhere there’s a hole before we leave you here like the whore you are for everyone to find.”

So not just a serial rapist. A killer.

The reality of my situation settled into my stomach, and the urge to vomit struck so hard I worried I couldn’t stop it. But I’d be the one to suffer if I threw up. I didn’t want to fight this hard only to asphyxiate on my own disgust.

The asshole relinquished his hold on my throat long enough to allow me to cough and suck in greedy gulps of air, but it was only so he and his revolting asshole crew could get the button and zipper of their pants open to do what they threatened.

But not without a fucking fight.

I kicked my legs up, hitting the gross pervert hovering over me in the stomach. Growling, he violently prized my thighs apart, and his buddies pinned my feet to the ground to keep my legs open. I struggled, bucking my body and trying desperately to dislodge the weight restraining my limbs, but my head knew what my heart refused to acknowledge.

They'd gotten me.

I wasn't going to get away. I was better off waiting for another opportunity. But I kept fighting. I tried over and over to outmaneuver them and get the bastards off me, writhing and struggling because my life depended on it. I'd never let them have the satisfaction of my tears or fear.

I'd fight until I was fucking dead.

Bad Lay tore through my pantyhose to get it out of the way, but then the weight holding down my arms and legs was suddenly gone. I could move them again, and it didn't make any sense why. In my confusion, I peered down, thoughts in disarray. I couldn't see them. And then I noticed Bad Lay was no longer above me. He'd just disappeared...

I couldn't figure out what was happening until I heard someone out of eyeshot make a sound that was an odd mix of a moan and scream. The sounds that followed were grotesque. Like I was in the middle of a horror movie where someone was dismembering several bodies. It was the haunting sound of bones breaking and flesh tearing. Deep voices groaned and pleaded for their lives before they all went deadly quiet.

The sound of liquid hitting the pavement finally encouraged me to sit up. It wasn't happening to me, but I couldn't be sure I wasn't next. If I had to run, I needed to see what I was running away from. Because the way it sounded, it wasn't human.

Or maybe it was better to play dead.

Fuck, I don't know.

I blinked, my entire body quaking despite the vow I made to never show an ounce of fear.

At first, I didn't know what I was looking at. The stranger from the club was standing in the middle of nothing but carnage. Discarded limbs, disfigured bodies, and pools of blood were scattered all around him. Somewhere in my head, I made the connection that these were the men who attacked me, but it was like I couldn't rectify the sight with my knowledge of the world.

Someone couldn't just...tear a person apart with their bare hands, could they? I didn't see a weapon. It was just him and his blood-coated hands. So, how did he do it? What human had that sort of strength? What human could dismember several bodies in seconds flat?

I found it hard to breathe as I held myself up on shaky arms, my head working hard to rationalize what I was seeing.

The guy who'd terrified me with his mere gaze was out here doing something impossible. I'd called him like the others, but I wished I hadn't. I wished I'd fucking stayed home. Because getting attacked by a predator frat crew wasn't anything when you compared it to a killer with inhuman strength. All I could hope was he wasn't here to do the same thing to me.

Only the side of his face was visible from where I was on the ground, but something about it was off. Different from what I remembered. Menacing and full of homicidal intentions. Darker. Like he could see into their very souls and read every sin they'd committed. And he'd make them pay.

Tonight, he'd send them straight to Hell.

Mr. Killer lifted Bad Lay by the throat. The guy was easily two-hundred-plus pounds, but the terrifying man from the club hauled him into the air with one hand like he weighed nothing at all. It was surreal to watch Bad Lay struggling inside the deadly hold before going completely limp. His eyes stayed with his attacker, no longer fighting. The bastard hadn't passed out, but it was like he'd lost every urge to live. Like he'd been put under a spell.

It'd be smarter to close my eyes—the next bit was going to give me nightmares for the rest of my life—but I couldn't stop watching. Deep down, I wanted the asshole to die for what he'd tried to do to me, and for what he'd likely already done to others. In the dark, hateful part of my heart, I was glad someone made sure these assholes never hurt another person.

Mr. Killer whispered something I couldn't hear before blood started to stream out of Bad Lay's eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. A symbol I didn't recognize appeared like it'd been branded onto my attacker's forehead, burning the skin a vibrant red. The area around his eyes hollowed and turned pitch-black. The darkness replaced what had been Bad Lay's eyes, and if I didn't know any better, I'd be convinced I was hallucinating.

Maybe Bad Lay slipped something into my drink when I wasn't looking. Because no matter how I spun it, what I just witnessed defied every logical truth I'd been taught about this world. It was, to put it simply, fucking supernatural.

Mr. Killer tossed the hollow-eyed man to the ground. Again, I was frozen to the spot as he stepped over the massacre he was single-handedly responsible for. Like none of it bothered him—probably because it didn't—the giant killer stalked over to me, his face splattered with my attackers' blood.

I stared at him, confused at first when the terrifying man crouched down to the floor, his head tilting to one side in greeting. “Come on, little raven. It’s time to go.”

Without waiting, he led my arm around his shoulders and gently lifted me under the back of my knees and waist into his arms. It was ironic how careful he was with me after literally tearing five men apart just seconds beforehand.

If I wasn’t in a state of shock—for a lot of fucking reasons—I would’ve demanded he tell me who he was and what he was doing. But for some reason, the minute I was in his arms, everything inside of me quieted. My heart slowed. My erratic breathing calmed. I stopped shaking. And when a cloak of impenetrable blackness wrapped around us, I tucked my head under his chin and closed my eyes, finally safe when I’d been so close to death.

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Chapter Three

Thanatos

Fuck.

I'd acted without thinking. I'd intervened in a way I couldn't take back. But those disgusting pigs put their filthy fucking hands on her. They'd try to hurt my little raven, and every single one of them deserved worse than they got. Have it my way and I would've burned their insides to liquid and kept their souls locked in their bodies long enough to feel every excruciating second of it.

But...she was watching. I couldn't just leave her there. Not after she'd seen what I could do. Not when, in order to collect her soul, I needed her to stay safe.

The woman was an evil-human magnet.

Without realizing it, I'd thoughtlessly intervened on several attempts made by demon-infested men to hurt the oblivious little human. I'd even jimmied my way into a window as a raven to scratch and peck at that bastard boss of hers who thought he could put his hands on what was mine. He was lucky I needed to rely on my bird form in daylight because I would've done more damage as a shadow had I been given the option. Of course, I made sure to pay him a visit later to satisfy my rage.

Humans who committed evil on a normal basis were especially attractive to demons. A perfect vessel to manipulate. But the number of demon-possessed humans that seemed to hover around my little raven was unnatural. As if something about her was

a lure to them. But I couldn't fathom a reason. From what I'd observed, she was the farthest thing from morally corrupt.

I didn't make it a habit of intervening on human-demon affairs. They ripened souls by feeding a human's urge to sin. Only angels cared about the corruption of a human's soul. Only angels were meant to protect worthy souls from demons. As Death, I was meant only to take a soul in whatever state it came to me. But I couldn't let my little raven become anyone's target, not until I'd ripened her soul to personally collect.

So, I'd kept an eye on her in a form she didn't see as a threat—a raven or shadow. Granted, I'd grown fond of fucking around with her every chance I got. Being Death rarely afforded me the entertainment that Asha became at a moment's notice. The little human was rather eccentric and reactive when she thought no one was watching. I found myself looking for ways to drag it out of her, and the nights quickly became my favorite time to play.

It wasn't intentional at first. It was easier to come at night as the shadows. Her presence seemed to have a lure I couldn't refuse. And in order to strike, I needed to be calculated. I needed to have a plan that couldn't fail.

Initially, my observations of her were meant only to aid in ripening her soul, but my presence caused a disturbance with her dreams. So, she'd wake in a state of panic. A few times, she even rolled right off the bed in her fright. I'd barely caught myself before snickering, because I could mask my presence but not my voice.

Every night with her hair a mess atop her head and loose clothes hanging off her body like she never bothered to shop for the right size, she'd rant and sing weird tunes I didn't always recognize, proclaiming herself the master of her emotions and dreams.

Once, she'd even sent her pointed finger my direction, whispering, "Be gone,

demon!” I froze, not sure how but convinced she’d seen me. But instead, she ambled to her feet and strolled right past me to the bathroom, mumbling about how her bladder was “stupid” and “couldn’t read a room.”

Honestly, the little thing never made much sense, so why did I crave every word that came out of her ridiculous but lush mouth?

No matter how many times it happened, Asha never failed to entertain me. It was addictive. Sure, being the Reaper of Souls came with an especially dark sense of humor, but I rarely found myself laughing. I rarely smiled at all. So, it’d become a habit of sorts to come to her in the dead of night and seek out the escape her antics offered.

It was very unlike me to spend so much time away from my duties as Death. I didn’t necessarily need to be present. It was true that Death was everywhere, as was I. The ravens and shadows were my messengers whenever I wasn’t available—an extension of my consciousness and desires—but I’d never found a reason to stay away.

Not until her.

If the others knew how often I followed a little human around, I’d lose face with them. They’d think I’d gone insane. And they’d be right to think so. If they knew how I’d spent every night watching her chest rise and fall, counting her breaths, and carefully memorizing her shape and face, they’d intervene on my behalf to see that my duty was fulfilled. Because we only had one moon cycle left to bring the end of the world.

I’d never intended for them to find out I’d already discovered her months before any of them found theirs, but now my entire plan was fucked in a single night. No, if I were honest, it was fucked from the moment our eyes met.

When she finally saw me.

When her gorgeous green eyes dragged down my body, both afraid and thirsty for what I could do to her, it was painfully clear I'd miscalculated. I'd underestimated what months spent watching her might do to my head. Who knew that there was someone out there more powerful than Death.

And her name was Asha.

Fucking shit.

Tonight was the first time I'd chosen to show myself to her. I was curious if she'd notice me. What reaction would she have when our eyes met and she was faced with a stranger she'd normally avoid? Would she glare and say something with that biting wit of hers? Would I make her pussy wet and throbbing with need even when I was everything she shouldn't want? Would I be the escape she sought tonight? Or maybe...would she know me somehow? Would she recognize me as the shadow and raven who'd followed her for months?

What I wondered most out of everything was whether or not I'd finally get to taste her lips and feel those luscious curves pressed against me.

When she stood there in front of me— finally seeing me —I didn't care what rule it broke to talk to her. What I risked by reaching out. What could inevitably go wrong if the usual tricks didn't work on her. Because all I wanted was to hear my name in that raspy tone of hers. All I could think about was finding a reason to touch and feel her warmth under my hands.

Unfortunately, before I could do anything but stare, another demon-possessed human came looking for her. This one gave me pause. His corruption was so far gone he wouldn't live long. His soul had been ripened by too many demons. And whatever

acts he'd already committed, they didn't bode well for my little raven. So, I let her escape to keep her safe and followed him instead.

If not for that stupid angel who didn't know her place, I would've gotten to her sooner. But I honestly thought she'd already gotten away like all those times before.

She was clever and resourceful. I'd seen it enough times to know Asha wouldn't hesitate to fight back. It was beautiful how perfectly she punished bad men infested with demons. Too many times when I thought I'd have to be the one to save her, the little human proved she was plenty capable of doing it herself. So, I hung back and watched. I let my little raven punish them in my stead.

Sometimes, I wondered which one of us was truly Death.

Except, when I found her with him, he'd brought more demon-infested bastards, and they'd already overpowered her. The rage went straight to my head. I lost control. I wanted to feel their blood coat my hands and paint my face. Every single bastard would pay with their lives for what they did to what was mine. A punishment so thorough it'd stay with them even as they burned in the recesses of Hell.

But I couldn't do it as a shadow or raven. So, I came to them as Thanatos. I reaped their souls as Death. I personally sent each bastard to the deepest level of Hell for hurting her.

I didn't hesitate to take Asha with me. Homicidal rage still melted the flesh from my bones, and I needed to have her in my arms to calm it. I'd already done what I promised never to do. I'd shown myself for who I was, and now I'd need to act quickly if I was going to ripen her soul for the apocalypse.

Letting the shadows remove the blood that saturated my body, I walked through her apartment like I did every night. She'd stayed uncomfortably silent all the way to her

room. I carefully laid the little human out over her unmade bed, and her inquisitive eyes finally lifted to my face, seeing something I wished she hadn't.

Her nightmare.

I'd expected her to scream and shout at me, but she didn't. If anything, she was too quiet. Of course, she was likely in shock and still unsure of what she witnessed, so I didn't push. I didn't speak. I simply took a seat beside her, absently fixing the loose hair that laid across her mouth.

Unlike other humans, I couldn't read her thoughts. I suspected it was another measure put in place because of who she was and what her soul meant for the apocalypse. But what we knew about Counter Souls was limited to theory. The only thing we knew for certain was that each one of us had one, and reaping any one of them would bring the apocalypse.

"You've been here before." It wasn't a question; it was a statement. "Is this a dream, then? Is that what's happening? Dudes can't tear other dudes apart. You're not a monster."

Oh, but I was. The greatest monster of them all.

Asha's voice wasn't the robust, sarcastic tone I'd come to expect from her. Tonight, she was afraid. And though I'd enjoyed her fear every night since finding her, tonight's burned a hole in my throat.

The shock and denial from the night's events could be exploited to make her think it'd all been a nightmare. I could disappear into the shadows and leave her to think she'd hallucinated everything. It was better to come to her as another human who looked like a man from her dreams—to make her fall into lust and ripen her soul by exploiting her desires. Zelus would. He was a master of conquering others through

their desires. But I didn't want her to forget me. I wanted her to know who I was.

I wanted her to know the monster.

"No, little raven. As much as you wish it were, none of this is a dream." I dipped my head down, stealing her innocent gaze for a heartbeat before fusing my lips with hers.

I expected Asha to punish me for taking advantage of her. I was rarely surprised by anything, but my little raven continued to baffle. Instead of hitting me, she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and dragged me back down for another kiss.

A groan rumbled inside my chest, reveling in how sweet she tasted. Pleasure was a luxury as the Reaper of Souls, and her mouth against mine was fucking perfection. I could only guess what it'd feel like when my cock made its home inside her, sweetening her soul for the end of the world. It'd probably be the greatest pleasure of them all.

Only one moon cycle left. Only a short month to take this lovely human's soul, but I'd do it as Thanatos and no one else.

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Chapter Four

Asha

A stranger—or should I call him my savior—took me to my apartment. He knew where I lived. But why? Why would he know? Then again, how could someone like him tear apart five men with his bare hands? None of what happened at the club made sense.

Maybe because this wasn't real life. Maybe I was finally part of the nightmare I dreamed every night, living the moments I'd forgotten each morning. Maybe I'd wake up at three a.m. like I always did and remember nothing.

But why did his lips against mine feel so fucking real? Why was it that the second our mouths touched, I'd never been so turned on in all my life, or so desperate to get someone's hands on my body?

His kiss felt right when everything about tonight was insanely wrong. I got the sense that I'd lose everything if I kept kissing him and let this thing between us go where it was clearly heading. Except, I didn't care if I did, and maybe that was the most terrifying revelation of the night.

Sometime between leaving the alley and getting to my apartment, the blood that had drenched the gorgeous killer's body had disappeared. Not one stain or red patch of evidence was left for my eyes to find. And it was just another nail in the it's-a-dream coffin.

My savior's fingers caressed the arch of my neck, gliding down until they reached the place where my heart pounded. I sucked in a frantic breath as he tugged my shirt down and dropped his head so he could suck on the exposed mound of my breast popping out of lace. "You taste so sweet, little raven. Sweeter than I ever imagined."

Little raven? Why does even that pet name feel right?

The stranger's ghost-grey eyes lifted and connected with mine, and I swear they were glowing. Fuck, everything about him glowed even when I got the oddest sensation that he'd melt into the shadows if I looked away. Like this terrifying stranger was a goddamn phantom brought to life. Everything about him was dark despite shining like the moon in a starless sky. He beamed his own goddamn light.

His devilish tongue traced the line of lace cutting into my breast, leaving a wet, glistening path over my skin. I swallowed a moan, tensing, trying not to imagine the things he could do to me with that tongue of his. I'd never seen one so long. It could've been a snake's tongue if I hadn't known any better. The only thing missing was the fork in it, but the length wasn't natural. I couldn't help but wonder what something that long would feel like between my legs, penetrating me in a way no one's ever had.

The sensation of his mouth worshipping the skin around my bra wreaked havoc on my pulse, and I couldn't keep still. My hips moved and my stomach tensed, wading the storm of sensation he gave me without asking, effectively pinned under his massive form and under his control. But still, I didn't want to escape. If anything, I hoped he'd take whatever he wanted. And I'd watch him do it. It was crazy, but I didn't want to miss a goddamn second.

With both of his hands, he yanked my shirt apart. The sound of fabric tearing next to my racing heart were all I heard in the otherwise quiet room. Something came over me as the impossible stranger dragged and splayed his large, ring-covered hand down

my front. Something carnal and full of dark desires. Something that hadn't been there until he touched me.

His eyes took the same path as his hand as if he were mesmerized by the sight. As if he'd worship every inch with his gaze alone. I wasn't naked, but I might as well have been with the way his glowing gaze ate me up. Every curve was delicious to him, especially the extra ones I'd gotten thanks to my terrible schedule and lack of training. He was a king claiming new land. Every part of me was now his to do whatever he wished.

And fuck, I loved everything about it.

No one had ever stared at me like Mr. Killer did. No one looked ready to destroy everything and anyone just to be with me. I couldn't explain it, but every touch, every caress of his powerful grey-white gaze was possession personified. I should be scared—terrified, actually—but I wasn't. He could kidnap me, hurt me, even kill me, but for some odd reason, I knew he wouldn't. Somewhere deep inside of me, I was already his.

I'd been waiting my entire life for him.

My breath came faster, and I struggled to say something in this weird dream I was having. "What's your name?" I asked in a soft whisper very unlike me.

The stranger dropped a kiss between my breasts and then flicked his gaze back up to mine. "Thanatos. But you can call me Than, little raven."

Entranced, I watched his hand slide out of view. "Thanatos...are you sure this isn't a dream?"

I didn't expect him to chuckle, and when he did, I swore the shadows around us

moved in reaction. I barely caught it out of the corner of my eye, but it happened. They'd shifted with him. All of them. Not just the ones his shape cast on the walls, but every single fucking shadow in the room. I couldn't explain how I knew he was the entire reason they had. In this weird dream world the two of us shared, this devilishly handsome stranger controlled the shadows.

Maybe the night, too.

Instead of answering, Thanatos tossed his leather jacket over the side of the bed and dragged his skull shirt up his huge torso. His beautifully sculpted upper half tautened and reformed when he finally discarded his shirt next to the jacket already on the floor. His skin was beautifully brown even as it glowed cast in moonlight. The shadows clung to every strong contour. But it was his gaze that stole my attention more than the perfectly sculpted form that came into view. The ethereal beams never left mine the entire time he undressed.

I couldn't look away if I wanted to.

The size of him doubled out of clothes. Every powerful cord and muscle expressed how deadly this man truly was. I'd spent years fantasizing about a guy capable of throwing me around. I never once thought someday I'd meet one who could. Okay, so he probably wasn't real, and this was still technically a fantasy, but if I was going to lean into this dream—or whatever it was—then I might as well try out the things I never thought possible.

As I laid under him, I yearned to be wrapped inside those enormous arms and pinned down by that dangerous, oversized body. Despite looking like a terrifying monster stalking me in the dead of night, I wasn't afraid of being eaten by him. No, if anything, I hoped he'd swallow me whole.

I fucking needed him to.

“Come here, Asha,” he beckoned with a penetrating stare and seductive smile.

When did I tell him my name?

If I was smart, I’d run. If I was smart, I’d get out before I discovered what hid behind that lethal smile of his. But I guess I wasn’t as smart as I thought I was.

Tonight, I was the perfect victim.

I moved before I realized, sitting up to be closer to him. To do whatever he bid me to do. Tilting his head, the gorgeous killer grabbed me around the throat with one of his impossibly large hands, his touch possessive but surprisingly gentle, and then he brought my mouth back to his. My lips parted to moan my dangerous savior’s name, but his tongue was quicker. It filled the space of my open mouth and smothered every sound I tried to make. I clung to his wrists, his steady pulse thrumming under my clammy palms.

So, he had a heart? And it pumped blood? It was odd to be surprised, but a part of me was convinced he was dead. Or a vampire. Or maybe even a demon. But I didn’t think for a fucking second he’d have a heartbeat or blood pumping through his veins. I thought for sure that whoever Thanatos was, he’d brought Hell with him and wouldn’t need to worry about pesky things like organs and life-sustaining blood.

So, what was he?

The killer growled, a thunderous vibration that echoed from his door-wide chest before his hand sunk between my quaking thighs and widened the hole my attackers made in my pantyhose. Whining into his kiss, I tried to close my legs, but something wrapped around my thighs and kept them open. I gasped again, my legs yanked farther apart by something I couldn’t see.

Thanatos's fingers slid over the shamefully wet lace of my thong. Thrusting his tongue between my parted lips, his mouth devoured mine. He sneaked a couple fingers under the lace and teased my clit like he knew exactly what'd get me off most. My stomach contracted, and I bit down on his lower lip by accident.

And surprisingly, he bled.

I was startled when the coppery-tang hit my tongue. I hadn't expected someone like him to bleed. If anything, I thought he'd have unbreakable skin. But probably most shocking was the overwhelming urge to drink him—to lap up every drop like it was my own personal drug of choice.

I licked the blood off his lips, savoring the taste, drunk on it. My head slowly fell back in a tipsy daze, affected by whatever witchcraft was in his blood.

Thanatos groaned, his hold on my jaw clenching. "Fuck. I never thought I'd love it so much when you finally bit back, but do it again. As much as you'd like. I want my blood inside you." His eyes glinted, catching the moonlight. "Like my cock will be, little raven."

His other hand slipped into my red hair and yanked my head farther back. I swallowed a moan, a hard throb hitting between my legs where his fingers still tormented me. I fought to stay off the edge. I was going to come if he rubbed any harder. The quake in my thighs and tension in my lower belly told me so. But worse than that, I was so thirsty. I yearned for the same thing he did.

Dark hair fell around Thanatos's eyes, giving him a crazed look as he watched me—the willing prey who wanted nothing more than to be eaten. His jaw clenched and the cords along his neck strained. Wetting his lips, the killer's white-hot gaze dropped back to my mouth. With another feral sound, the hand in my hair tightened, and his thumb rubbed my clit without mercy.

“Thanatos...” I moaned.

Biting my neck hard enough to get a gasp, he penetrated me with two of his fingers, scissoring them inside. My pussy clenched around them, fighting but desperate for it. Finally, he kissed me hard enough to suck the air out of my lungs, whispering against my lips, “Bite me, little raven.”

Scratching my nails down his back, I did exactly what I was told. I bit him. It was out of character for me, but I blamed the fact that this was all a dream. Come tomorrow and I’d unpack the fucked-up things I did here. But for now, I gave into the urge to do whatever he commanded.

I tasted his blood again, no longer hesitating. It was rich and delightful. Nothing like I’d expect. Nothing like real life. He tasted like sin, delicious and forbidden. My lower half throbbed and clenched harder around his fingers, and his satisfied growl was enough to make me brazenly fuck myself on his hand. After a second, his blood coated my throat, and I couldn’t help the sounds of feral need leaving my throat. I continued to drink it like I’d been thirsty forever.

Before I understood what was happening, I was on my back, arms tied up to the headboard by something I couldn’t see with his head between my legs. I stared down in shock, confused by the black wrapping around my thighs to keep them bent, open, and immobile. Looking up, the same darkness wrapped around my joined arms. I tested the feeling, unable to pull or move.

Am I being bound by...fucking shadows?

Again, I should be mortified. I’d been attacked only a short time ago, and here I was with some stranger who’d been the one to tear them apart, becoming his sexy plaything with barely two words exchanged between us. Bound by shadows, no less, and completely at his mercy. I should want to run for my life, to fear for my future

with his head between my legs, but I didn't. Not even a little bit. I wanted it, too. Call it the suspension bridge effect or temporary madness, but I was willing to sell my soul to the Devil just to have one night with him.

This is a dream.

It was the permission I needed to enjoy it, and when his tongue finally tasted where I was ridiculously wet for him, my head flew back and my chest pushed off the bed, surrendering the way I wanted to from the very beginning.

Because this was a fucking dream.

Chapter Five

Thanatos

How fucking beautiful was this creature? What right did she have being so gorgeous bathed in moonlight and wrapped in my shadows?

I couldn't keep the darkness away. My shadows wanted her as desperately as I did. They were me by extension, but tonight, I didn't have any control over them. They sought her out, moving to touch and wrap around her without thought or command.

But, fuck, did my little raven look good bound by my shadows. Her milky-white skin contrasted their darkness beautifully, and I couldn't get enough of the sight. I wanted to brand it into my memory and paint it on a large canvas so I could look on it whenever I wanted. Even if it meant that every other horseman questioned its origin.

Asha followed the shadows moving over her body with curiosity, not fear. As if she wanted to touch them and find out what they could do. But they kept her locked to the bed, leaving the curious human to watch their slithery descent with her captivating green eyes.

Of course, she thought tonight was a dream, so my shadows binding and snaking across her limbs didn't seem odd. It was all part of a cleverly constructed dream. I thought for sure I wanted to come to her as a nightmare, but the fact that I hadn't settled inside my chest like it pleased me. Why would it matter how she felt about me?

I was her nightmare come to life.

The monster under her bed.

“Are...are you controlling them?” Asha asked out of nowhere, dragging me out of my spiraling thoughts.

Grinning, I leveled my intense, all-seeing eyes on her. “Does it scare you?”

Her breathing was shallow, but she quickly shook her head, denying it so strongly it made my eyebrow quirk in amusement. “It’s just weird. I know this is a dream, but it all feels so...real.”

Because it is, little raven.

My shadows might be what touched and imprisoned her first, but it was I who needed to own the little human. Every fucking inch of her.

I wrapped squeezing hands around her soft thighs, addicted to how every part of her body was made exactly to my liking. Fucking perfection. That was the danger of this woman, no doubt—she was created to be my greatest temptation and my most terrifying weakness.

My cock throbbed and pushed against my pants, demanding I sink into her heat and spill every dark part of myself as deep as I could. Lay claim to her in ways no other person could. But I denied myself the treat. For now.

I wanted to savor her.

Her chest hitched when I licked her wet opening, tasting it for the first time. Even this part of her was made for me. Utterly fucking delicious. And I was starving. Had been

for a long time. It took every ounce of control I had left not to dive into her and force the length of my tongue as deep as it would go.

Instead, I slowly traced the soft outer parts, teasing the places that made her thighs quiver with the urge to clench. My shadows kept her legs wide open for me, but I wouldn't mind the little human using all her strength to crush my head between them.

"Oh, fuck. Just like that," she groaned, her voice cutting out a little at the end. It made it nearly impossible to focus. My cock was already so hard it could puncture through the pants I wore.

Wouldn't that be a sight? How would the little human react to my dick slicing through fabric, I wondered? Certainly amusing to imagine her face should I let it.

Asha arched and swiveled as much as my shadows allowed, stealing my focus instantly. The sight of the gorgeous thing writhing from the pleasure I gave her got my dick fucking throbbing.

I'd never craved someone like this. Never thought about the endless ways I could have them or make them writhe in pleasure. Or how to forever bind them to me so I never had to let go of this feeling. I was ready to be buried inside her. Fucking dying for it as ironic as that was coming from Death himself. It was all I could think about with her taste on my tongue and her moans in my ears.

She was finally mine to ripen and devour.

Her lustful gaze stayed with mine, living for everything I did to her without asking. She couldn't wait for what was next, and I couldn't wait to show her what no mortal was capable of giving her. How would she respond to the piercings running the length of my cock? Would her mouth grow wet? Would her legs go weak, her pulse quicken, and her pussy clench imagining all the ways I'd fuck her with it?

If she didn't care for the piercings, they were easy to remove, but most women enjoyed them. Not that I had time for many, but I'd gotten the occasional craving to have a woman under me. Honestly, it was Zelus's idea in the first place, the kinky fuck. He'd talked me into doing it, saying "Give those human bitches pleasure they'd never forget." I knew better to listen to Zelus go on about his sexual prowess, but I'd grown fond of the effect it had on the women I bent over to satisfy an urge.

If I wanted, I could change my appearance to match whatever she preferred. I chose this form because it was closest to how I saw myself, but being Death meant I could shift to be whoever or whatever she wanted. Still, the fear of the little human rejecting this form was unexpected. As if I was...self-conscious? Concerned she'd reject me? But I was Death. Death didn't get self-conscious or worry about whether or not he was wanted.

Granted, I'd never been refused by anyone.

I sucked her wet pussy into my mouth and grazed my lengthened canines over the petal-soft flesh I found there. Her wanting moan nearly caused me to sink my fangs into her, but I wouldn't. Not tonight. Tonight was about the euphoric pleasure I could give her without biting. I'd save the taste of her blood for another night. A night when she was ready to surrender her soul to me.

Asha fought the restraints keeping her locked to the headboard, pleading with the darkness to release her, but I liked her bound and didn't send them away. If anything, I beckoned more to join. Several snaked across her gorgeous white flesh and teased her body into another beautiful curve.

I dragged a hand down her chest and stomach, obsessed with how quickly my nails left red marks across her obscenely pale skin. Lifting the little human off the bed, my shadows released her to me, but only enough so I could have her the way I wanted her.

Greedy darkness. But then again, so was I.

Having Asha under my command was too good to end this early into the night. If she cried for me to send them away again, maybe I'd give in. I smirked. But probably not.

"Thanatos..." she begged, stomach retracting sharply when my tongue penetrated her. "Please, just fuck me already. I can't take it anymore."

She wasn't the only one, but this was my dessert to savor. I wouldn't surrender it to anyone, not even her.

I stole a look at the bound beauty, soaking in the sight of her completely at my mercy. It was easy to tell she liked my shadows more than she let on. It was in the flush of her skin and glazed look about her eyes. She was getting off on being my prey.

Good.

The urge to hunt her clawed at my throat, demanding I send her running into the night so I could chase her down and fuck her out in the open. But I kept that part of me locked away. Tonight, I'd take my time and give her more pleasure than she could conceivably comprehend. Later, I'd devour her excited fear. That promise was the only reason I kept myself in check. I promised myself another night—a future I wasn't permitted to have but would take all the same.

My tongue worked back and forth, sliding and flicking, delving deeply into her softness and tasting parts of her no human tongue could reach. She writhed and moved over the bed in a sensual dance, conflicted about whether she should give in or keep fighting. But it wouldn't be Asha if she surrendered right away, so I welcomed it. My shadows gave her just enough room to put on a show, to fight back, but neither of us wanted her to get away.

Not this time, at least.

Sucking on her clit, I beckoned my darkness over. It slithered over her stomach, quickly making its way from her chest to her hips. Her glittering gaze followed its path, confusion etched into the lines of her face. Then her head shot back when it slipped between her legs and stroked the place I was already devouring.

She wasn't given a chance to ask questions. My tongue tormented the deepest part of her, twisting and fucking the vulgar moans out of her. The shadow stroking her clit moved to tease the other hole before I pulled away.

I sat up, licking my lips of her taste.

Have it my way and I'd eat her delectable pussy all night long. But my dick was violently pulsing inside my pants. I needed to be inside of her. Fucking her. Ripening her body to my liking. Spilling my dark seed inside her. Breeding her.

No. Fuck. I can't breed her.

My jaw locked, fighting the urges bubbling inside my chest. Urges I hadn't any right to act on. Urges that made me forget why I'd come to her in the first place. I stared at the beauty wrapped in my darkness. She was so fucking beautiful.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Her eyes took a slow path down my body when the rest of my clothes transformed into shadows and disappeared. "Oh my god—"

I put a finger to my mouth, hushing her. "You're never to say another man's name around me again, little raven. Do you understand?"

Her eyebrow quirked in adorable perplexity. “I didn’t...oh,” she murmured, finally catching on. “Does that mean you believe God’s a man? How very old-fashioned of you.”

I’d forgotten who it was I saved tonight. This was the ridiculous human prone to silly rants in the middle of the night at no one but the four walls. Despite the fact that we were both naked, ready to commit a number of sins, it appeared even that wasn’t enough to smother the silliness from her mouth.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. With my fucking dick out.

Asha’s lips twitched, hiding her smile, before her eyes caught sight of the entire reason this absurd moment happened in the first place. I followed her line of sight, smirking and flexing in an uncharacteristically proud moment.

The curious human tilted her head, still quaking inside of her shadow prison. “I didn’t expect that , but I can’t say I’m mad about it. If I’m honest, I...want to know what that feels like. But, um, you’re going to need to go slow, killer. That thing is a goddamn weapon,” she rambled cutely, her tongue swiping across her lips like she was thirsty for it.

And fuck, I wanted to force my cock into her throat and make her choke on it. Smother every silly word bent on leaving that pretty little mouth of hers. Watch the tears and saliva pour down her face because she could barely take it all in.

But I didn’t move on her like the monster I was. Instead, I watched her face and body for signs of distress and rejection. It took me a second to piece it all together in my head. I was waiting for Asha to give me permission.

Which was fucking insane .

Death didn't need permission. I wasn't here for her consent. I was here to ripen her soul for the apocalypse. I could coax ripening even when she wasn't willing. But why did it feel like I was waiting for this little human—my Counter Soul—to accept me for everything I was? The man and the monster. A killer and her savior. The reason she'd one day lose her soul and no longer exist.

Fuck.

I dragged a hand through my dark hair, ignoring the powerful burn in my throat. Denying the explosive feeling in my chest when I thought about how one day, I'd be the one to take her life. How one day, she'd be gone forever.

As if she'd read my mind, the sensual air receded, and Asha stared at me, struggling to get free of my shadows. I hadn't called them off, but she gained her freedom somehow and was suddenly in front of me, her soft hands taking my jaw's shape. "Is everything okay, Thanatos?"

Without meaning to, my eyes closed, living for the sweet way she said my name. For the fucking amazing tone of fear it'd taken. Not fear of me, but fear that I'd reject her. She wanted me the same way I wanted her. No, needed her.

When my eyes opened, I took the red-haired beauty by the throat and kissed her so fiercely it nearly sent both of us off balance. My shadows reached out and dragged her back down to the mattress, binding her the same way as before, and I hovered over her body like the fucking menace I was.

"I've kept you waiting. Forgive me." Her eyes danced across my face, and I grabbed her around the back of her head, collecting a handful of that beautiful vibrant hair before yanking it hard enough to make her gasp. "Tell me one thing, little raven. Are you ready for what comes after I fuck you the way we both want? Are you prepared to give me everything?"

The pause and breath she took left me oddly anxious, but when she let it go and a ghost of a smile lifted her mouth, the tension in my body eased.

“Yes, I’ll give you everything.”

Fuck.

With her consent, I no longer cared what I’d come for. She was mine now.

All mine.

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Chapter Six

Asha

Where had this man come from? Shows I'd watched? Books I'd read? What in the actual fuck was happening with my dreams these days? And why did it feel like I'd sold my soul the second I agreed to give him everything?

Thanatos didn't wait. His kiss overpowered sense. His tongue conquered every space in my mouth. The darkness moved with him when he rocked his waist and thrust his huge, pierced cock inside of me. I'd never felt anything like it. Each silver ball stimulated a different part, and the sensation of them as he fucked me was entirely unique. It wasn't terrible. No, if anything, it felt surprisingly good.

The loud slap of his hips cut through the sound of our heavy, lustful breathing. Sensation swarmed and flooded my lower half and was already too much to handle. The blissful stimulation wasn't something I could adequately put into words. It hit like a storm. Like a motherfucking disaster. Without question, I'd be a whole new person when this gorgeous demon was done with me.

My spine curved, but what I could only describe as shadows come to life kept me from bending as far as I would've liked. The dark-haired bad boy's tongue dipped in and out of my mouth while his unforgiving cock sunk into me over and over without mercy. I'd never been this close to death until Thanatos fucked me like it was his intention to take my body and soul tonight.

It went against who I was to give into him, but I'd done it almost gleefully. I blamed

the dream me who was desperate for a good fuck.

I'd been with assholes who thought they knew how to pleasure a woman, but really, all they knew how to do was pleasure themselves and pretend they'd rocked our world. Live in a delusion that they were the greatest sex we'd ever had. It happened enough times that it wasn't an exception; it was the rule. But Thanatos wasn't dominating my body to meet his own selfish end. If anything, from the way he thrust and found every sensitive place inside and out, his motive was to destroy me with pleasure.

And I wasn't ready for it.

Bliss had never hit me so quickly. The storm came on hard and fast, and I couldn't catch my breath. All I managed to do was react. To curve, shift, and fight the invisible hold on my body. I just had to hope that at some point, he'd have mercy on me.

"Fuck! Oh...fuck. Wait a goddamn minute, you sexy jerk—" I barely bit out, electric sensation slicing down my spine and stimulating my flesh with every possessive shift of his hips.

Instead of waiting, Thanatos kissed me harder. Fucked me like a goddamn madman. Dominated every part of me like the demon he was. And the smack of his waist between my thighs was a vicious echo in my ears.

The elusive dance of his powerful form was mesmerizing. Shadows played across his smooth flesh, permitting short glimpses of how much strength he put into dominating every part of me. Every muscle tensed and released—a visual story of his determination to make me his in every shift and clench.

His glowing eyes lifted, connecting with mine. No man had ever looked at me the

way Thanatos did. Like he'd devour me whole. Like I couldn't run anywhere he wouldn't find me. Like he'd chase me to the ends of the Earth to keep me by his side. And fuck, it got to me like nothing ever did. I wanted him to chase me. To be the beast in the night, and I, its eager meal.

Thanatos's hand wrapped around my jaw, angling my face so he could drive his tongue into my mouth. I'd seen how long it was, but he was a goddamn genius at using it. Flicking, coiling, and tasting me like he couldn't get enough. I wanted to reach out and hold onto him so I could anchor myself to this moment, but I couldn't move. These damn shadows kept me restrained in the most infuriating way.

"No, no, little raven," the Devil in disguise whispered into my ear, slamming his cock into me several more times. I moaned his name and fought to stay off the edge. "You should be demanding I fuck you harder. Tell me how much you enjoy my cock inside you. Beg me to make you come. I just might give you what you want."

Holy shit.

I'd mocked dirty talk. Emily loved it. I, on the other hand, hadn't met a single guy who didn't make me burst out laughing when he tried to call me a dirty whore or shamelessly narrated what he planned to do to me. This dude, though, was on another level entirely. The way he growled each word and squeezed my ass to emphasize he'd make good on every threat, every promise, the way he wrapped his hand around my throat and dominated the senses—well, let's just say that I got it now, Emily. Holy shit, I got it so fucking hard.

The beautiful killer's face came into view, his hips slowing, and I watched his expression in confusion. The smirk he wore a short second later was nearly as scary as the one he'd given Bad Lay after dismembering his frat boy buddies.

The shadows wrapped around my body receded, finally permitting movement. But

his hand was quickly on my throat, fingers pressing firmly at both sides. He could kill me, but he wouldn't. Instead, it was instant pleasure. Nothing like those amateurs who cut off a girl's windpipe. Not that I'd ever let them. This was how it was supposed to go. The gorgeous killer knew his way around a woman's body. Or more importantly, how to choke someone for pleasure.

Please, don't let me ever wake up from this dream.

Back arching, I bit my lower lip, and my insides clamped down on his pierced length. His approving groan, full of pleasure and promise, made my thighs clench at his sides. The same way I got off on what he was doing to me, he got off on the effect it had on me.

"That's it. You look so good with my hand around your throat, surrendering like the good prey you are," he growled, his powerful waist moving again. "How does it feel to have this monster's cock inside of you? Does it feel like a sin, little raven?"

Before I could respond, Thanatos flipped me over, grabbed my hair, and fucked me doggy style with as much intensity as before. One of his hands gripped my hip in aggressive possession, and then he drove me back onto his cock. Each thrust hit its mark, washing sensation into my thighs every time. I struggled to stay upright on shaky arms, but Thanatos never slowed for a goddamn second.

Sex like this didn't exist in real life. I was sorry to say I'd never been fucked brainless before this dream. And I'd also never worried about what would happen to me if he kept plowing into me the way he was. Could I come back from a violent fuck like this, or would it forever be branded on my body? This might be a dream, but the fear of what it'd do to me after was real.

My neck was curved back thanks to the hold the dominant bad boy had on my hair, and the sounds of my ass meeting his front assaulted my ears. I moaned, but every

sound I made was distorted by the awkward angle my neck was pulled into. I couldn't warn him when the tension in my waist finally snapped. Couldn't even vocalize my unbelievable relief the way I wanted to when the crash took my body into another brutal curve and I came harder than I'd ever come in my entire life. But the aftermath was fucking bliss.

If I died now, I wouldn't care. It was that good.

Arms wrapped around my naked chest, collecting my breasts and soft curves inside strong forearms and biceps. I was pinned against Thanatos's firm body. I felt the sensual ripple of his muscles against my back as he continued to fuck me, and then the steady pulse of his cock as he came, waist locked, groaning my name. He sank his teeth into my shoulder, and I cried out more in surprise than pain. If this hadn't been a dream, I'd definitely be sporting a bruise come morning.

Still trying to catch my breath, I glanced over my shoulder at him, but the world shifted violently. Lightheadedness struck just as hard as the shock of five men murdered had. I didn't know what was happening until everything went black and I slumped over in his arms. I was laid out over the mattress, but that was the only thing I registered before my brain shut off and I went unconscious.

My head was fuzzy when I woke in my room, clothed and tucked under the covers. It took a minute to get my bearings. I remembered the dream in vivid detail. That never happened to me. It'd been months since I remembered any dream at all. Why did I remember this one so clearly? Like it happened? Like it wasn't a dream but a memory?

Peering over, I noticed that the other side of the bed was empty. My stomach dropped.

I should be elated. No mystery supernatural killer. I wasn't a witness to five men

being murdered by a demon—or whatever the fuck he was. I didn't have to rethink my entire existence, because now that I was awake and he wasn't there, I could confidently say it was all a dream. Or would some call that a nightmare?

The sex certainly wasn't.

I'd happily spend my life savings to recreate sex that good. What did a girl have to do to trick her brain into another sex dream like that? Maybe there was something on TikTok. Hypnosis? Psychotherapy? Demon summoning? Whatever it took, I'd go to sleep every night in hopes that I'd meet the sexy demon again and be bound in his shadows.

Groaning, I sat up. Every part of me ached. It wasn't clear how the night went since everything was a dream. When did the dream start? Where did my night end? Was alcohol to blame? Did I walk home or was Emily the reason I made it back?

I couldn't help the disappointed feeling in my chest that the best sex I'd ever had wasn't even real. Of course, it came directly after nearly being gang raped and killed, then witness to some inhuman stranger tearing apart frat boys right in front of me. So, I guess I should be glad I dodged that bullet, right? There was no telling what therapy I'd need after being party to a five-person homicide. I'd leave that honor to Benson and Stabler. No need to relive the trauma from my uncomfortably realistic nightmare. If anything, I was lucky that it was only my fucked-up brain and not reality that manifested those assholes.

I really need to stop binge-watching SVU.

Throwing my legs over the side of my bed, I tried to get my thoughts together enough to find Emily and demand how I got home. I certainly couldn't remember getting myself back in bed. Or putting on the usual oversized shirt and pair of shorts. The door to my room creaked open, and my head shot over in surprise. But it wasn't a

certain killer who fucked like a demon, just a girl who had some ‘splainin’ to do.

“Hey, last night—”

“No. Stop right there,” Emily ordered, coming into the room and closing the door behind her like she was afraid of us being overheard. “We need to get our alibis straight. But before that, I have a series of questions I need you to answer, chick.”

I was instantly worried I’d committed a crime by how quick she was to go into lawyer mode. “Oh, fuck, what did I do last night?”

Shaking her head, my friend of fifteen years tucked unbrushed hair behind her ear and settled her gorgeous blue gaze on me. “Ah-ah. You and I went straight home together after going to the club. But...um, should you have, say, killed five men in a street with no witnesses, then as your lawyer, no you didn’t.”

Killed five men? What...?

“Excuse me?”

Emily cracked a smile, giggling. “Oh, come on. You’re great in a fight, but there’s no way you could tear a bunch of men to pieces on your own. Even to the police, it’s unclear how it happened. They theorize that it’s probably gang related.”

Torn to pieces? Oh, fuck.

“No, my questions are less murder inspired and more delicious bad boy related. Who the fuck is that gorgeous specimen cooking breakfast for us, and does he have a brother or friend he can ask to come over so I can sit on their face?”

I was on my feet in an instant. I didn’t wait for Emily as I fled the room and turned

the corner into our kitchen to find the man of my literal dreams standing in front of our stove, just as beautiful in the morning sun as he was in the shadows of night.

His eyes slid over to me, no longer the white I remembered but a pale blue instead. The dark hair I'd ran my fingers through was perfectly styled but not brushed back like the night before. He wasn't wearing a shirt, but he was dressed in the same pants he'd worn to the club. You know, the ones that disappeared and became shadows. Tots normal. So, what the fuck was happening? How was he here? What did that mean about last night?

"Over-easy, right?" Thanatos—or whatever his real name was—asked like it was perfectly normal.

I barely swallowed before Emily crashed into me, nearly taking the two of us to the floor. "That's a good guess! She's sort of a hussy for some ooey-gooey eggs. I take mine scrambled."

Was I really here talking about eggs with the man who'd apparently destroyed five other men with superhuman strength after they tried to gang rape me? And if what happened to those men happened, then...

"Fuck," I cursed out of nowhere.

Thanatos didn't bother to hide his grin. For some reason, I got the sense he rarely smiled at all, and I didn't know how to feel about that. Worried? Honored? Aroused? All of the above?

I need therapy. I'm clearly attracted to walking red flags if I'm feeling honored and aroused that this terrifying killer finds me amusing.

He might not be wearing anything, but the raven wings inked onto his back reminded

me that if last night happened, no matter how good in bed this gorgeous dude was, no matter how life-changing that sex was, he was still a stone-cold killer. Maybe even supernatural. Quite possibly a demon. That, or I hallucinated the entire night.

Oh please, oh please be drugs.

“Hope you don’t mind me using your kitchen. I figured you would be...starving after last night.”

Oh, so he told jokes now? A killer with jokes? What was this, some poorly scripted paranormal romance Netflix series? It’d better be drugs. It’d better be fucking drugs .

Emily lost her shit out of the corner of my eye, making all kinds of faces to express her envy. Usually, she was the one who brought home the bad boys who looked like they made people disappear for a living, not me. My tastes were blander by comparison. Think some nerdy tech company, glasses-wearing dude who was pressured into going to the club with his overly outgoing friends, and you’d have my type down to a T.

But all I could stand there thinking was how he hadn’t been a dream. The killer—my savior—was real. Last night happened. I was nearly gang raped. Five men were torn to pieces. Shadows moved and bound me to a bed. I had the best sex of my goddamn life. And now the man responsible for everything was in my kitchen making jokes about it.

Holy fuck.

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Chapter Seven

Asha

Emily cleared her throat, and my brain was electrified back to life with the sound. “I’m sorry, I never caught your name?” she asked in a far-too-polite-to-be-Emily kind of way. Lawyer Emily. Shit.

“Thanatos,” he replied.

Lies.

“That’s...interesting.”

Lie buddies.

The word interesting was Emily’s polite way of saying fucking weird, but okay to someone she didn’t know. Clearly, she wanted to investigate more about how I, the social pariah, landed a hunk like him. From the eyes she made at me in between their back and forth, she was committed to the task.

Fuck.

“You can call me Than,” he offered, no longer smiling. No, his eyes were penetrating my thoughts, most likely doing voodoo only supernatural types could do—mind manipulation or something as equally invasive. So, I hadn’t obtained a poltergeist, just a motherfucking demon.

Fuck my life.

“Emily,” she offered in return, knocking her elbow into me. Ouch. “The best friend. Roommate. Enabler. Whichever title you’d prefer.”

I nursed my sore arm with a glare her direction. “I prefer nosy bitch, but I guess friend works, too.”

“Best,” she corrected, gesturing something vulgar when Thanatos wasn’t looking.

She’d definitely heard me last night. All those sounds. The begging. The filthy side of me I gave into because I thought it was a goddamn dream. Oh god, the shame. Could you die of shame? Might save Mr. Killer the trouble because I was mortified. Humiliated. Ready to accept the whole demon thing, but not the things I’d done because of it.

“So, you two met at the club last night, then?” Emily pried, undeterred.

I opened my mouth, but Thanatos spoke first. “We did. She was all I saw when we crossed paths. I’m sort of a...monster when it comes to a woman I like.”

The jokes, they just kept coming.

Sort of like you did last night.

I was going to Hell. I was sure of it now. Watched five men die horrible deaths—okay, deaths they indisputably deserved—but here I was, hyper-focused on the fact that I’d disintegrated into a submissive sex kitten with the demon presently cooking me eggs and talking to my best friend like none of it happened.

Emily’s squeal was barely smothered by her hand, and I eye-rolled the shameless

bitch so hard that I nearly threw myself off kilter. “Maybe we shouldn’t do all this...”

“Do you have a brother? Or maybe just a very close relative with the same genetic disposition as you?” Emily asked searchingly, a little crazy in the eyes. Give her enough time and she’d be smacking her lips, ready to offer a trade— me —for one of his friends’ phone numbers. If there was a poster girl for thirsty, Emily would be it.

I smacked a hand over her mouth, glaring because I didn’t know what Mr. Killer was capable of. What if she pissed him off and he tore her to pieces? What then? Did she even know how close she was to death right now? I was basically saving her life by shutting her up.

I’m such a good friend.

“Don’t you have a deposition to prep for your next trial? Or did you drag another poor victim home last night and leave him to wake up, disorientated and crying in your bedroom?”

She licked my hand, and I pulled it away with a nasty look her direction. Real professional of her. But then again, even at the office, Emily was a menace. Men had tried and failed to put her in her place, but she was a powerhouse. Gifted. An asset they couldn’t afford to lose. That was my best friend. And even though I hated her right now, I loved her.

“What’s in this kitchen is waaaay more interesting than what’s in my bedroom, promise.”

Whichever poor bastard she’d tied to the bed last night, my condolences. He was probably enslaved, enchanted, bewitched, besotted—or whatever word you wanted to use—after a kinky night of being her toy. So, of course, she was already bored. He’d chase, and she’d forget his name.

I'd seen it enough times to know that Emily never got attached, and she liked her sex string-less. Spicy but detached. Full of kinks but no future. I couldn't actually remember a time when she dated someone. Meaningless sex buddies, sure, but never date. Her general opinion of men was that they were only good for one thing. Sex. Anything else, she could do herself.

Fuck, I loved her, but I was going to murder her if Thanatos didn't. Emily never read the room when it came to me. Which was a talent being a goddamn lawyer literally trained to do just that.

Typically, I told her everything. I'd bled my soul to her from the moment we met. She and I were two cold pieces of jagged glass that somehow fit together. Damaged, standoffish, dark humored with general contempt for anyone and everything. She might be bright and shinier than I was on the outside, but she was a sadistic queen who enjoyed putting men on their knees. And I, well...I just liked that she loved all the weird bits about me.

I didn't get along with people. Barely had any friends at all. Not from a lack of trying, but people had a tendency to think my sarcasm was cause for concern and I was too quick to throat-punch an asshole who mouthed off. Not Emily. She laughed at my jokes, helped me dodge legal bullets, and was genuinely happy to just stay in with me for a glass of wine and serial murder documentary.

But Emily hadn't believed that a bird was chasing me everywhere I went. She'd never believe I was fucked by a killer, or demon, or maybe the anti-Christ after he saved me from five ready-to-kill rapists. Besides, the less interaction these two had, the better.

Questions pressed on my mind like nails piercing flesh. I needed answers, and Emily was in the fucking way.

“You should go,” I started before my savior—killer?—quickly interrupted.

“Forgive me for intruding,” he asserted politely, but I got the distinct impression he didn’t mean any word of it. My bullshit meter was screaming.

Didn’t matter, though. Emily was quick to elbow me again and say, “Rude, Ash. He’s making breakfast. You can’t kick a man out who’s making us breakfast.”

“I meant you, Ems. Not him.”

“Rude times two. I live here.”

I saw right through her. She was going to play this like one of our usual arguments. Dirty. She’d go for the throat, and I didn’t know if I had the headspace left to fight back. But still, I had to try. Her life depended on it.

“Not for long if you don’t go find something else to do,” I warned, mad-dogging her with my best be-gone-with-you-woman stare.

We both knew she paid the lion’s share of the rent, and my words were an empty threat. But still, she played her role well, hand over her heart like I’d damaged it in the crossfire. “At least let a girl eat before she’s thrown to the curb, abandoned by the one person who owes her a lot of fucking favors for the shit she’s gotten her out of...”

What a sly bitch.

Massaging her shoulders and leading her over to our thrift-find bar table, I dialed up the charm. “But of course she should. And this bitch...this bitch is super grateful for your continued help”—because I might end up in the looney bin, or worse, dead, if I don’t play my cards right —“and would never want to insult, belittle, aggrieve, or

dismiss her nearest and dearest friend.”

“Pulled out all your fancy words for this one, did you, Ash? Nothing but synonym rolls for your girl here. I’m flattered.” Pleased with herself, Emily took a seat and dropped her chin on folded hands. “The bitch stays!”

I hated her so much right now.

The twitch of Thanatos’s lips was damning. He was having fun. Fuck him. Fuck him right back into yesterday. I couldn’t ask him a single goddamn question with Emily here, and by the acrobatics my face was doing, he knew it, too.

That look of his changed, though. In a single heartbeat, his secret smile and seductive onceover of my body set my skin on fire. It was the look of someone who’d seen you naked. And begging. Someone who’d figured you out in one night. Someone who’d not only pinned who you were, but every egregious kink living inside your head. And even though I should be full of rage, and rage only, the place between my legs had the audacity to pulse with the memory of what that mouth— that stupid fucking gorgeous mouth —did to me last night.

His eyes roamed my loosely-clothed form like he owned it. Every fucking inch. His icy gaze was full of steadfast possession and the confidence he’d trace every curve, dip, and crevice again. Lick every stretch of exposed skin. Memorize my valleys and ridges, my wetness and softness. He looked hungry, and I felt violated, but in a way that made my pulse take off running for the forest, desperate to be chased. In an instant, I was back under him, his prey, his willing victim, his desperate sex kitten.

His little raven.

“Shit,” I accidentally said out loud, and his all-consuming stare finally slid away, back to the eggs he cooked with a gentleness a person like him shouldn’t possess.

Usually, Emily was perceptive as shit when I was unraveling, loose at the seams, and dangerously close to combustion. But obviously, the handsome bad boy chef, who might also just so happen to be a demon prince sent from the underworld, was enough to distract her from her usually astute Asha face-reading talents.

“Come here,” came his soft-spoken command when he turned back to stare at me.

I almost thought I’d misheard him. But before I realized it, I moved to stand next to him as ordered.

What the fuck?

His hand engulfed my face, and as if my friend wasn’t in the room, Thanatos bent his head down and claimed my mouth in a greedy kiss. My knees buckled, nearly taking me to the floor in an outright ridiculous way, but he was quicker. His hand wrapped around my waist, and before I could fully gasp, his tongue stroked mine without any regard for who was watching. His lips tasted, and his teeth bit and yanked my lower lip. The tight, familiar coil in my stomach warned me any more and I’d make Emily a voyeur to some shit I’d regret later. But thankfully, Thanatos pulled away, leaving me sufficiently dazed.

“Good morning, little raven,” he whispered so sweetly that I’d never believe he was a demon if he hadn’t brutally killed those assholes last night. “I’m sure you have questions.”

Emily whistled, probably upset he stopped and didn’t fuck me right in front of her, the voyeuristic queen. “Holy shit. I’m going to need a list of the people you know. I’m willing to trade that hot piece for one of yours.”

Called it.

The awkwardness continued well past eggs and kisses. Thanatos was apparently fond of stealing, but finally, Emily found a reason to leave. Mostly to avoid the guy who'd fallen in love with her after their night together. I was grateful that she needed an excuse to send him on his way by stating that she was a very busy lawyer person and needed to stop by work for "things pertaining to my deposition." Incidentally, the same deposition she didn't care about earlier when I'd asked about it.

But it was now just Mr. Killer and I, alone.

Thanatos regarded me from his chair, which he'd put as close to mine as physically possible. The way his ice-blue eyes traveled down my body, eating me up, it was clear he wanted to get me undressed and under him again.

And it was fucking distracting.

But he hadn't burned up in the sunlight, so not a vampire. Or at least not one like the stories told. I wasn't an expert, but I'd read a few paranormal romances in my time. He fit demon more than vampire, but what did I know? This was fucking reality, not some fictional romance written by a creative mind and depraved heart.

Not one to beat around the bush, and definitely not ready to let this gorgeous but dangerous killer tear my clothes off with the same hands he used to dismember five people, I got to the point, safe from being overheard by my roommate who'd practically sold me off to him for a phone number.

"What are you, some kind of...demon?"

His eyes flashed with something akin to contempt. "They should be so lucky to be as powerful as I am. But to answer your question, no."

I could see we were about to play twenty questions if I didn't get to the heart of

things, so I followed it up by asking, “Mind elaborating there, killer? What kind of creature can tear five guys to pieces and murder them in cold blood like it’s nothing?”

Thanatos’s amusement reached his mouth and he leaned back in his chair, plenty happy to drag out this little conversation of epic, reality-upending proportions. “Murder is a strong word, little raven. More like...deliver their souls to where they belong. You haven’t forgotten what they planned to do to you, or is that part of the night fuzzy?”

Condescending ass.

“I remember it all perfectly. In a little too much detail, if I’m honest. Like, for example, the fact that some kind of symbol was burned onto their foreheads and their eyes fucking hollowed out. Well, Bad Lay, anyway. The rest you tore up at lightning speed, so I didn’t exactly get a good look at them before they were butchered. Unlike some of us in this room, I’m not used to the sight of carnage.”

His thick arms crossed over his naked chest, drawing my attention to it in an instant. I hadn’t forgotten the muscles. Or the piercings. My eyes took a stroll down memory lane, and the killer cleared his throat when I stared at his lap for a beat too long.

“I’m not a demon. Nor am I a vampire.” Mind reader! “No, just incredibly good at reading your expressions, Ash.”

I swallowed thickly around the intimate use of my nickname. It sounded both foreign and insanely forbidden in his deep, panty-wetting baritone, but I wanted him to say it again. He might if I asked or pretended I didn’t hear him.

My head clicked back over to the entire reason we were here, and now I was angry I got distracted by him again. If he wasn’t a vampire or demon, what kind of creature could have this sort of enthralling lure? Nothing good, I bet.

Our eyes connected. The way he sucked in a deep, powerful breath then wet his lips as the blue of his irises faded to a haunting white sent alarm ringing through my head. I wanted to run, but I couldn't. Call it a woman's intuition—or maybe a trained fighter's sixth sense—but I just knew I couldn't outrun this monster.

“You still haven't answered my question,” I pointed out, leaning back in the same manner, asserting my own dominance and refusal to get anything but the truth. “What are you? I know it wasn't a dream. It couldn't be. Those assholes are dead.”

“As I admitted only a second ago.”

Twenty questions, it is.

“So, not a demon, not a vampire, but something with a creepy shadow power and the ability to tear men apart, burn their heads, and steal their souls?” I searched my very limited database on the subject. “Reaper?”

His lips twitched, and I could almost fist-pump my brilliance. “Close, but not quite.” His eyes dropped to my mouth then my breasts before lifting. “I would think you'd be more interested in why I chose to show you.”

He wasn't wrong. A normal person would wonder why them, why now, what for, but I wasn't exactly normal. Of course, I did wonder why he'd fucked me like a beast. Or probably more confusing, why he'd saved me in the first place. Or maybe why he stayed when he could've let me think it was all a dream. What did he stand to gain from all of this? Who was I to him?

When my eyes sliced back up to his, the smile he offered me was the sexiest yet. “Now you're getting there, little raven.”

“But will you answer any of it? So far, it feels like we're going in circles. It's giving

me a headache.”

I glanced at the clock. Today was the only day I could laze around, but tomorrow it was back to work. Major Asshat Boss pulled a fast one on me and ordered I go into the office tomorrow to catch up on a few client documents, stating in no small way that it was my sole responsibility even if it was his initial error that they got missed.

But alas, this was the life of a girl living in a capitalistic white man’s paradise. Unfortunately, supernatural killer or no, I still had bills to pay. If I was lucky, whoever or whatever this man was, he’d lose interest and go on his merry way. I’d deal with the other night the same way I dealt with my childhood—by not dealing with it. Stuff it down. Pretend it wasn’t there. Ignore the trauma I incurred, and then suffer when I was rudely triggered in public at random.

“Death,” he said after a long, very pregnant pause. One I was certain would lead straight into me giving up and leaving.

“Pardon?”

“Humans call me Death. The Reaper of Souls. Not one of many, but the only one of my kind.” He watched me, gauging my reaction by the way his jaw clenched and his muscles firmed all over his chest.

If I hadn’t experienced what I had the night before, I would’ve laughed. Instead, a deep, aching sense of dread crept into my chest. A vice-grip took hold of my heart and lungs. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t decide whether to laugh or scream.

My trauma response kicked in, the numb reaching my head. “Death...”

“Yes.”

“And what...um, does your job entail? Wait, do you work? You said you sent those guys where they belonged, so...like, Hell?”

He was quiet, but like the night before, it was full of meaning. The killer—Death?—was silently studying me, figuring me out, wondering what my puny, human mind could handle. Then he spoke. One short, damning reply. One that would change the way I saw the world forever.

“Yes.”

Chapter Eight

Thanatos

I'd watched her for months, but being folded into their antics was a satisfying feeling I couldn't name. I rarely interacted with humanity. What interactions I did have were predominantly business.

Death was busy.

The closest I came to what Asha and her friend shared was the other three Horsemen, but I hardly regarded them as friends. Inescapable acquaintances more like. These two women were bound to each other. Sworn sisters. Ride or dies as I'd overheard Asha mention a time or two when excusing her friend's reckless behavior outside the office. My attachment to the Horsemen was agitating at best, though I had a soft spot for Ares. She didn't thrive on the violence she created, simply knew it was necessary to maintaining the balance.

Humans called her War.

I didn't realize I might yearn for something the two humans shared. It did, however, become painfully clear that I was weak to the same proclivities when Asha made expressions she hadn't with me. When she let her guard down and gave into her friend more times than I could count. A nagging sensation reached my throat and clawed at my insides, demanding that I lay claim to her in front of the person who was her everything. If I didn't charm her friend, I'd never charm my little raven.

Telling her I was Death was easier than I thought it would be. Maybe because I was resolute and saw no reason to hide it. Maybe because I wanted her to know me, the real me. The others would call it reckless. It was, but not for the reason they'd claim.

I expected fear when her entire reality shifted. I expected the little human to unravel and question the world she knew the second I exposed the truth. But I should've known that Asha would be different from the rest. Fear was there, but the strength and assurance she could coax answers from me shined through. She should be wailing and fleeing the room, but she wasn't. She leaned back, the luscious curve of her delectable body a feast for the eyes, and weighed her options. Sought audience with her thoughts in a way I never predicted.

It was captivating.

I'd taken a risk by staying and telling her who I truly was. By revealing more than the human mind could comprehend. For what reason? Why was it necessary? I could've fled at the first rays of light. I could've come to her as someone else and completely discard this version. Woo her in another form, as another person. But I laid her out over the worn floral sheets she should've tossed in the trash months ago and dressed her with care the other Horsemen would argue I didn't possess. I couldn't leave her side again, not like before. Not if it meant I'd be forgotten.

So, I took a chance. I stayed. And despite the fear creeping into her expression, she didn't run. She stayed, too. She asked her questions, countered my non-answers with sass, and projected strength when she knew it was futile.

My courageous little raven stayed.

Something tugged at the edge of my consciousness. One of them was reaching out. A second later, my phone dinged. Asha watched me dig it out of my back pocket. Her amused look was followed by a short, sassy "So, even Death can't avoid being texted

at all hours of the day? What a tragedy.”

My lips twitched, close to a smile, but I'd already given her too many. The fact that I lacked total control over my face around her was damning all on its own. Still, her saucy comment meant that maybe I hadn't made a mistake. Maybe this was the perfect way to ripen and take her soul.

As Death.

As Thanatos.

The burn was back in my throat, fiercer than before. I ignored it. I'd never admit even to myself that I didn't recognize my own reactions. I blamed the human body I created to walk this plane. Maybe it was malfunctioning because I wasn't as practiced as my fellow Horsemen in the mortal realm. I was more comfortable as a raven or shadow, if I were honest.

A sigh escaped my lips when the person I least wanted to deal with popped up on my phone's lock screen.

Fucking Zelus. He was on the hunt for his Counter Soul. Cleverer than most, he was the only one I worried about finding me with mine. The others didn't care enough to chase me around, but Zelus was invasive on principle.

He lived to fuck with me every chance he got.

Given his nature, it made sense. Always desperate to cause devastation. Endlessly bored by his existence, so he found distractions in the humans he lived to torment. Sometimes the other Horsemen for a real challenge. He had the blackest heart of the four, which was saying a lot, seeing how our entire purpose was to maintain balance through pain and suffering.

If he was reaching out, it meant he was onto something. He might be sly, but I'd figured out his tells a long time ago. Whenever he latched onto something interesting with any one of us, he'd reach out. Stubbornly if we didn't reply right away. This was his third text this morning. I'd need to be careful what I divulged to the nosy bastard and how I moved around with Asha. If he found her, he wouldn't let up until I took her soul. He might even try to take it for himself; he was just that much of an asshole.

She's mine.

I pocketed my phone without looking at the message.

The beauty in front of me tilted her head in curiosity. "Not a fan of whoever messaged you?" My eyebrow rose, and she laughed for the first time since she discovered last night wasn't a dream. "I mean, I know you're not exactly human, but that was a pretty universal look for someone who wasn't happy to be bothered by that particular person. The face I make when Asshat —er, my boss—calls. Or maybe just receiving a text bothered you in general? I don't know. I'm still trying to process you being Death and...having a cell phone."

"Me having a phone is what you're most curious about? Not the fact that I'm here with you?"

Mumbling, her eyes dropped to her lap. "Well, that, too. Obviously. But someone wanted to play twenty questions..."

Twenty questions?

Still, it would appear Zelus had competition. I shouldn't be surprised that Asha picked up on my genuine distaste for the Horseman the humans liked to call Pestilence, but I rarely gave my thoughts away. I was...out of sorts after watching the little human sleep all night. I'd never craved something so fiercely after already

claiming it, but the second she appeared in the light of the kitchen, her body aglow and my shadows reactively reaching for her, I was desperate to have her again.

I'd never admit it, but she put me off balance.

In all the time I existed, nothing and no one could challenge me. Not that they ever did. Even Zelus knew better. He walked a fine line, and if he ever crossed it, he'd pay the price. I existed outside the usual planes of good and evil. My existence was ultimately a benefit to both, so I generally stayed out of their squabbles.

Unlike the other Horsemen, I was perfectly content to do what I was always meant to do. But I couldn't deny that the night I crossed Asha's path, something changed in me. I craved. I yearned. I chased. And after last night when I thought for sure fucking her— ripening her —would satiate those cravings, I was surprised to find that if anything, they'd gotten worse.

Fucking hell.

Stealing a glance at me, Asha got to her feet. "Well, I guess you're done answering questions. Not that you answered many. You can...uh, leave? Go hither? Be gone to the underworld or whatever? Door's over there."

I couldn't help it. I laughed. She was in the middle of turning to head out of the room but went rigid when my laughter echoed off the time-worn wooden floors. She stood stock-still as if she'd been struck by a bolt of lightning. Then her eyes tracked back over to me.

Getting to my feet, I towered over the frightened human. Her eyes followed, but she refused to move. My little raven wasn't one to flee even when she should. "Forgive me for being short with you. You're the first human I've revealed myself to in...quite some time."

Her breath whooshed out of her, and then she clicked her tongue. “Bet you say that to all the girls.”

Again, I was chuckling against my will. What was it about this woman that had such a hold over me? Surely the fact that she was my Counter Soul was to blame for why I’d become practically unrecognizable since the first night I caught sight of her. I knew immediately she was meant for me. Meant to be ripened and used to bring the end of the world.

“I swear it isn’t a line, Asha. I know better than to pull one on you.”

Her eyes danced across my face, skeptical at first, then firm in a way I’d never seen before. “Okay, say I believe everything...why me? What do you stand to gain, Death? Are you here for my soul? But then why save me in the first place if you just planned to collect it anyway?”

Yes, cleverer than most. My little raven didn’t miss a goddamn thing.

Thankfully, she quickly rambled under her breath, no longer speaking or looking at me. If she had, she would’ve noticed the strain in my jaw when she accused me of the very thing I was there to do. But her head was elsewhere, caught in another one of her mumbling rants about how crazy it was she watched five men—if you could call them that—die at the hands of literal Death. Despite the circles her rant took, it was clear she believed I was who I said I was.

I heard every word but decided to move forward with the plan. I’d dance around the truth and blame the ache in my chest on the power of a Counter Soul and not because the very thought of her soul disappearing forever ruined my pulse and shredded my insides to bits. This was fate’s trick. Humanity’s failsafe measure to thwart the apocalypse. A mere obstacle, and I’d do what was necessary to accomplish my goal.

“You intrigue me,” I whispered, crowding her with a few steps.

Still, she didn’t step away. She held her ground. What a brave girl she was. She leveled her gorgeous green eyes on me, the power of someone with a soul worth shepherding the end of humanity in her stare. “Why?”

I held her by the neck, the growl waiting in my throat when her eyes fluttered shut. “Call it intuition, but there’s something about you, and I won’t leave until I figure out what that is.”

Her mouth opened to a soft, barely-there breath, and the urge to kiss her made it difficult to focus on anything else. Until my phone’s vibration went off over and over, an insistent annoyance in my back pocket. Not a text but a call. Fuck. The spell was broken, and Asha broke the contact between us by taking several steps away from me.

“You better get that,” she remarked, pointing to my pocket. “Look, thanks for saving me from those gross assholes, but unless I’m marked for dead, I don’t want to get involved in whatever this you-intrigue-me business leads to. I’m barely keeping myself mentally afloat as it is. So, you can go ahead and show yourself out. I’m sure that’s not a difficult task for someone like you.” With one final, fleeting glance, she escaped down the hall. The door to her room clicked shut before locking.

“Fuck,” I cursed, taking my phone out before answering in a tone that threatened violence. “What, Zelus?”

“Just missing you, Dead.”

I stole a look at the hallway, determined to chase but worried it’d be met with derision and silence. Worse, I sensed Zelus was close by. If I stayed, he’d find me with her. So, I’d go elsewhere to keep him off her scent.

“I can see you’ve made yourself a nuisance again,” I clapped back, heading to the front door. Shadows crawled across my torso, fitting a shirt into place, then my favorite leather jacket. Leaving her made me uncomfortable, but I needed to intercept Zelus before he came too close. “I’ve been taking care of some business out here, so what do you want?”

“Death business?” he pried, another tell.

“What other kind is there?”

I could hear him snicker. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe you’ve found your Counter Soul and neglected to say anything. That sounds like something you’d do.”

Growling, I quickly exited Asha’s building, leaving her behind the way I promised I never would. “Unfortunately, I’ve been too busy doing my goddamn job. Must be nice to be so free to wander around, doing nothing but what your heart desires, hmm, Pest?”

That shut him up.

“So, no soul yet? We only have a month left, Dead. They have to be easier to find than this. Fate wouldn’t make it impossible. I mean, we know practically nothing about them, of course, but it shouldn’t be this fucking hard to find one measly human. There’s one for each of us. That means four, Dead. And none of us has found a single soul? Seems odd, don’t you think?”

I heard the uncertainty in his voice. He’d been unsuccessful. He hadn’t found his. He was seeking me out for help because he was getting desperate.

How perfect.

Brushing back my dark hair, I eyed the street, sensing him miles away to my right. He wasn't as powerful as I was, so he wouldn't be able to track me from this distance. I'd lucked out, but it wouldn't stay that way. Zelus was smart enough to get this close, so it was only a matter of time.

A raven landed on a fence nearby, cawing its greeting. I nodded to it, sending it to find Zelus. It would track him better than my shadows from this distance. But he'd grow suspicious if he noticed it follow him, so I asked it only to report his location and tell the others to take places along the way to Asha's home to ensure if he was headed this way, I knew about it.

"Want me to hold your hand and lead you into the apocalypse? Wasn't it you who said it was a piece of cake and we'd all be thanking you because you'd found yours and taken care of it?" I finally muttered when the raven took flight.

"You're a real dick when you want to be, Dead. Just let me know if you cross yours. Not that you will before I do since you're so busy and can't be bothered." I heard him call out to a woman nearby, and I let loose a breath of relief. "Whatever, you sour wanker. Come take the edge off. I've got us some birds. Not that kind before you give me an ear-lashing. But I bet the reason you're all growly is because you haven't fucked someone in a couple decades. Still got those piercings?"

Instead of answering, I ended the call and did a quick sweep of the street. Alarm was ringing through my body, electrifying all of my otherworldly senses. Zelus was crafty, so I couldn't trust he was off the scent just from one conversation. I'd play it safe and take post at a distance for the night instead of returning to her room, my new favorite spot.

Zelus might have trouble tracking me while I was a shadow, but around Asha, I couldn't trust myself. I'd want to touch her, feel her warmth against me, wrap my shadows around her and fuck her again. It was laughable how scared Death was of

some little human, but I wasn't reckless enough to test it with Zelus skulking around the area.

I hated the idea of not watching Asha sleep and missing the angry ramblings she'd make about me or her poor attempts at rationalizing what she experienced, but I couldn't take the risk. Not when I'd just revealed myself to her. Not when I had her where I wanted her. Not when I hadn't had my fill of her gorgeous body or been given the chance to chase and fuck the excited fear into her.

No, I wouldn't let that bastard ruin this for me. I just needed a little more time. I'd ripen her the way I liked then deliver her soul like I was supposed to. I had a month. Plenty of time to accomplish such an effortless task. Too much time one could argue. Might as well enjoy what I could before she was...

My throat constricted, but I cleared it and fixed my jacket. Easing back into the shadows, I watched Asha's building from a distance, invisible to the humans who ambled along on the sidewalk. Determined never to be far from her. Surrendering her to no one, not the other Horsemen or the apocalypse.

For now.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:16 pm

Chapter Nine

Asha

How did someone process all that I was asked to in a matter of a day? They didn't. So I wouldn't.

I'd escaped to my room, knowing that if he wanted to come find me, he would. But he didn't. After what felt like hours, I peeked my head out of the door and waited for Thanatos to manifest out of the shadows right in front of me like the demon he claimed he wasn't. But he didn't. Instead, the apartment was quiet.

Slowly, I walked to the kitchen, still not convinced. Nothing. Three plates were still on the table where they'd been left—and honestly, where I'd devoured the best eggs and hash concoction I'd ever tasted, convinced it was poisoned or roofied but too hungry to care. The pan he'd used was washed and fully dry on our over-encumbered drying basket.

But still, he wasn't there.

My phone went off, and I nearly jumped five feet into the air in my fright. It was a text from Emily. She'd be out for the rest of the weekend. Guess the necessary prep she'd put off for the deposition later that week was no longer procrastination-okay. I sensed Emily's frustration with her boss based purely on the long string of emojis she used about his refusal to let her come home until they could move forward with what she had.

Whatever that meant.

I wasn't a lawyer, and most of the stuff she told me went right over my head. But she was a powerhouse, so she'd knock their socks off, and they'd forgive her like always. No matter how many times they tried to beat her down and put her in her place with their blatant sexism, she swooped in to save the day and proved they'd drown without her.

I couldn't do it. Guys like that made me see red. The urge to throat-punch and deal with the consequences later were irresistible in a day-to-day setting. I'd only kept it together with Big Asshat Boss because he rarely deigned a reason to come into the office. He much preferred to be out galivanting and taking credit for everything the other girls and I did for him to Daddy Warbucks. But Emily found a way to channel her rage for the partners at her law firm into the nightly victims she hand-picked to tie down to her bed.

After another few minutes of looking around the deserted kitchen, I grabbed my purse and decided that I'd hit the office today so I could unravel into a screaming, rambling mess tomorrow.

Note to self: Get Rocky Road ice cream and several bottles of whipped cream.

I was probably still in shock. I mean, it wasn't every day that a girl met Death and lived to tell the tale. I didn't want to have a mental breakdown at work tomorrow, and definitely not when I didn't have Emily to come home to.

Checking my purse, I made sure to have the office key. Mark gave it to me after the fifth time he asked me to come in on a weekend, which was so long ago I couldn't even remember when it was. I'd attached a poop-emoji keychain to the spare, so it always gave me a good chuckle when I used it because Mark served as the entire inspiration for why I went out of my way to get it.

I left the apartment and walked like I always did. I didn't own a car. Emily did, but I didn't see a reason to bother with one. Everything, including work, was within walking distance. And if not, Emily could always ditch work for a minute to take me somewhere if I needed her to. Not that I ever did. But the benefits of a powerful friend who called the shots at her nine-to-five job were endless.

It wasn't late, only a quarter past two, but the sun was hidden behind a dark stretch of thundering clouds, threatening to drop rain at any moment. I cursed when I realized I'd left my umbrella back home. Picking up the pace, I decided to leave it. I was only minutes from the office, and it'd take me just as long to go back home. If it was raining when I finished the bullshit documents Mark forgot to do, then I'd bug Emily this one time.

Seconds after deciding to take my chances, the heavens opened and a heavy downpour soaked my clothes all the way through in no time at all. Fucking figures. I hurried along, taking a shortcut I didn't always like because it was dark and out of eyeline of anyone nosy enough to look, but it'd shave a few minutes from the walk and offer short moments of cover.

Except, alarm was ringing through my head again. It felt too much like the other night. Another unlit and out-of-the-way path. Another street where I could become some asshole's victim. Hadn't I learned my lesson when I played witness to a five-person homicide? Guess not. The fact that I was already soaked all the way to my underwear trumped any common sense I might still have today.

A smarter person would've gone back home, changed, grabbed an umbrella, and taken the path most traveled to work. A smarter person would've at least hesitated for a minute before going deeper into the side street. But as it turns out, I wasn't, in fact, a smarter person; I was a stubborn-as-shit person who thought fighting in clothes that were five-pounds heavier thanks to the sudden downpour would be no trouble at all.

Ignoring my instincts, I walked faster. Rain continued to pelt every surface left open to it, falling in heavy sheets and completely obscuring the path ahead. But I was hopeful it'd let up in a few minutes. It never lasted long. I just needed to push through and I'd be rudely leaving water for the janitor to find at my office in a few minutes.

The sky flashed, and I could've sworn I saw a humanoid shape before it was gone. Slowing a little, I peered behind me. I got the oddest sensation that someone—maybe even something—was following me. No one. But my fighter instincts were screaming that I was about to be in the thick of it, and I stopped altogether.

When I looked ahead again, the shape was there. It moved toward me, black as night with glowing red and orange eyes. Like nothing I'd ever seen. What the fuck was it?

Before I could blink, Thanatos was in front of me. Ravens landed all around us, cawing angrily. It didn't make sense so many birds were out in the rain, but it also didn't make sense that there was some humanoid figure with red and orange eyes either, so the birds were the least of my problems. Shadows danced across the walls and asphalt, moving like they had the night before.

Totally on their own.

I opened my mouth in confusion, water pouring over my face and making it difficult to see or speak.

The man who'd haunted me all day ran a hand over his dark hair to push it back. His shoulders moved under a form-fitted leather jacket with raven wings painted across the back. His biker boots were several inches deep into water, but he didn't move out of the puddle. And like the night before, he towered, so tall it felt impossible. But when you considered he was supposed to be Death, I guess it made sense he'd be tall. Couldn't really strike fear in the hearts of the dying if you were just some dude in a jacket.

Water saturated his body the same way it did mine, but something about him wasn't human. I couldn't explain it, but it was as if he wasn't solid. Like he was made of the same shadows moving and reaching across the stone and asphalt for the thing at the other side of the street.

"Fucking bold of you to attack what's mine, demon." His voice bottomed out, carrying a tone that expressed nothing but violence.

I'd never heard it on him before. Of course, he hadn't talked much if I thought over the last day we'd spent together. Most of what Mr. Killer had said was limited to this morning and little comments he made when we...

A shiver shot down my spine. Even in this weird thunderstorm stand-off, I couldn't stop the otherworldly sex from turning the heat up in my body.

"You'd be naive to think we'd let you have her when we'd lose everything the minute you did. This is our fucking playground, Death. I'm not alone, so you'd better just take those ravens and shadows of yours and go. You might not know this, but we do. Her soul makes you weak. By the time you make it back after we've dragged you to Hell, she'll be dead and gone."

A clap of thunder hit, shaking the ground underfoot. It was so loud I barely heard a word the thing said. I only got pieces. Lose everything? Her soul? Dead and gone? What in the supernatural Mortal Kombat was happening right now? More importantly, how did one fight a demon? Would kicks and punches work the same way they did with human assholes, or would nothing I did stop them from killing me?

Two brushes with death—pun intended!—in just barely a day and piles of work still left to do for Major Asshat Mark? What a fucking class-act this week was turning out to be. Where were the Ghostbusters when you needed them?

Thanatos turned his head, the haunting grey-white irises replacing the earlier light blue ones. His hand stretched out, calling me over. Like earlier, I went over to him without a thought. When I slid my hand into his, he held it gently before his eyes cut a deadly line over to the figures looming ahead. Not one but several. I couldn't count how many, but enough sets of glowing red-and-orange eyes to figure it was at least a dozen or so that blocked our way both directions.

“Do you want to know a secret, little raven?” His ethereal moon eyes were back on me.

I hardly thought this was a great time to have one of our twenty question sessions, but I answered anyway, “What's that, Mr. Killer?”

His lips twitched upwards, and the haunting eyes started to glow and swirl. “Even at my weakest, they won't come close to defeating me. Not here, not anywhere. Death can't die, little raven, so trust that whether it's human, demon, angel, or otherwise, I'll keep you safe.”

Did he just say angels? Wait...but why? I wanted to ask, but for some reason, I didn't. I just shrugged as if I wasn't surrounded by the holy-shits of supernatural problems and replied, “Guess there are perks to being friends with Death, huh?”

I didn't expect him to laugh. Definitely not when we were surrounded by demons waiting to kill us. Well, me at least since, apparently, Death couldn't die. Must be nice. But Thanatos threw his head back and laughed like I'd told the funniest joke he'd ever heard. I called bullshit. He was easily a bazillion years old, so I couldn't be the first comedian he'd encountered.

Then his paranormal grey gaze returned, excited by something I couldn't even pretend to know. “That's right. So many perks. But have it my way, not the friend kind.”

I couldn't keep up. Everything seemed to be moving both unbelievably fast and excruciatingly slow at the same time. Were all supernatural men like this, or was it just Death? The way he purred the last bit was another jolt and electric sensation down my body, straight to the thirsty-as-fuck snatch between my legs.

Oh, god. I can't be turned on right now with so many reasons to be scared.

I was starting to think that the only fear I'd ever experience with this impossible man was sexual, and fuck, I'd never worried about pouncing on someone while being afraid I'd die at any second at the hands of a goddamn demon.

Large hands eclipsed my jaw before Thanatos dipped down and stole a kiss. His tongue slipped into my mouth, devouring me hungrily before he pulled away, smirking. "You heard the lady. Send all of Hell a message they can't ignore. No one touches what's mine," he called out to no one in particular.

The shadows came alive around us, writhing and stretching. The ravens perched along the building and on the railings shot down, attacking the figures closing in on us.

Chapter Ten

Asha

The sea of black shapes and glowing eyes reacted in horror as they were attacked like this was *The Birds* movie—the single-most terrifying film I’d ever watched as a child.

But as soon as the eerie sounds of demons being torn apart by beaks and shadows started to grow louder, Thanatos walked me back until I hit the wall behind me. He crowded me, blocking my view from the crazy shit happening behind him. His thumb swept across my bottom lip before he lifted me under my ass like I weighed nothing at all. He pinned my body to the wet wall with his. Water slid down his gorgeous face, but he said nothing, only stared.

An eerie shriek filled the air. The shadows moving along the brick across from me responded angrily. Don’t ask me how I knew they were angry, but I got the sense that something had changed. My skin prickled with the sudden ominous sensation in the air. My flight or fight response was activated, and I squirmed anxiously, desperate to get away from whatever danger the demons brought with them.

I swallowed when a ghost of a smile tilted Thanatos’s mouth after I tried to lean to the side to see what was happening. Most of the noise was smothered by the thunder and electric cracks of lightning. I couldn’t hear anything, just the rhythmic sound of water hitting the metal balcony above us, but the dangerous sensation invading the space only intensified as the seconds ticked on.

“Don’t worry about all that, little raven. I’m the scariest monster out here. Those bastards don’t know their place,” he said, putting his mouth directly next to my ear. “But they will.”

I stiffened, not prepared for the storm of heat hitting my thighs and stomach. He’d spoken in such a sultry tone as if we weren’t in public and feet away from an epic battle I desperately wished to watch. Or maybe this was a normal Saturday afternoon for Death?

“I don’t know what the fuck is happening...” I whispered before gasping. His hips rolled into mine, sending a message—a message I wasn’t confident I could stop myself from answering.

Nipping my ear, Thanatos rumbled a promise. Or maybe to some, it’d be considered a threat. “A little demon nuisance isn’t going to come between me and my plans, Ash. I thought I’d made that perfectly clear this morning. You intrigue me, and it’s going to take more than a few demons to keep me from fucking you like I did last night.”

My head knocked back into brick, and I sucked in a greedy breath. It was hard to breathe with him whispering those filthy things in my ear.

Memories invaded my head of him fucking me while I was bound in his shadows. I wanted him to do it again. It was all I thought about since waking up. Not the fear of being assaulted. Not witnessing five men get torn apart. Not even the fact that he was some impossible supernatural being who reaped souls and sent them to their afterlife. No, I was remembering how his tongue felt inside me. His powerful body in motion. His greedy kisses and sultry smiles. His pierced cock slamming into me without mercy. I was thinking about how much I wanted him to chase me the second I ran away. I couldn’t make sense of my own thoughts.

I was a fucking mess.

Thanatos knew just what to say to make me forget he was the terrifying killer who controlled shadows and ravens and couldn't die. Or that he was the monster who could reap my soul and end my life. Because when I should be frozen with fear, I was clinging to him out of desperate need instead. I hadn't caught my breath since I crossed paths with him in the club. You know, before everything went supernaturally to shit.

“And I thought I made myself perfectly clear, Mr. Killer. I'm far too busy for this shit. Either take my soul or get lost. If my number isn't up, then I've got shit to do.”

Where had all my confidence come from? In what world did I think I stood a fucking chance against Death himself? But I guess the biggest question was how threatening my words would come across with my hands gripping his wet shirt, pulling his chest to mine while my legs wrapped tighter around his hips. Talk about saying one thing and doing another.

I was a full-body contradiction.

He'd noticed. It was all in the little raise of one of his eyebrows as he looked down first at my hands, then at my legs wrapped around his waist. His sexy grin when our eyes met again made the thirsty thing between my legs contract, and my hips moved before I realized. He sucked in a quick breath before closing his eyes.

My heartbeat was in my ears, waiting for him to either kill me or fucking kiss me already. Just do something. Honestly, I'd take any response at this point. The suspense was brutal. I couldn't take much more of it. I didn't stand a chance against him no matter what he chose to do next.

Pushing against me, the dangerous supernatural beast bent his head and devoured my mouth. Even through the wet denim, I could feel how hard he was for me when we'd barely done anything at all. In the middle of a battle and storm, Death stole my

common sense and self-preservation with his hungry kiss. I couldn't run anymore. I wanted to be there with him. Call me stupid, say it was a death wish, call it reckless lust, but I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and pulled myself closer to his face, chasing his tongue whenever it retreated in the slightest.

Rain fell on us from the holes in the metal balcony, and I was completely drenched—in more than one sense—by the time he leaned away to glance over his shoulder. I followed his line of sight, noticing that we were now the sole entertainment for about a hundred ravens. Even the shadows writhing over the walls seemed to be watching. Weird didn't quite cover the feeling. The shadows moved closer, reaching for me again, and I heard the beast of a man sigh like their reaction annoyed him.

His thumb stroked my cheek, taking a long moment where all I heard was the rain falling and the sky roaring. Before I could lean in for another kiss, Thanatos took several steps back with me still held firmly in his arms.

His shadows moved closer, then rose off the ground like curtains of black silk, dense and no longer translucent. We were wrapped in them like the night before. The same sensation that stole my breath after I watch five men die took powerful hold over me. But it was only seconds before we were at my office. I didn't have time to be surprised because I was dropped on top of a desk. When I realized that he'd taken us to Major Asshat's office, I almost couldn't stop myself from laughing out loud.

“This isn't my office, but something tells me you know that already.” I sounded way too amused for the annoyance I intended to express.

But Death's little grin stole the laugh I worked hard to suppress. “I won't lie, little raven. I've wanted to fuck you on this desk since that bastard tried to put his filthy hands on you.”

He saw that? How long had he been watching me? That was over two months ago.

Stripping off his jacket, Thanatos slid his hands up my pantyhose, teasing the hem of my skirt. His enormous shape seemed larger in Mark's office. As though he took up half the space. And maybe he did. Something told me that no room could hold him. His moon eyes followed every movement his hands made before they jerked back up to mine, asking.

But I was too distracted by what he'd previously mentioned to make a cute comment about it. "Wait a second..."

I thought back on the day Mark nearly sexually assaulted me after calling me into his office to have "a little chat." I'd thought it was odd that a bird got in—my little raven stalker—and attacked my boss when he'd pinned me to the desk, touching my thigh the same way Thanatos did now but with a much sleazier look on his face.

I was seconds away from giving Mark's groin a good hit with my knee, fuck the consequences. Enough of us had been sexually harassed by Grand-pappy's Golden Boy. I could easily build a class-action suit against him with Emily's expertise and contacts. Instead, a raven attacked him out of nowhere. I hadn't even seen how it got in through the window.

At the time, I'd thought that good ol' karma had finally paid Mark a visit. The asshole was known for his sticky fingers and gross commentary. A few of the ladies talked about it, but none of them felt comfortable reporting him. Since it'd never happened to me, I couldn't do anything about it. I wasn't Mark's type. I had a real woman's body, and he liked them Instagram thin. So, I'd only ever heard about it. Color me surprised when he tried it on me. I figured it was the ammo I needed to spank him with the legal hand of justice, Ems style. Oh, and also Ash's knee of justice, just for extra flair.

But since that day, Mark stayed away from the ladies in the office, and his fear of birds followed him everywhere he went. Last week, one of the girls said he'd screeched over a little black bird landing on their car on their way to an off-site client meeting. Not only that, his entire demeanor changed since that day, but I just figured nearly getting your eyes gouged out by a bird had made him rethink his inappropriate conduct a bit.

Did Thanatos have something to do with all that? Was there more to the story I hadn't already gotten? Could I persuade him with sexy promises to get play-by-play details of how his bird tormented Mark into a fearful mess?

"Was that one of your birds?" I asked, giving him my cutest eyebrow waggle.

I wasn't sure what I expected, but when Thanatos's smirk grew and he tried to hide a chuckle, I found myself laughing, too. But I quickly realized that I was still sitting on Mark's desk with fucking Death between my open legs. The irony wasn't lost on me.

Clutching the mahogany ledge, I turned my head to stare out the window aimed at the rest of the office. The blinds were drawn, and the chances of Mark coming in on a Saturday were slim to none. Still, I was worried someone might know we were in here and come looking.

Mark usually kept his door locked, but that didn't stop the spiraling fear that I'd lose my job because some supernatural dude who controlled birds and shadows thought it'd be cute to rewrite the script and recast the hero's role. Not that I was complaining with who'd been cast this time.

Thanatos grabbed me around the jaw and forced my eyes to meet his again. "I think you've forgotten who I am and what I can do."

Gah, he's so goddamn beautiful. Look at that jawline. Is it carved from stone, or is

that just another supernatural Reaper of Soul's thing?

“No, that’s pretty much all I can think about right now, Mr. Killer. I’m just not sure why we’re here and not back home.” I’d forgive the fact that I’d essentially admitted I was fine with what we were about to do, just not where.

My thighs were shaking. I wanted to pretend it was because I nearly got attacked—again—or that I’d confirmed demons were real and out for my blood, which wasn’t great for my overall mental wellness. But if I were honest with myself, it wasn’t out of shock or fear I was trembling. It was the promise of sex that transcended reality. More than that, it was the fact that he hadn’t left.

He was still here.

I should be scared for my life. I should wonder why Death was stalking me at all. I didn’t buy this you-intrigue-me business. My gut told me he was after something else, and that alone should terrify me, but it didn’t. If anything, I was glad he hadn’t gone far; that he’d shown up when I needed him to. That our night together wasn’t the last.

Emily’s YOLO lifestyle was apparently rubbing off on me.

It was fucking insane how quickly I gave into him. But so was the fact that I’d become Death’s newest obsession. Or because whatever I was to him made me the target of both demons and angels alike. I wasn’t sure what it all meant, but the part of me that came alive when he fucked me like it’d kill me made it impossible to reject him.

I wanted another kiss. I wanted him inside me. I’d conveniently forget that having sex with him was playing with fire—and my life—because if I could have another night like that, maybe dying wasn’t a big deal. I mean, like he said, there were perks to

being special to Death.

He watched me, never doing more than running his impossibly large hands up and down my thighs. When I'd decided to give in, his entire vibe changed. Like he'd been patiently waiting for consent that wasn't coerced by the situation we'd been in. Like my feelings mattered to him.

Which was so weird when you considered how powerful he was. He could take whatever he wanted. I couldn't fight him. I didn't have powers, or shadows, or even a bird that I could sic on him so I could run away screaming. My little raven stalker probably took orders from him, anyway. So, why didn't he just take what he wanted? Why didn't he enslave me with his mystical Death powers? Unless sex was the enslavement? Made sense. I was willing to risk my safety to be with him. Maybe he'd put a spell on me. Could Death do that?

"Ash," he whispered, leaning in and nibbling my lower lip in that sexy way of his. I gasped, and he groaned low in his throat as if it took every bit of his willpower not to attack me. "I won't do anything you don't already want. You're right. I do have the power to control you, but I won't."

He dropped a kiss on my neck, and I angled it so he'd have better access. The hands on my thighs squeezed, and I moaned without meaning to. His feral growl echoed in my ears. "Tell me to stop, little raven. You have all the power here."

I caught his gaze, confused. "I do?"

His pretty moon eyes sparkled and glowed. "You do."

"I can just say no and you'll stop?"

His throat bobbed and his pupil-blown eyes dropped to my lips when I swiped my

tongue over them. The line of his jaw was taut for a second before his stare lifted. “I will. Do you want me to stop?”

No fucking way.

His smirk was downright diabolical. “I thought not.”

I still wasn’t convinced he couldn’t read my mind, but I was thankful I didn’t have to speak. It’d give me the excuse later that I didn’t have any choice in the matter. A lie I’d tell myself when reality came swooping back in.

He moved in on me, slamming our mouths together so hard that I nearly fell back. A hand splayed and pressed across my shoulders, keeping me upright, as the other slid under my skirt, teasing fingers over sleek fabric and making it impossible not to hold my breath. Last time he’d torn through it. I waited for him to do it again, but he simply slipped his hand under my waistband and into my underwear.

His thumb pressed over my clit, and I moaned into his kiss, surrendering the same way I did the night before. Becoming his perfect, willing prey.

Chapter Eleven

Thanatos

I wanted to be buried inside her so I could forget what just occurred in the alley and what it meant for her future. Demons were expected. The Horsemen another inconvenience but expected. Angels, however, I didn't calculate into the equation. A few I could handle, but not teamed up with demons—and certainly not if they were after her.

I'd underestimated their determination to save humanity. I'd expected the angels to stay out of it, not join hands with demons in a display of outright rebellion. To risk losing their wings to kill a human. If I hadn't intervened, they would've sunk their heavenly blades into Asha's chest so they could personally ensure her soul was reincarnated instead of used for the apocalypse. One less Counter Soul. One less chance of the world ending.

Persistent bastards.

Worse, I still sensed Zelus nearby. He hadn't left since I'd spoken with him earlier. He was still skulking around the area, and it'd only be a matter of time before we crossed paths. I was supposed to stay away until I could get the bastard to go elsewhere, but I'd detected the intense presence of demons shortly before Asha decided to head into the office.

The fact that several angels were also following her didn't bode well for my plan to stay away. I'd need to be her shadow again. I couldn't give her room to breathe. I

needed her desperate to keep me by her side. Which, thankfully, turned out to be the easiest task of them all. The little human was especially vulnerable to my caress. As if I'd been the first and only man who'd ever drowned her in pleasure.

I didn't mind the thought.

Her visible relief when I showed up in front of her put a feeling into my chest unlike the rest. She'd been waiting for me. She didn't want me to leave. She was happy I'd stayed. It showed in her expression the second our eyes met, and everything in the world bled away. I'd send however many demons it took back to Hell for my little raven. I'd face an army of angels to have one more day. One more night.

Then I'd take her soul for the apocalypse.

My throat and chest seized with a burn only the fires of Hell could match. I stared at my hand, the one that took lives for millennia. Since the beginning of time. Since humanity breathed its first breath. And it didn't make sense at first to see it shaking.

Death feared nothing.

I slid it into my damp hair, determined to calm the quaking, but it only calmed when I ran my hand over Asha's thigh. Touching her eased the tension in my chest. Lessened the burn in my throat. What could it mean? Why was she the only thing that seemed to ease the sensations running rampant in this human shell I was forced to wear?

I'll take her soul tomorrow. It's the only way to put an end to everything. The only way I'll go back to who I was before.

The warmth of her soft flesh under my hand dragged my thoughts back to the sweet darling sitting on the desk, waiting for me to do whatever I wished. On the desk of that bastard boss who I'd systematically tormented since the day he fucking dared to

touch her. But her adorable giggles when she discovered I was behind the attack soothed my intensifying rage when I thought what might've been if I hadn't intervened again .

I'd fuck her on this desk and replace the memory. Now, every time she came into this room, she'd think about me and not that weak, undeserving human. She can't think when she's dead. She'd remember she was mine . Until she's gone. No mortal could ever touch her again. Because she'll no longer exist. The second they tried, I'd tear them to pieces and send their festering souls to the deepest level of Hell. Maybe I'll reap her soul next week instead.

Fuck.

I wanted to possess her future, not just her present. One month. Less now. The clock was ticking. Less than a month to do what I never questioned. Only two weeks to do my part to end the world. But every moment spent with her made me question to what end? Who would I be when she was gone...when the human world ceased to be?

Asha's moan jerked me out of my silent reverie.

The smell of her lust was mouth-watering. I'd worry about the apocalypse another day. I hadn't indulged like this since I came to be this...monster. If the other Horsemen were given freedom to do whatever they wished, why not Death? Why should I be the only one who did everything by the book? Why shouldn't I be permitted to bend the rules this once?

Biting her lower lip, the little human kept herself upright on shaky arms. Her legs opened wider to my fingers already sliding into her wet folds, flicking and fingering the slippery heat I couldn't wait to sink my cock into. Her sleek wetness made it nearly impossible for me to keep it slow, but I wanted her begging. I wanted her on

the edge, pleading for release. And only then would I bury my face between her legs and lap up her sweet juices like they were the only thing that could quench this devastating thirst of mine—a thirst that started the second I laid eyes on her.

I ripped through the silky button-down top she wore. It wasn't my favorite, mostly because it hid her curves.

I hated how often she dressed like she wasn't the most beautiful thing walking around this godforsaken place; the way she grew visibly anxious anytime she showed any part of her body, afraid of what lesser beings might think. How could the most gorgeous and courageous human I'd ever set my eyes on not already know what a fucking gift she was to anyone paying attention? That her curves and shape were what made her dessert on two legs?

“Hey—”

I pushed my thumb between her lips, smothering the complaint about to leave her pretty mouth. “You're beautiful, Ash. Why you insist on hiding it I'll never understand.”

She sunk her teeth into my flesh, punishing me, and it took several deep breaths not to lose my head and bite her in return. Or bend her over her bastard boss's desk and fuck her like the sassy little thing she was before sampling the treat waiting between her legs.

“If you can still worry about your clothes, I'm not doing enough. Forgive me. I've neglected my promise to fuck you like I did last night.”

I added another finger between her legs, slamming my hand into her, reaching those sensitive places that made my little raven go absolutely feral. Her wet heat clenched down on me, fighting the pleasure. In a moment of desperation, her mouth opened,

ready to scream profanities, but I pushed my thumb deeper into it and all she could do was moan in subdued distress.

I tore the offending bra away. Bending down, I got a firm grip on her breast and sucked it into my mouth. Her stomach retracted, and she gasped sharply, barely keeping herself upright. My tongue traced her nipple's shape, and her body tensed under the assault. It was easy to tell that she wanted to grab onto me, but she'd lose her balance, so I beckoned my shadows to assist with the endeavor. They supported her back as I guided her hand around my neck.

"You're good. Are you using your power to get me the way you'd like me?" she asked between gasps as I teased her with both my fingers and tongue. She tasted sweet everywhere, and I wanted to suck any place that made her look close to the edge. Like she'd come undone any second.

"What gave it away?" I couldn't help meeting her sass with my own, flicking my gaze up to hers in challenge.

She brought out parts of me I hadn't seen with anyone else, not even the other Horsemen. Me, the one with the power? Unlikely. It was effortless how much power she held over me. Enough to upend every plan I made. Enough to destroy any semblance of control I tried to get over the situation and dissolve any bit of resolve I gathered to do what I must.

Here, Asha had all the power.

Everything about her was fucking breathtaking. I'd never get over how pretty she waited. Water dripped from her hair and down her neck. I couldn't help myself. I licked it away and sucked on the steady thrum of her pulse. Her pussy constricted around my fingers, and I pushed them deeper. I rubbed my thumb in circles over her clit and tormented the spots inside of her that made the little human's breath catch.

My fangs itched to sink into her flesh, but I wouldn't bite her no matter how much I yearned to drink the liquid life force thrumming under the surface. I denied myself for the second day in a row. Instead, I'd satisfy the bloodlust by nibbling and sucking on several sensitive places along the beautiful column of her neck. I'd leave glaring reminders that she was mine in all the places that would make it impossible for her to hide. The next bastard who dared to let his eyes wander over her body would know right away she wasn't for anyone else to claim. The hickeys I gave my little raven were as glaring as the marks I burned onto the foreheads of evil souls destined for Hell.

I leaned away, admiring the dark red marks. Her thighs were shaking. She was close. If I rubbed her clit a few more times, she'd come. So, I slowed my movements, teasing places that didn't satisfy the way she needed them to. I denied my little raven the world-unraveling release she desperately desired. Her expression gave away her frustration. It made my smile grow as her hips tried to swivel and chase.

Impatient little thing.

I brought the fingers now dripping with her taste to my mouth and licked them clean. I took my time with each one so she would lose herself and beg me to fuck her. Because then, and only then, would I give it to her.

"You're a fucking tease," she huffed petulantly.

I laughed without meaning to. Her shameless honesty was something I admired about her. I'd seen it with everyone she interacted with. She never held back. I couldn't decide if it was reckless or courageous to taunt someone with the power to end her life. But no matter who it was, she didn't bite her tongue. She said whatever she wanted. She wasn't afraid of Death, and maybe that was why I couldn't get enough of her. I couldn't wait for what she might say to me next; what she might demand in that confident tone of hers.

Asha grabbed me around the back of my neck and yanked me down into a demanding kiss. Her tongue traced the shape of my lips before slipping between them.

No one ever caught me off guard, but she'd done it so often that I didn't recognize the person I was around her. The effect this little human had over me I'd conveniently blamed on the power of a Counter Soul, but as she mewled and kissed me like her life depended on it, I wasn't so sure anymore.

"Please, Than. Do something already."

Fuck .

The last string of my patience snapped. I got her naked and sprawled out over the desk the way I wanted her. She reached for me, but the side of my lip pulled up. Shadows wrapped around her wrists before slithering across her stomach and neck, binding her to the surface. I went to my knees and dragged her body down the smooth wood. After hitching her legs over my shoulders, I buried my face between her open thighs.

I'd been yearning to make her scream and squirm ever since the little human tossed a saucy command at me and stormed off down the hall of her apartment. I saw what my tongue did to her. I'd make good on my promise to fuck her like I had the night before.

Her entire body tensed, preparing for what I was about to do to her. And I didn't make her wait long. My tongue pressed and sunk deep inside without warning. She sucked in a desperate breath before I teased her favorite spots. She fought the shadows binding her. She pled with me for release. I sucked, bit, and devoured her the way I did the night before, but this time with an urgency I didn't quite understand. Like I was rushing against time to have her every way I could.

In truth, I was.

Just like the night before, she was fucking delicious in every single way. I nearly missed the telling signs that she was about to come because I was so absorbed by how good she felt wrapped around the length of my tongue. Seconds later, my mouth was washed with her taste. I swallowed every precious drop before standing and slowly opening the button and fly of the black jeans I wore.

Something about the way she watched me retrieve my fully hard dick—the same one that plowed and destroyed her the night before—put me on edge. Pumped the blood in my veins harder. Made my cock throb. Set my nerves on fire. It was fucking tantalizing. Her gaze ate up every movement like it was a goddamn feast. It made it worth the extra effort I put into using my own two hands to do the job. Maybe I'd remove my clothes without my shadows more often.

Zelus claimed it was half the fun, and until now, I hadn't seen the point. But I liked the way my little raven waited. I liked how much her thirst to have me fucking her shined through her pretty green gaze when I took my time undressing.

I stroked my cock, watching her closely. She wasn't breathing. Her cheeks were flushed with an elusive red I couldn't wait to kiss and lick. The thick shaft in my hand pulsed and throbbed, satisfied with how good she looked bound in my shadows. I'd burn it into my memory so that I never forgot the little human and how good she was as my prey.

Even when she's gone.

Yanking her up, I slammed our mouths together. Before she could lose herself to it, I bent her over the desk like I'd wanted to since I'd saved her from the bastard who touched what was mine. My shadows retreated begrudgingly, but I barely noticed their presence after I slid my cock back where it belonged.

Inside my little raven.

I told myself it was the last time. I promised I'd take her soul tomorrow. Her ass cheeks reverberated with every smack of my hips, and she moaned her appreciation after I'd pinned her face to the desk. As I relished the little moans and whimpers that slipped out of her pretty mouth, I couldn't say with confidence that I'd surrender her to anyone.

She was mine.

Chapter Twelve

Asha

I gripped the sides of the desk with my cheek pressed into the glossy surface. My breath painted a streak of fog across the dark mahogany. Every thrust of his hips blasted electric pleasure through mine. My stomach clenched, my legs quivered, and my body quaked. I couldn't express how otherworldly everything he did was. It just was. Nothing would ever compare. He'd ruined me. No one would ever come close. The only word that made sense was perfect.

Shadows crept over the desk, back shortly after he'd sent them away. I watched them, helpless but secretly loving it. They snaked closer and slowly disappeared under my chest and stomach. Like it were his fingers roaming my sweat-saturated flesh, they teased my nipples to points and sought out my clit, the friction of them writhing with every thrust heavenly.

It was both absolute bliss and insane torture.

I gasped and tried to get away, but the hand holding my face down pressed harder and kept me firmly in place, so all I could do was curse and thrash every time the explosive sensations rushed straight to the building tension between my hips.

A pleased growl rumbled from the man behind me before his hips smacked into my ass a few more times. His chest fused with my back when he bent over to torment my ear with his teeth and tongue. "That's a good girl. There's no running from me or my shadows, little raven. Not today, anyway."

Thanatos made good on his promise earlier. He pounded into me without mercy like he had the night before. Like we didn't have time for slow and sensual. All the gentle but dominant killer could give me was rough and unhinged. But holy hell did he give it.

Not sure what I expected from a supernatural monster capable of taking souls, but wild grunts and hissing curses hadn't been it. For some reason, I didn't think someone like him would be overcome by the same things we mere mortals were. A supernatural badass capable of controlling shadows and tearing apart men with his bare hands wouldn't lose control, right?

But he did.

The madness of his hips slapping into my backside and the way his hand clenched around my throat told a story of someone unraveling. Someone feral and wild with absolutely no fucks to give for what anyone else thought about it. Like me, he'd given himself over to whatever this thing between us was, and now I'd be fucked an inch within my life.

If anyone could kill me with sex, it was Death.

"You feel so fucking good, little raven. Like you were made just for me," he whispered huskily into my ear, his hips hitting into me several more times to make his point. "Wet and tight like you never want to let my cock go. It's any wonder how I manage to do anything else but fuck you."

The way his pierced length rubbed and grinded all the right spots made it impossible for me to stay quiet. I cursed and gasped his name. I clawed at the glossy wood, trying to escape the amazing but powerful sensations, but the large hands on my hips kept driving me back on his massive shaft over and over, making it impossible to flee the pleasure he was giving me.

Despite having several orgasms already, Thanatos never stopped or gave me reprieve. Just drove his cock back inside and tormented my painfully sensitive body no matter how much I suffered and tried to smother my moans.

“Oh, go—”

His hand closed over my mouth, silencing the cry before I could finish making it. I’d nearly forgotten how frustrated the killer got when I’d uttered the name that meant nothing and something all at the same time. It made me wonder if God was real now that it was clear Death was.

Thanatos slammed into me again as if he’d heard my mind wander away from the unfathomable sensation plowing through my body. His thrusts sped up and the hard wood ledge cut into my thighs. I’d be bruised by tomorrow, but fuck did it feel good. Totally worth it for this girl who’d unlocked some new kinks in the process.

When the tension between my hips reached another breaking point and I arched back, the growling killer grabbed me around the throat and waist and fucked me like he was worried we wouldn’t finish. But he came quickly after another blissful wave took me. Liquid poured down my thighs. It was another reminder that even if he was a supernatural beast, Thanatos was still just a man—a slave to his desires.

Before I knew what was happening, I was suddenly dressed with the supernatural bad boy whispering next to my ear, his hand on my hip because my legs were wobbly and unstable at best, “We’ll finish what we started later, little raven. Unfortunately, that bastard decided today would be a good day to do his fucking job.”

Wait, what? Who?

I couldn’t gather my thoughts. I was pleurably numb everywhere and my head was in a daze. I might be dressed, but I was covered in sweat with my skin still a vibrant

hue of red. I sucked in a shaky breath as the door clicked open and Mark walked in looking equal parts bored and annoyed.

The asshole was lanky but worked out, so his suits always cut a nice shape on him. Which meant nothing when your face was as bland and as forgettable as they came. No amount of plastic surgery could save him. So, the asshole always made up for it by showing his wealth in everything he wore. Top of the line. Name brand. The latest fashion and accessories. He never wore the same suit. Never the same shoes. It was like he had an endless supply of them. As if he'd hit a shop before going anywhere every damn day of his life.

Must be nice.

My boss's eyes glided over to the two of us, confused at first before he straightened like he did around his father and grandfather. "Mr. Muerte! I didn't expect you until later this week. Did...uh, did Ms. Bailey show you in?"

Mr. Muerte? A little on the nose for those of us who knew a little Spanish. Wonder if he did that on purpose? Wait, of course he did. I'd picked up on Thanatos's dark sense of humor since he'd upended my entire life and believed reality. It seemed like something he'd do to fuck around with Mark, who did not, in fact, speak a lick of Spanish. Nor would he ever bother. He fashioned his toxic white masculinity with every suit he donned.

I stole a look at Thanatos, still having a hard time breathing, but his expression gave nothing away. It took me nearly a minute to notice he was in an expensive-as-shit suit, too. Then another minute to realize he'd put me in a dress that showed every fucking curve—and all the red marks he'd left on my chest.

It was a gorgeous black lace that cinched at the waist and barely reached mid-thigh. By the looks of it, it was beyond expensive. Definitely nothing I could afford with my

meager salary. By the very unsubtle onceover Mark gave me after bowing to Thanatos like we were in some weird period drama, he'd noticed it, too.

"Oh, Ash?" Thanatos replied, using my name intimately. Mark definitely noticed by the little glance he gave me. "Yes, she did. I asked her to show me around since I'll be overseeing operations for the next couple weeks. If I remember correctly, this was meant to be...my office."

Mark's eyes widened, and it was the first time I'd seen him act like he didn't own the fucking place. "Yes! Of course. Father explained everything. You can have this one...and any of the staff you deem worthy to assist you."

To say I was having a hard time following would be an understatement, but it wouldn't be any weirder than shadows and ravens attacking shapeless things with glowing eyes or a gorgeous killer who reaped souls for a living.

Such a weird fucking day.

"Ms. Bailey will do. She's available to assist me for however long I need, yes? And I expect she'll be paid extra for all the overtime I'll require her to work."

Mark's eyes wandered over to me, but after Thanatos edged closer to my body, my boss combed shaky fingers through his sandy blonde hair and nodded. "Absolutely. Overtime. Better pay. She's one of the best. She'll give you everything you need."

"I'm counting on it," came Thanatos's saucy reply full of double meaning.

Fucking hell.

"This is the new consultant you mentioned last week?" I pieced together, trying to appear as though I wasn't still riding the bundle-pack orgasm he'd given me only a

minute ago. Thanatos might've dressed me, but I could still feel liquid leaking down my thighs, and I clenched them together in horror, worried my overtly oblivious bastard boss would choose today to be observant.

“The very same. Smart girl.” Patronizing asshole. “See, she’ll be a great help to you, sir. She’s always working here on the weekends.” Yeah, thanks to you, you fucking lazy buffoon. “Grandfather tells me you’ve worked miracles for other companies. I had hoped to pick your brain and learn all your secrets over dinner. Are you free now?”

It didn’t take a genius to gather that Thanatos had already worked some supernatural sorcery on both Mark and his grandfather, but why was what I truly wondered. Did it have something to do with what happened earlier in the alley?

The little sideways smirk the impossibly tall man offered me meant my thoughts were likely projecting on my face again. “I’m afraid I have a prior engagement with Ash. She and I need to discuss our next steps. You understand, of course.” The smile he gave my shameless boss who couldn’t pick up on subtlety to save his life was nothing like the little grins he’d always give me.

So, of course, Mark replied, “Then I can join, yes? Let me grab a few things. We’ll get Ms. Bailey to clean out my office for—”

“No need. I’ll do it myself. Wouldn’t want Ash to spend her precious weekend cleaning house when I’m fully capable of doing that much myself. And I’d prefer the dinner to be with her, and her alone. Your father gave me everything I require to perform my duties, so you can go.”

I’d never seen Mark minimized to just another employee with quite as much ease as Thanatos accomplished in a few sentences. And I’d never been so turned on watching the arrogant asshole bite his tongue before taking his leave without another word.

When the door shut behind Mark's swift exit, probably horrified he was dismissed by someone he hardly knew, Thanatos offered me his hand.

Giving the sleek bastard an eyebrow, I placed mine on his. "So, I guess this means you're sticking around?"

"Suppose it does. Upset I won't leave you alone?"

"Does it matter what I think?"

His glittering blue eyes met mine, and the twitch of his mouth told me he was amused by me again. "More than you know."

I threw him a bone. "Guess it doesn't bother me as much as it should. But should I expect what happened in the alley to be a more frequent thing? And do you ever plan to tell me why I'm now the target of demons and angels?"

His jaw worked in an uncharacteristically candid gesture. "It won't change anything, so no."

I scoffed at his non-answer, expecting it. "Thought so. Twenty questions it is. I'll get it out of you one day."

Finally, he smiled. A genuine smile that reached his eyes. "That's what I'm worried about, little raven, and it's why I can't seem to leave you alone."

Smug, I walked out of the office with my chin up, ignoring some of the sideways glances the other girls working overtime gave me on our way out. Fuck, I hoped no one heard me. Their cubicles were pretty far from Mark's office, but sound carried in this damn place. I'd likely be questioned come Monday morning, but not before everyone drooled over the new hottie who'd dethroned our asshole boss.

Chapter Thirteen

Asha

Emily sat across from me at our bar-style table, her chin on her hands and a devious grin splitting her face. “I knew this would be a thing.”

“Shut it,” I hissed, looking over at Thanatos cooking dinner for the three of us.

He’d insisted, and after two weeks of nothing but out-of-this-world sex, I couldn’t be bothered to argue with him. I was tired. I’d barely slept. Even my dreams were filled with him. I’d never had so much sex in my whole damn life, in or out of dreams. Places I didn’t even know existed ached, and I could barely keep up at work these days. Clearly, the asshole cooking us another five-star meal certainly didn’t need to get any shut-eye. He looked perfect and ready for the day every time I caught sight of him.

Must be nice.

Thanatos had stayed over every day since our little chat with Mark. Two weeks had passed where he showed up at the office and bewitched every woman in the building. Despite my worries, he was incredibly knowledgeable about what we did and put on a very convincing performance as the hired consultant.

I’d quickly become a source of salacious gossip on day one because Thanatos rarely left my side. Other women didn’t exist to him. His eyes were always fastened onto me wherever I was in the room, especially since he’d updated my wardrobe without

my consent—expensive outfits I couldn't explain to anyone and were rumored to be gifts from a very rich consultant who'd shown up the day I started to wear them. It didn't take much for the girls at the office to connect the dots. Now, I wore dresses that never hid anything. I walked around like I spent my days playing arm candy for our resident hottie. But since the asshole got rid of everything I owned, I didn't have a choice.

Whenever I chose to work at my desk, he'd roll a seat over to oversee everything I did. If he had to be in his office, I was expected to be in there with him. More than once, he'd used the office as a place to steal kisses and slip his hand under the clothes he shamelessly forced me to wear. Unfortunately, I'd had the best orgasms of my life sitting on that desk, or in his lap, or pinned to the door, always a room away from discovery. I didn't think I was much for the thrill of being caught, but I couldn't get enough of it. Neither could he.

And for a little while, I forgot he was Death. To me, he was the guy who continued to rock my world. I only remembered that he was a supernatural beast capable of stealing souls when a raven would tap on his office window, and he'd proceed to have a full-blown conversation with it like it was totally normal. Or whenever his shadows would wrap around my body and pin me to whatever surface I was pressed up against.

Without those two things, Thanatos was just...Thanatos.

I hadn't figured out why he'd chosen me. I tried, but it always ended with me pinned underneath him, his monster-sized cock thrusting in and out while his shadows wrapped around my body, imprisoning and teasing in place of his hands and tongue. It wasn't a secret that he used sex as a distraction, but holy fuck did it work every time. I'd never felt more like an animal until my legs were wrapped around his waist, fingers in his hair and our mouths clashing at different angles, succumbing for the millionth time that day.

I didn't like how quickly I fell for his charms; how easily he coaxed me into fucking wherever we were—a couple of teenagers in the throes of our first sexual relationship. It was absolutely crazy how many things we'd done that could put me in jail, or at least make me lose my job.

But if there was a trick to saying no to Thanatos, I hadn't figured it out yet. Doubt Emily would, either. She'd tell me to enjoy it, fuck the consequences. A little part of me had used that as an excuse to ignore my head's departure from sense since I met the mythical, soul-stealing monster posing as a man.

Today was different, though. He'd taken a weird call earlier, and I couldn't figure out why he was so on edge since it. He seemed to be in his head more than usual. Several ravens had shown up over the course of the day, popping a squat on the branches outside our apartment window—the beginning of *The Birds* movie, I noted. They didn't rap on the glass like they did at the office. Guess they knew better, but I'd seen him leave a couple of times to talk to them.

It was silly when I thought about how a terrifying looking man just stood outside my house, talking to a few birds in a tree, and no one cared to notice it. If Emily hadn't been following him around all day with her eyes glued to his form, I'd be convinced he was invisible to everyone else but me. But obviously, he wasn't.

After setting our plates down, Thanatos retrieved his buzzing phone from his back pocket. He clicked his tongue the second the screen flashed on. Emily watched him curiously as he bent down, stole a quick kiss from me, and whispered in my ear. “Stay,” was all he said before leaving the two of us in the kitchen and exiting the house.

Emily made eyes at me, taking a little bite of her food and moaning. “I don't care what you have to do to keep that man, but do it. I can't go back to our shitty mealtimes after this, and you can't go back to your shapeless outfits. You've looked

hot as fuck every damn day since he showed up. I didn't want to say anything because, you know, fuck men and what they think about how we look and what we choose to wear, but he's got a knack for dressing you, chick. And it shows how sexy you feel. You walk around like a goddess visiting the mortal realm. If I weren't so afraid of ruining our friendship, I'd tap that."

Emily rarely held back, but I was surprised. I hadn't thought the outfits made that much of a difference. It might've been the world-shattering sex too, but I'd only mentioned how it was the best I'd ever had. I couldn't exactly tell my best friend that I was being fucked by a monster who controlled ravens and shadows— oh, and who could steal our souls if he wanted to. So, I stuck with the simple things. The sex was amazing, because it was, and he was insatiable, because he was.

I glanced over my shoulder to eye the door the devastatingly gorgeous man left through. "Shut up...but, um, really?"

"Whatever you have to do, girl. That man is a Grade-A everything. Dial up the charm and sink your claws in. For both of our sakes."

Licking my lips, I leveled tired eyes on my hungry hippo of a best friend, who was currently devouring her steak like they didn't feed her at that fancy job of hers. We both knew that they did nothing but lunches and dinners. "You don't even know him. It's been barely two weeks, Ems."

"Two weeks where the two of you have been attached at the hip. Just get married already. There's always divorce if things don't work out. Just think about all the money you'll get by ditching his gorgeous ass once you're done with him," she proclaimed with bits of food flying out of her mouth.

Gross.

“How romantic of you.”

“I’m just keeping it real. I’ll even get you in touch with a great lawyer who’ll secure most of the money in the split. That chick’s a goddamn shark. I’d never want to be on the other side of her in a courtroom, that’s for damn sure.” She waved her fork around, still gobbling up her steak like she never ate and wasn’t all of twenty pounds.

I opened my mouth to argue that I never wanted to get married and was an independent woman capable of making my own damn money when there was a thump, thump, thump at the door. My body went rigid. I almost didn’t think Emily heard it until she gestured to the door with her fork.

“Since you insist on not eating this decadent meal fit for the gods, why don’t you go and answer the door? It’s probably your boyfriend, anyway. I don’t mind if you give him a key. Actually, do it. Gives more credibility to your relationship. Just another step in the wedding bells direction.”

“Have I ever told you that you have issues?”

“Plenty of times.”

“Well, now I’m confident you’re a sociopath.”

“Takes one to know one, babes.”

My lips thinned, and I got to my feet. “And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“He’s been here since that night at the club, Ash. He cooks all your meals. He kisses you any chance he gets. His eyes follow you everywhere you go. It’s honestly gross how into you he is. So, pray tell, oh bitchiest one, what else would you call him?” The twinkle in her eyes told me that I’d be stupid to argue with her. She’d made

enough points that it'd be silly to think I could make a case to the contrary.

Sneaky little bitch.

Turning on my heel, I stomped my way over to the door to take out my frustration on the stranger who thought it was a great idea to bother two single women at nearly eight at night. But when the door swung open, my jaw dropped in surprise. Leaning up against the wall was a man just as impossible as the one who'd kissed me only moments ago.

Two words: Beautiful and dangerous.

Everything within sight was pierced. Not in an unattractive way but definitely in a way that made it clear he liked the way it hurt. He was in a black tank top that exposed all his tattoos. Full, shoulder-to-hand sleeves of tribal ink outlined his beautiful musculature. Not too thin, but not grossly large either. Singer of a band vibes. Still, he'd be someone I'd outright avoid if I saw him on the street. Nothing but bad news central. The dude screamed toxic bad boy, and not in a fun fictional boyfriend kind of way. In a way that had any woman within reach starring in the next murder documentary.

Put simply, this bro was a hundred percent Emily's type, but only because she liked to make his kind beg. Something about taking down a "superior breed" got my friend with too many issues to count all hot and bothered. She'd explained it once, but I'd barely listened because I was almost certain that out of the two of us, she needed the most therapy.

The stranger's short and styled vibrant red hair was a similar color to mine, completely unnatural, but his neon-yellow irises were what took me off kilter for a second. Contacts? Wait...

“Demon,” I spat out loud.

“Rude. Those bottom dwellers have nothing on me, bird. My friends call me Z, but you...” His unsettling eyes took a very pointed path down my body. “You can call me whatever you like.”

I couldn’t immediately narrow down his accent, but he was probably from somewhere in the United Kingdom. It wasn’t strong, but it was there.

The stranger tilted his head, trying to look past me, and I prickled with alarm. Something in my gut told me I didn’t want whoever this asshole was to see Emily. I couldn’t explain it, but the urge to protect her was so powerful it led me to walking right out of the safety of my own home and straight into the belly of the beast.

I shut the door behind me, on guard. “What can I do for you, sir?”

His eerie-colored eyes danced with delight, and he licked his lips in an overtly sexual way. Something told me he was used to getting any woman he wanted. The dude was annoyingly pretty. Of course, they always were. But he’d never dealt with someone like me—a girl who could ignore a pretty face when the rest of him was screaming serial killer.

Well, up until Thanatos, at least.

“Sir? I like that.” Leaning in, Mr. Pretty and Pierced reached out, but I was quick to get one of his fingers into a hold that put the asshole in his place before he could do any nonconsensual touching. “Cheeky. Z likes. To answer your question, love, you and I have a friend in common. One who seems to have revealed a few things to you already. Interesting. So, tell me, is my good ol’ buddy Thanatos hiding in there by any chance?”

I released his finger begrudgingly. “You just missed him, actually. Too bad, so sad. Well, later!”

He caught my wrist before I could make an escape. “Not so fast, bird. I think he’ll come looking if I take a pretty little thing like you with—”

Before he could finish his sentence, the lights flickered ominously. The hallway was suddenly drenched in darkness, and the hand that had been wrapped around my wrist was gone. I took a step back, a sudden wind chill slamming into my body. A loud thud shook the space, and birds cawed outside the stairwell window.

“Hello, Dead,” I heard the stranger greet in a sultry whisper. “Looks to me like you found what you were looking for. Sort of funny how you failed to mention it to anyone else...”

I blinked at the two figures outlined by the light coming through the window. Thanatos had the stranger pinned to the wall he’d been previously leaned up against. But something about his face was off. Black, inky veins grew like electricity over the skin around his white, moon-colored eyes. It was the first time since the night he killed the five men who attacked me that he looked like the monster he supposedly was.

“Pest. I think you’ve forgotten that I don’t owe you a fucking thing. Why are you here?” Thanatos didn’t look over at me. His eyes stayed with the stranger the entire time as if he was worried what would happen should he look away. It was the most hostile I’d seen him since the first night.

Pest?

“Aww, Dead. Is that how you greet your mate? So, she knows who you are but not why you’re here, is my guess?” The thundering growl Thanatos released only made

the pierced bad boy grin. “Thought so. Oh, this is way more fun now.” The redhead cut his glowing yellow eyes over to me, then laughed a little to himself. “I always thought it was weird nothing ever got to you, but I guess it was only a matter of time, aye, Dead?”

Thanatos let the man go, and the shadows around him moved in agitation, creeping closer to the arrogant nuisance. “That’s where you’re wrong, Pest. You think simply finding them is all that’s needed?” Thanatos had blocked my view of the other man by standing in front of me, so I could only hear the exchange, but I barely understood any of it, anyway. “How juvenile. Patience and careful execution are key, and that's why you haven’t found yours. You couldn’t possibly do something you don’t first try to understand, and that’s why you never will. Don’t interfere again, Zelus. It’ll be the last time you do.”

Death’s threat hung in the air before the lights flickered back to life, and the stranger was gone.

Why did the pierced bad boy’s name feel important? What were they even talking about? Find yours? Yours, what?

But before I could spend any more time thinking about it, Thanatos had turned and grabbed my face. “Did he touch you?”

Blinking in confusion, I stared at him. “Touch me?”

“Yes, Ash. This is important. Did he touch you?” he asked again, his voice bottoming out. I looked down at my wrist, and his eyes followed. Inky veins encircled the spot the asshole had grabbed. “Fuck.” Lifting my hand, he inspected my wrist. “I fucking knew it wouldn’t be that simple.”

“Who was he?”

Thanatos pushed his loose black hair back and his jaw clenched. “Someone I’d hoped to avoid for as long as possible, but this complicates everything. What he’s done can’t be undone without help, and to get that help, I’d have to...” He didn’t finish, just cursed again.

“Who is he?” I demanded again.

The supernatural killer’s eyes lifted from my wrist. I didn’t expect him to answer. He’d kept everything to himself all this time, so why would he start telling me things now? But then his thumb brushed over my wrist, and he sighed loudly. “One of the Four Horsemen. Humans call him Pestilence.”

What the fuck?!

Chapter Fourteen

Thanatos

Weight landed in my stomach after seeing the inky mark circling my little raven's wrist. The mark of her inevitable death if I didn't seek assistance from someone who'd never give it. One of God's most beloved angels. The only angel capable of purifying a human from Pestilence's incurable sickness. But she wouldn't go against God. Not after what she and her lover did. Not when she was banished to the human realm to prove her loyalty to God.

Fuck.

The first call of the day was a warning by War. Ares rarely involved herself in my affairs, but she'd been tracking Zelus because he'd interfered with hers. He couldn't find his Counter Soul, so he was trying to take the souls of the other Horsemen. Limos—or Famine as the humans liked to call him—was the laziest of the group and hadn't bothered to look for his. Nor would he if given the option. So, it wasn't surprising that despite Zelus's obvious fear of Ares, he'd tried to outwit her. No surprise, he hadn't managed it. Even I was at a loss when it came to her. Should I ever be on the wrong side of Ares, I'd struggle to evade her wrath.

I quickly realized she didn't intend to assist with annihilating humanity. Ares had outright rebelled against our function as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Despite what she saw over millennia of the wars she instigated, she loved humans. No matter what ugliness humans enacted on one another, she still believed they were worth saving. Even claimed that in the midst of war and often at its conclusion, she

witnessed the true strength and compassion of humanity.

So, the Bringer of Warfare proclaimed in so many words that she didn't want the world to end and wouldn't take another soul to do it. Instead, she'd keep her Counter Soul safe until the danger was over.

Honestly, I was speechless.

"I won't apologize," she had told me in that strong, no-nonsense tone of hers. "But I won't try to escape any punishment you see fit to give me. Once the final day comes and goes and humanity is safe from the unfair judgment God has cast down on them, I'll return and accept whatever fate you deem worthy of my failure to do my sworn duty as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. You have my word."

I guess she expected me to punish her for it when she revealed the truth behind why she refused to give up the location of her Counter Soul. Least surprising was she found hers well before I found mine.

If I were clever, I'd lean into my role as leader of the Horsemen and lecture her. But I didn't. If anything, I was relieved to hear I wasn't alone. Perhaps because after a week of promising tomorrow I'd take Asha's soul but always failing to do so, it finally felt as though I wasn't the only Horseman struggling to do what we'd been created for. Someone who didn't want everything to come to an end. Rather, I didn't want to see my little raven gone from this world, never to reincarnate.

So I divulged my weakness—my inability to let Asha go where I couldn't. I expected War to admonish me for getting too close to a human, but it was the first time I'd heard her laugh in nearly a century.

"So, you do have a soul," she had murmured, her voice playful. "I never thought it'd be you who'd agree with me about this, but...I'm glad, Thanatos. Maybe there's still

hope.” That was all she said before ending the call.

I’d stood outside for a time, marinating in the idea that we had the power to stop the human world from ending. I wasn’t sure if humanity deserved it, but Asha proved maybe some of them did. Unfortunately, that was the least of my problems.

It was arrogant to think I could outwit Zelus with someone to protect. I didn’t consider he’d use underhanded tactics to claim my Counter Soul, but I should’ve known he’d find a window and attack while I was dealing with another demon retaliation nearby. I suspected he’d led them there. A clever distraction, and one that worked.

Anytime danger was nearby, I lost my head a little. I didn’t think the same way I did before meeting Asha. I was reckless and reactive, not calculated and cool-headed. The number of enemies out to kill her had grown exponentially over the last two weeks. They wouldn’t believe I didn’t intend to take her soul. Death had never failed to do his job, not once. Why would this little human be any different?

The demons wanted to taste her blood, and the angels rebelling against God would drive their blades into her heart to save all of humanity. Either way, Asha wouldn’t be safe until time ran out and we’d failed to bring the end of the world. Not that it mattered anymore. They’d won. Unless I could convince Michael humans were worth saving—which was something I wasn’t even sure if I believed—then I’d lose my little raven no matter what I did.

Fuck.

More determined than I’d ever been for the end of the world, I sighed and looked down at Pestilence’s disgusting mark, knowing it was my oversight that caused it. “We can’t stay here.”

Asha's eyes widened. "Emily—"

"She'll be safer if we're not here. He'll have no reason to bother her. The only place you will be safe is...my realm," I murmured, taking gentle hold of her face. I wanted to burn her gorgeous eyes, perfect nose, and luscious mouth into my memory. An acidic burn reached my throat, and I soothed it by kissing her.

She reacted by grabbing my shirt and yanking me harder into the kiss. When I tried to wrap her body in my arms, she took a step back and crossed hers instead, a telling sign that she was about to say something sassy. "The Underworld? Or is it Hell? I don't know what realm a dude like you would live in. What mythology is right?"

I tried not to smile because my chest was so excruciatingly tight that it felt like it might burst into a million pieces at any moment. "Not where you'd think. As Death, I have a realm of my own, but I've never brought a mortal there. I'm not sure how it'll work once you're there, but we're not safe here."

"Locking me up in a gilded cage until when?" she countered, her eyes piercing mine. "Why? What was he talking about when he said you'd found yours? What's happening, Than? I'm not going anywhere with you without some goddamn answers."

Her freckled cheeks puffed out, and I hated how cute she looked when I knew that everything I told her would ruin how she felt about me. Would she hate me with every fiber of her being? Would she cast me away? Would she refuse to leave when I told her that everyone she loved would no longer exist as soon as we delivered a soul for the apocalypse?

I couldn't take her unwillingly to my realm. She had to be compliant, or it wouldn't work. That much I did know. I just wasn't sure if she could leave once I brought her to my isolated space, or if she'd regret coming once she knew the truth—that I was

one of the only beings who could keep her company for eternity.

The person I was before wouldn't care, but Asha had changed me. I no longer took whatever I wanted. I waited for her permission. I waited for her to tell me that being with me was the very thing she wanted.

Fuck, I don't know what to do anymore. What will it take to keep her when I know she'll be dead in a week?

"That mark..." I started, staying as close to her as I could manage without losing sight of her face. My voice was low, entreating, and more desperate than it'd ever sounded. "If I don't get it removed, you'll die in a week. In four days, you'll fall ill. In five, you'll be in a coma. In seven, you'll breathe your last and succumb to the illness."

"And I won't in your realm?"

Fuck.

"You will."

"Then what's the point?" she clapped back in a tight voice. She was surprisingly calm for someone who'd been told her death was imminent. "I'd rather spend the last days I have with Ems. She's..."

The tightness in my chest was unbearable when a tear broke away from my little raven's eye. It was only then that I realized she wasn't calm at all; she was silently grieving.

I'd forgotten how brave Asha was. It was all there in the eyes she cast my way. She knew nothing she did would change the fact that she was about to die. The only thing

she wished for was to spend her last days, hours, and minutes with her friend. Her chosen family. Maybe a part of her understood the day she crossed paths with Death that she wouldn't leave the encounter alive. I'd never seen anyone look so beautiful as she did accepting her fate with grace and determination to make the most out of it.

But I wasn't ready.

She might be willing to accept that her time had come, but I wouldn't. Even should it be the last thing I did as the Reaper of Souls, I'd save her from her fate. I'd find a way. If she died in my shadow realm, I suspected that I could keep her soul there. I'd never done it, but no other being was permitted to wander there without my invitation. I could keep her for myself and bend the rules of life and death, forever if I must. But first, I had to persuade her to come. I had to give her what she wanted first.

Hope.

"There might be a way." My eyes wandered over her face, memorizing every detail. "But we can't stay here. It'll endanger your friend. Pestilence will expect us to flee. We can take advantage of that. Tell your friend I'm taking you on a spontaneous getaway."

"Just tell me one thing, Thanatos."

I stiffened, worried she'd demand an answer I couldn't risk giving her. "If I answer this one question, will you promise to come with me?"

I hated how desperate I sounded, but if she knew everything, I couldn't keep her safe. She'd stay. She'd die. Her soul would disappear like it never existed. I couldn't bring her soul to my realm if she died here on the human plane. I'd either be forced to leave her to wander aimlessly until the end of time or deliver her for the apocalypse. I couldn't keep her. I'd lose her forever.

“Why are you doing all of this for me?”

I opened my mouth, at a loss. “I—”

“I’m just someone who intrigues you. Why would you go to all this trouble for some human who’s going to die someday, anyway?”

Why was she so clever? Why couldn’t she just blindly do as I say? I struggled to answer because even I didn’t know why I’d gone to such lengths to keep her safe, or why I refused to take her soul when it was part of my duty as one of the Horsemen to bring the end of the world. What did one human’s soul matter? Why would I ruin everything to keep her?

“If I told you that even I don’t know why, would you believe me?” I posed to her finally after a long pause, choosing honesty for once.

I hadn’t expected her to smile, but when she did, the tension in my chest eased. “Actually, yes I do.”

“Then you’ll come with me?” I couldn’t keep the hopeful lilt in my voice from surfacing.

I needed an answer so I could keep her safe and figure out how I’d argue my case to an angel who’d surely refuse it. Zelus wouldn’t remove his mark, so the only option left would be to convince Asha to come to my realm. I had four days to make the little human need me as much as I desperately needed her. Four days to endear myself to Asha so she’d give up her afterlife to be with me.

I ran a hand through my hair.

It was pathetic to think that I’d gone my entire existence not once needing anyone,

and the first person I wanted was someone I couldn't have. Someone I had to beg to stay. To think, a powerful being like myself was so quickly brought down to the same level as the humans I sent to their awaiting afterlife. But I'd lost all sense of propriety when my eyes connected with the mark that would take my little raven's life.

Fuck who I was. That person didn't exist anymore. Whatever I had to do to keep her, I would, and it didn't matter how desperate I had to be to achieve it.

Asha's hands cupped my cheeks, and the touch startled me out of my head. "I guess you and I are going on an adventure, huh? Who would've thought my first vacation in years would be with Death. Doesn't get any weirder than that."

The overwhelming rush of relief that hit after she agreed to come with me eased the tension in my body, but it was far from over. If I kept her away from Zelus, it'd give me time to call on the angel. Zelus couldn't quicken the illness if he wasn't around her, and those precious few days could mean the difference between whether she lived or died in this realm. It would give me time to convince her to come to mine. To make myself someone she couldn't live without.

Then I'd figure out a way to keep her with me forever.

I'd never wanted something or someone so much I was willing to test the limits of my power, but I would for her. If I could keep my little raven from dying, I'd have time to figure out the rest. Whatever it took for more time, I'd do it.

Chapter Fifteen

Asha

I should've been more surprised when Thanatos told me I was going to die, but some part of me always knew it all was too good to be true. And to be fair, I was probably meant to die that first night we met. Deep down, I knew we hadn't crossed paths by coincidence. He'd come for my soul. Whether that fate was put off a little to satisfy his curiosity, I couldn't be sure. After seeing what he could do to those assholes, I'd be stupid to think I could avoid Death.

In a lot of ways.

But what I hadn't expected was his insistence that he wouldn't let it happen. Ever. I mean, come on, Death proclaiming he'd keep you from dying was as ironic as it got. Wasn't that sort of his entire job description? I wasn't an authority on how life and death was supposed to work, not that any of that religious babble my parents spouted my entire childhood held any truth, but something told me it was against the rules for him to tamper with my scheduled end. Pretty sure that was how someone lost their job, or worse, got punished in uncomfortably supernatural ways. Maybe Death couldn't die, but that didn't mean he couldn't suffer like the rest of us.

So, when he asked me to come with him, I hesitated. Sure, I wanted to live, but could I really be the reason that Death went AWOL? Would there be human-world consequences should he act on it? Would we both be thrown into supernatural jail, forever tortured for one lust-driven decision? It wasn't like he...loved me or I him, right?

That was ludicrous.

We'd only met two weeks ago. I wasn't an early twenty-something with her whole life ahead of her and love on the brain. I was a woman of sound mind— sort of —who made logical choices— sometimes —so it'd be insane to label this as anything but lust at first sight.

I might not know much about the supernatural world order, but people—er, gods?—didn't just give up their supreme position as Death for some mortal woman who could barely remember where she put her keys every morning. A woman who tripped over the same damn rug she insisted made the apartment look “fancy-chic” despite her best friend reminding her what a damn klutz she was on a normal day without rugs in the hallway. It didn't make sense. Why throw away everything for some human who intrigued you?

Besides, I couldn't leave Emily. She and I were ride or dies. Two amigas against the world. A pair of crazy ladies with only each other to live for. I couldn't abandon her. But then again, I also couldn't ask her to watch me die, either.

She wouldn't understand. She'd be convinced I could be saved, never knowing it was Death himself who'd come to collect. Was it kinder to leave and promise I'd come home? To give her hope that one day she might find me again, then ruin her life in a never-ending pursuit of where I'd gone? Or would it be kinder to make her watch me disappear right in front of her?

Because when Zelus showed up at our doorstep, a part of me knew I wouldn't come out of the exchange alive. Maybe because I sensed the monster he was. Thanatos had said he was another Horseman? Did he mean the ones foretold to bring the end of the world? Was Mr. Killer in the middle of starting the apocalypse? Because if so, spending time with Emily was paramount if the world was about to end.

Maybe he didn't expect me to connect the dots, but I wasn't that stupid. Death, Pestilence, the other two, it was just like the stories they told. But what did I have to do with all of that? That was the only thing that was unclear. Why was I important, and why did it feel like he'd abandoned everything he was meant to do by promising I wouldn't die?

I stood at the door with a small bag of luggage, afraid I'd cry because Emily was smiling from ear to ear. I'd chickened out. I told her I was going on a little romantic excursion with my very rich boyfriend; that he'd pulled some strings with Major Asshat Boss and gotten us a few weeks off. She was over the fucking moon. I'd never seen her so happy for someone else. You'd think it was her who'd been asked to take a few-week vacay across Europe.

When I didn't come back, it'd tear her apart, so I left a letter in an envelope addressed to her in my room to find. When I didn't come back, she'd go looking for it. In the letter, I explained everything—how I was ill and only had a few days, maybe a week at most to live, and how I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth. I used every fucking mushy word I knew in that damn letter. Put every emotion I'd stored for a friend I didn't deserve into that final goodbye.

Emily was the family I never had, so I made sure she knew how grateful I was that she'd stayed until the bitter end, and how much happier my world was because she'd been in it. I asked her to go on living for the both of us. With a shaky hand, I told her I loved her and sealed the envelope with a big, fat kiss because she deserved all the love I could put into every part of that letter.

A tear trailed down my cheek, and Emily rushed over, laughing at me. She'd never know how much I'd miss the sound of it. "It's only a few weeks, Ash. You're acting like we're about to say goodbye forever. What are you, five? Mommy will be right here when you get back."

“Eww, gross,” I complained, smiling despite the tears falling faster. “It’s all the dust in here because you never fucking clean. I better not come home to a mess, Ems. I’ll kill you if I do.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she replied noncommittally because Hell would freeze over before she dusted anything.

Thanatos stayed quietly beside me. His presence soothed the aching part in my chest. I wanted to believe that he’d save me, or at least save the rest of them, but I couldn’t be sure if Death even had that kind of power. If I could make one wish, and only one, it’d be that Emily was safe after I was gone.

“You better take good care of my girl here, mister. She’s all I got in the world,” Emily directed at Thanatos.

I couldn’t contain the tears, so I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her cheek. I allowed myself a moment to breathe her in because she was my best friend, my sister, and the only person I would ever call family because mine had failed me in so many ways. I wished I could tell her everything, especially about the maybe-apocalypse in our very near future, but I wouldn’t know where to start.

She wouldn’t believe me even if I did.

Emily waved us away, and I followed the silent man all the way to the curb where a car waited. It was sleek and expensive, so I cut a look over to him with a little smirk tilting my mouth. “Making sure my last few days are in the lap of luxury, hmm, Mr. Killer?”

He opened the passenger-side door for me, but he didn’t smile or seem amused at all. “I think you underestimate what I can do, little raven. Anything you could ever want will be yours now that you’re mine.”

His? Wait, was this Death's way of comforting me? These last two weeks were top-notch weird. I guess I couldn't expect to have life-altering sex without it being the literal death of me.

I'd let him believe what he wanted. Who knows, maybe he had a few tricks up his sleeve. My feeble human brain could only handle so much. It'd hit max the first day we met. Maybe shock or denial were to blame, but I didn't want to spend my last days pining for more. Nor would I believe I'd get more if I asked. It felt like a lot of work arguing with someone who was determined to save you, whether or not it was possible. I couldn't pretend to understand how all this paranormal nonsense worked, so I'd leave that to Death to figure out.

One promise I did make to myself was to enjoy the time I had left however that looked—and have it my way, it'd be skin to skin with a sex god. Well, god of death and sex. Might as well enjoy whatever perks I got out of this bat-shit crazy situation I'd unwittingly gotten myself into.

I stared at the red door that appeared out of fucking nowhere after Thanatos whispered something that didn't sound like English. His fingers caressed my neck, moving red hair out of the way so he could drop a kiss on my shoulder. Shivers danced down my spine. I still hadn't gotten used to how possessive his every touch was, but he never held back. Not since the first day we met.

Thanatos took hold of my marked wrist and brought it to his mouth, stealing my gaze with it. "I'm breaking a few rules bringing you here, so you should expect them to respond with...hostility."

"Them?"

His icy irises sparkled with amusement. "The angels."

Angels?! As in, more than one? Fucking fantastic.

Taking me by the neck, the gorgeous killer fused our bodies together. “Before we go in, I need your permission to do something. Think of it as a little insurance policy to ensure they won’t do anything to you.”

Do anything to me? What did angels have against me? I was hardly the worst sinner of the bunch. Okay, so I’d kicked a few asses and made a habit of saying the Lord’s name in vain—honestly, I still didn’t believe that person existed even after everything I’d learned—but I hardly thought that my lack of faith and history of ass-kicking warranted the wrath of every angel out there.

When I finally realized that my companion was still waiting for me to answer, I gave the silent supernatural predator a nod. “You’ve seen me naked, sir. And that’s after telling me that you control shadows and ravens and, you know, take souls for a living. Not sure if there’s much you can do that’ll surprise me anymore.”

For this being an alley to an elusive angel club, it was pretty unspectacular. It looked like every side street I’d traveled, if not a little weather-worn and isolated. Guess angels didn’t travel in flocks like badass birds of the sky to get here. Although, that’d be a funny sight, angels migrating together.

The shadows around us moved in agitation, and a few ravens flew overhead, cawing in their obnoxious way. Several landed on the railings, chattering at Thanatos. He turned his head. I was seriously worried for a second he’d caw back, and my image of him would be ruined. Hard to find a dude cawing sexy. I’d remember it every time he touched me, and the mood would be destroyed with it. But instead, he nodded at them and one flew off.

Something was up.

Cursing under his breath, the towering man turned his head back my direction. “We don’t have time, little raven. Do I have your permission?”

It felt weird that Death was asking for my consent when he was fully capable of taking what he wanted, but after the day I’d had, I didn’t have it in me to test my luck by making him wait out of sarcastic spite.

“You do.”

The area around his eyes went inky, growing like black vines down his cheeks. If I hadn’t seen it before, I might’ve been terrified, but the thrum between my legs signaled an entirely different response thanks to his daily barrage of sexy touches. Thanatos’s white-grey eyes glowed, traveling from mine to the area his thumb brushed on my neck.

My breath seized when I caught sight of his incisors. They were razor-sharp points. Wait...did he always have fangs? Where had those come from? I’d never seen them before. Was I somehow led astray by a vampire claiming he was Death? Leave it to me to be bamboozled by Lestat.

As if hearing the thoughts swirling around my head, Thanatos hushed me and fused our mouths together in a possessive kiss. With so little effort, he quickly eased me back into the safety of his touch. “I’m not a vampire.”

I could feel his amused smile against my lips, and I scoffed unattractively. “I didn’t say you were.”

“But you were thinking it.”

“Again with the mind reading. I don’t believe you anymore when you say that you can’t. You can’t fool me, Lestat,” I grumbled, and he responded by nipping my lower

lip.

Another raven cawed, and the frustrated God of Death shot his eyes over to it before hissing something under his breath. It definitely wasn't English. Or any language, really. More like a series of whistling exhales that were both dangerous and erotic sounding at the same time. Honestly, I wouldn't put it past him to be speaking snake or something. Not that it made sense that he'd hiss instead of caw, but what did I know. Maybe ravens spoke snake, too.

He caught me thinking a little too hard on the subject, and the sigh he let loose was enough to annoy me. "That's not the language of snakes, Ash. Why would I talk to my ravens in the language of snakes? That doesn't even make sense."

"What...I...you never know! I don't know how this supernatural stuff works," I whispered, narrowing my eyes on one of the ravens because it was clearly laughing at me. "And stop reading my thoughts, asshole. I mean it. I'll smite you. You'll wish Death could die after I'm done with you."

His mouth twitched, but he didn't give me the satisfaction of a laugh. Bastard. I was days away from dying, and he couldn't even bother to laugh at my lame jokes? So rude. Ems would be doubled over already.

"Forgive me for leaving you out. They can understand any language, so I'll aim to speak to them in a way that won't leave you out."

I wanted to argue with him that it didn't matter what he did if I was going to be dead in a week, but something stopped me. If he wanted to be a weirdo and talk to his damn birds out in the open, have at it. But he continued without giving me the chance to rant spitefully.

"We're out of time, Ash. She'll be here very soon."

She?

“It won’t hurt, but we need to share blood so they know just whose you are. I won’t take much, but you might.”

I might?

“Wait...you mean here?!”

His tongue was already pushing its way into my mouth, coaxing mine into action. Because that was his thing—do whatever he wanted and leave me to figure out the rest on my own. I should’ve been angrier than I was, but when the guy kissed like the Devil, it made my usually clever brain go to mush. Worse, I wasn’t even sorry. Might as well enjoy it if the hours before it was all gone kept ticking away no matter what I did.

I was pinned to the wall. His leg pushed between mine, and like always, the area it brushed pulsed with an eagerness I’d argue was his fault. Desperate for more sensation, I rolled my hips and rubbed myself over his thick thigh. The hard friction dragged another needy moan out of me.

Thanatos groaned in return, pushing against me harder than before. “Fuck.”

Our mouths collided violently. He sucked my tongue and tugged at my lips with his teeth, tasting and kissing me so thoroughly it flooded my hips with familiar heat—sensation I’d absolutely riot over if he left me unsatisfied. His thigh stayed firmly in place, so I continued to use it to relieve the uncomfortable tension building between my legs.

The friction was intoxicating. So fucking good. I always fell perfectly into his trap. Always the one desperately begging him to finish what he started. But he ended the

kiss before I could really get going, and I was left in a daze, panting.

Thanatos looked down the empty alley before his piercing gaze was back on me. Without explaining, he drove his fangs into his tongue and came down for another kiss. I stiffened. Memories of the first time I tasted his blood came rushing back in. I'd thought it was all some kind of dream, but this time I knew for sure it wasn't.

The second the warm liquid coated my tongue, I couldn't contain the feral sound of need that dislodged from my throat. Thankfully, it was smothered by his tongue dancing around mine. I swallowed every drop that streamed into my mouth, thirstier than I'd ever been.

Groaning, Thanatos pulled his head just out of reach. He'd never looked more like a beast than he did now. His body wasn't solid like it should be, and everywhere my eyes wandered was just another reminder this man was a supernatural beast. He looked like the monster he warned he was, and I'd never been so eager to be attacked by someone until he came tearing through my life.

Grabbing me around the throat, Thanatos forced my head to the side and licked my erratic pulse. When his fangs sunk in, all that hit my body was pleasure. It didn't hurt, but I thought for sure it'd kill me.

His hand sunk between my legs, his fingers pushing past my wet folds, reaching deep inside and fucking me so hard my legs quaked and threatened to take me to the floor. His other hand wrapped around the back of my thigh, lifting it up so I could lock it around his waist. His hand returned to my throat like it belonged there. The hold he had on my neck tightened as he sucked harder, taking strong pulls of my blood into his mouth. He used his tongue to make sure not a single drop slipped away, and I clung to him, afraid I'd fall over if I didn't.

I couldn't explain it, but it felt like I'd been waiting for him to bite me since we met.

Really bite me. It was the final piece to a puzzle I hadn't realized I was trying to solve. Everything about it felt right, and from the way Thanatos growled into my neck and kept me firmly in his grasp, he was feeling it, too.

As he swallowed down greedy mouthfuls, I was unraveling. Coming undone. Desperate to have his pierced cock sliding in and out of me, fucking me shamelessly out in the open. Delicious sensation stormed my hips, relentless waves licking across my skin and setting my body ablaze. I was pounded by his fingers in time with my thundering pulse for what felt like forever before, without warning, the tension in my lower waist snapped.

I came so hard my vision failed.

“Oh, fuck. Thanatos!”

As soon as I came off the numb rush, the towering killer-turned-vampire stopped and wiped the blood coating his lips with his thumb. He visibly savored my taste by pushing the digit into his mouth with his eyes closed. A growl rumbled from deep within his chest. Then our gazes locked.

I couldn't breathe.

The look he gave me was wilder than I'd ever seen him. Dangerous. Possessive. The eyes of a predator. Watching me carefully, Thanatos lifted his other hand to his mouth, the one he'd fucked me with. He licked each finger clean the same way he had his thumb. I nearly stumbled, but his penetrating stare demanded I watch. The thing was, I couldn't have looked away if I wanted to. How could one simple act be the sexiest thing I'd ever seen?

His chest rose and fell, seconds away from attacking. But when he finally broke our eye contact, it felt like I could finally breathe again. “My mark looks much better on

you, little raven.”

A jolt shot down my body. I’d never get over how quickly he went from stoic shadow to possessive beast. Faster than I could blink. The always subsurface yearning to be his prey rose into my throat. I wanted to run so he could chase and eventually catch. I wanted that carnal, lustful monster I knew was under the surface to put excited fear into my body.

Frustrated, I latched onto his shirt and tried to pull him back down. I didn’t care that we were barely a hundred feet from a public walkway. I wanted him to fuck me. And hard. I yanked him again with more insistence and went to my toes. His head dipped down just enough so that my teeth could grab hold of his lower lip. I bit him, and the black veins around his eyes grew like cracks in the ground in the midst of an earthquake.

His moon gaze narrowed. Every muscle in his body tensed, practically stone to the touch. The feeling in the air was electric. A warning. An ominous sensation of darkness. The same feeling I got the first night I caught his eye.

The look I gave him dared the Great Soul Taker to do something, and from the way his jaw worked and his neck strained, he’d gotten the message. His nostrils flared. But before he could dip his head back down and claim my mouth the way he wanted to, someone’s voice broke through our sensual stand-off.

“You have some bloody nerve showing up here and shamelessly throwing this in my face, Thanatos.”

Chapter Sixteen

Asha

Thanatos turned sharply, keeping me firmly behind him so I couldn't see who had called out. But when I stepped a little to the left, I was surprised to find a tall woman in a vest top and fitted pair of dress pants standing next to the red door.

Her short, silky white hair was brushed off to the right while the other side was shaved. I'd seen the hairstyle before, but no one had ever made it look half as good as she did. Let's just say that she gave off all the devastating vibes of an androgenous babe out to conquer the world.

But holy shit, she had to be at least six or so feet tall. I envied how perfect she looked in everything she'd chosen to wear. She could easily be a model or a high-powered executive with the vibes she put out. Worse, she looked almost exactly like Charlize Theron. I'd never been so sexually confused looking at another woman until that moment.

Charlize Theron's doppelganger cut her blue-eyed gaze from Thanatos to me, then her shapely lips rose sarcastically. "A human, Dead? Really? I would've never thought you'd stoop so low."

Ouch. Did she have to say that with me standing right here? What was she, Regina George's supernatural mentor?

It didn't take a genius to figure out she was likely an angel. Though, I wouldn't be

surprised if she was the Devil, either. My sexual confusion would make way more sense if I could blame the worst demon of them all for it. But the light around her had taken the shape of wings. It wasn't solid and there weren't feathers like I expected, just fluorescence, but the outline was there. It pretty much confirmed my theory she was an angel. To be fair, I could still blame the reason I was presently falling in love with a stranger on her being a heavenly creature.

I was surprised when Thanatos didn't say anything, just stared at her. And when she sighed loud enough to make a statement, I wondered if they were having a conversation telepathically.

"Fine. Have it your way. But ten minutes. That's all you get, Dead. I'm only humoring you because I owe you a favor," she growled before the red door opened. Brilliant light spilled onto the asphalt. "Keep her close. There's a few in there I wouldn't put it past to disregard the rules to make sure you do your bleeding job." Her eyes caught mine, her pupils dilating until all of the blue was gone. "Or make it so you can't." Then she disappeared into the white light.

Not sure what I expected when we followed her in, but walking into blinding light before everything disappeared into an endless sea of stars and galaxies wasn't it.

The gleam of sparkly black marble stretched out farther than the eye could see, but every wall to our left and right was a shiny line of glass that exposed nothing but glimmering stars and far-off galaxies beyond it. Like I'd stepped right onto a bridge across the universe. Were we even on Earth anymore? Was this another dimension? A portal to the Heavens? The afterlife? Were we free-floating somewhere impossible? I couldn't be certain.

I nearly tripped over my own feet trying to process what I was looking at. It didn't make sense. The walls weren't clever illusions produced by some kind of television that I could see. Everything looked too three-dimensional and solid to be an image

projected behind the glass.

But the scattered tables and luminous eyes of what I figured had to be angels caught my wide-eyed stare next, interrupting my head's epic unraveling to comprehend the impossible. I studied the people seated and wandering everywhere with no real purpose or destination.

I expected celebrities, and no surprise, that was exactly what I got. I just didn't expect there to be so many. Hundreds. No, thousands. Every single one had the fluorescent outline of wings behind them. They were in different states of dress, some showing more skin than others, but those who did sparkled every time a stray beam of light would catch their skin.

I barely caught myself before muttering, "This is the skin of a killer, Bella" from *Twilight* because I'd break down laughing like I always did anytime I said it to Emily. I wasn't sure if that was allowed here. Definitely didn't feel like the time to be cracking jokes. Did angels get jokes? Would I be killed on sight for making one?

Thanatos led my arm through his and jerked his eyes over to a few angels that started to get up, their expressions darkly ominous. The two went visibly stiff, all but stopping the second his glowing gaze sliced over to them. But just as quickly, his eyes dropped to mine when I peered up at him in open confusion.

Were we about to pull a full-blown musical moment from *West Side Story* and battle it out dance style, or would there be weapons? I couldn't fathom fighting people this beautiful, let alone beautiful people who were also badass birds. I didn't bring my brass knuckles with me. I'd left those treasures on my bedside table for Emily to remember me by. I mean, how did one even defend themselves against shimmering flocks of angels?

Brushing his knuckles across my cheek, Thanatos leveled his luminous gaze on the

men behind me again. Even I could sense the uncomfortable tension and warning lingering in the air. With a little nod the way we were walking, he urged me to keep going. “Ignore them, little raven. Anyone who so much as thinks of harming you will be devoured by my shadows, and they know it. So let the bastards try.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good time.”

His haunting gaze seemed to glow brighter. “Oh, I assure you it isn’t. Even angels can’t handle the inescapable dread of being lost to nothing but darkness.”

I stole a look at the two who’d been warned with a single glance, and it was clear Thanatos wasn’t exaggerating. Whatever happened after being devoured by his shadows, it was enough to put off powerful creatures like these sparkly badass birds.

“Glad I’m on your good side, then,” I mumbled, terrified to think what would’ve happened if he decided to kill me the night we met. Would I have been devoured by his shadows, too?

When Thanatos laughed out loud, the room seemed to freeze in stunned silence. I got the distinct feeling they were under the impression he never laughed, and with a quick scan of the angels I could see, several had taken to whispering to others nearby.

But Charlize Theron’s doppelganger cleared her throat, agitated by our limited progress. “Can your human walk any slower, Dead?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin when his fingers interlocked with mine, and he picked up the pace. “Forgive me, little raven. Michael’s had a stick up her ass since she was banished to your world for—”

“You’re playing with fire, Dead. I won’t bother to hear you out if you’re going to be a fucking ass.”

I bit my lip and tried not to smile when Thanatos rolled his eyes and offered me a sneaky grin. Swallowing, I tried not to stare at anyone else for the five minutes we walked through a galaxy landscape, but someone caught my eye before we reached a bright red door standing on its own, attached to nothing and apparently going nowhere. Our ungracious host opened the door with a sigh and beckoned the two of us inside with a finger.

But not before I'd gotten a good look at the familiar woman standing nearby, acting as if she couldn't believe her eyes. It was the same gorgeous woman from the club who'd whispered someone was looking for me. You know, the one who helped me take a shower in my drink. Was she an angel, then? Who was she warning me away from? The guys who attacked me? So...did that make us friends already?

Fuck yeah it did.

I gave her a little smile and wave, but the chick looked outright spooked to see me. Her eyes went from me to Thanatos until she caught herself and licked her lips. Mouthing something I couldn't figure out, she motioned to the door we'd entered that led back out to the street. But as soon as Thanatos turned his head to see why I'd slowed down, she looked away and brushed back her silky blonde hair.

"Thought I saw something." Which wasn't untrue. I had seen something. Well, someone.

He scanned the crowd. "Other than angels and a universe of stars?"

"Right? Who are they fooling? This looks nothing like the real thing," I joked, stealing a glance at the blonde still miming something I couldn't even pretend to understand.

Thankfully, I'd managed to distract Thanatos because he started to walk again as if

nothing was amiss. “Odd. Because it is exactly what you think it is.”

“Beg your pardon?” I demanded louder than I intended, and he couldn’t hide his smile.

“Eight minutes, Dead. Time is ticking.”

“Come on, little raven,” he commanded with a tug.

I picked up the pace but stole another look back at my angel friend who had moved with us, apparently trying to get my attention again, stopping only when our very irritated host called out to her.

“Amidya, you come, too,” Charlize Theron’s doppelganger ordered.

The blonde, Amidya apparently, visibly paled, instantly looking a little green around the gills. It actually comforted me to know that angels weren’t very different from humans. They showed emotion the same way we did and reacted in ways I could decipher. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t worried about why she might be so hellbent on getting my attention, or why she was clearly concerned when her eyes tracked back over to where I was. I knew that look of fear that dripped from her expression. It was the same one I wore the night Emily got into an accident.

Amidya was afraid I’d get hurt.

Her heels clacked as she hurried through the red door, and with one last fleeting glance at the room full of angels, stars, and galaxies, I followed Thanatos into the white light beaming from the open red door.

It was disorienting to go from a galaxy-scape to a cozy living space with a fireplace and desk situated in the corner of the room, but the silent man at my side made sure I

kept walking. He helped me into a seat and then took his. Charlize Theron's doppelganger grabbed something from the desk before turning and crossing her arms. Amidyra took her place beside the dangerously gorgeous woman, fidgeting in place but no longer looking at me.

"I'm guessing whatever you've come for, it has something to do with that mark on her wrist," the angel said, getting straight to the point. "But you know why I can't help you."

Thanatos sighed. "I thought that you out of everyone might understand wanting someone you shouldn't, Michael."

I'd wondered since he first mentioned her name if she was who I thought she was. It was a common enough name, but something told me she was the Michael. Didn't take a genius to put it together, but I stayed quiet. The way her eyes flashed silver and her body tensed made me obscenely uncomfortable.

Michael brushed back her hair, laughing without amusement for a second. "That's low, even for you. But I guess we all have our moments, don't we?"

Walking over to us, the angel eyed me with caution. The killer next to me tracked her movements like she was the greatest threat we'd faced yet, and from the way she looked at me, I wouldn't be surprised if she was.

"What are you willing to risk to persuade my help, I wonder? What soul are you willing to take?"

Thanatos seemed to understand what she was getting at. I, on the other hand, was totally lost. Whose soul? Mine? Someone else's? Whatever it meant, I got the distinct feeling that if he agreed, he'd be breaking some major supernatural rules. I needed to tell him he shouldn't. It wasn't worth throwing the world out of balance to save one

soul. It wasn't even clear why he would.

"Than—"

His icy tone cut me off. "If you promise to remove it, I'll collect her for you."

Amidya's eyes went impossibly wide. "But that—"

Michael threw her head back and laughed. "I never thought it'd be that easy. I'm a little annoyed that I didn't think of it first. But I guess we're all fools when it comes to—" She trailed off, and I waited with bated breath for her to finish. "If you can do it before the human falls into a coma, then I'll remove the mark. But..." Her smile disappeared. "You're better off doing your duty, Horseman. Being on the wrong side of both God and Hades is...well, I'd be curious to know how you think you could manage it after you got what you wanted."

Holy fuck. On the wrong side of two unbelievable names, and for what? Me? Why?

I stood up, decided. "I don't know what the two of you are talking about, but I think I've heard enough." Looking down, I stared at the impossible man on the couch. "It's not worth it, Than. Taking someone else's soul for mine goes against everything I believe in. I won't let you, so you're better off just doing what you came to do. I'm not afraid to die, especially not if it's you who's the one who collects."

I hadn't expected Michael to bark a laugh before dropping an arm around my shoulders, but when she did, Thanatos's stare narrowed. "You know what, human, I like you. If only you knew what you were asking him to do, you might change your tune there a bit. But I admire your courage. I can see how you'd be chosen as a Counter Soul."

Counter Soul?

Before I could ask what the hell that was, Thanatos was on his feet, shadows crawling angrily across the walls and floor, attempting to ensnare the angel with her arm around my shoulder. Michael clicked her tongue and flicked her wrist. A sword was suddenly clutched in her hand, and without knowing how it happened, its sharp edge was already against my throat.

The couch went skirting back until it hit the wall with powerful force, cratering the plaster. Shadows lifted from the floor, whipping out, but Michael easily deflected them. Though how, I couldn't figure out. With the wind? Invisible light? I was still having a lot of trouble following what was happening. My eyes couldn't track anything. But large, black veins were already growing down Thanatos's cheeks. His true face. The monster beneath.

He'd never looked so terrifying.

Death closed his eyes, exhaled a breath, and then fixed his gaze on Michael again. "You have my word. Two days. I'll deliver her soul to you, and you'll remove Asha's mark."

I couldn't see Michael's expression, but the way her blade pressed against my neck felt like a warning. I couldn't breathe without worrying it'd cut into my flesh. But for some reason, Thanatos appeared more worried about what she'd do to me than I was. His eyes dropped to the blade at my throat several times, his jaw working. His shadows moved around him in growing agitation.

But after several torturous seconds, Michael removed her blade and released me. "Two days, Dead. I don't get why you'd risk so much for some human, but if it means I can have her back, then I'm willing to remove the mark as promised. But the consequences are yours. Remember it."

I was already in his arms, the shadows creating a barrier between us and the two other

angels. “You don’t have to tell me that. But as always, you underestimate my power and relationship with Hades.”

She smirked and shrugged. “In this case, I certainly hope so.”

But that was it. The shadows eclipsed us before we were somewhere I didn’t recognize. All I knew was that it didn’t feel like I’d gone back to the human world. No, if anything, I’d crawled deeper into the supernatural realm.

Chapter Seventeen

Asha

“This is the only place that’s safe. I need to take precautions. Every angel and demon will be after you now that they know your face. So, you can’t stay in the human world while I’m away. Nowhere will be safe until I get that mark removed. But if you didn’t want to be here, you wouldn’t be.”

Here?

“I’m pretty sure you know how insufferable you’re being right now. Ever heard of vague-booking, Mr. Killer?” The raised eyebrow he gave me suggested he hadn’t. “It’s pretty much the worst thing you can do on social media. Ramble vaguely and make everyone else reach out for clarification. It’s a dick move. So, do us both a favor, talk to me like I don’t really understand anything you’re saying, ‘kay? Thanks so much.”

I’d taken a risk by mouthing off to the only person on my side right now, but by the little smirk he gave me, he wasn’t bothered by it. Thank fuck for that.

“My realm.”

“Your...realm? As in, you own it? Am I hearing you right?”

His eyes scanned the distance. “Yes. It’s a place no one can enter unless I’ve personally permitted them to. You could say I’m the ruler of the space between life

and death.”

“Sure thing,” I replied, brain in complete overload.

I figured it didn’t matter what I understood about this supernatural stuff. I’d probably be dead in a week. But I was a little surprised that an angel would agree to help us. One that seemed more or less like a big deal. Whoever’s soul she was after, it was a huge fucking deal. Like something they shouldn’t be doing at all. Yet, here we were, about to piss off the God of the Underworld. Wait, did that make him Thanatos’s boss?

Nothing made sense anymore.

One thing I did know for sure was that Thanatos didn’t intend to listen to me. After he’d all but broken Michael’s couch to make a statement, he made it crystal clear that he’d do whatever it took to make good on his promise to save me. I was still going to argue my case. I didn’t agree with putting anyone else in the middle of whatever was going on with my soul.

Because whether it was love or attachment, I didn’t want Thanatos to spend the rest of his eternal life paying for a crime I never asked him to commit. I liked him enough to want him to continue to do his thing. He’d punished five assholes better than I ever could, and maybe that was my service to the world—five less douchebags out there preying on innocent women.

Ravens cawed loudly in the distance, but the landscape was essentially an uninhabited gothic paradise. Desolation to the max. Or what Emily would call Addams Family chic. I couldn’t see anyone or anything for miles, just a rolling landscape of dead trees and grass. Total isolation. Everything was painted in blue and black. No moon. No stars. No sun. My feeble human brain couldn’t make sense of what I was seeing. All I could gather was we probably weren’t in Kansas anymore,

Toto.

So, this was his own slice of paradise? This barren and cold world where everything looked haunted and endless? Ironically, it fit him. When I'd met him at least. Now, I wasn't so sure. The man I knew was warmer than this place. Warmer than any person I'd ever met. Scary as fuck but soft in the middle.

"So, is this it? Are we going to camp out here, or...?" I remarked before shadows swept out from where he stood and built up from the ground.

Thanatos folded his thick arms over his chest and watched the towering estate form out of shadows at breakneck speed. I was too awestricken to make a snide comment about how I should've expected his house would not only be made of shadows, but overstated and grossly large. It was castle-like and reached high into the blue-grey sky.

Ravens flew overhead, circling the four towers, and I had to angle my head back just to trace each tower's length. An innuendo that wasn't lost on me, but I didn't have time to giggle about it because I was too engrossed in how incredible everything here was.

I couldn't see where the towers ended, and it made my stomach churn thinking I might be asked to climb thousands of stairs to the top, just to be locked in one while Death conducted his business. I couldn't pull a Rapunzel with only a few days left to live. Not when I had a list of things I wanted to do before I croaked. Well, several I couldn't do now that I'd crossed over to Death's realm, but still.

"You're not locking me up in one of those cock-shaped towers of yours, Death. I'll smite you."

His laughter eased the uncomfortable pressure in my chest. "I hadn't considered it,

but now that you mention it, I wouldn't mind locking you to the bed for a bit. Bet you'd look absolutely ravishing chained to my headboard, little raven."

My mouth was suddenly dry. "Uh...that's also against the rules."

"And whose rules would those be?" he questioned, turning.

You'd never believe I was just threatened by an angel and on a quest to save my soul by the sexual air that ignited between the two of us at a moment's notice.

His grey eyes took a very unsubtle path down my body, making it perfectly clear he wasn't in a hurry to go find Hades. He'd fuck me right here if I gave him a reason. And holy shit, I couldn't keep up. I wasn't used to the chaotic blend of sexy and terrifying that seemed to come with being Death's new favorite toy.

Don't give in, Asha. He's baiting you.

I turned away, not rising to the challenge. For once.

The majestic structure in front of us remained black and ominous, but the architectural details were breathtaking. I hadn't thought they'd care here, but apparently, even the God of Death appreciated a good architectural masterpiece.

"Sort of looks like you're compensating for something with this obnoxiously large castle, Mr. Killer."

Thanatos's lips twitched, but he didn't give me the smile I aimed to get out of him. Spoilsport. "You and I both know I don't need to compensate for a fucking thing. But I'm happy to fuck you hard enough so that you'll never forget it."

Ugh. Whenever he slipped a growling curse and sexy taunt into his response, the

thirsty animal between my legs throbbed with renewed lust. Guess even being on my death bed couldn't curb my sexual appetite.

"So...Hades," I said, voice cracking. My chest was tight again, and I coughed a little to relieve the pressure. My clever pivot had done its job. The mood was instantly snuffed out.

Brushing angry fingers through his hair, Thanatos sighed. "I guess I can't expect you to understand if I don't tell you why I came to you in the first place."

My heart hammered against my breastbone, attempting an escape. "I might be a meaningless human to you guys, but even I deserve to know why I'm being hunted like a goddamn animal."

I dared a look at him. His piercing eyes were already on me. "You're not meaningless, Asha. Far from it. But you're right. I owe you that much, and there's no going back after I seek an audience with Hades. Whatever favor he asks in return...well, it's important that this doesn't fail."

Searching his face, I finally relented. "Do you have any food or drinks in that grossly large castle of yours, or is this size just for show?"

Chuckling, he took me by the hand and yanked. I was suddenly lifted into his arms. "Sure, but you'll have to satisfy my hunger first. I've been desperate to fuck you since we were rudely interrupted. You've kept me waiting long enough."

"Hey now, I seem to remember you starting it," I argued. Everything that happened in that alley was entirely his fault. I planned to lay into him, but he kissed me so possessively that all I could do was try to keep up with his mouth and tongue.

Before I had time to blink or get my bearings, we'd already entered the shadow

castle. His movements didn't follow the usual human pattern. As in, the gorgeous killer wasn't walking at all. The dude was fucking gliding over the floor. We ascended countless stairs and floors before reaching a door that looked like every other one we'd passed on our way to it. But when he entered, I got the sense this was where Thanatos spent most of his time. It felt like him. I couldn't explain it. It just did.

Candle sconces fixed to the walls offered small breaks in the darkness every so often, but otherwise, I couldn't make out much else about the room. The only thing I knew was that the bed was impossibly large and didn't appear to take up much space. It could easily fit twenty-plus people on it, and I idly wondered if it had at some stage.

No shame in it. Death was...well, Death, and he'd probably explored every version of sex there was. I just had to hope that I hadn't completely bore him up to this point. No matter what experience I had, I couldn't be twenty people at once. Granted, he'd mentioned earlier that he hadn't brought any humans here, so demon sex? Ghost sex? Who did the God of Death sleep with?

I was suddenly on a bed with him over me, staring down into my eyes. "Now, where did I put my cuffs..." he pondered with a smirk.

I huffed, suddenly worried that he'd lock me to the bed like promised. Or threatened, depending on who you asked. "Don't you fucking dare."

His thumb swept across my lips before he dropped a kiss on them. "So, my shadows are fine, but cuffs are where you draw the line?"

He had a point. "It's different."

"Ah," he hummed, a devilish smile lifting his mouth. "If you say so." His shadows crawled over the bed and latched onto my wrists, pinning them to the mattress. "As

you wish, little raven.”

My pulse raced as I tried and failed to put up a fight. He still hadn’t told me why I was a target. I didn’t want to get lost to the sexual air again. I was weak to his touch, but I was determined to find out why we’d met that night. He owed me that much.

“You’re stalling. You promised to tell me the truth. I deserve to know why you came looking for me in the first place, Death.”

His eyes seemed to bleed color. “You’re right. It’ll change the way you see me, but I beg you to give me a chance,” he whispered, his thumb swiping over my bottom lip again. His other hand worked its way under my dress. “Whatever this started as, it’s different now. And whatever I have to do to keep you by my side, I will. Trust that much, Asha.”

It was hard to breathe with how intensely he was staring down at me, daring me to argue. But his hand worked the usual magic, and I’d already given in before the thought of fighting even registered.

“You act like the last two weeks haven’t been a supernatural upheaval of epic fucking proportions. So, go on, then. Whisper your sorcery, Mr. Killer.”

His eyes danced across my face, his hand already under my bra. My nipple was brushed, circled, and teased until I was forced to suck in a breath. I wasn’t given the chance to complain that he was trying to distract me again because Thanatos’s mouth was already moving over mine.

Our tongues twined, then chased back and forth. He kissed my neck and continued down my body, tearing through the fabric of my dress. He pulled pieces off one by one until my chest was exposed. His long tongue slithered out and traced my nipple. I moaned, legs falling open so he could fit between them. When his head lifted, his

fangs caught the nearby candlelight. The inky black veins were back, already reaching his cheeks. I lifted my hand and traced several with my fingers, and he closed his eyes and moved his face into my hand.

It was so odd to think Death was here, clearly enjoying my touch. It was such a powerful feeling to have someone so terrifying reduced to a cute beast at my beck and call. Okay, so he wasn't exactly at my beck and call, but I'd pretend he was.

"Don't try to sidetrack me. You're too good at it, buddy. What is it that you planned to say?"

Turning his face, he pressed a kiss first to my palm, then the mark wrapping around my wrist. "Hades is what you'd call a...brother of sorts."

"Your brother?" I hadn't expected to hear that.

Sighing, Thanatos lifted my butt off the bed, squeezing it a few times inside his hands, something I noticed he did a lot, before he fitted his waist between my legs. I swallowed a moan when I felt how hard he was for me. "Yes, in a way. We're both the rulers of our respective realms. He rules the Underworld, and I oversee the realm between life and death."

"Like...limbo?"

His hips moved against mine, and I fisted the bedding, biting back another moan because the friction was unreal. It hadn't felt like this since he drank my blood earlier. Something about being here made my body extra sensitive.

"Not exactly. It's not important. What you need to understand is that what you are to me...who you are to the Horsemen, I can't be sure he'll help. He'll want a favor in return. He might ask for something I'm unwilling to give. So, I'll keep you here when

I go to him. It's the only way to ensure your safety," he whispered huskily, his thrusts rhythmic.

My spine curved, tantalizing ripples of sensation spreading from between my legs to my lower stomach. But I was frustrated and wanted to hear everything. I pushed off the bed, free of his shadows, and got him onto his back. His eyes widened like he hadn't expected it. Maybe because he was used to being the one in control.

I could get used to this.

I sat up and swiveled my hips experimentally. He sucked in a sharp breath, hissing in that weird snake language of his again. His hands clung to my waist, leading it into harder rolls, and I realized his pants were gone. Probably became shadows like that first night. I wasn't exactly upset about it.

The piercings were fucking amazing against the sensitive skin between my legs. I slid over him a few times, holding the powerful beast down by the arms, but I never let him inside. And by the way his abs tensed and hardened to prominent mounds, he didn't like it. He was frustrated I wouldn't give him more.

Good.

"You still haven't told me why I'm a target. Who am I to you guys?"

He grabbed me around the throat, bucking up into me. Pleasure swept down my thighs, and I bit back a whine. It was too fucking good, but I wouldn't let him win. Not when I had the high ground. I nearly laughed at the thought, but the head of his cock brushed my clit and explosive sensation hit my hips again.

"Ah, fuck," I groaned.

But Thanatos finally gave me what I wanted. An answer. “You’re mine. It doesn’t matter who you are to them. Still, you should know the truth. Your soul is one of four the Horsemen can deliver to start the apocalypse. I was meant to take it the day we met, but...” I stopped breathing, listening intently as he whispered his confession. “It doesn’t matter what you were meant to be, Asha. They’ll have to find a way to kill me first because I won’t let anyone else have you. I’ll never stop until you’re mine forever.” His voice was so thick and strong I couldn’t reply right away.

“The soul you’re taking—”

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” he interjected, sitting up and fusing our bodies together. He brushed his fingers through my hair before grabbing a handful and yanking my head back. Licking from my collarbone to my ear, he finally sunk his cock into me. Gasping, I shuddered against him. “The soul is Michael’s lover. God sent her to serve in the Underworld for eternity as punishment for her crimes.”

Crimes? I wanted to ask so many questions, but I was lost to how good it felt for his pulsating length to grind against impossible places inside me. The harder he thrust, the tougher it became to do anything other than moan his name and curse my weakness to pleasure.

“Shit, you’re so tight, little raven,” he growled, driving into me faster. “I promise to tell you the rest, but I need to have you first.”

I couldn’t argue because I wanted the same thing.

Sucking on his lips and tongue, I swiveled and fucked myself on his lap. Neither of us spoke, just moved in perfect, wild sync. I clawed at his hair and traced his jaw’s shape with my tongue. Kissed along his face and enjoyed the way his body felt against mine; how his muscles strained and moved to fuck me the way he and I liked.

He responded by sinking his fangs into my neck and driving me down on his cock harder, angling his body so he could reach deeper. His shadows crept closer, eager to touch, but he sent them away like he couldn't bear the thought of anything but him touching me right now. His hands bruised the skin of my hips from lifting and dropping me down on his thick length with growing urgency. But before I reached that elusive edge I wanted nothing more than to throw myself over, something burned through my chest and rose into my throat.

Out of nowhere, I started to cough. Dark liquid splattered across Thanatos chest, glimmering ominously in candlelight. He looked down in confusion as I coughed harder, lungs sputtering and failing to take in air. Terrible sensation hit my chest all at once, and I groaned.

“Asha!”

My vision swam and blurred. The world went topsy-turvy. I didn't realize I was collapsing until Thanatos rushed to keep me from falling back. His shadows swooped in to help. I coughed harder. Liquid sprayed over my hand as I tried to crawl away from him, confused and disoriented.

The feeling in my body was terrifying. I'd never felt anything like it. Swells of pain enveloped every nerve, set my skin ablaze, burned me from the inside out. Dark red liquid poured from my mouth, and I wiped it away to look at it in the light painting a streak across the bed.

Blood?

Another uncontrollable coughing fit struck, crippling me for a second.

“Come here, little raven,” Thanatos whispered. I was lifted into his arms then laid out over the bed. “Fuck. It's already starting. I need to get to Hades before the coma takes

you.”

Was this it? I didn't even get a final orgasm? Rude.

It was surreal to think that this might be the last time I saw or heard him. I wasn't sure what came after, but I had to hope it didn't hurt this much; that the pain was gone and so was the sadness. That'd be nice. What was weird as pain scorched my flesh and I couldn't seem to catch my breath was that all I could think about was how much I'd miss him.

We hadn't been together long, but Thanatos made an impression on me. He'd proven that there were good men out there, even if they took souls for a living. It was a shame we didn't have more time. I would've liked to explore what this was between us. What he meant when he said I was his. Or why him saying it didn't ring of toxic masculinity; it made me feel safe and loved.

His voice was distant. I tried to say something, but another fit hit me, and all I could do was cough. Before I knew what was happening, everything was dark and quiet. I was here but gone. Numb but warm. Safe but alone.

Chapter Eighteen

Thanatos

F uck!

Wiping her forehead because sweat was already collecting over the surface, I bent over and kissed the fitful little human. Her skin seared the flesh of my lips, a fever that burned like the fires of Hell. She writhed and moaned in pain. It was like a blade to my heart every time knowing that I couldn't do more for her.

She no longer heard or saw me, and she wouldn't until the mark was removed, but she was thankfully not comatose yet. Unfortunately, the illness hit sooner than I expected. Perhaps the effect of my realm on her, but I couldn't be sure. One fact remained. I was running out of time. I might be able to keep her soul here, but I couldn't be certain it'd last if she didn't want to stay. I couldn't take that risk. I needed Michael to remove the mark. I needed more time to be sure she would stay. I needed more time to make her irrevocably mine.

I growled low in my throat and brushed my wild hair back in frustration. "Fucking Pest."

The illness Zelus inflicted was torturous, and I'd be out for blood— his blood —after she was safely mine. Until then, I'd plot my revenge.

The ways I'd tear his flesh and break every fucking bone in that human body he loved so much would have the asshole begging for mercy I'd never give. I couldn't kill him

or remove his soul, not like those foul humans who attacked my little raven, but I could inflict endless torture and submerge the bastard in impenetrable darkness. What I did would make him wish he could die. I'd spend eternity tearing him apart again and again, then when I couldn't be bothered anymore, I'd banish him to the shadows.

He'd crossed me for the very last time.

Several ravens flew in through the window, cawing their arrival. I'd summoned them to watch Asha while I was gone. They could take human form for short periods of time, but with how out of it she was with the sudden fever, she wouldn't notice them.

It tore me apart to leave her. I'd rather keep her by my side, but Hades was more powerful than the other three Horsemen combined. Worst of all, he was unpredictable. Or as Morning Star referred to him, a moody bitch. Unless he was entertained or got something out of it, he couldn't be bothered. Gaining his favor was difficult, but he and I shared more than most.

For whatever reason, he had a soft spot for me.

Still, should negotiations fall through, I didn't want to worry he'd use Asha to subjugate me to his will. I couldn't lose her to the Underworld. His realm would swallow her whole. So, I'd leave my suffering darling here with my ravens and shadows to protect her in my stead.

"Keep her comfortable. I don't have to tell you what I'd do should anything happen to her, hmm?"

The ravens looked at each other, not used to the vicious venom I currently spat at them. I rarely took out my anger on anyone. Emotions were too...human, and they hadn't expected to see anything close to it in my expression or dripping from the words I hissed. But they were an extension of me, so I knew they'd never fail me.

They caved their usual promise and got to work gathering things to keep her as comfortable as they could make her.

With one last fleeting glance at Asha, shadows swirled and enclosed around me, sending me straight to the Underworld. Straight to the only person I could ask for help.

A dark room rolled out and materialized in front of me. Sharp, jagged rocks grew into an endless black sky, glowing like crystals hit with light. A stretch of water reached both ends of the open cavern, serene and unmoving, but the moans of the dead echoed across the surface. White tendrils swirled and moved in a circle before disappearing into the deep, impenetrable darkness.

The souls of the abandoned, of the unfinished, of the placeless. Captives of Hades. Not the damned but close enough. Unless they were claimed, they'd stay in an endless darkness and were never permitted to reincarnate. Some may argue a fate worse than death. Destined to be nothing. Lost forever. Eternally forgotten by the realms.

I heard him before I saw him. "Little brother! I never thought I'd see that dark, emotionless face of yours again after the last time you cursed me out."

I cringed. "An ear-lashing you deserved after stealing the souls I was meant to send to Hell."

"Oh, Morning Star won't miss those, will he? Why not let me play with them before he does?" he went on as if it hadn't nearly started a war between the realms over a little prank.

Turning, I found him standing in the middle of the cavernous room, nothing but a pair of black pants on.

He'd stolen several hearts across the realms with that face of his. It didn't matter that he'd condemned them the second they fell for his lies. People continued to fall for his terrifying charms. Every single one became his captive for eternity. Playthings condemned to his whims, and I'd seen a few powerful angels lose their wings to be with him.

He fed his boredom with the misery of others. Fed off their desperation to be adored. Not much separated him and the ruler of Hell. They were cut from the same cloth and enjoyed torturing anyone they could get their hands on. Just, Hades preferred his two-faced love approach to ensnare while Morning Star captured his victims with insurmountable fear.

Hades was a calculating bastard. I couldn't let my guard down for a second.

Tattoos adorned his pure white skin. His blue hair floated away from his head as if we were underwater. His body was never truly solid, but he preferred a human's shape to the beastly form he took sometimes. Like me, he could move without ever fully forming. But unlike me, he couldn't use shadows to consume, only his wits.

His dark, soulless eyes caught mine from across the space before he was in front of me. "You've been naughty, haven't you, Dead? What's this I hear about a human you've marked?"

With Hades, I knew better than to give too much away. My face remained entirely lax and unreadable. "How about we skip the pleasantries, Hades, and get to the deal you'll force me to make in exchange for Mysra's soul. I'm sure you know why I'm here. Your little spies would've told you seeing how much you enjoy taunting the angels. Bet you even have one working for you."

Hades laughed into his fist and walked a circle around me. "I forgot how clever you are. Nothing gets past you, aye, Dead? But then again, there'd be no fun in it if it did.

You and I are very similar in that way. As much as you hate that we are.”

“I don’t take pleasure in the pain of the dead.”

His smile grew. “Oh, I think you do. I heard all about the five humans you sent to Morning Star before they were called. Quite the fuss you made with the demons. Not that he minded. They were all very tasty, I’m sure. Their screams will be a great addition to the chorus of the damned.”

The soul pool glowed behind him, and I was a little surprised when Mysra walked out of it without another word from Hades.

“Just a small thing, Brother, then she’s yours.”

I was instantly on guard. It was too easy. But the thought that I could save my little raven so quickly made me ask, “What is it?”

Hades was in front of me again, beckoning Mysra to his side. She came but was silent, her translucent blue-white body barely able to take form. His captive souls couldn’t speak unless he gave them permission, and I could see how the years of service had plagued her expression. He’d made her suffer a great many things, no doubt. Hades despised angels the most. He likely made her tend to the souls of the young—the worst position an angel with a compassionate countenance could be given.

“Just tell me...do you love her? Are you willing to abandon your duty as one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse to save this human?” Hades came close enough that there was hardly any space between us. I might’ve been tall to humans, but Hades was massive. So, despite how it hurt my pride, I cranked my neck just to look at the bastard.

“It might not make sense to you, but yes. I love her. I have already abandoned my duty to be here. And I would do it again if I had to. Whatever it takes.”

I hadn't meant to tell anyone other than Asha that I loved her, that I would wreck my soulless existence to be with her, but there were two things that made Hades impossible to deal with.

First, no matter who a person was—Horseman, angel, demon, or even the ruler of Hell itself—they couldn't lie to him. He'd know straight away. Speaking in truths was the only way to gain favor with him.

Lastly, if someone struck a bargain with the ruler of the Underworld, they were his servant until they'd honored their part. It was impossible to escape promises made with Hades, but it was the reason that I had to be clever to not agree to terms I couldn't deliver on. Better to stay quiet and leave him to revise, but this ask was easy enough.

I did love her.

I would give up everything to be with my little raven.

To my surprise, the blue-haired nuisance smiled to himself and led Mysra straight over to me. He guided her hand to mine, a devious grin splitting his face. He didn't ask for anything else. The moment her hand touched mine, I owned her soul.

My shadows wrapped around her wrist, keeping her my captive, but she didn't seem happy to be leaving like I expected. I thought for sure she'd pine for Michael the same way God's favorite yearned for her. But still, she didn't speak. If anything, the punished soul was forlorn and devastated to be returning.

I stared at Hades in confusion. “What do you stand to gain from this?”

“More than you could ever know, little brother. But I won’t bore you with the details. That’d ruin all the fun.” Hades crossed bulky arms over his tattooed chest, his smirk containing nothing but secrets. “Oh, and consider this little tip a gift. You’re more capable than you think. I mean, you and I were created to be similar. Two peas in a pod as the humans say. There are ways to bind her to you. The same way I bind souls to me. Just something to think about when you meet with Michael.”

His words were an omen, but one I wouldn’t understand until it came to pass. He’d probably sought the advisement of the Fates to carry out whatever agenda he had for the end of the world, but I’d be stupid to think he’d share any of it with me.

Mysra’s eyes wandered over to me, and it was the first time I’d seen her do anything but look at the ground. I wondered if she knew whatever Hades stood to gain, but then again, it didn’t matter to me as long as I got to keep my little raven. If Hades was about to start a war, then I’d leave him to it. Nothing mattered but saving Asha.

I didn’t say another word.

Mysra wobbled and turned into white smoke before her soul was a little ball in my open palm. The white ball disappeared into my skin, mine to deliver. And I would deliver her. Before I could seek out Michael, a raven came flying through the sky, fluttering anxiously. Messages couldn’t be delivered across the realms, so whatever brought it over was already bad enough to put me on edge.

Hades chuckled as it cawed loudly, the sound carrying like a vicious echo in the endless space. I stiffened, the burn I’d felt in human form materializing in the body never meant to have it.

Asha was slipping into a coma.

I didn’t have time to waste.

“Looks like you’re needed elsewhere, Dead. I look forward to you going against God to save her.”

I didn’t wait for him to ramble on self-importantly. My shadows were already forming a vortex to take me to Asha so I could bring her to Michael to remove the mark. Whatever it fucking took, I’d make the angel do what she promised.

I stood with the unconscious woman in my arms and back in the same room we’d made the deal.

Michael was surprised to see us by the way she stood frozen in confusion. “That was...did you acquire Mysra’s soul, or are you here to beg for your little human’s life without honoring our bargain?”

She didn’t seem to believe I could work as quickly as I had, but I didn’t have time to argue about the details.

“I have her soul. Once you’ve removed the mark, I’ll give it to you.”

Michael’s eyes dropped to Asha’s lax form in my arms. “Mysra first—”

My voice boomed through the room with dangerous clarity. “Do it now, Michael, or I’ll send Mysra to Morning Star myself. He’s been eager to steal her away, and I have nothing left to lose if you refuse to help.”

Her body visibly stiffened before she came over, clicking her tongue. “I never thought I’d see you like this. I guess we all become something changed when we fall in love.”

I didn’t bother to respond. She was already working on the mark. Light bled out of her hand as she touched Asha’s wrist. In seconds, the mark was gone, and my pulse

came to life when my little raven sucked in a surprised breath.

Asha's eyes shot open, confused to be in my arms with Michael leaning over her. Her skin glowed with renewed health, and I couldn't find the words. I didn't know what to say. How could I possibly express how relieved I was to have time to convince her to be mine?

But first...

My eyes shot up, carefully helping Asha to her feet. I secured one arm around the disoriented woman for both protection and in case Michael did anything after I followed through on my part.

Asha's eyes skipped over to my face after realizing where we were. "Is it over?"

I opened my hand, and Mysra's soul bloomed inside my palm before snaking through the air and forming a beautiful, ethereal outline of the angel. Michael took her lover's hand, and her body was solid again, free of the Underworld's chains that kept her translucent and controlled.

"Now that everything is in order..." I brought Asha closer and peered down at her. She was enamored with Mysra's angelic form, but we couldn't stay. I didn't want Michael to get any ideas now that our deal was finished. "We'll take our leave."

Michael opened her mouth, but Asha cut in, "Thank you for saving me. I know you did it because...well, just thank you." Everyone in the room was surprised, including myself. "Than, can you take me home? I need to...the letter—I don't want Emily to find it, and I need to make sure she's okay."

The desire to kiss my little raven and take her away crowded my throat, but I agreed because I knew how much she cared for Emily. Whatever she desired, I'd give her.

Even if it meant I was forced to smother the urge to keep her all to myself for a little while longer.

I caught sight of Michael before the shadows consumed us. Something about her expression was off, but I didn't pay it any mind because I finally had Asha back in my arms. I'd keep her safe until the danger was over, and then I'd convince her to return to my realm.

Chapter Nineteen

Asha

I hadn't expected to wake up. When I slipped into a boundless darkness, I thought for sure that was the end of my story. So, when I woke up with Thanatos holding me and Michael hovering over my face, I couldn't believe it. He'd done it. He saved me.

But at what cost?

I worried about it before I realized that Emily would find the letter I left if she hadn't already. If I could help it, I wanted to make it back home, check on her, and then get rid of the damning evidence that I'd nearly kicked the bucket. I'd worry about the supernatural-world consequences of what Death had done to save me once I got the real-world consequences of what I'd tried to do resolved.

A girl could only do so much at once.

When we appeared inside my living room, Thanatos didn't wait. His lips came down on mine so hard I tasted blood in my mouth. His tongue pushed inside, coaxing mine to tangle with his. The desperation of his kiss was so sudden that I couldn't get my thoughts together. He held me so close, so hard, that I couldn't get away, so I just kissed him back and hoped Emily wasn't home.

When I finally pulled free, the God of Death stared at me in that dangerous way of his. Like he'd consume me whole after chasing me. Like he couldn't wait to rip my clothes apart and fuck me until I screamed.

Gah! I wanted it, too, but I stole a look at the window. It was daylight. Either Emily was asleep or already at work. Either way, I didn't have time to get distracted by the gorgeous soul collector. If he caught me with another kiss like the first one, I'd be his before I did the one thing I'd come to do. I'd get lost to the all-consuming current of his caress.

"One minute," I pleaded with my finger in his face when he moved forward, ready to attack. "I'll just get the letter and then...then I'm all yours."

Thanatos's lips lifted impishly, and my heart hit harder against my chest. "All mine? Aren't you already?"

"You know what I mean, asshole. I—just give me a minute!" I rushed to say, then headed for my room with my pulse pounding in my ears.

I tripped over the rug and barely saved myself from a faceplant. Shit. My legs were already jelly after one fucking kiss. It was the first day with him all over again. I couldn't get my pulse under control. My body was ramped up, ready to be his in every way it could. Again.

I nearly died a few minutes ago. I'd dodged death, but that didn't mean I wanted to evade Death himself. Fuck that. I wanted to jump his bones and show him how glad I was to still be here; that we'd been given more time. But first, I'd remove all evidence that I'd been close to breathing my last.

With a happy grin distorting my face, I opened the door to my room and walked over to the bedside table. The letter was where I'd left it. The back was still sealed. She hadn't seen it. Thank fuck. After tearing it to pieces and throwing the mess into the drawer so I could discard it covertly later, I turned around. I thought at first Thanatos had followed me in, but it wasn't him in front of me. It was someone else. Someone I hadn't expected to see in my room. But with how dark it suddenly was, it took me a

minute to figure it out.

I chanced a look at the door, but it was closed. “Wait...why are you here?” I asked in a startled whisper as wings spread out with brilliant light, no longer a fluorescent shape but fully solid beams. The feathers were unmistakable and damning.

My heart hit harder and acid rose into my throat.

Why would she be here now?

With the curtains drawn, I couldn’t see anything else but the glimmer of her smile. “Nothing against you, human. I need to make good with God. You understand, right?”

I hadn’t any clue what she meant until sharp pain echoed inside my chest. She yanked a glowing blade covered in dark liquid from my body. I reached up, the blood pouring quickly over my hands, but my head hadn’t caught up with the sight covering my fingers and soaking my dress. Was this my blood? Before I could do anything but gasp, I collapsed.

“Your soul is needed to start the apocalypse. It’s His will. Nothing you or Death do can change that. It’s always been Thanatos’s purpose—and yours. But since he’s abandoned it, I guess I’ll have to do it for him.”

I tried to inhale, but blood was already filling my mouth. I coughed and tried to clear it out, but it didn’t help. More blood just replaced it. Struggling, I stared up at the angel hovering over me like the sight of me dying was a mere inconvenience.

“Apologies. I meant to hit your heart, but it’s been a while since I’ve had to put my blade through a human. I’m out of practice. You won’t suffer long, Chosen One. I’m sure you’ll be greatly rewarded for the part you played in doing His will. If anything,

you should be honored.”

I couldn't react to the crazy speech she spouted at me. I mean, was she serious? Me, thankful for my death that would lead to millions—no, billions of other deaths? How did that make sense? Why would I take any pleasure in that?

Unable to breathe, I clawed at my throat. The pressure in my head from being unable to breathe grew too impossible to ignore. I moaned and whimpered, desperate for it to end. And as the seconds ticked on, my vision tunneled. I tried to fight as hard as I could, but my body was shutting down. The pain was ebbing away. A numb cold swiftly took its place.

Michael cocked her head to one side, staring down at me like I was a bother. “That should be close enough. Your soul looks ready.” She reached for me, but surprise widened her eyes. After light beamed around her hands and then dimmed to nothing, her lips curled into a snarl. “That just fucking figures. God would make this whole thing complicated. Guess I'll just have to make sure the next Horseman does their bloody fucking job, won't I?”

I didn't understand what was happening, only that she seemed upset that whatever she tried to do wasn't working. She peered down at me before her head jerked over to the door. Then she was gone.

It was ironic how everything came full circle. I'd evaded my death the night I met Death, and yet here I was, still dying. The irony wasn't lost on me. Maybe we couldn't escape our fate, but I hated that tomorrow, the world would end because I wasn't strong enough to keep my soul. Tomorrow, I'd be the reason every human ceased to exist.

I sputtered, coughing blood, staring up at an entirely dark ceiling thanks to the zero-light curtains Emily encouraged me to get. It was odd to be dying only a few rooms

away from Death. It was such a waste to think I hadn't gotten a chance to work out how I truly felt about him. I didn't want to leave him like this. I just had to hope that wherever I went after this was somewhere maybe I could see him again. But based on how he acted when I'd told him about the mark, that wasn't going to happen.

Tears rolled down the sides of my face when I thought I never really got to say goodbye to Emily. I'd torn up the letter. She'd be alone when the world ended, and that was probably the worst part about all of this next to dying before I got the chance to explore my feelings for Thanatos.

So many regrets, and all of them selfish in the end.

Before my vision completely blackened, Thanatos's figure loomed above me, his face distorted with impossible rage. I tried to smile and tell him it was okay. I'd been ready to die the day we met. Guess even having a good relationship with Death couldn't save you from the inevitable. I didn't want him to blame himself. Not that he would. He was Death. I was a blip in a long life of moments, so he'd be free after this.

I just wished that I could ask him not to use my soul to end the world. If I got one wish, that'd be it. But I couldn't talk anymore. I couldn't even breathe. I slipped away before I got the chance to tell him that I wished we had more time; that I would've done anything to stay by his side and show everyone humans were worth saving.

Chapter Twenty

Thanatos

My shadows reacted too late. I found the redhead on the floor covered in blood seconds after her assailant fled. The sensation in the air told me it was Michael. She'd used her power to buy herself time to stab Asha. But it was clear she hadn't managed to take her soul. Interesting. Was I the only one who could? My vengeance against Michael would be swift, but it wouldn't change anything.

I was too fucking late to save my little raven.

Her eyes closed before she could entrust her soul with me. Before I could vow myself to her forever. I'd wasted time. I should've told her that I loved her. But she slipped away before I could.

Her soul lifted away from her lifeless form, glowing the way the ones marked for more were. But I couldn't be sure what that mark entailed. Even the Horsemen weren't sure how Counter Souls served their purpose. Typically, the ones that glowed the way she did were headed for Heaven. If I touched her, she could be swept away by an angel. Or she could be delivered to start the apocalypse. But she was mine. I refused to let her go. She'd be gone forever if she brought the end of the world. And she'd lose her memories of me should she go to Heaven. Either way, I...

No, I had to keep her somehow. Maybe I could guide her to my realm until I figured out how to bind her soul to mine.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

There had to be something I could do. I was Death. I ruled over shadows and ravens. I ushered souls to wherever I saw fit. If I had to, I could steal her soul. I could keep it, surely. If all this power had to amount to something, then taking one soul for myself had to be it.

The shadows around my body ached to touch her, but I kept them close, tied the wild things to my body, afraid of what they might unwittingly do should they reach out. I couldn't lose her now after all I'd done to keep her.

I'd take my own soul first.

But the sensation in the air was magnetic. Electric. Explosive. Her soul reformed in a breathtaking way, naked and so goddamn beautiful. The sight of it hit me right in the chest. She was so fucking perfect. Her soul hovered over its prone human form, no longer attached to it.

But then her eyes met mine.

As if she was waking from a dream, my little raven stood in front of me, smiling in that heart-shattering way of hers. It hit harder than I expected to see her gorgeous soul ready to be collected. I didn't think I could feel sadness or loss, but looking at my little raven this way destroyed me from the inside out.

Her hand reached out, waiting for me to take it. How the fuck could she be so willing to go? How could she think of leaving me now? Did I matter so little in the end? Was she happy to be free of me? What had our time meant to her?

I swallowed, terrible sensation crowding my throat in a way it never had. She was asking for permission. She was seeking my touch. I stepped back, but she followed.

She chased for once. It was sickeningly ironic to think one day I'd be afraid of anyone.

"I won't," I growled. "You—don't you want to save your friend? You can't go now. Your soul is all that is needed to bring the end of the world, little raven."

The dead didn't speak, so I couldn't hear her voice, but her smile said enough. She thought I was being ridiculous. Me, the Soul Eater. The Ruler Between Life and Death. And I couldn't believe how even after she'd left her body, the cheeky woman could taunt me like this. But it was just another reason I refused to lose her. So, I did something I never thought I'd be capable of doing. I begged for her to stay.

"Come with me, Asha." I sucked in a breath, closing my eyes. "Stay with me, little raven."

When I opened my eyes, her soul was fucking sparkling. Her smile grew, then she reached out and took my hand before I could snatch it away. Emotions swelled in my chest when I thought that I'd lost her. I wasn't given the chance to keep her. And I would never recover.

Who was I without her?

But instead of disappearing, Asha grew solid, and the shadows clinging to my body fled mine for hers. She was wrapped in them. A skin-tight dress formed around her naked body. The hand in mine became solid, weighted, and then before I could gather my wits, she wrapped her arms around me.

I stared down at her, hands eclipsing her pale face while her devastating green eyes lifted to mine. "How?"

She yanked me down, and our lips met in a heated kiss that could've lasted for the

rest of time and it still wouldn't have been enough. "I don't know how I knew, but I just did. If I touched you, I'd be yours."

I kissed her again, the words gone. All I could do to express the relief, the gratitude, the happiness that rushed through me all at once was to suck her lips and feel her subtle warmth. To inhale her sweet scent. Our tongues twined before I gathered the beauty into my arms and forced her legs to wrap around my waist.

Though it was clear that now her body shared the same attributes as mine, nothing had changed. She was still exactly as gorgeous as she'd always been. Perfect in every way.

And she was all mine.

Asha

My spine curved as Thanatos made his way down my naked body, nipping and sucking several places along the way. His moon eyes shot up to mine before he sunk between my thighs and used his ridiculously long tongue to reach places inside me I didn't know existed.

I was still getting used to my new body. Or not body. Well, supernatural form, I guess.

"Oh, fuck," I moaned, his tongue working back and forth while his fingers prodded lower. "You're not playing fair, asshole. Your ravens—"

"Our ravens," he corrected, pulling his head away.

I bemoaned the loss of it. "Still feels weird to say it. Can't believe I somehow became Death, too, when Michael decided it'd be a great idea to stab me with her badass bird sword."

His laughter tickled my thigh, and I shuddered in response. Brushing his mouth over my skin, he eyed me skeptically. "Even I'm not sure how it all works, but I'd be the first to admit I don't give a fuck how it happened, only that it did." He kissed his way down my legs, getting closer to where I throbbed for him, and I stopped the jerk with a hand.

"They said one of the Horsemen found their Counter Soul? Does that mean the end of the world can still happen?" I demanded, relieved when he lifted his head and got to

his knees.

Brushing back his dark hair, Thanatos sighed. “It does. They still have time to deliver one of the Counter Souls for the apocalypse. We were wrong about the timeline. There’s still a few months left. Each Horseman has a Counter Soul, and now it’s clear that they’re the only ones who can collect. But you needn’t worry. War is protecting hers. Famine can’t be bothered to find his. And Zelus is...well, Zelus. He’ll be punished for what he did to you, so even if he has, I’ll make it so he can’t ripen and deliver his soul, I promise you, little raven.”

But my gut was never wrong, and it was screaming at me, so I wasn’t listening anymore. Sitting up, I beckoned the shadows to dress me. It was weird that I could do everything he could now. So weird. The thoughts of a human with the powers of a goddamn god.

“I need to check on Emily. I don’t know what it is, but something feels off. I just...”

Already next to me, Thanatos peered down at me, not happy to be interrupted.

He hadn’t let me go since the day I died. He’d spent every second drowning me in pleasure—pleasure I didn’t know was possible. It was nothing like the ecstasy I found in my human body. Still, he’d ignored every raven that came calling. He left them to do his—our—duty. I’d come to terms with the fact that Thanatos would happily let the world burn around us, but I had someone I still cared about in danger. Especially if they still had months left to deliver a soul.

“I can take human form like you can, right?” I asked, turning. “She won’t know I...you know...died, right?”

His smile burrowed into my chest. “Right.”

“Good. Let’s just pay her a little visit, and then we’ll team up to thwart the end of the

world,” I decided out loud.

Thanatos couldn't look any less interested. “She'll die one day. We'll collect her soul the way we were always meant to. If...should you want her to come here, I could—”

“No. I want her to live a fucking awesome and ridiculously long life, Mr. Killer.” I clicked my tongue at him, crossing my arms. “We'll take her soul when she's super old and super ready to go. Not because you guys thought humanity wasn't worth saving, and not before she's gotten to destroy every man who crosses her in the courtroom.”

The terrifying Reaper of Souls who I couldn't help but find adorable sighed again, signifying his defeat. “I should've known you'd meddle with it all. What if we can't stop it?”

“Well, you did it once, Than. What makes you so sure you can't do it again? Besides, if what you say is true, then it's really only Zelus we have to worry about.”

Finally, a grin appeared on Thanatos's face. “You make a very good point, little raven.”

“Those are the only kind I make, Mr. Killer. Come on. I don't want to waste any more time. I need to make sure she's okay.” Shadows danced around us before we were in front of my old apartment door.

Shadow teleportation really beat having to walk everywhere. Wetting my dry human lips, I tried the door knob. It was unlocked. When I opened it, Emily came sliding out of the kitchen with a spatula in her hand. She looked gorgeous all dolled up like she was about to make a room of men fall in love. And was she...cooking? That could only mean one thing.

“You expecting someone else? Rude.”

Her eyes went wide before she ran at me. I nearly got taken out at the door by the blonde, but I'd expected it, so I braced myself.

She pulled away, in awe. "Holy shit, lady. You look a-ma-za-zing. Shit. You even smell good. What's that called? Oh, but wait. Did you text to say you'd be coming home?" She dragged out her phone, sauce splattered across her face.

"I wanted to surprise you," I lied as we came inside.

"No shit. I'm definitely surprised." She stole a glance at Thanatos before wagging her eyebrows. "This chick has that satisfied glow about her. That your doing, big guy?"

I didn't think I could blush, but apparently, I could. After a second, I finally got my thoughts sorted. "Wait. Who do you have coming over? You never cook."

She laughed, then sent her elbow into my side. Ouch. Still hurt like hell in this human body I created. "I cook. I cook...stuff. What, I can't cook?"

Thanatos's eyes suddenly darted over to the door. I was still getting used to the new Death spidey senses, but even I knew someone was here that wasn't human. Demon? No. It didn't feel that way. Angel? Definitely not. Before I could ask, Emily pushed past the two of us to open the door. I almost couldn't believe who was on the other side until Thanatos growled the name.

"Zelus."

The End.

If you loved everything about Thanatos and Asha, consider leaving a review so that other readers can discover it.