



Chariot of Souls (Tales from the Tarot)

Author: *Morgan Mason*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Being a reaper, Arit has been around since the dawn of humankind, ferrying souls from one realm to the next. Always separate, always alone, his only connections are with the departed. Some he may have encountered before, but while most are unmemorable, there is one soul Arit would never fail to recognize, for he has been called to carry it more than any other.

Accident prone and clumsy, it's a miracle Nixon has made it to adulthood. Having survived a dozen near-death experiences, everything changes one night when he manages to escape death's call, one more time. But who is the hooded figure standing outside Nixon's apartment window? And why does this beautiful man seem strangely familiar?

When Arit realizes Nixon might be on his last life, never to be ferried again, can he and Nixon make a bargain with Fate in time to save Nixon's soul? Or are both man and reaper destined to part before they even get a chance at love?

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter one

Arit

Death is universal.

Death is constant.

It's unavoidable.

It's inevitable.

Death is a friend I know by name, for we have been together since time immemorial.

And death is my purpose, my reason for being.

Watching the rain fall on this leaden street corner, I feel not the cold nor the damp. I see not the purposeless rats scurrying from one place to another in an endless race they will never win. I don't even notice the interminable cacophony, the ceaseless rabble a city this size demands.

Once upon a time, this corner looked vastly different. But I must say, the advancements in indoor plumbing and city sanitation have improved the smell considerably. Though I'm still on the fence as to which is worse, human waste and filth or the stench of exhaust and pollution. At least there are no longer bodies piled in the cart-rutted mud.

Waiting is sometimes the hardest part. For I do know death intimately, but her timing is impossible to predict.

The urge to move, like being pulled in by a rubber band, grows stronger. Tension in my chest and gut tells me I'll be moving within moments, whether I want to be or not. Like any job, being a ferrier of souls comes with pros and cons, the inability to ignore my charges going in the latter. I'm still undecided if a billion-year lifespan is a pro or not, especially considering I didn't ask for this job.

I suppose on some level I've always been envious of bipedal sentient beings, at least since they came on the scene. Their whims, their minuscule attention spans, their power of choice have long fascinated me. Of course, humans have fine-tuned that now that they can simply use a phone to have any and everything delivered to their doorstep, leaving them so utterly available to do whatever strikes their fancy next.

I have often wondered what it would be like to simply sit and watch a movie or take a vacation or find love. But the snap in my core reminds me such things are not meant for me, and I can't even say I'm mad about it. It just is, as it always has been and will be forevermore.

Shooting forward, I grip my umbrella and command my chariot to rise above the street and cross over to where I know I need to be. A new, distant tug inside tells me I'll be on my way again shortly, but first things first—yes, there. My new charge is ready, followed closely by the wails of grief and despair that have been my everlasting companions.

But I can do nothing about that, as my calling is to help the dead, not the living.

Lost and confused, Mrs. Edith Ann Henning glows radiant—a sure sign she was one remarkable lady who will indeed be missed. I approach, and with no need to introduce myself, she calms, her frazzled sunshine-yellow energy settling into one of

peace and tranquility.

A sense of gratitude and acceptance washes over me as I encourage Mrs. Edith Ann Henning into the chariot with me, reminding me for the millionth time why this job isn't so bad after all. For I am a shepherd of the sterling, the golden, the pure, and the pristine. As I weave my magic and the usual shimmering golden hue appears in front of us, I ease us through the portal and deliver my charge into her brilliant ever after.

And I must say, I have seen many, many gorgeous versions of "heaven," as humans like to call it, but this one—with vibrant waving green grasses, effervescent white-hued clouds in a flawless cerulean sky, cheerfully dancing flowers dotted along sea cliffs, and the nearby shore of a pristine mountain lake—looks lovely.

As I watch, catching a few fleeting seconds of perfection, mirages begin to appear in the distance, vague at first, then solidifying as they grow closer. People. A tall man and a shorter woman. A child aged approximately six years. Dogs and cats, even a horse, appears. Mrs. Edith Ann Henning is home, resting in the cradle of her perfect version of bliss.

I might spend less than a minute—as time is perceived in the human construct—with each soul in my care, but it's these moments, when I cross over into another's utopia, that I recharge my own sense of self. Feeding is too crass a term to use here in nirvana, but it's the closest to what I'm doing that I can think of.

My consciousness slowly fades as my arms extend away from my body and I float, thriving on the pure, untainted energy of this place. Time becomes meaningless as the vastness of life, death, and the universe unfold and refold, vibrating into infinity. It's this process that recharges my existence, and I fall back into myself in time to see the shimmer of contentment slip away. I settle, fulfilled and renewed, back into my chariot, then turn and leave silently the way I came.

I've long gotten used to the jarring transition between this world and the next, so the noise and claustrophobia slink back on like a well-worn coat.

That distant tug I felt before transferring Mrs. Henning is back, but I can ignore it for the time being. I rarely have time to myself, so I take this opportunity to indulge in one of my favorite endeavors and head to The Met. Not only do I prefer The Met to MOMA, but I loved witnessing the Renaissance era take shape after the horrors of the Middle Ages. That was definitely a dark time in human history.

Letting myself in is easy as can be—I simply weave my magic and take my ethereal form. I can still see and function normally, but since I don't plan on touching anything, I have no need to materialize. Plus, I don't want to trigger any sensors.

I spend the next hour or so wandering from the American Wing into Egyptian Art and end where I usually do, staring at statues of ancient Roman and Greek warriors. If ever there was a time in human history where more perfectly toned and exquisite male bodies were on display, I must have missed it.

As a being who developed alongside mankind, changing and evolving as they did, I have seen many eras, many civilizations, and many cultures come and go. From the ancient peoples who discovered flint points and barely managed to create fire to modern man and their sophisticated technology, none were more pleasing for me to witness than the advancements of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Seeing their strength develop in both mind and body—the philosophy, the arts, the sciences, government—combined with their ferocity in war, it was hard not to be in awe. Plus, there was one particular warrior I kept almost transferring, but somehow he managed to beat the odds every time. When I did finally take him to his greater reward, it was the first time I was ever truly envious.

Standing here, observing the plains and valleys of deeply toned muscles and a

capable frame, I'm reminded of him yet again.

But the tug in my chest intensifies and draws me out of my darkest musings. There will never be anything for me that way. My path is infinite and defined. As long as there are human beings roaming this planet, so too shall I be.

There is no changing that.

Turning my back on those distracting memories, I will my chariot to move and am on my way to my next charge within moments.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter two

Nixon

I don't even know how many times I've nearly died, but I'm sure this is the one that's going to finish me.

Only I could be so unlucky to choke to death on the one night all of my roommates are out of the house.

Panic claws at my insides, needy and desperate, as I frantically paw at my throat in a futile attempt to dislodge the stupid piece of sweet and sour pork I was trying to toss to myself. Well, Winner , I guess we caught it.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I know I have only seconds to save myself, but I'm freaking the fuck out and can't think straight. My hands are glued to my throat in the universally known gesture of "help me, I'm choking to death," but there is no one to save me tonight. Linc, my best friend, is going to come home in the morning to my stiff blue corpse and two half-eaten cartons of congealed Chinese food, sauce on the side.

I know I'm clumsy and accident prone. I know I have the absolute worst luck. But come on, universe! Give a guy a break!

A flash of memory—my dad, in jeans and a white undershirt, telling me during one of our many trips to the ER that at the rate I was going, I wasn't going to live past my teens, my mom holding a blood-soaked towel to my head as we waited to be called

back.

A car crash.

Weak lungs.

Caught in a riptide.

Mugged.

Tripped on my own shoelace.

Only now it seems I'm going to die of an obstructed airway. Great.

As black spots begin to appear in my vision, I scramble into my bedroom on weak and wobbly legs. I somehow manage to make it up onto my bed, and in a last-ditch effort, I jump and launch myself into the air.

The impact against the hardwood floor is so jarring I know I'm going to have a mild to moderate concussion, but the instant crack to my skull and down my back is secondary as I gasp in a lungful of air and then practically fold in half as I cough and cough, the blasted batter-coated piece of pork flying from my mouth to land harmlessly across the room.

My eyes water, and I clutch my head and throat, trying to get control of my coughing as the tingling in my limbs gradually subsides and adrenaline takes its place. Everything else fades as the seconds tick by, and I breathe in the shock of being alive.

"Fuck," I mutter roughly, hardly able to process the last seventy-five seconds. Blinking away tears, I slowly try to sit up and just manage it, only everything wobbles once I'm upright. I've had enough concussions to know I won't be going

into work on Monday.

Movement outside my bedroom window catches my eye though, and I swear I must have hit my head harder than I thought. There's a man standing on the fire escape.

I'm on the fourth floor, so it's not impossible for him to have climbed up there, but what the fuck is he doing staring inside my window at one o'clock in the morning?

"Hey!" I shout instinctively, then instantly regret it, my vision swimming as I squint toward the window while rubbing the back of my head.

I'm with it enough to see the man jerk back in surprise, though I can't make out any of his features since he's wearing a black hoodie with the hood pulled up. Before I can blink, he vanishes into thin air, and if I hadn't just nearly died, again, I know I'd be freaking out that he possibly fell off the fire escape to his death. Or that I'm hallucinating.

As it is, I muster the will to crawl to my window, moving slowly so I don't rattle my noggin any more than necessary. There's no way I'm fighting with the damn old window to wrestle it open right now, so I settle for peering outside. I can't see much since it's dark. There is some ambient light from the street below that filters in my windows, but I don't see any bodies on my escape or the one below.

Whatever. The way I figure it, if the guy was some Peeping Tom, he got what he deserved.

Settling with my back against the wall, I rest for a minute, still rubbing my bonked head and swallowing continuously in a futile attempt to soothe my sore throat. I pull out my phone and squint at the brightly lit screen as I text Linc.

Nix : Just so u know, I managed to save u from having to come home to a corpse.

It takes a minute, but Linc's reply comes in all caps.

Linc : WHAT DID U DO?

Nix : Nearly choked to death on a piece of sweet and sour pork.

Linc : Dear God. How are u actually still alive?

I snicker because seriously.

Nix : (shrug emoji) Mysteries of the universe.

Linc : Do u need me to come home?

I pause to take stock. My head throbs and my developing headache will probably only get worse. My throat hurts, but it's not really anything to worry about. All in all, aside from having nearly died, I know I'll be okay. I've been here before.

Nix: Nah. I'll live.

Linc : Not funny, man.

Nix : Ik. Sorry.

Linc : Text me if u need me.

I send back a thumbs-up emoji and then set my phone down before kneeling up again to look outside. It's just as dark as before, and I literally can't see anything other than my platform and the ones directly above and below mine. I'm not sure why anyone would be out on the fire escape at this hour, but I suppose whoever it was probably won't be coming back.

I grab my phone to make a note since I know my fuzzy brain won't remember it in the morning: dark curtains and something to bar the window.

I wasn't expecting much to happen on my lackluster Saturday night spent at home, but I definitely wasn't planning any near-death experiences.

I've never been what anyone would call "hale" or "hearty." Having been the only one of a set of triplets to survive to birth, I was still born premature and incredibly fragile. While I suppose surviving at all might make me lucky, it was clear from the start I was going to be one of those people who should live in a bubble. Or Bubble Wrap.

My younger brother—apparently my parents wanted another shot at producing an heir who would make it to adulthood—is probably twice my size. While Saint definitely got the brawn in the family, I'm not at all sorry to say I got the brains.

If only all my smarts could keep me out of trouble.

Deciding I'll be okay for the night, I know the best thing I can do for myself is to get some rest. I gingerly stand and head to the kitchen, glaring at the cartons of half-eaten food while I close them up and stick them in the fridge. I grab a bag of frozen peas from the freezer and a bottle of water from the pack on the floor.

Stopping by the bathroom, I pop a couple of ibuprofen, brush my teeth, and then head back to my room to strip. If whoever was outside earlier wants to watch me sleep, well, I hope he enjoys the show.

I forgo a text to my mom since I know she'll only worry and flick off the light, then place the peas on my pillow. It's bound to be a restless night, and the morning is not going to be pretty either, but I settle in, close my eyes, and do my best to sleep.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter three

Arit

“What do you mean he saw you?” Khan asks.

One of my oldest friends, Khan, is another reaper, but he deals with the dark, the dirty, the coarse, and the grim. His charges do not get such fine reunions as mine.

Unlike me, Khan is wearing a more ceremonial robe in full black. The likeness to a priest's robe is not lost on me. He thinks of himself as vengeance personified and takes pleasure in delivering his charges to their just rewards. Where I've taken to carrying a simple umbrella, Khan still carries his scythe, enjoying the human personification of our kind too much.

“I mean, I was called to his transfer. Again, I might add. He never seems to actually pass on. And when he never came, I peered into his window.”

Khan gasps, and it sounds like ragged air being drawn in by a broken vacuum.

“I know,” I placate, fiddling with the handle of my umbrella.

The thing is—something I've never even told Khan—before I looked in Nixon's window, I knew who I was being called to carry. I would recognize the essence of Nixon's soul against all others since I've met it so many times before.

Humans have this notion of reincarnation, where the soul lives on after the body dies.

As a reaper, I can attest that this is one hundred percent true. I may not have met Nixon until he was born in this century, but I know his soul. I've delivered it to its resting place many, many times.

Which makes me wonder: why is it not at rest?

Why does he keep coming back?

And why does he escape death every time I come for him?

"You looked in his window?" Khan asks. "Arit, that is forbidden."

I glare even though I know he can't see my eyes. "I'm aware."

"We cannot intervene. Ever."

Gritting my teeth, I say, "I didn't intervene. I was called to collect him, and he was saved at the last possible second." I turn my nose up and glare in the opposite direction from where Khan is sitting perched on the rooftop. "I was merely making sure I wasn't needed."

"Arit. You would have felt that. As old as you are, I know you know when you're being called and when your duty is done."

I sniff and don't answer, staring off down the quiet street as my thoughts betray my indifference. The truth is, more than once I've nudged someone off a curb, tripped them, or shoved them into someone else. Does that make me a bad person? Not hardly, when my actions saved their life. Should I meddle in what Fate and destiny have in store for my charges? I'm undecided on that front.

Perhaps if my charges were like Khan's, foul and irredeemable, then I might never

have considered the notion in the first place, content and perhaps even smug to send them on. But my charges are not at all like his, fair and wholesome as they are, that it only seems right to nudge them back before they get plowed over by a drunk driver or struck by a stray bullet while making dinner for their families.

Do I say any of that to Khan? No. He's traditional. He's too caught up in the gray and bleak to see the silver and spark. His world is full of the ominous. There is no hope or light for him. He would never understand, and he'd think my actions outlandish.

But none of that means anything when the majority of the time my existence is invisible and no one is the wiser.

On rare occasions, if death is imminent, if I'm merely biding my time until my charge is available—accidents and illness don't discriminate—I will let my guard down and my mask slip because my presence can be a balm to those in despair.

Would I call myself an angel? No. But I do understand I can sometimes be seen that way.

The fact that I was not purposely revealing myself to Nixon and he saw me anyway? I don't know what to make of it, which is why I sought out Khan.

"Anyway," I drawl. "Why would a human be able to see me if I was masking?" I ask, looking back at one of the few men I've known for most of my existence. As the Homo sapiens population continues to grow exponentially, so too do our numbers, but Khan and I go way, way back, so I don't mind seeking his opinion.

"I don't know. I've never heard of such a thing." His icy gaze and furrowed brow tell me he really is perplexed.

I nod. I'd suspected as much. In all my long years, I've never heard of it either. There

is a reason we are who we are and have the powers we do. If everyone was able to see us, I can only imagine the chaos that would ensue.

Like me, I know Khan reveals himself from time to time, but for someone to be immune to our shields? The very idea is unfathomable.

“Well, I certainly thought it odd. I’m sure it won’t happen again since the man seems in perfect health.” Khan gives me a disapproving look at the fact that I know the state of Nixon’s health at all, but I choose to ignore it. We’ve convened too long as it is. “I’ll be going now. I’m sure you have people to save.”

Even though Khan is what some might consider dry, I can sense that he’s amused by my comment.

“Yes, you as well, though your people are fewer in number than mine.”

“It does seem that way lately. We have switched places a time or two over the years, but for now, I shall kick my feet up until I’m needed again.”

Khan hums agreeably, and I can tell by the tightening in his shoulders he’s being called. He won’t have long to linger, so I bid him goodbye and take my leave.

As a reaper, I’m a nomad by nature. I’ve traveled every inch of this world, in all its eras, and have witnessed the rise and fall of many epochs. From cave dwellings to animal skin huts, from marble palaces to squat apartments, I’ve requisitioned them all.

Never keeping a place of my own, my presence is transient and almost always unnoticed. I flit through this world like a wisp of smoke on the breeze.

I direct my chariot toward the newly renovated building I’m staying in off Broadway

near the cemetery, one of the few places I can find peace in this feral city. Without the need to mask, I let myself in and do what I usually do, plop down in the overstuffed armchair and grab a book. I know it will only be a matter of time until I'm called again, so I settle in, hardly caring the book I've picked up is in Mandarin. It could be in Cuneiform for all I care.

That thought makes me smirk. I know more languages than currently exist on earth, which I think is both grand and disheartening at once. As a being who has been around since the earliest hominins, I've witnessed a great many cultures and species rise, evolve, and fade. Daunting as it seems, thus will be the path for current *Homo sapiens* as well.

As my thoughts wander, thinking of primitive tools and various forms of communication, I can't help but reflect on all my long years. The very concept of a year, in fact—a single measurement of time that has only been agreed upon for roughly the last four hundred years—is in itself a supremely modern notion. For millions of “years” this world did just fine without hours and minutes.

I, myself, have evolved alongside even the most advanced civilizations, ferrying souls from this world to the next. Even now, when I look in a mirror I can still see the traces of where I've been and note the subtle changes of where I am headed.

The slope of Nixon's face and masculine brow ridge, along with the placement of his high cheekbones, comes to mind, and I ruminate, staring blankly at the book in my hands. I only caught a glimpse of his mottled face as he gasped for air after his ordeal, but I've seen him before a time or two—okay, more than that—and always thought him beautiful. Not nearly as muscular as the men of Ancient Greece, but I can imagine Nixon would be just as glorious if sculpted out of marble.

Thinking of those perfect honey-brown eyes, those long dark eyelashes, and those ruby-red lips has a strange wave of longing pass through me, something I've only

experienced a handful of times. And while the sensation of desire is more or less foreign to me, the feeling of Nixon's soul is not. It's his soul that is magnificent. And I've encountered it over and over again since its creation.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter four

Nixon

I 'm groggy when a soft knock raps on my bedroom door.

Groaning, I reach up to hold my sore head and rumble out a reply.

The door cracks open a couple of inches, and Lincoln's bulky frame appears in silhouette. "You dead in there, Nixy?"

"Very funny," I mutter.

"Hey. At the rate you're going, the chances of you being dead are about as good as they are of you being alive."

Sadly, I can't dispute my roommate's words. "Tossing the pork in the air and trying to catch it in my mouth was a grave mistake, but fortunately, I was able to dig myself out of it."

" Ugh . Dear lord, save me from his puns. Especially when the outcome of his misadventure could have been so much worse."

That makes me crack a small smile, and I roll over only to land on the warm and squishy bag of peas I'd apparently used as an ice pack. "Gross." I snag the bag, dropping it over the side of my bed.

Lincoln chuckles and takes that opportunity to come inside. Living in a shared unit with four bedrooms, one common area, one kitchen, and one bathroom, our bedrooms are tiny; my childhood bedroom was easily twice the size of my room now. But the place is mine, and Linc is one of my better friends, so I don't even care that his hulking body takes up half my room.

"You're a piece of work, Nix. How are you feeling?" he asks. He's wearing basketball shorts and a Nike T-shirt that would probably fit a normal human but on him looks two sizes too small.

"Okay, all things considered," I reply, ignoring the throbbing in my head.

Lincoln squints at me and hums knowingly, then turns on his heels and disappears back out into the hallway. From the sounds of it, he's tromping to our bathroom. He returns a moment later and holds out his hand. "Take these."

"Sweet angel of mercy, bless you." That makes Linc snicker, and when I take the pills dry, he only crinkles his nose a little. Eh. I've learned to make the best of what I have on hand.

But my angel comment triggers a spark of memory. A hooded man standing on my fire escape. Looking over, there's obviously no one there now, but was there really a man out there last night? And right when I was on death's door? I've had enough concussions and bumps on the head to know I don't always remember things clearly afterward. Was I hallucinating?

"What?" Linc asks, following my line of sight. "Too bright? Want me to throw a blanket over the window?"

"Nah. I can deal. I think I'm only mildly concussed." But still, I squint toward the window.

“Only mildly concussed. I’m not at all surprised you can self-diagnose at this point. How many times have you nearly died? Twenty? Thirty? Remind me, I’ve lost count.”

“Last night makes twelve,” I answer, though that’s probably not accurate, since I’m sure there were several close calls in there that could have been worse if not for the quick thinking of my parents or other more responsible parties getting involved.

“Jesus, bro. You have a running tally somewhere? It was a joke, Nixon. The fact that you’ve nearly died twelve times and are still walking this earth is some freaky shit.”

“Yeah.” But now my thoughts are stuck replaying every time I’ve nearly died, or at least the times I can remember. There are two events I prefer not to relive simply due to past trauma, but the rest? There’s a weird nigggle of something in the back of my mind. Like I’m trying to remember something I was going to say, but I get off topic and the thought vanishes. Like the perfect word that’s just out of reach or a sneeze that never materializes.

This strange realization is an itch I cannot scratch.

When I was in my teens, there wasn’t much to do in our small town, so I would go biking—or eventually, driving—with my friends and we’d do all sorts of stupid shit. I was probably twelve when I fell out of a huge oak tree my friends dared me to climb—broken collarbone and left arm, including stitches in a couple of places. Then, when I was fourteen, it was a jump off a bridge that ran over the river we all liked to swim in during the summer—belly flop that knocked the wind out of me, and I nearly drowned because I couldn’t breathe.

Fifteen and we’d taken a matching pair of old recliners we’d found next to a dumpster and loaded them into my buddy’s pickup. He drove us up to the foothills, and we raced each other down the hill in the chairs, strapping ourselves in with

ratchet straps, using them like seat belts. I don't recall nearly dying, but I know I ended up in the ER with lacerations, deep bruising all along my ribs and hips, and a dislocated shoulder.

When I was nearly seventeen, I thought we were invincible. There was an abandoned house in the woods outside of town that was rumored to be haunted by a witch. In Connecticut, practically everything is rumored to be haunted, but a friend of a friend had seen something in the shadows. My bestie at the time, a girl named Cami, was really into ghosts and Ouija boards and tarot cards, so I drove us there.

The way I remember that night is kind of like that scene from *The Blair Witch Project* where the college kids are running through the forest with their camcorder and there are sounds and it's dark and they get separated. The camera is so shaky it's a little nauseating to watch and really hard to follow.

There was a storm that night that neither of us knew was coming, so while we were out there, traipsing down the "path" that we could only just make out, the wind kicked in and so did a thunderstorm. Being young and stupid, we chose to make a mad dash to the dilapidated house since we were closer to it than my car.

I remember scrambling over rotting wet logs, slipping on sopping piles of dead leaves, and the crack of lightning looming just over our shoulders. I do not recall tripping over roots or hitting my head on a rock, but I do remember waking up to Cami crying and dragging me through the open doorway to the scariest structure I'd ever been in.

If I hadn't nearly died of a cracked skull, I'm sure I would have died of fright.

We were each grounded for a month after that, and I stopped hanging out with Cami, who had changed her wardrobe to nearly all-black clothing and taken up an interest in witchcraft because she claimed I was saved by the witch of Knifeshop Road.

After that, I took up indoor hobbies, wondering if perhaps my parents weren't right all along about me not surviving to adulthood.

Still, there's something in all of those events that sits like a lost memory, a feeling I can't place or even name. But there is one thing about the odd lost niggles that I can say with certainty: it's familiar. And that in itself brings me a measure of comfort.

Sure, I may have nearly died a few times, but who hasn't had a brush with death?

And maybe it's weird to think about my near-death experiences as being comforting, but that's better than fearing the world, right? I'm not sitting in a dark room rocking away because I'm scared to live for fear of dying. Am I?

"Well, I just wanted to check on you," Linc says after I don't know how long. I was lost in thought, and he was probably just standing there awkwardly thinking my brain must really be damaged. I think back to the man I hallucinated out on my fire escape. Maybe my brain really is damaged.

"Yeah. Thanks. I think I'm going to lie low today. Try not to get into trouble."

Linc looks unconvinced but nods anyway. "Probably a good idea. The guys and I are going down to play hoops, but I'll be around if you need anything. I think Curtis is home today too."

I groan and bury my face in my pillow, but I can still hear Linc's laugh.

"I'll make sure he wears his headphones," he says.

"That doesn't help much when he's screaming 'Die, die, die!' and 'You can't hide from me, motherfucker!' all day long."

Shrugging consolingly since we both know this is Curtis's house too, Linc only pats my foot. "I'll see what I can do. If it gets too bad, maybe you can walk over to campus and hang in the library lounge for a few hours. It's quiet, and I know you love it there."

I nod in consideration. I probably wouldn't get hurt walking to campus. I mean, I make that round trip sometimes three times a day if the weather is nice. "Maybe. Have fun with the guys. Depending on how I feel, you want to grab dinner at Vinny's tonight?"

The one and only time Linc and I hooked up we were both extremely drunk, and he'd just confessed he was bi. He later admitted he'd planned on us both getting shitfaced so he could work up the courage to tell me. Neither of us had planned what happened after we stumbled into the apartment later that night. He damn well knows my dinner invite tonight is strictly platonic.

"Sure, man. Sounds good. I'm going to bounce. Don't forget to rest and hydrate." He smirks at me over his shoulder as he leaves my room and quietly pulls the door closed behind him. At six-two with golden-brown skin and firm muscles in all the right places, Linc is definitely a fine specimen. But he's someone else's specimen.

I shudder at the fuzzy memory of that epic disaster.

Snatching up my phone, I shoot off a quick text to my mom, briefly explaining the events of the previous night, and then make a slow but mad dash for the shower before my mom's reply can come through. I know she's only going to worry and probably insist I see a doctor, but I know I'd feel guilty if I didn't tell her eventually. Might as well get it over with so I can use the "I'm recuperating" card and get a less pointed talking to.

I grab my bathroom caddy, an annoying but necessary tool, and before I can stop

myself, I step over to my window and peer outside. In the light of a new day, it suddenly dawns on me that the fourth floor is actually pretty high up since our floor numbers actually begin on the second floor because there's a Subway on the ground level. For there to have been a man out here last night is really fucking creepy. Like, of all the apartments in the whole of Manhattan, why was this guy peeping into mine?

And why, of all nights, was he there when I was moments from death? And at that exact time? I'm wigged out over the coincidence.

Taking one last glance at the fire escape, the sidewalk and street below, and the neighborhood in general, I finally decide a hot shower is the perfect way to relax and let my swirling thoughts wash away.

I just need to pamper myself a little bit, have some lukewarm coffee, and I'll be feeling better in no time.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter five

Arit

I don't know what compels me, but after sitting idle in my flat and getting nothing accomplished by way of reading, I find myself driving back to Nixon's. I tell myself I'm only checking on him. After all, he looked rather distressed from his ordeal.

The sun is rising, and I can feel a pull to the east, but it's distant enough that I can ignore it for a while yet. There's a glare on the windows of Nixon's apartment building, and I only now notice the intricate facade and brickwork of the older building. As is normally the case in developing cultures, older structures are typically torn down or destroyed to make way for newer, more modern structures befitting of the time.

It lightens my spirits to see an older dwelling still standing.

Since I'm masking—something that is so second nature I rarely even notice when I'm doing it anymore—I don't hesitate to approach Nixon's window and peer inside, figuring he'll no doubt be asleep since it's still early morning.

Sure enough, nestled in an array of bedding, Nixon is fast asleep. I can just make out the riot of freckles across his cheeks and nose and the reddish-brown mop of curls on his head. He looks quite peaceful.

Taking a moment, I study the inside of Nixon's room. While the general atmosphere appears orderly, there are piles of clothes on the floor, stacks of books on the small

side table, and an assemblage of papers scattered on his nightstand and hanging out of his satchel. There are also a variety of color-organized garments hanging in his partially opened closet. The only photos I note on display are those of a sun-kissed, smiling Nixon standing with three other people, whom I know to be his parents and brother.

The distinct lack of any indication of a significant other leaves a strangely satisfying contentment in my mind. I've been called to carry Nixon so many times over the years and never noticed anyone hanging around who seemed particularly close to him outside of his family. While I realize I should want Nixon to live a life full of love and family, there's something in me that rebels at that idea. Not that I want Nixon to be unwell, just that it settles a part of me I have never given much notice to before that he is still finding his way on his own.

The last time I saw Nixon, he was a young adult. Seeing him now, filled out with a close-cropped beard and greater sense of self, fills me with desire and pride like I have known this man his whole life and attended to his needs. Despite his close calls with death, Nixon is thriving.

His soul is strong and familiar, and I'm pleased it has called out to me again.

Deciding this fire escape is as good a place as any, I settle down and tune in to my next charge. It's been a quiet night, all things considered. Where sometimes us reapers are zigging this way and that, ferrying souls left and right, I've had a relatively peaceful few days.

I can sense, like a building buzz of static in my core, that the next couple of days will be busy. As is usually the case, when the weather warms up, so do the number of calls I attend.

I'm not one to keep regular track of time since, to me, it's so fleeting, but a sudden

knock on the door behind me has me sitting up straighter.

I listen intently to the conversation Nixon has with his flatmate. There are a few tidbits of information I glean from the exchange, not least of which is that I like Nixon's sense of humor, and he's wrong that he's nearly died twelve times.

But still.

As the conversation wraps up, I hear the other man leave, and shortly thereafter, I note the rustle of bedding and softer footsteps. Not wanting to test this new and interesting development where Nixon can apparently see me now, I quickly dissipate and head up to the roof, just in case he looks outside.

As the tug across town to the east intensifies, I can't help but ruminate on eavesdropping and my own curiosity. I've been wandering this earth for millions of years, and aside from doing what I was created to do, I've never assimilated. I've never been involved .

I've always looked in from the outside, never taking part in any celebrations, any defeats, or any matters of the heart. I've never been disappointed. I've never been elated. And something that suddenly sinks in, I've never had a conversation with anyone who wasn't a reaper.

The mundane conversation I just overheard between Nixon and his flatmate is potentially one of the first human conversations I've ever cared about.

I mean, yes, I care about humans. It's my purpose to treat them with respect, to be there for them in the end, and to ensure their eternal happiness. But have I ever gone to such levels as to sit near one specific person and listen in to their daily preoccupations?

Not that I can recall.

And for what? All because Nixon saw me?

Sure, that's a new and interesting development. Sure, no one has ever seen me unless I've dropped my mask. I've been so diligent and focused on my purpose, I probably wouldn't have cared if someone else had seen me instead of Nixon.

So what is it about him that's piqued my interest?

I don't have the answer to that right now. I've never had to ponder such things before, and perhaps that's part of this puzzle that has me intrigued as well. It has to mean something that he can see me, right?

Or is there something wrong with my gifts?

The sudden thought that my powers might be dwindling has me on edge and a touch panicky.

I leave my perch on the roof and head down to the street. Nixon's apartment is on a relatively busy street, with shops, banks, and eateries lining the way. If I stand in the middle of the bustling crossroads, someone is bound to see me.

Yet, as I stand, arms spread and directly in the center of the road, no one honks, no one swerves, and no one looks my way. I should be an imposing figure, dark and mysterious—and with a chariot for crying out loud—yet everyone totally ignores me and cars zoom right on by. I may as well be a ghost for all the attention I'm drawing.

But it appears my powers are not dwindling and there is merely something going on with Nixon. Something I can't help wanting to know more about since this is a first for me.

I spend a few minutes reflecting on what I should do—if anything—about this situation, but the tug in the east draws my focus, and I leave Nixon's to attend to Mr. Colin Washburn, former high school principal, grandfather to six, and former Navy pilot.

Directing my chariot, I set thoughts of a certain human aside. The situation with Nixon really is nothing more than a passing fascination. There might be something odd at foot, but in another hundred years I'll have forgotten all about it.

Maybe.

But as my day progresses and I find myself back in Nixon's neighborhood, it seems my determination to put my purpose first is waning. I've carried two more souls—one, a young single mother, and the other, a middle-aged city councilwoman—since I attended to Mr. Washburn. And since I can't seem to stop myself, I end up outside Nixon's apartment, wondering if I should see if he's home.

"What are you doing?"

I jump and barely contain a shout as I spin around and glare at Rai. I've been so lost in contemplation over my next move I didn't sense another reaper in the area.

"Nothing," I snip. "Just waiting. Why are you in town?"

Rai raises one of her elegant eyebrows, knowing full well I'm full of shit. Reapers don't usually stare up at buildings mindlessly, and we're never caught unaware. "I was following my next charge, who was being transported to the nearby hospital. Why are you so jumpy? And why are you standing here instead of meeting your charge?"

"I didn't say I was meeting a charge. I said I was waiting. I don't have anywhere to

be at present, so I'm just standing here." I'm short with my friend, and it irritates me. Despite what we do, despite our purpose and our ceaseless proximity to death, reapers are generally genial beings; we're compassionate and patient by nature.

But I don't like that I let myself get so carried away by my distraction I zoned out and am now on the defensive.

Rai's frown makes me feel quite belittled. "Arit?"

"Sorry," I soothe. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be short. You caught me off guard, and that's upsetting to me. I've been distracted of late, and my mind is elsewhere. I apologize for being terse with you."

Rai places her delicate hand on my shoulder. "It's fine. I'm not vexed. What's troubling you, brother? I've never known you to be this distraught."

I sigh. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was distraught, but I am off balance. Just as I'm about to explain the situation with Nixon, the man himself exits the front door of his building, looking beautiful but slightly unhinged.

Automatically, I snap to attention, immediately standing taller despite knowing my mask is in place. There is a very real possibility Nixon will see me, and that prospect makes my life force thrum faster.

Even though I'm no longer looking at Rai, I can tell she's startled and curious about my reaction. Out of my peripheral vision, I notice as she turns to see what's captured my attention.

Nixon is adjusting his sweater and the satchel over his shoulder as he mutters something about his annoying housemate while glaring daggers back at the door. I can't help wondering if he's feeling okay or if he's suffering some ill effects from his

concussion.

When he finally turns away from his death stare, he winces and squints, quickly pulling out a pair of sunglasses from his bag.

“Who is that?” Rai asks, and I have the sudden urge to shush her even though I know no one will hear her.

“Nixon Everhart,” I whisper, but I wasn’t as quiet as I thought because Nixon looks our way. His eyes widen at the same time as mine, and a flood of questions pour from Rai as Nixon takes a step our way and speaks.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter six

Nixon

H oly hotness, Batman.

The man standing outside my apartment building is absolutely stunning. If I'd met him before, I'd remember him, but he apparently knows me since I just heard him say my name. I take an involuntary step toward him. "Um, hi." The iciest blue eyes I've ever seen widen even more. "Do I know you?"

The man shakes his head, his gorgeous black hair just brushing the tops of his shoulders. Layered perfectly, shiny and smooth, I don't think I've ever seen such commercial-worthy hair in my life. He's clean-shaven and fit with broad shoulders; my dream man looks even better than I could have imagined him.

"No," he says, his voice like hot fudge over vanilla ice cream, decadent and sweet at once. For some odd reason, the timbre of it immediately puts me at ease.

"But you just..." I can't help but look him over again, a sense of déjà vu washing through me. There's something...

"I've seen you around campus," he explains. "I was surprised to see you step out of your door there and just blurted your name. My apologies. I didn't mean to intrude or startle." Then he actually bows, a slight gesture of deference as he dips his head respectfully.

I'm so taken aback I don't even know what to say. Removing my sunglasses, I can't help another wince at the bright day. My headache has been a dull thud all day since Curtis only has one volume when playing video games.

"Are you all right?" mystery man asks, stepping closer with a concerned furrow to his brow. "It's quite luminous out. Perhaps you should put your glasses back on."

I blink at him more out of the strangeness of his words than needing to actually blink. Does he also have an accent? "I'm okay," I say out of habit but regret it immediately and elaborate before he can double check. "I bumped my head last night, and it's a little bright outside, but I'm okay."

The man looks like he wants to ask again anyway but holds the question back and nods instead. "Very well. I should be on my way then. I'm sure you were off somewhere yourself." He gestures to my bag.

"Oh." I'd forgotten I was even carrying it. "Not really. I just needed to get out for a while." I adjust my bag again and gesture toward my building. "Housemates." He nods like he totally gets that. I fidget under his intense stare. He's gorgeous, and even though he's only wearing jeans and a dark hoodie, I feel thrown off balance by his attention and intensity.

Out of nowhere, he turns sharply and yanks his arm, glaring over his shoulder like there's something there. A rumble of something I can't hear passes from his lips, but just as quickly he turns back, looking serene and apologetic. "I've kept you. Forgive me." He does his bow again, accompanied this time by his hand over his heart, and takes a step back.

"Wait!" I blurt, suddenly struck by the irrational sense that if he leaves now I'll never forgive myself for at least not asking his name. He looks up, concerned again, his pale, almost white-blue eyes laser focused on me. "I didn't catch your name." Real

smooth, idiot.

A small smile teases the corners of his perfectly shaped ruby lips. His features are so masculine and symmetrical, there's an almost otherworldly quality about his beauty. Why he's standing here talking to me and not out shooting the next centerfold for some magazine, I have no idea.

"Arit," he says, but there's something in the way he says it, the way he forms the word on his lips, that intrigues me. It's like he's never said his own name before, and he's pleased with how it sounds.

"Arit," I repeat and finally gather myself enough to step forward and hold out my hand. "It's nice to meet you."

He looks at my outstretched hand for a long moment, long enough that I get the feeling he's not going to reciprocate. When he raises his gaze to meet mine, he finally steps forward and places his large, warm hand in mine, a strange sort of low-humming buzz fizzling through me as we shake. "It's lovely to finally meet you as well, Nixon."

The second I pull my hand back, I miss whatever that feeling was, like some kind of cosmic energy or warmth has suddenly been taken away from me and I didn't even know I needed it to survive. I can't help the small shiver that passes through me as I regrip my bag strap. "Well, I guess I should go. You said you've seen me around campus? Are you a student?" I ask, even though I just said I should go. I'm not sure why, but I get the feeling this chance encounter won't happen again. I would definitely have remembered seeing Arit before now.

Arit turns his head and glares over his shoulder again, but when he looks back at me, his face is placid. "No. I have no need for a degree in my line of work, but I do pass through campus often. The grounds are quite beautiful and quiet. I also love the

library.”

I couldn't even begin to guess at Arit's age despite his casual attire. Youngish? Under fifty? But there's something in the way he carries himself, in the way he stands and his confidence, that suggests he's more mature maybe? Like he's seen more of life and the world than most people, and he doesn't concern himself with the little things.

I nod along even though his answer is vague at best. “And what do you do for work?”

He smiles, a panty-melting, heart-stopping, jaw-dropping event that literally makes me weak in the knees. Arit is easily the most beautiful man I've ever seen. “I'm a guardian of sorts,” he replies reverently, like his answer is the most important statement he's ever made.

My first reaction is to ask which Marvel movie he's in, but I only squint instead, confusion marring my brow. Apparently my reaction is amusing to Arit because his smile widens even more. “Interesting” is all I can think of to say.

The man actually laughs, a deep rumble that seems to come from within. “It is indeed. And you? What do you do at the university?”

It takes me a moment to get over his laugh. I'm not a particularly funny guy, but I love the fact that I've made this man happy. “I work as a coordinator for university programs and events.”

“Hm. Interesting,” he says earnestly, though there's a definite smirk lurking around the corners of his mouth. If I didn't know any better, I would say Arit was flirting with me. Me! This gorgeous man. He looks away suddenly, down the road, and his entire countenance changes. When he looks back at me, I know our moment is over. “Nixon, I'm afraid I must be going. I've lingered too long.”

“Of course. Sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you.” I itch to reach for my phone and ask for his number, but I won’t. I know he’s miles out of my league. And besides, it was purely coincidence we ran into each other as we did.

“You didn’t. I enjoyed our conversation. But I really must go. I’m sorry to run off so suddenly.”

I can only nod, an unwarranted sadness filling me now that he’s leaving. I look down at the brown-gray sidewalk and shove my free hand into my pocket. “It’s fine. Totally. If you have to go, go. I was only going to the library myself and interrupted you.”

“Thank you for understanding. That’s very kind of you.”

I can’t help catching one last glance of my dream man. Arit looks utterly sincere and apologetic, but he also looks edgy, like he really does need to be going. I readjust the strap to my bag. Again. “Sure. See you around campus maybe.” Then I force myself to take a step back and walk around Arit, telling myself not to look back with every step I take away from him.

It isn’t until I’m around the corner, down the street, and finally in the shade of a tree at Morningside Park that I allow myself to stop and actually breathe. I don’t know why and can’t begin to explain it, but there was something about Arit that was so familiar. Like *déjà vu* but with a person rather than a situation.

What was it about him and those few minutes we talked that now has me feeling more alone than I’ve felt in a long time? Am I that bad up that a simple conversation with a stranger has me huddled under a tree, trying not to go back and beg him to talk to me some more?

It may have been almost a year since I last dated, but I’m not generally lonely.

Between work, my housemates, and my family, I'm fairly social. But with Arit...
There was something there I can't explain.

And now I can't help feeling like I'll be looking around campus for a ghost.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter seven

Arit

G ods dammit!

In all my long years I've never been irritated or frustrated at being called; it is what I'm here to do, after all. And I wouldn't ever blame anyone for calling me when I didn't want to go, but I haven't ever not wanted to go more than in this moment.

Watching Nixon walk away after our conversation is like a thunderous kick to the gut. Not only is Rai still standing here watching the play-by-play, but now I feel terrible for having to leave Nixon hanging while my next charge is in desperate need of my attention.

I turn sharply toward Rai, a surge of something unpleasant boiling in my core. "Follow me."

Without a word, we mount to the sky, and I dash off, mere seconds passing as I arrive on the scene of a terrible and tragic car crash. There's another reaper across the street, Cas, I believe, and a third, Ohl, sitting on the side of the overturned bus. As is sometimes the case, there are incidents that require multiple reapers, and the smoking engines, twisted metal, and shattered glass speak of that need today.

Like specters from the mist, one by one, we collect our charges, good or ill, and lead them onward to whatever end awaits.

This time, young Penny is in my care. Her soul is light and full of energy, happy despite the way things ended for her. Rai waits while I weave a portal, the process seamless. As is often the case with young children, I'm not at all surprised to find myself in the sky. Pale pinks, laughing lavenders, and blushing peaches, the clouds are soft and perfectly fluffy.

In the distance, figures emerge with arms outstretched, and Penny runs joyously forward, giggling and skipping, singing songs of youthful delights. Hugs and kisses are passed around, and as I watch, flowers of every color sprout up, a rainbow emerges, and a unicorn runs along nearby.

These moments are bittersweet for me. While I'm happy for Penny and pleased to see what she has created, I can't help but wonder who she might have become if given the proper chance. I also feel remorse over my own actions, for taking the frustrations I had at being called into my initial encounter with Penny. She will never know that I was cross and crisp at coming to her aid, but I will. And that is a pill I'll have to swallow.

But such things as Fate are not in my wheelhouse, and I must trust that She has something else in store for young Penny, and perhaps even for myself.

Returning from my portal calm and recharged, I find Rai where I left her. Together we ride toward the Brooklyn Bridge. We perch on the side, our feet dangling over the edge, and stare out at the view of the East River.

It's only a few minutes before Rai breaks our peaceful silence. "He can see you." A statement then, not a question.

"So it would seem."

"How long?"

“Yesterday. I went to attend to his needs, only, he managed to save himself at the very last second. I was surprised but not shocked. Yesterday was the eighteenth time I’ve been called to carry him.”

Rai sucks in a sharp breath. “Eighteen? Gods. He looks perfectly innocent. Perhaps if it were wartimes or he was a stuntman or something... Not employed by the university. And so young. Arit, do you have any idea what it means?”

“That he can see me?” Rai nods. “No.” But that doesn’t mean I haven’t been tossing around my own ideas for the last several hours.

“Hmm. He obviously has no idea who you are.” She turns her head to look at me, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Though he did seem to like what he saw.”

Even though her words make my stomach swoop because I know what she’s saying is true, I feign annoyance instead. “Would you focus on the real situation here? Whether Nixon found me attractive or not—”

“He did.”

“Is not the point of our conversation. What we’re trying to determine is why he can see me. Why I’ve been called to carry him so many times. And why he always seems to escape my coming.”

“Do you recognize him?”

“Of course. I just told you—”

“Not that.” She waves my comment away. “Do you recognize his soul? Have you encountered it before?”

And that's the thing. I know we've all encountered souls multiple times before since some souls have unfinished business, and only Fate can decide when a soul should rest. But Nixon's soul? Yeah, I've encountered it before.

"Yes," I reply, taking a centering breath. "It's the one soul I've encountered more than any other soul I've carried. I would recognize it anywhere. In any lifetime. In any era."

Rai stares at me like I've spoken gibberish. "Really?"

I nod and look out over the water. "Four thousand, two hundred, forty-two. Give or take."

"What?!"

"That's the approximate number of times I've carried Nixon's soul."

"Gods in the cosmos." Rai's eyes are the size of saucers. "I'm not even going to comment on the fact that you've been keeping track because of course you would, but what in Fate's name does that mean? And you know it means something, so don't even lie to me. You're far too old and brilliant not to have your own theory worked out."

I huff a small laugh, something I realize I do far too little of. If Nixon made me laugh in less than three minutes and forty-nine seconds, I'm apparently not beyond hope. "I do, but I'm sure the situation is just coincidence. Or my theory is wishful thinking. Our kind don't get involved with humans. We observe. We wait. We're separate."

"But that's not what your brain is telling you. And I hate to point out the obvious here, but you're already involved with a human. Or did you forget that Nixon can see you? And that he shook your hand less than an hour ago."

Now that is something I'm not likely to forget. Not only was his skin warm and soft, but I'd longed for the feel of another hand in mine for millennia. I know reapers are not human. I know we're here to ferry the souls of Fate. I know we're autonomous. But that hasn't stopped me from wanting.

And my theory that Nixon is somehow meant for me? That I recognize him for a reason? Quite possibly preposterous. Why, after thousands of lifetimes, would this one be any different? Why did Nixon only see me for the first time yesterday? And why would I feel a connection to him, a fine palpable buzz that simmered through me when his hand finally met mine?

"No, I didn't forget that."

"So? You think he's somehow connected to you? Like he's the yin to your yang? Or that the whole thing is a fluke? Because I've got to say, I've never heard of a human being able to see a reaper with a mask."

I know what she means. Rai is relatively young by reaper standards, possibly somewhere around the low three hundred thousands, but that's plenty of time for her to have seen—or not seen—the type of situation I've got going on with Nixon. And for me? A reaper nearing six million? No. I've never heard of it either.

But still, as we chat some more and toss around ideas, Khan eventually finds us, and we all agree to ask around and meet up in a day or two with our findings.

In the meantime, I have souls to carry, other reapers to query, and a man with freckles who is calling my name.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter eight

Nixon

My time in the library was turbulent at best. The peacefulness of not having to listen to Curtis was lost on me as my thoughts circled, and all I could do was relive my encounter with Arit on a loop.

The thing is, it's not like I've never met an attractive man before. I realize Arit was above and beyond the norm, but what was it about those few minutes that has me so twisted up?

Walking home, I can't help but rub my hand again. I've got my satchel slung across my body, and over the last three hours, I've caught myself doing this exact thing more than once. That feeling... That familiarity... I'm not sure what it means.

I don't know what to make of that odd sensation that ran through me when we shook hands either.

Rounding the corner back toward my apartment, I'm shocked to see Arit sitting on the ground with his back against the wall. He looks relaxed and peaceful, no phone in sight as he watches the world go by.

"Arit?" I ask as I approach. I'm not going to lie, I wasn't expecting to see him again anytime soon.

Looking up, Arit smiles and quickly hops to his feet. "Nixon, hello. I hope you don't

mind me waiting for you here.”

“Hi. Um, no. That’s fine.”

“I didn’t want to intrude. Again.” Arit’s small chuckle puts me at ease. “But I felt bad for the way I had to run off earlier and wanted to apologize. I suppose you could say I live an unconventional life and am often called away unexpectedly.”

I’m not sure what to make of Arit’s explanation, but I do like that he came back and wanted to talk to me again. I have no idea how he arrived since I don’t see a bicycle, but he obviously left and returned somehow, so maybe he walks everywhere or uses taxis. It’s also distinctly obvious he doesn’t have a phone. There is not one person I know who would have been sitting, watching life go by—instead of staring at their phone—if they were waiting for someone.

But I am happy to see him. “It’s fine. We do what we gotta do, right?”

He smiles, but there’s something in the way it doesn’t quite reach his eyes that makes me wonder what I said wrong. “We do. Anyway, if you’re busy I’ll let you be.”

“I’m not,” I rush to say, not wanting him to disappear again. “I was only at the library because one of my housemates gets a little too into his video games on the weekends.” He nods but doesn’t offer anything in return. Quickly searching for something that doesn’t involve me inviting a virtual stranger up to my apartment, I say, “But I am kind of hungry. There’s this little sandwich shop a couple of blocks over. Would you care to join me for a late lunch?”

“Oh, um.” Suddenly Arit can’t meet my gaze. “I’m not much of a sandwich guy. And I already ate.” He pats his flat stomach like he’s just finished Thanksgiving dinner. “But thank you. Do you enjoy sandwiches?” Now he’s back to staring at me like my answer holds the key to world peace.

“Uh, yeah. They’re good.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Oh, um.” Weird question. “I guess it depends on my mood, maybe. At home, it’s probably just ham because I’m cheap, but if I’m going out, maybe club or pastrami? BLTs are good too. Since you don’t care for sandwiches, what do you usually eat for lunch?”

“Oh, nothing.” He waves my question off with a chuckle. “This and that. You know.”

Arit’s reactions—the staring and then looking away—give me the impression he’s a little awkward socially. Which is odd considering how good-looking he is. Not that his looks have anything to do with his social skills, but more that I would have figured people would always want to talk to him and be near him simply because people are like that. They like to surround themselves with pretty things and that, sadly, includes other pretty people.

But maybe Arit’s job, the way he has to pick up and go on a dime apparently, keeps him kind of isolated. Maybe he doesn’t have a close family. Maybe he’s younger than I first thought, though I’m only twenty-five, and it’s not like I’m struggling to fit in.

Whatever it is that makes him seem slightly off, it’s kind of cute in a quirky sort of way.

“Sure. Well, if you’re not up for eating, maybe you’d at least walk over with me? I can grab something to go, and we can sit in the park for a bit?”

Arit is already nodding before I’ve even finished talking. “Yes,” he says brightly. “I’ll accompany you to your sandwich shop, and that way I can make sure you don’t trip or get hurt along the way. An excellent idea, Nixon.”

That comment makes me pause as I stare at Arit for a moment too long. Why would he say that? I mean, I know I'm clumsy and prone to tripping, or any kind of accident for that matter, but no one outside my immediate friend and family circle would know that. Why would he assume I'd trip or get hurt? "Sure. Thanks," I say, not sure what this situation calls for. I'm not about to correct him or tell him off, so I just brush the comment off as some weird thing Arit has about being protective and fall into step as I lead him back around the corner and down the street.

Strangely, as fit as Arit appears, he seems unaccustomed to walking and dodging cars. He's not sweating or cursing or walking too slow, but he seems frustrated. More than once, I've heard his nearly imperceptible mumblings and grumblings of irritation when a car didn't slow down or someone honked when we crossed a street. To me, it's all background noise, but Arit doesn't seem to appreciate the city ambience at all.

"We're almost there," I say, pointing ahead when I see the black-and-white sign for Rusty Subs. The submarine sandwich—complete with periscope—below the lettering on the sign makes me grin to myself.

"Excellent. I must say, I'm not a fan of all this walking. And the drivers? It's no wonder—"

He's cut off from his mini tirade when I nearly get swiped by a bicycle courier. "Jesus."

"Nixon!" Arit reaches for me as I stumble to regain my balance, and before I know it, I'm crushed against his chest, arms flailing since I'm not sure what's going on or where I'm supposed to grab. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," I mumble, breathing in the unfamiliar scent of Arit's clothing. Despite—sort of—being held against my will, I can't help but notice a distinct lack of perfumed laundry soap or shampoo. But before I get too caught up in trying to figure

out what Arit does smell like, I pat his side and attempt to put some space between us. “I’m okay. That kind of thing happens to me all the time.”

Arit gently pushes me away, but only to hold me at arm’s length so he can look me over. “I know, but I’ve never been here when it’s happening. I can’t believe that hooligan.” Cupping my face, he peers into my eyes. “I would never want to cause harm to a human, but I would be willing to go track that guy down and show him a thing or two about looking where he’s going next time. Are you sure you’re fine to walk? How’s your head?”

Standing on the street corner, all I can do is blink in confusion as a few of the things Arit just said get stuck in my brain. “Yes, I’m fine. What do you mean you would never want to harm a human?”

Arit freezes his examination of my eyeballs as his own eyes widen in alarm. “You know, I would never want to hurt anyone.” He glares down the street after my long-gone attacker. “Except maybe that guy.” He returns his attention to me. “But I won’t because you’re fine. Right? Just an accident.” His false cheer is confusing my already addled brain. “Shall we continue? I’m eager to get you back indoors.”

I don’t know what makes me say it, but my only response besides a head nod is “Sure, but being indoors hasn’t helped keep me any safer than being out of them has.”

Out of the corner of my eye as we continue across the street, I see Arit raise a hand to his forehead and sigh, and I can’t help but wonder if maybe my clumsiness and predisposition for accidents has been contributing to my lack of dating and social life. As handsome as Arit is, no one like him is going to want to be with someone like me.

This sandwich date? It was doomed before it even began.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter nine

Arit

This is a horrible, terrible, very bad idea, but I can't seem to make myself walk away.

For millions of years, I've been roaming this earth with nothing but duty on my mind, and now, after one conversation, I'm suddenly captivated by the most accident-prone man alive. A human man, with flesh and blood, who eats sandwiches and nearly dies just by being alive.

How Nixon has survived this long is truly a mystery.

But whatever is at play here, be it Fate or coincidence, I find myself drawn to him and all his little peculiarities.

That said, I have to watch it. I'm not used to censoring my words, so comments about how I would never harm a human have never been a problem. Nixon is perceptive though, and if it weren't for the concussion, I'm sure he would have demanded more than my passing attempts at distracting him.

The sandwich shop is quite interesting. I've definitely been inside buildings before, when the need to collect my next charge demands it, but aside from my limited dwellings, I've lived mostly on the outside of things. I've never had a need to enter a sandwich shop. But with Nixon, even though he doesn't know it, everything is extraordinary.

I study everything. The menu, the architecture, the music playing in the background, the employees. The silly artwork of the sandwich being turned into a weapon of war is amusing to me as well.

I follow Nixon's lead, going where he goes and remaining silent as he orders his meal. The looks I'm getting from the workers and other patrons range between hostility to outright lust. And that in itself is fascinating. I've never spent much time in my true form without my mask, but even after one outing, I can see why we're meant to be hidden.

The whispers carry.

He's so pretty it's like he's not real.

He looks like a model.

That jawline could cut glass.

The simple fact that I stand out is one of Fate's flaws. I know reapers have evolved alongside human beings for millions of years, taking on evolution's newest, most perfected traits. I'm not sure if Fate really thought about what that would mean for us should our presence become known because humans would be able to pick us out with ease.

As soon as Nixon's meal is handed over, we make our way back outside.

"I'm sorry about that," I blurt, even though I hadn't meant to address the elephant in the room.

"About what?" Nixon asks, leading the way toward the park. He doesn't know that I know the way better than he does, but I let him lead as I walk beside him.

“I don’t go out a lot, so I’m not used to these types of situations. I don’t know if I should have said something or simply ignored it.” Understatement of my existence.

“It’s fine. People are going to talk no matter what. I’m sorry if you were uncomfortable.”

Offering Nixon a small smile, I ask, “May I carry your bag? You’ve already carried it to the library and back and now to lunch. I’d be glad to help ease your burden.”

Nixon glances at me and stumbles ever so slightly on an uneven section of sidewalk but catches himself before any harm can be done. “You’re very distracting, but no, I’m all right. It’s only my laptop and e-reader. Thank you for the offer though.”

“You’re welcome. And you think I’m distracting?” I can’t let that gem slip.

He shoots me an exasperated look that makes me want to smile in return. “As if the chatter in the sandwich shop wasn’t enough. You know you are. Everyone we pass is distracted by you, including me, and I’m already prone to tripping.”

Now that makes me laugh. “Yes, you are.”

Nixon studies me as we enter the park but doesn’t comment. I can tell he wants to though, that he’s curious about me. Well, I’m curious about him as well, so I guess that’s a good thing.

We head toward the nearest bench as I notice a new tug in my chest. It should be a little while yet, as distant as it feels. I hate to run out on Nixon again, but I will if I must. My duty is my purpose, and there is no ignoring it.

Attempting to push my wandering thoughts aside, I join Nixon as he sits and pulls out his sandwich, tuna on sourdough. Having never eaten human food, I try to see the

appeal. I realize the emotion, the passion, and tradition associated with humans and food. I understand that meals have been part of the human experience since the dawn of their existence. I know the symbolism and ritual, the aching need and the gluttonous desire. I realize the significance of sharing a meal with others.

As Nixon takes his first few bites, humming his satisfaction and approval, I sit in contemplation over something so simple. Us reapers are relatively solitary. We drift on our own, only stopping to chat with others if we pass into another's territory or they into ours. But our work, our ferrying, is singular. It's done alone. And by proxy, so is our recharging. Our eating, so to speak. No two reapers would ever be able to coexist in the same moment together.

This simple meal I'm attending with Nixon, while I may not be eating, is maybe the first meal I've ever been present for with another. The realization is flabbergasting and confounding at the same time.

I turn in my seat to watch Nixon, completely befuddled by this amazing being.

I don't know what I must look like, but Nixon freezes mid-bite and the most gorgeous blush colors his cheeks. "Why are you staring at me?" He grabs a napkin and dabs at his beard. "Do I have food in my beard?"

All I can do is shake my head as I gaze over every one of Nixon's features—his straight eyebrows, his freckled cheeks, the slope of his straight nose, the curve of his hairline across his forehead. "No."

"Then what is it? Why do you look like that?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Like that. Like you're either going to cry or kiss me."

The idea of kissing Nixon is suddenly all I can think about, primarily because I've never kissed anyone before, reaper or otherwise. What would it feel like to press my lips to his? Would my body respond? Would his? "Definitely the latter. Kissing you seems like a brilliant idea."

Nixon huffs an adorably cute sound that's a cross between disbelief and humor. "You're crazy. All I'm doing is eating a tuna fish sandwich, which is the least sexy sandwich out there, and now you want to kiss me? I think we're jumping ahead a few steps in the getting-to-know-you phase."

"I don't. I already know you, Nixon Everhart. Just as you know me. We've met countless times, only this time you can see me as I am. I don't know why things are different now, and I don't know how the change happened, but watching you eat a tuna fish sandwich—talking to you at all, for that matter—is the best thing to happen to me in a very, very long time. So, no. I don't think kissing you is jumping ahead."

Nixon freezes, eyes huge as he stares at me. His skin has lost a bit of color, but I know he's perfectly fine. "What?" he finally manages, though the word is more of a breath than an actual word. "What are you talking about?"

"Fate," I reply.

"Fate? What fate? You think you know me? That we've met before today?"

I can see that Nixon is on the verge of freaking out, but I'm not worried. I'm not going anywhere, and I have years to wait him out. "Yes. Maybe not in this life, but I know you. I have known you. Many times. Though as I mentioned, things are different this time around."

"Because I can see you?" Nixon's words are dripping with disbelief and cynicism.

“Yes. That’s never happened before. I wasn’t even sure what it meant myself. But that has to be the reason, right? I mean, why else would you suddenly be able to see me after all these years?”

Nixon makes a choking sound, but he hasn’t had a bite of his sandwich in a minute or two, so he’s probably fine. “Years?”

“Of course. You’ve never seen me before last night.” But this does bring up an interesting point of contemplation. Why, all of a sudden, would Nixon be able to see me? “Come to think of it, I have no idea why—”

“Wait a freaking minute,” Nixon demands, his indignation turning angry. “What do you mean, before last night? I only met you a few hours ago. I didn’t see you last night.”

Abruptly, the conversation takes a nosedive, and I know I need to back off. I’ve probably already said too much, but I can’t help wanting to plant the seed in Nixon’s mind that something is happening between us that goes beyond the realm of his world and mine. Somehow our two worlds have overlapped, or perhaps the veil has thinned, but however we arrived at this moment, I can’t ignore my inner voice telling me that Nixon is mine. Or at least his soul is. I do quite like the packaging though.

“I know it may seem that way since you have no recollection of the past, but I assure you, we’ve met before. Many times.” I lower my gaze so Nixon doesn’t feel quite so put on the spot and say, “I apologize if it seems like I’m coming on too strong. I can tell you think I’m not all here. I’m not trying to upset you, and I didn’t seek you out with any ill intentions. I was merely curious about the change in our dynamic and that drove me to your building, where you inadvertently found me standing on the sidewalk. I didn’t intend on intruding on your day or even making myself known to you. I’ve just been alone for so long that I suppose curiosity killed the cat.”

Nixon is quiet for so long that I do eventually turn to see what he's doing.

He's staring at me, and I can see the tangle of thoughts and emotions vying for attention behind his eyes. It's another full minute before he finally says, "I don't know what to think. I want to tell you to get the hell away from me and that I never want to see you again. That you're a creep and a psycho." That makes me wince. Nixon looks down at his lap and fidgets with his sandwich wrapper. Then he takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly. "But also—this is so fucking weird—I recognize you too."

Chapter ten

Nixon

A rit sucks in a huge breath, and when I glance at him, his eyes are wider than normal. I can't believe I'm even saying this shit since it's so fucking out there, so I understand his surprise.

"You do?" Arit asks, his voice solemn and serious, quiet with awe.

Dear lord, I have to be insane for even thinking this. What Arit was saying should have been completely off the rails. I should be packing up my lunch and running as far away from this lunatic as I can get. I should be dialing 9-1-1 and asking for help. But instead of doing all that, instead of doing the whole self-preservation thing, the only thing that comes out of my mouth is "In a way."

Arit nods, encouraging me to continue.

"I don't know. This is so freaking weird. But earlier, this morning, it was like déjà vu. Like I'd lived that moment before. And when you introduced yourself, it was like I already knew you. For a second. Then we shook hands."

"You felt it too?" he asks, imploring.

I must be losing my mind, but I nod anyway. Arit looks so hopeful, I don't want to let him down. "Yeah. I guess. Like a low buzz of energy or something. I didn't notice it that much at first, but when you pulled your hand back, I missed it immediately."

When I realize what I said, I finally notice I've been rubbing my right hand with my left for who knows how long. I catch Arit watching me too, and he holds out his own hand.

"Show me," he says, his voice back to that thick melted honey. His ice-blue eyes have taken on a sultry quality, all lazy and inviting.

My pulse reacts to the offer and his proximity, and I'm helpless to resist. There's a small, insignificant part of my brain telling me to about-face and hightail it out of here, but the larger part of my brain that finds Arit extremely attractive, not to mention intelligent, is saying "full steam ahead." So of course I take his hand.

That fizz of energy tingles into my palm and up my arm, sending a subtle shiver of warmth down my spine. Arit's eyes fall closed as his larger hand surrounds mine, and he tilts his head ever so slightly, as if listening to something only he can hear.

I have no idea what to make of this whole situation, but if Arit and I do have some weird, never before heard of Fate voodoo going on, I suppose I might be okay with it. Even though I barely, and I mean barely, know Arit. I would certainly hope Fate wouldn't pair me off with a serial killer or used car salesman.

Arit seems like a decent, if not slightly old-fashioned guy, so if what he's saying is true, I should probably get to know him. And my body is definitely telling me to get to know him better. A lot better.

Arit breathes in deeply and hums on his exhale. When his eyes open again, his pupils are huge. "You feel like life and warmth. Like the perfect summer breeze as it sways in the fronds of a beachside palm. Like smiles and laughter and a beloved book with well-worn pages." Taking my hand, Arit slowly brings it up to his cheek, eyes pleading for me to accept him.

I may not know what's going on, but I know I'm not going to turn him away. Even just him holding my hand like he is, I can still feel that fizzling warmth radiating between us. Fate might be a little far-fetched, but I can definitely say I've never felt anything even close to what Arit makes me feel from a simple, innocent touch.

I nod, just enough for Arit to see it, and he sighs, closing his eyes again as my hand finally makes contact with his cheek. Warm with no trace of stubble, Arit's skin is luxurious and silky, as is his thick black hair that brushes the back of my hand. Without meaning to, my own eyes fall closed, and I sigh in time with Arit.

In the back of my mind, I'm acutely aware of what we must look like to an outsider, but the vast majority of my focus is centered on the man in front of me, who's holding my hand to his face and turning my world upside down. I don't know why, but I can feel his energy like a life force thrumming just under his skin, drawing me in and filling my own veins with a whisper of his essence.

And slowly, almost drunkenly, I peel my eyes open to see Arit already watching me, and the first thing I can think of to say is "Who the hell are you?"

But Arit's look of innocent wonder fades, sliding off his face like a ruined watercolor.

He pulls my hand away with deliberate care, gently tucking it back into my own lap. When he withdraws completely, I immediately want to reach out and grab him again just to keep whatever connection we had going, to feel his warmth and vitality seeping into my bones. But when he looks off into the distance, I can already tell he's pulling back.

That realization shouldn't upset me, but it does. He just waltzed into my day and changed my life, and now he's sighing again, but it's not the happy, content sound from moments ago. It's the sound of resignation, and I hate that I already know what's coming.

“I am many things, Nixon, but perhaps it is better if we wait to get into who I am until you’re ready. From my experience, people get”—he twists his lips up like he’s thinking of the right word to explain—“overwhelmed when confronted with the truth.” As he looks back at me, I can tell there’s more he’s not saying.

“Overwhelmed,” I say, squinting and tilting my head just so. What could there possibly be to get overwhelmed about? He’s already said he’s a guardian. A guardian of what? And why would the truth be overwhelming? Watching Arit, the way he moves, and even the way he talks, there’s something different about him. Aside from the obvious lack of anything technological, the way Arit studies me, the way he’s been studying the city at large, strikes me as odd in its own way. People are usually oblivious to the world around them.

“In a way.” Arit places a hand over his heart. “The truth is going to be more than you’re ready for right now. We have, after all, only just met. While I may have—”

“But you said we’ve met before,” I interrupt, not wanting to hear whatever excuses he’s going to make up. “Lots of times. That’s why I recognize you. In what? Past lives? Like reincarnation or something?”

Arit sighs again, and it’s already a sound I’m growing to dislike. “Something like that. Without getting too in depth, I might clarify that I’ve met you many, many times. For you, this is the first time we’ve met in your conscious mind.”

I take a good, long moment to try to process what he’s saying. We’ve met before, but I’ve never been conscious. My first inclination is to think we’ve met in dreams, but I already know that’s not right. Even though I want to think I would remember dreaming about Arit, it’s not possible to meet someone in a dream and then recognize them in real life. Besides, Arit’s pretty insistent we’ve met before, like actually met, not like some weird dream-walking thing.

And how can he remember all these meetings and I can't?

“So what does that mean? I've been asleep? Is that why I don't remember you? And why do you remember me and not the other way around? Maybe you only think you recognize me.”

Arit's look of exasperation lightens something in my chest. “I don't think. I know. You always look different on the outside, but inside, your soul is always the same.”

Holy.

Shitballs.

Without even realizing it, my heart begins to race and my hands begin to tremble, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm balling up my uneaten lunch and standing on unsteady legs. When Arit moves to follow, I stumble back, eyes huge and hands out. “No.” I shake my head. “Don't.” I can't seem to form any more words, but the looks that cross Arit's face—hurt, worry, sorrow, resignation—barely penetrate as I snatch up my bag and make a break for it, my thoughts spinning out of control.

Whatever the fuck is going on, I can't process it right now.

Beautiful or not, weird Fate voodoo or not, I don't have the mental capacity to parse out just exactly what Arit was implying. I may kick my own ass later, like ten—or fifty—years later, when I'm alone and miserly and wishing I'd taken a moment to think rather than flee, but right now, self-preservation finally kicked in, and I need to get the fuck home and away from the man who just told me he has recognized my soul across multiple lifetimes and remembers me.

Sweet though it seems, Arit's words are also creepy as fuck, and despite being my usual clumsy self, I make it home without incident. I lock my bedroom door, drop my

bag, and crawl into bed, wondering if I should really be getting into my car and driving as far away from here as possible.

Arit might not have a phone, but he knows where I live, and that thought has me pulling my blanket tighter around me and hiding my head under my pillow.

Chapter eleven

Arit

Determined to follow my purpose, to shove all thoughts of Nixon and his tender hand against my face aside, the next few weeks are a struggle, even for someone like me who has never faltered from his path.

Over the many long hours of reflection I've endured when I'm not being called, I've concluded that there is a reason humans and reapers live as they do, as separate beings coexisting in the same time and space without interacting. Humans are beguiling, but humans like Nixon are bewitching.

For countless centuries, millennia really, I've observed humans forming attachments. I've witnessed devotion, passion, hatred, envy, jealousy, and a multitude of other emotions—words I have had little understanding of—and always found their ways, their declarations and acts of bravery or selflessness, heartening, but I was indifferent. Detached and aloof by nature.

I didn't understand. None of it affected me.

And that is why my path now has a branch.

Until Nixon, there was only me and my singular, linear existence. Now my path has a before and an after.

And I've got to say, I'm not sure which is worse.

Rai and Khan have both been busy, asking around on my behalf. Even though I've told them not to bother, there are whispers now, and the reaper community is talking. Despite our nomadic and solitary existence, I've encountered more reapers in the last two weeks than I've seen in years. And all of them are watching me.

"I don't know what they expect to happen," I mutter, perched in my usual spot on the church roof with Khan on my right and Rai on my left. There are three other reapers, each companionless, in various spots within my field of view. One, a young-looking man, sat on a ledge almost directly across from us, while the other two are females of indeterminate age, at opposite ends of the street, bookending the man currently staring in my direction.

"Probably nothing," Rai acknowledges first. "They're just curious."

"We're all curious," Khan comments. "No one has ever heard of a human and a reaper having the kind of connection you have with Nixon."

"Connection or no, the situation is quite irrelevant. Despite the fact that Nixon literally ran away from me when I even hinted at who or what I might be, he's human, in case anyone forgot. In terms of longevity, human lifespans are fleeting at best." The twinge in my chest is not from a new charge calling out to me. Over the last two weeks, I've become familiar with the ache missing Nixon has created inside me. It pains me just to consider the idea of him not being around.

As long-lived as we reapers are, I'm all too aware that this moment—Nixon's lifetime—might be all I get. If the previous four thousand something lifetimes are anything to go by, whatever fluke or twist of fate is occurring right now, there is absolutely no guarantee that history will repeat itself. And the more likely probability is, it won't.

Which makes what I have with Nixon all the more special.

And now I understand why reapers, young and old, have left their posts to come see for themselves the one reaper who is visible to his charge.

Rai is frowning when I toss a sidelong glance her direction. “You know that’s not entirely true,” she admonishes, making me slump away from her watchful gaze. “Every life is relevant. Whether human, animal, supernatural, or unidentified, every life has a purpose. Every life has significance. The timespan is what’s irrelevant. Even us reapers, as long as we live, are not permanent. But we have purpose. Whether that purpose lasts one hour, one day, or one century, it’s all valuable. It’s all relevant. You know this better than anyone, Arit.”

“And my purpose is to ferry souls, just like yours is. Nixon’s ability to see me shouldn’t change anything.”

“But it does, Arit. It changes everything. Have you ever stopped to consider what his purpose might be? Why Nixon is the first human to ever see a reaper while masking? Perhaps fostering your connection with him is part of your purpose. Is also part of his purpose. If Fate has changed the course of your path, your purpose then becomes to follow that new path, does it not? Maybe being a reaper isn’t all you’re supposed to be.”

Khan hums in consideration, but neither of us reply.

Could what Rai said be true? Am I meant to follow this new path?

The millions of years I’ve spent following my one directive tell me no, I’m not. I’m a reaper. My path is clear and uncomplicated. Precise in its parameters. But I also can’t ignore that something has changed. Is that something me? Or is it Nixon? Or... does it even matter?

That twinge inside me that aches when I think about another six million years without

knowing Nixon tells me that, yes, despite my better judgment, whatever we have matters.

But how can I return to him if he's afraid of me? Of what I might have to tell him?

That look of horror on Nixon's face, the trembling hands held out to stop me from following—those are the moments that haunt me.

So what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to be if not a ferrier of souls?

Even after our small group disbands and we all head our separate ways, our charges needing our assistance in their transitions, I can't help but ponder these thoughts in endless circles.

My purpose.

Nixon's purpose.

How Fate has rewritten the rules, and I no longer know the stakes.

But whether Nixon is meant for me or not, I still manage to find joy in helping others. As dawn breaks on another warm summer morning in the city, I ferry Matthew Carter St. John, aged nine years, to his perfect utopia, an endless amusement park full of roller coasters, carnival games, and all the cotton candy he can eat.

Witnessing these moments, this purity of youth and spirit, will never get old, no matter how people change or what evolution has in store for the human species. There is no greater joy than giving this ever after to my people. If only the loved ones left behind knew, the tears they cry are for them. For there are no tears when the soul is pure and the perfect heaven is waiting.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter twelve

Nixon

I 'm at my wits end. I'm frazzled. I'm exhausted. And short of posting missing person flyers all across Manhattan, I'm desperate to find Arit.

It's been almost a month since that day at the park, and every day that passes only seems to get worse.

I can't explain what's happening to me, but there is something inside me that's shriveling up. As crazy as it sounds, as far-fetched and whacked-out as it seems, I'm genuinely worried for my soul.

Then there are the dreams, which began the night I ran away from Arit.

Vivid, heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching dreams that leave me sweating and wrung out like I've lived a hundred lifetimes and never once slept. And what's worse, Arit is always there. Peaceful, serene, and steady, he's a balm to my tumultuous subconscious. So much so that I've even begun to take notes on any scrap of information I can recall when I finally wake the next morning, panting and damp with my heart racing, and flashes of faces, tools, and objects I have no name for pass through my mind like a kaleidoscope.

Linc asked me if I was okay a while back, but I don't remember what I told him. I've been avoiding as many people as possible. Including my mom, who has called and left a dozen messages telling me if I don't return her calls by tonight, she's going to

drive down and check on me herself.

Which is why I'm currently standing outside a nondescript shop that looks, from what I can see, more like an old bookstore rather than the magic shop it claims to be. But I need help. And not the medical kind. There is no medicine that will save my soul.

And maybe, desperate as I am, there's a spell or potion I can take that will help me find Arit. I don't know how, but I know his presence, or lack thereof, is related to everything that's going on with me. We're connected, like truly connected, and without him, I'm dying. Not physically, but inside. And when my soul goes, I'll go with it.

There is no bell or chime to signal my arrival, but smooth as silk, a man in a top hat appears from behind a curtain, smiling a friendly and welcoming smile that slowly slides off his face the closer he gets to me. His ageless features and eyes that seem too black to be normal pull down as he approaches, and his rabbit-in-a-hat routine is gone. "I see we are in trouble, yes?" he says by way of greeting, and perhaps I'm only imagining a trace of an accent.

Ignoring the musty smell of old books combined with the overpowering scent of what are likely aromatherapy candles or incense, I nod gratefully. "Yes. I'm desperate. I need to find someone, but he's like a ghost. Is there a summoning spell or a potion I can take? I'll try anything." My hand automatically goes to my chest, where I've taken on the habit of rubbing the sore spot inside me.

The gentleman nods, solemn yet keen. "Let us do some research first. I'll need a bit of information to see what we're dealing with."

Sighing in relief, I follow when the gentleman beckons me along, passing a tiny café-type area with a Closed sign on the counter. Strangely, the shop seems to be endless and has much higher ceilings than I would have suspected from the street. There are

tall bookcases everywhere, complete with the classic black ladders I'd associate with an old library.

Off in various corners, I can tell there are sections of the shop dedicated to crystals, tarot readings, herbs, and even mythology. While the front of the shop contains a lot of the usual kitschy items I'd associate with a magic shop—card decks, top hats, clown noses, and face paint—it seems to me that the rest of the shop covers a broad variety of the more mystic arts, not the usual party tricks.

Stopping at a small desk at the head of a long aisle of books, the gentleman takes a tablet-looking device off the table and turns to me, offering a more enigmatic smile. "I'm The Owner here. What might I call you?"

"Nixon," I reply, and The Owner nods again.

"Thank you. Now, what can you tell me, Nixon?"

Sighing, I explain that I don't have much to go on. I tell him about meeting Arit, how he had to leave suddenly, and then how he reappeared just as quickly. I tell him about the connection we share, the buzzing I can feel coursing through Arit's veins and into me. Then I tell him what Arit said, about us having met before and the multiple lifetimes Arit has recognized my soul.

The Owner doesn't laugh. He doesn't tell me I'm crazy. He listens with squinted eyes and occasionally taps at the tablet in his hands. He studies me in a vague way, like he's trying to see through me to the source of my problem.

When I finish telling him about the dreams and the ache inside me, and that I basically blew Arit off as a lunatic, he nods in sympathy. "And now you are in trouble. Your aura is dwindling and barely visible. If I read your cards right now, I'm not sure I'd like the outcome."

I swallow hard because I have a feeling I wouldn't either.

"Do you have any idea what Arit is?" The Owner asks, no trace of amusement anywhere on his ageless face.

The word what should send a shiver down my spine, but instead, I only shake my head. I've thought about every possible scenario in regard to what Arit might be. "No. I assume he's not a ghost because I can see and feel him. He doesn't strike me as the demon type. And maybe it's just a stereotype and they can hide their wings, but I didn't see any wings, so no angels or fae."

"I'd agree. Does he carry anything? A staff or talisman?"

"I've seen him with an umbrella, but I don't know if he has a talisman. Oh! I just remembered, when I asked him what he did for a living, he said he was a guardian of sorts. Which kind of brings me back around to the angel thing, but definitely rules out other supernaturals. I've never heard of a vampire or witch guardian."

The Owner's eyes are wider than I've seen them, and I notice a deliberate swallow. As I study him a moment longer, a trickle of fear has entered his unnatural eyes as he looks around quickly and then focuses back on me. "Come. To the back room," he urges, his voice low and unsteady.

He reaches out like he wants to guide me along but quickly pulls his hand back and goes paler than his medium complexion would seem to allow. His nervous energy suddenly has me on edge, and every worst-case scenario I've thought up jumps to the forefront of my mind.

Whatever just popped into his head, it doesn't bode well for me.

The back room is not at all what I was expecting, not that I have any experience with

the back rooms inside magic shops. Where I was expecting a break room, maybe a sofa and microwave, a refrigerator or storeroom, this room is full of glass cases, books that look to be temperature or humidity controlled, and objects I could never guess the name or purpose of.

There's a long workbench type area along one wall that's full of shelves lined with glass bottles, odd-shaped containers, and felt or velvet pouches. A mortar and pestle sit near one end with a vial and sachet nearby. Various bits of plants, feathers, rocks, powders, and other tidbits are scattered across the workspace.

But the majority of my attention is focused on a crimson curtain The Owner is pulling back, or rather, what the curtain reveals. An archway, which looks to be woven together out of vines around stone, crystals, and— gasp —bones, stands alone in the back of the room. From what I can see, there are runes carved into the stones and the crystals glow softly in the dim lighting.

The Owner returns to me, wary and cautious. “This is a portal, spelled by a great wizard who used to trade with me when he passed through town. I wouldn't normally offer the portal as a first resort, but I'm not keen on meeting your intended. If you're open to it, I'd like to make a quick potion and grant you passage through the portal. A small blood offering should suffice and allow the Fates to match your DNA to his, expecting, of course, that you are his Fated one.”

If I wasn't so desperate to find Arit, I'd have a lot of questions about what this man just said, namely why he's so freaked about who Arit might be. But knowing the questions I have are for the ghost in my dreams, I hold them back and instead say, “I'm open. I need to find him, so I'm willing to do whatever you think is best.”

“Very well. Come to my workbench, and we'll get started. The only payment I ask is that when you find him, if he's pleased to see you, tell him it was me who helped you. If not, do not mention my name.”

Agreeing because I really have nothing else to offer and hadn't even thought about a payment, I follow The Owner to his workbench and watch as he crafts a potion that smokes and sizzles, but it will also take me to Arit.

For a potion like that, I would pay just about anything.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter thirteen

Arit

I know something is wrong with Nixon. Even if I wasn't his reaper and able to feel a slight tug on the tether that connects me to him, I can feel his distress. Our connection, while faint and ill established, still allows me to see a glimmer of his essence. And the gray sludge clinging to him has me worried.

But I'm torn.

Nothing can come from forming a bond with a human. Other than desperate heartache and memories of a time I'll never get back, I'll have to live with his loss for millions of years.

But at the same time, love and happiness are things I've never even dreamed could be mine. Would the chance to love Nixon be worth the suffering his passing would cause me later? And what kind of life could we even have when I have to run off all the time and don't age? Would he want to be with someone like me? A supernatural being who deals with death day in and day out?

I want to say the answers to my questions are easy. That the chance to love another would be worth any price, but still, I sit alone in my borrowed apartment, rubbing the spot in my chest where I feel Nixon's absence

Maybe I should go speak to him.

Maybe the memory of his terror upon hearing my confession is still too fresh in my mind.

Maybe relationships are far more complicated than I ever realized, and I'm not even in a relationship.

Maybe humans are vexing creatures that I understand a lot better now.

A loud crash outside my apartment door startles me out of my wandering and circuitous thoughts. This building is empty save for me due to the renovations taking place on other floors. No one should be here.

Masking is second nature, so without a thought, I slip through the wall only to come face-to-face, kind of, with Nixon, who is on his hands and knees in a pile of scraps and rubbish.

When he looks up, he doesn't say a word, but his beautiful, terrified eyes immediately fill with tears, and he drops his head and cries.

Powerless to resist, I instantly follow him down and scoop him into my arms, relishing his slight weight and the warmth of his body as he curls around me and sobs. I've never held anyone before, but I'm saddened my first time holding Nixon is because he's upset.

Falling back on my years of observations, I attempt to soothe Nixon, even though I've always thought platitudes were unnecessary. "Shh," I whisper, feeling foolish and awkward. I may be more highly evolved than current humans, but I'm a fledgling where emotions and empathy are concerned. "I'm sorry you're upset. I knew you were hurting, but I didn't think you'd want to see me. The last time we were together didn't go very well."

Nixon sobs out a choked hiccup and clings tighter to my neck, his wet breath and tears mixing against my skin.

Rubbing a hand up and down his back, I can feel him trembling. He's shaking and crying and utterly wrecked. I want to take him inside my apartment, to hold him and talk to him, but I've never used the front door before and have no idea if it will open. I'm exceedingly curious as to how Nixon ended up in my building, but my more pressing concern is helping him feel better.

"Shh. You're safe. I'm not going to hurt you." Ironical, the words coming out of my mouth, considering it's he who will end up hurting me, but I continue, trying to offer reassurance, until I feel Nixon's crying slow and eventually fade. "You're okay."

"I'm not," he croaks, his voice thick and rough with tears. When he pulls back, I let him go, hoping it won't be the last time I get to have him in my arms. His handsome face is splotchy, and his eyes are swollen. He looks like he's lost weight as he wipes his nose on the back of his hand. "I'm not okay. Not without you."

I freeze, because this is both exactly what I want to hear and a death sentence all at once. Nixon must feel how still I've become because his eyes fill with tears again and he rewraps his arms around my neck.

"You can't leave me," he mumbles around his tears. "You can't. We're supposed to be together, remember? You said Fate changed things. And it's true. The portal worked. I'm here. Which means Fate wants us to be together. Please don't leave me. Please. I'm sorry about running away. I just didn't understand. I still don't, but I know I need you. I need you, Arit. I'm sorry."

His crying picks up again in earnest, but this time I don't offer any words, I just hold him, pondering his mini rant. Something about a portal and Fate and how he still doesn't understand why we're supposed to be together but that he accepts it

nonetheless. At least he thinks he does, until I have to tell him the truth. He may change his mind again at that revelation.

“I can feel you thinking,” Nixon eventually whispers, pulling a slight quirk out of my lips. I hadn’t realized how still he’d become.

“You can, huh?”

“Yes. It’s kind of freaking me out.”

Sighing, I give Nixon one more squeeze, and he lets me go when I pull back. Wildly, I already miss the feel of his beard against my skin. Cupping his face, I use my thumbs to dry his damp cheeks. “Can we go inside and talk? I’d like to hear more about this portal you mentioned, and there are things I need to tell you that might change the need you feel for me.”

Nixon is already shaking his head. “We can go inside, but I’m not going to change my mind. I need you. Just being near you is already healing me. I won’t survive it if you send me away.”

That has me furrowing my brow, but I move to stand, so Nixon takes the hint and climbs off my lap. When I try the door handle, my suspicions are confirmed. Locked.

I look back at Nixon.

“Do what you gotta do. I may not know what you are, but I know you’re something special. I just traveled through a magical portal fueled by Fate and my DNA to find you. I’d say I’m past the point of freaking out.”

His confidence is kind of sexy. I like this new development in Nixon’s demeanor. With one more once-over, I nod and back away, allowing myself to fade through the

wall, watching Nixon for his reaction the entire time. He doesn't flinch or cower in fear, and when I'm back in my living room, I quickly move to unlock the door from the inside.

Nixon meets me with a challenging look as he passes through the doorway and into my personal space, the personal space that no one has ever shared with me before.

My only furnishings are two chairs and a table, which is currently covered in books.

"Nice place," Nixon comments, and when he turns to face me, I can tell he's teasing. "Is it yours?"

"No."

"Hm" is all he says as he steps closer to examine the top book in a stack. "You read this one?"

"I've read them all."

"But it's in..." He studies the symbols like he's trying to figure out what language they are.

"Mandarin, yes. I can read any language."

His eyes widen, but he doesn't look scared. He looks impressed. "Will you teach me one day? I've always wanted to learn French."

Studying Nixon further, I can't detect any trace of hesitation or wariness. Gone are the tears as well. Nixon looks calm and self-assured, even if he looks like he hasn't been sleeping well. "What happened to you?" I ask instead of answering his earlier question.

He doesn't shy away from me. He steps closer and offers me his hand, which I take and hold between my own. "I made a choice," he replies easily.

"What choice?"

"To accept you no matter who or what you turned out to be. When you pulled my hand to your face that day in the park, I knew I would never be the same. And at first that was terrifying. You were saying some crazy shit." He smirks but removes his hand from mine and then cups my cheek like he'd done that day so many weeks ago. "But then the dreams started."

"You were having dreams?"

"Yes. At least, at first I thought they were dreams. Now, I think they were memories. Of the people I've been and the places I've seen. You were always there, of course. Steady and calm, just like you are now. So, I made the decision to find you. To live a life with you that I can remember. It seems to me that I've always been destined to find you, wouldn't you say?"

With everything I am I want to scream to the world that yes, I agree, and Nixon will always be mine. That his soul is always meant to find me.

But what I say next will make or break his vow to accept me, regardless of what he might think now.

Taking a deep breath, I blow it out and say, "Even if the reason we always meet is because I've carried your soul to its resting place more times than you can imagine?" And then I await Nixon's judgment. Will he flee again, or will he stay and fight for us?

Chapter fourteen

Nixon

I smile.

I can't help it.

I know Arit is holding his breath, but just being in his presence, holding his cheek, there's no way I could go back on my word. If finding him and confessing all that I have made me nervous, I can only imagine what he must be feeling. I don't care what he is. He's mine. And that's good enough for me.

My answer comes in the form of a kiss as I pull him closer and our lips meet for the first time. Despite the mess I must appear to be, there's no denying how right this moment feels. This gorgeous, kind, thoughtful, compassionate man has just set my soul on fire and given me life in a single breath.

Never, in all my lifetimes, have I ever felt anything like this. Arit's lips on mine are like cosmic energy on a galactic scale. Like my very essence is being rewritten to include him as part of who I'm meant to be.

If this is what soul mates are made of, then sign me up because I am never letting him go.

But it's Arit who pulls back first. His eyes, when I find them, are wide and fearful, bordering on desperate even. He looks terrified. "I can't," he whispers, his voice

weak and wrecked, causing a splinter to form inside my chest. “I can’t do this. I thought I could. I thought I was strong enough. That being able to have you for your lifetime would be better than never having you at all, but I was wrong. I was so, so wrong. I’ll never survive losing you. No matter how many lifetimes it takes for you to find me again. I’ll never be the same. Millions of years will never be enough time to get over losing you.”

My heart pounds, a dull thud echoing in my ears, but I reach out and take Arit’s hand, ignoring the threat of tears I thought had passed. “Arit,” I manage, my voice as wobbly as a newborn colt. He meets my gaze, but I can tell the effort is forced. “I don’t think there will be a next time.”

He freezes, an odd habit he seems to have, and I can’t tell if he’s breathing. Does he even need to breathe if he’s not technically human? “What do you mean?” he whispers.

“I think this is my last lifetime. My soul’s last lifetime.” Arit sucks in a breath and his eyes go even wider. “When we were apart, before I found you again, I could feel it. My soul was dying. Inside. I knew I needed to find you. If I was ever going to have a shot with my soul mate, it had to be now. Because I’m pretty sure I’m not getting another chance.”

The tears are back, and when I move to hug Arit, he pulls me into his arms.

“Nixon,” he moans. “Fate wouldn’t be this cruel. I’ve witnessed plenty of terrible things, infants killed by bombs, diseases wiping out entire villages, but to finally, after millions of years, have Fate put you in my path only to rip you away again is unimaginable. And permanently? No. There has to be another explanation.”

Pressing my face to his neck, I murmur, “I wish you were right. But even The Owner of The Magic Shop I visited to find you didn’t have high hopes. I can tell I’m better,

that the frayed edges of my soul have mended by being with you again, but when I eventually die, I think my soul is done too. If it's been around as long as I think it has, this is its last hoorah."

And when Arit doesn't answer, I know he's realizing that the change in Fate's design was very much on purpose. What he said about me never being able to see him before suddenly makes sense. This is why I'm being given this chance with him.

We stand together for a long time, him holding me while I hold him in return. If all I get out of finding him is a single kiss and this time together, it will have been worth the effort to know what having a soul mate is like. Even if my soul is dying.

After what feels like hours but is probably only a few minutes, I finally pull back and take Arit's hand. "Come sit with me. I want to hear all about what you do."

Arit gives me a sad smile and doesn't move when I tug him. It takes a few seconds for him to speak. "Do you really think getting to know each other is a good idea?"

My heart trips and bangs around in my empty chest. He's not even going to try. Already resigned to losing me, he doesn't see any point in making a connection with me. Well, as many things as I've survived, I'm not going to roll over and take his sulky attitude. If he thinks he knows me, then he damn well better know that my soul is fierce, and it's not giving up without a fight.

I take my hand from him and point, pressing my finger into his chest as my breathing picks up. "Yes. I think it's the best idea I've ever had. You may not be human, but you're going to learn a thing or two about what it means to be human. Now sit your ass down and talk. I want to know everything there is to know about you. If it takes the entire rest of my life to hear your story, then it will be time well spent." I nudge him again, and this time a small quirk tips the corner of his mouth up.

He relinquishes and takes the closest chair. I follow and curl up in his lap, making him huff out a small laugh. “You’re a little bit bossy.”

“Just wait. After we’re finished here, we’re going to track down my magician friend and find out what he knows. If we have to search the globe for some magical potion that will save my soul, then that’s what we’ll do. But for now, talk. I like the sound of your voice.”

Arit huffs again, his exhale tickling the side of my face. But he wraps his arm around my back, pulls me closer, and says, “I’m a reaper. Humans like to call us grim reapers, though I only know of a few reapers who would come close to matching how your kind portrays us. It is my purpose on earth to ferry souls from this life to the next.”

“We have an afterlife?” I ask, totally blown away. “And reapers are real? That’s kind of freaky.”

“Yes, well. Humans would have us harvesting souls for our own amusement, which is not at all what we do. When a human life ends, we collect the soul and take it to its resting place. Whatever that resting place looks like is up to the owner of the soul in that life. Judgment, as you might suggest. The way you live will determine the quality of your afterlife.”

“That’s so cool. I had no idea.” My mind is literally blown. It’s going to take longer than a few seconds to process this new information, but just hearing Arit talk is what I need most right now.

“No one does. That’s the way it’s meant to be. A life of choice.”

“And God?”

“A human construct. I have been around since the dawn of humanity, earlier actually. Before language and tools, when hominins were just learning to walk on two legs. The notion of a God, or gods, didn’t come around until fairly recently—perhaps the last ten to fifteen thousand years. Before that, the genus Homo didn’t have big enough brains to imagine such a thing as one all-powerful God. They were too busy surviving and crafting tools out of rocks, hunting, and considering such notions as burial of their dead.”

Holy shitballs. My mind is on overload. I mean, I have a basic understanding of human evolution, but knowing Arit was there, like actually alive during that time and is still alive now, is absolutely insane. “How old are you?” I ask out of nowhere.

Arit hums. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Not really.”

“Then maybe you’ll be fine just knowing I’m very, very old.”

“I’m only twenty-five.”

“I know.”

I sit up suddenly and scramble around to stare at Arit with my jaw hanging open. “How do you know me?”

Arit smiles and a look of pride enters his stunning icy eyes. “I’m your reaper. I’ve been called to carry you every time you’ve needed me.”

Oh. My. God.

I’m stunned. I’m so shocked I don’t even have words. I don’t know why, but out of

all the things he's just told me, this one is definitely hitting the hardest. I've nearly died at least a dozen times. Has Arit really been there every time I've been hurt?

"That time I got caught in a riptide in Hawaii?"

Arit nods, but his smile is fading. He's watching me just as carefully as I'm watching him.

"When I was twelve, I fell out of a tree."

He nods again.

"Collapsed lung just after birth."

"You were extremely fragile."

"Holy. Shit." I cover my mouth with my hands, a low tremor developing as reality sinks in.

Arit reaches up to touch the back of my head gently. "That Saturday night a few weeks ago when you almost choked to death on your dinner."

"Eek!" I scramble off his lap, needing an outlet for my pent-up anxiety. I know I'm probably overreacting, but I back up and press myself against the far wall. "That was you? On my fire escape?"

"Yes. I will always come when you need me."

"Oh my God. Oh my God." I take up pacing and shaking out my hands, pretty fucking freaked out. I mean, I knew I was close to dying. Logically. I was choking to death on a piece of pork. But to hear Arit lay it out like that, to learn that my very

own grim reaper was there, ready to collect my soul, is absolutely, unquestionably the most terrifying thing I've ever heard. "I need some air."

Without waiting for a reply, I bolt for the door and practically run for an exit. I have no idea where I am in the world because I didn't exactly ask how the portal worked before I entered it, but at the moment, my mind is spinning, and I just need some fucking air.

Bursting through an exterior door, I gasp in a lungful of familiar city air and place my hands on my knees, attempting to control my breathing before I black out. Arit is right behind me, but he gives me space, which I distantly appreciate as my world spirals and panic settles in.

I may not be in mortal danger, but as more black spots dance in my vision, I'm powerless to do anything to stop it. I'm going to black out. I know it.

"Arit," I gasp, just as strong arms wrap around me, and I fade, lost to my body's insistence that it take over from here.

Chapter fifteen

Arit

Watching Nixon sleep is one of the most fascinating things I've ever done.

After he passed out, I carried him back inside and attempted to transport him back to his apartment via my chariot. Interestingly, I had no problem at all. Supporting Nixon's sleeping form, I simply commanded my chariot, and we were off, not a hair out of place, much to my relief that as long as Nixon was in my chariot with me, no one could see him.

And now, after a good hour spent watching him sleep, I'm considering all the possibilities of what he explained to me back at my apartment.

A portal fueled by Fate and his DNA.

His insistence that his soul is finally ready to rest.

A magician with the power to craft potions.

And no explanation necessary, that kiss. Fate and stars above, that kiss was the single most defining moment of my entire existence. Like the very cosmos stopped spinning and our kiss was the burst of energy needed to get it moving again. I could outlive every other reaper on the planet and never, even in passing, forget it.

But if what Nixon was saying is true, if his soul really is done, it will be the end of

me when he goes. Without him by my side, without him out there, ready to be found again, my purpose, my reason for existing is over.

If I could make a bargain with Fate, I would ask that when Nixon's soul goes, I go with it.

"I can feel you thinking again," Nixon murmurs, and when I look over, his eyes are still closed.

"Is this some new human-reaper intuition you have?" I ask, reaching out to stroke my hand down his back.

Nixon hums in appreciation. "Maybe." He cracks his eyes open. "Thank you for bringing me home."

"You're welcome. I figured you'd be more comfortable here. Plus, I don't have a bed."

Sitting up, Nixon rubs his eyes and runs a hand over his face. "It's already dark out. This has been the longest day I've ever had."

"I bet. When you're feeling better, I'd like to hear more about this magician and how you found me."

"Sure. How long was I out?"

"One hour and thirty-nine minutes."

Sufficiently roused, Nixon meets my gaze. "I'm not even going to ask how you know that. As far as I can tell, you don't have a phone."

“Why would I need a phone? I’m not human, Nixon. I live off the energy of the universe. And from the moment I was created until twenty-seven days ago, you are the only human to ever see me without my permission.”

Nixon’s gaze doesn’t waver. Instead, he crawls closer to where I’m perched and somehow manages to straddle my lap. “That’s because I’m yours. Your human. Who gets to see the real you after all these years.” Then he leans closer and presses his lips to mine, soft and sweet and so very tempting. “Thank you for always being there for me. I’m sorry I freaked out earlier.”

Running my hand down his arm, I say, “I told you the truth was overwhelming. Thank you for still talking to me. Any normal human would have run for the hills.”

A small smile tugs the corner of Nixon’s lips. “I’m definitely not normal if Fate paired me off with a harvester of souls.” Nixon kisses me again, short and lovely. “Aren’t you supposed to carry a scythe and wear a black robe? And how did we even get here? What kind of magic have you been using on me, Mister?”

Some latent instinct I never knew I had kicks in, and I can’t stop myself from cupping the back of Nixon’s head and pulling him to me. I press my lips to his, and kiss him like I own him. Nixon doesn’t seem to mind. He gives as good as he gets, slanting his head and swiping his tongue against my lips in a move that has me gasping.

“Kiss me,” he demands, then he’s back, and I’m powerless to resist. My tongue finds his, and even though I have no idea what I’m doing, I shut off my brain and feel, allowing myself to mimic his moves and return them. Nixon guides our kiss, showing me what he likes and asking me in return what I like.

I like the feel of him. The texture of his tongue rasping against mine. The sound of his breathing as we shift and try new things. I like how close he is, how he fills my senses and my arms, his weight a perfect balance to my own. But maybe my favorite

thing, or at least my first favorite thing, is the way he holds me close, gripping my shoulder and running his fingers through my hair to hold the back of my head. I like how he doesn't shy away from my touch, instead scooting closer and then wrapping his arms around my neck.

I've never touched anyone this way before. Never been this close to anyone. Never wanted to be. But Nixon is not just anyone, and what we have defies the very laws of nature.

A knock on the door, however, startles us both as his friend calls out, "Yo, Nixy. You in there? Your mom's here."

"Shit. I forgot about her," Nixon mutters under his breath.

We stare at each other with crazed eyes, panting and ruffled, and Nixon's never looked more beautiful to me. With kiss-swollen lips, a rumpled shirt, and his hair sticking up every which way, all I can think about is finding a way to keep him. Forever.

"Yeah," Nixon calls out to his friend. "Give me a few." Then he raises an eyebrow at me, reaches between his legs, and adjusts his cock. And supernatural being or not, I think I might actually combust. "You, sir, are trouble." He scoots off my lap, and I immediately want to haul him back into my arms. He must read my intentions because he points a stern finger my way. "No. More of that later. Right now, you get to come meet my mom."

"Uh..."

"You said you can be visible if you want to, right?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure I want to. I've seen your mom. She's a little overbearing."

Nixon's shock at my knowing his mom is quickly replaced by a laugh. "She's only that way with me because of how accident prone I am. Hey, how come you're not her reaper, or Saint's, or my dad's? Is it not a family thing?" Nixon adjusts his dick again and runs a hand through his hair. The move pulls his shirt up just enough to reveal a strip of creamy freckled skin and some reddish-brown body hair leading downward into his waistband. Of course, he notices where my gaze has landed, and he steps closer, taking my hand and placing it under his shirt, directly against his skin.

He doesn't say anything and neither do I, but my eyes fall closed as I simply feel him, his warm skin against my palm. He is life. He is strength. He is the opposite of me, the yin to my yang. And already I know I'm going to love him until the end of time.

His soft hand against my cheek has me nuzzling into his palm. I look up to see him watching me. "Have you ever touched anyone before?" he asks, his voice low and gentle.

I press a kiss to his hand and shake my head. "Only you. Twenty-seven days ago. And today."

He gets this sweet, yet melancholy, look on his face, and then he leans down and presses a kiss to my lips. "Stay here. I'll go tell my mom I'm better now, and possibly give her my credit card so she can get a hotel room, so she doesn't have to drive back to Connecticut tonight. When I get back, we're going to cuddle and talk. We have a lot of catching up to do."

With one more kiss, Nixon leaves his room. I can hear him greet his mother and the conversation that ensues. Apparently, in my absence, Nixon had grown quite unwell. He wasn't returning anyone's calls or messages, and even his mother notices he's lost weight.

As I listen to him explain about his recovery, a sharp tug in my chest suddenly

demands my attention, and I'm up and looking for a piece of paper in seconds. I scribble out a note for Nixon, phase through the wall, and mount my chariot, admonishing myself the whole time that duty comes first, and this is exactly why reapers and humans shouldn't mix.

But even as I wage an internal battle with myself, I know nothing will stop me from returning to Nixon. Fate put him in my path and changed the course I was on. So Fate better be prepared to answer when I come knocking because there will be no me without him.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter sixteen

Nixon

Convincing my mom that I'm fine and she can leave takes longer than I'd like. After spending the evening with Arit, I'd completely forgotten about her threat to check in.

But eventually, my mother relents, telling me I'm to meet her for breakfast under penalty of another visit if I don't, and leaves with my credit card in tow.

I make a quick stop in the kitchen for a glass of water, relieve myself in the bathroom, and am supremely disappointed when I find a note on my bed instead of Arit.

Had some business to take care of. Back soon. -A

Fuck. This man. I run a hand down my face, taking a moment to relive the last couple of hours.

I understand that Arit is not technically a man, but for all intents and purposes, aside from the fact that he's older than humanity, ferries the souls of the dead to their resting places, and apparently feeds off the energy of the universe, he's the being I will spend forever walking next to.

Not only is Arit thoughtful and compassionate, he's attentive, intelligent, gorgeous, and an incredibly fast learner. After hearing his confession, that he'd never touched another living soul aside from me, knowing that obviously extends to anything even

remotely intimate, I'm floored at how quickly he'd taken to kissing, like he was created just to please me.

And perhaps in some weird, supernatural way, he was.

He's also my guardian angel.

Freaking out over learning of Arit's watchful presence in my life was admittedly not my finest moment. But knowing now that a being like Arit exists at all, that there really are beings on earth whose sole purpose is to make sure our souls are looked after into our transition, is beyond comprehension.

Society at large would collapse if this knowledge was made public.

Which makes what I know even more significant. And will potentially change the shape of my future.

If reapers exist, if fae and vampires and angels exist, is it truly possible that more powerful forces are at work? Is there a being I could ask for help in keeping Arit? Granted, Arit will continue with his purpose into the future whether I'm there or not, but could I somehow bargain for the privilege to stay by his side? A deal with the devil, so to speak?

What would I have to give up to keep Arit?

The thought sends a shiver down my spine. I can only think of one thing I have to bargain with, and it's the one thing Arit has been protecting my entire life.

Strong arms wind around my middle, startling me as Arit murmurs into my ear, "I can feel you thinking." He presses a kiss to my temple.

Relaxing into his arms, I smirk. “That’s my line, buddy.” But I still twist my neck to press a kiss to his cheek. Arit squeezes me once more before letting me spin around to face him. “Everything okay?” I ask, looking up into his tranquil blue gaze. Arit looks serene and completely at ease.

“Yes. At the moment, everything is as it should be.” He leans down to press a kiss to my lips. “Sorry to leave you. Was your mother understanding?”

Huffing a breath, I say, “Well, she couldn’t deny that I looked fine. It took about ten minutes to convince her I was eating and that I had a plan to try to get more sleep. She’s demanded breakfast with me in the morning.”

Arit smiles, and it’s the same smile I saw the first morning we met when he was standing outside my apartment building. Only this time, when my knees threaten to give out, he pulls me close and kisses me. “Tell me about this plan of yours to get more sleep?”

I can feel a blush creeping in because my plan included lots and lots of orgasms and the tempting man currently holding me, but that’s putting a lot of eggs in one basket and all we’ve done so far is kiss. So instead of saying what I actually have in mind, I say, “Your arms around me every night and sleepy kisses when I wake up in the morning.”

Arit runs the backs of his fingers down my cheek. “Are you sure that was all you were thinking about?”

Now my blush comes in full force, and I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, shaking my head no.

“Hm. I didn’t think so. This blush is giving you away.” Gently, Arit uses his thumb to release my trapped lip, and when his lips capture mine, he uses his teeth to pull my

lip into his own mouth.

I literally want to melt into him.

We kiss for what feels like hours, eventually moving to my bed, removing our shirts in the process. His skin against mine is stoking an insane inferno inside me. The cosmic buzz of his life force is doing amazing things to my cock as well. The way Arit uses his larger frame to blanket me is also one of my favorite turn-ons. As clumsy as I am, I love the feeling of a larger man protecting me with his body.

When our kisses eventually slow, we talk well into the early hours of the next morning. Arit asks about the portal, and I explain how I needed help finding him, about The Owner of The Magic Shop, and about the blood offering The Owner suggested would be enough to allow Fate to send me to my soul mate.

Arit is definitely intrigued. I can see his wheels turning as I explain about watching The Owner make my potion, what it felt like walking through the portal, and how I ended up on the floor outside his apartment door. I don't mention my own plan to seek out The Owner again. My own hopes that he might have some information on how I can make a bargain with Fate are still too new to give voice to. But at some point, I hope Arit will listen when I explain my need to stay with him.

When conversation shifts and I ask whether he has other reaper friends, he explains about the roles—or designations—each reaper is assigned and how he ferries the souls of the pure. He talks about his friends, how other reapers have been coming into the city to see for themselves the one reaper who seems to have a mate, how solitary and nomadic the life of a reaper actually is, and how no one has ever heard of a reaper being granted the opportunity he seems to have been given.

For me, my own thoughts keep circling back to Fate and why we are being chosen—out of billions of people and thousands of reapers—if there isn't something

greater at work.

Sleep catches up with me eventually, and even though I know Arit has had to leave throughout the early morning, I can also tell each time he's come back. Over the last twenty-four hours, I seem to have developed a sixth sense where Arit is concerned.

Unfortunately, my failed plan to get more sleep doesn't escape my mother's notice when I join her for a late breakfast the next morning. Arit is off being invisible somewhere, and despite him not having a cell phone, he's told me he'll be checking in regularly.

"You look worse than you did last night," my mom says by way of greeting. She's sipping a Bloody Mary, and her phone screen shows some gossip website she likes to follow.

"Thanks. I was hoping my boyfriend would put me to sleep with an amazing orgasm, but we just talked for hours instead." I crack a huge yawn. "Still worth it though." I flag down the waiter for a coffee.

My mom looks skeptical but also ready to pounce. "You didn't mention a boyfriend last night."

"That's because he was in my room. I didn't exactly want him to hear me talking about him without him being there."

"Well, you could have had him join us, you know. It might have been nice to meet him. How long has this been going on?"

And I can't hold back a laugh. Oh, mother. If only you knew.

Chapter seventeen

Arit

Nixon's breakfast with his mother gives me the perfect opportunity to hunt down The Magic Shop. Nondescript, tucked onto a little side street, it's the perfect cover for a supernatural haven.

"One moment," The Owner calls out from the back as soon as I enter the store.

I've got to admit, the place seems a lot bigger than it did outside.

"My apologies," says the tall, thin man in a top hat who bustles out from behind a black curtain. "I had my nose buried in a book. What can I help you with?"

I can't put my finger on it, but there is something interesting going on with this guy. "Yesterday, you helped my boyfriend find me using a magical portal." No point in beating around the bush.

The man instantly pales, removing his gloved hands from the counter and taking a step back. "Ah. Oh, um, yes. I suppose it worked then, did it? Brilliant. Very good. Yes, and his payment. I see you are pleased. Excellent. Most excellent. Happy to help." His nervous rambling is amusing. I can tell he knows something about what I am but maybe not the full extent.

"You know who I am?" I ask, more for effect than expecting an actual answer.

“Ah, no sir. No details necessary. We all have our quirks, don’t we? No need to say more. I’ve made it my business to help. Just happy you had a nice outcome.”

“I did, thank you. Though that’s partly why I’m here.” His medium complexion loses even more coloring. I watch his Adam’s apple bob with a swallow. “Can you detect my aura?”

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“That’s because I don’t have one. I’m sure by now you know why.”

“I have my suspicions, sir.”

“Good. Then you might have noticed there’s a bit of a difference between me and my boyfriend.” His eyes widen and he swallows again, now fiddling with the gloves over his fingers. He nods, nonetheless. “So I’d like some help with that. I’m not prepared to lose him. Ever.” The man actually gulps. “What information do you have about Fate? And what can you tell me about where to find Her?”

“So you threatened him?” Nixon’s adorably accusing look makes me chuckle. He’s been pacing his tiny room ever since I mentioned I stopped by The Magic Shop while he was with his mom.

“No, beloved. I let him draw his own conclusion about what I was and merely hinted that I would be disappointed if he couldn’t help. I never once suggested any harm would come to him.” He pins me with a fierce look. “What? You know I can’t do anything to him even if he couldn’t help. But lucky for me, he had a whole section of books dedicated to Fate and all Her mysteries. Now, we do our research and find Her.”

“Oh sure. A mythical being who controls the life and death of every living creature

on earth. Should be a piece of cake. Actually, you know, I think She was sitting outside my building earlier today. Let's go track Her down and have a chat."

That actually does make me laugh. I spring up and wrap my arms around Nixon before he has time to react. He makes a small squawk of protest but still meets me for a kiss. "You're too much." I peck his tempting lips again for good measure. "You know, I, myself, am a mythical being. I don't think it will be too hard to track down my maker. Give me some time to read through my stack of books, and we'll be on our way in no time."

Nixon looks skeptical, but he still begins to nibble his lower lip. "Why do you want to find Fate?"

I don't know why, but his questions always make me freeze up. Probably has something to do with the whole never dealt with a living human before thing.

"Relax, Arit. I was just asking because I was thinking about Fate too."

"You were?"

"Yeah, of course." He places his hands on my chest, and I shift my hold to his lower back. "I mean, if Fate brought us together and made it so we can see each other, She obviously had something in mind for us. But what if She wants something in return? For giving us this chance to be together. And why would She even do that, knowing my soul is about to expire and you're going to live forever? Basically." He's back to nibbling his lip again. "What if She wants my soul in exchange for our happily ever after?"

That actually makes me growl out loud, and Nixon's eyes widen. "She. Can't. Have. It. Your soul belongs to me."

Nixon throws his arms around my neck, and I hold him close, my life force pulsing strong in my core. There have been very few times in my existence I've gotten close to losing my cool, but the idea of losing Nixon's soul is unimaginable.

"It's okay. I didn't mean to upset you. We'll figure something out." Nixon presses a kiss to my neck.

Humming my approval, I rub my hands up and down his back. "Sorry. It's rare for me to get upset, but losing you is not an option."

"Well, I'm not excited about the idea either. I only just found you, and after how many lifetimes?"

"Four thousand, two hundred, forty-two."

"Good lord." Nixon presses his face to my neck. "It's kind of creepy the things you've kept track of." Then he pulls back and says, "I need a distraction. How do you get around? You never told me how you got me home last night."

And that has me grinning again. "Ask and you shall receive." I hold out my hand to him, and he snickers as he takes it. Then without another word, I will my chariot into view and smirk when Nixon gasps.

"Holy shitballs."

"Indeed."

"Is that a freaking chariot in my room?"

"It is. And it can take you anywhere you'd like to go, darling."

Nixon's eyes are huge. He looks back and forth between me and the chariot half a dozen times. "Won't someone see us?"

I lean in close to his ear and whisper, "I have magical powers. Didn't anyone tell you?"

And Nixon actually squeals. He bounces around on the balls of his feet. "Oh my God, that's so fucking cool! Can we go somewhere?"

I laugh, pull Nixon close, and kiss him soundly. "Hold on." We board my chariot, Nixon's arm around my back, and I visualize where I'd like to take him. Creating a portal is second nature, so only a few moments later, the shimmering golden glow appears, and I ease us forward, Nixon's constant litany of amazement making me feel ten feet tall.

With perfect timing, the sun is just setting behind the Eiffel Tower.

"Oh. My. God." Nixon is rendered speechless at my side, his eyes glued to the cobbled walkway ahead of us and the view of one of the most romantic places I could think to take him. As far as first dates go, I think I hit this one out of the park. "You are... How? This might be the most incredible moment of my life. I've always wanted to come to Paris."

I wrap my arms around him from behind, my chariot no longer present. "I know." I press a kiss to the side of his head and hold him, watching as the sky turns pale pink and then saffron, eventually fading into a deep amethyst as the lights of the city illuminate the iconic structure.

Nixon doesn't say anything, but he turns in my arms and kisses me, completely uncaring of where we are, regardless of the fact that no one can see us. He takes his time, nipping and teasing, using long strokes of his tongue to draw me out, and

holding my jaw, my cheek, my shoulder, whatever he can reach to keep me close.

Like I have anywhere else I'd rather be.

When Nixon moves his attention down my neck and actual goose bumps break out across my skin, I shiver, a feeling I've been waiting my lifetime to explore taking over. "Come with me?" I ask softly.

And Nixon's reply is everything. "Always."

Chapter eighteen

Nixon

The vacant loft overlooking the twinkling lights of Paris pales in comparison to the man before me. Stripped to just his jeans, Arit looks incredible cast in light and shadow.

His spur of the moment trip to Paris is the most romantic thing I've ever experienced. Knowing he brought me here as a gift, out of all the places he could have taken me, is a testament to how thoughtful he is. Despite Arit not being human, he's already the best boyfriend I've ever had.

Stepping back, I hold out my hand for Arit to join me. My wallet is already on the nightstand, and I shut off my phone completely. If tonight is going where I hope, I don't want anything interrupting us. "Come here."

He does, tracing every exposed inch of my torso with his gaze. When he reaches me, he takes my hand and places a kiss to my palm. "You take my breath away."

"I was thinking the same thing about you. The way you look at me. Like I'm the only thing you see. No one has ever looked at me that way before."

"You are the only thing I see. For thousands of lifetimes, it was always only you."

"And somehow, I always managed to find you too, even if it was just for a few seconds. My soul knew you'd be there. Waiting. For this." I press my lips to his and

pull him close, knowing even that will never be close enough.

Arit follows me down, the loft bed soft and inviting, and takes his time making love to my mouth. We kiss until my jaw aches and his chin is red from my beard. Even though I know he'll heal quickly, I like seeing the evidence of what we've done on him.

I'm sweaty and nearly panting, and my dick has been hard for what feels like hours. I somehow manage to get Arit on his back as I straddle his thighs. "Probably not the sexiest time to ask, but I assume you're packing?" I give a significant look to the bulge in his pants.

Arit takes a moment to stare before answering. His pupils are huge, and he looks ready to shove me back down and have his way with me. Which I would be totally okay with once I get a feel for the goods down below.

"Yes. Though reapers are a bit on the asexual side. We're here for a reason. And our purpose usually keeps us separate from others, humans and reapers alike. We're independent. If we ever feel the need for a sexual release, more often than not, we take care of ourselves. At the moment, however, I would very much like for you to be involved. And so would my dick."

Sighing in relief, I lean down and press a kiss to Arit's gorgeous mouth. "I would like that a lot too. Like a lot, a lot. But"—sobering slightly, I meet his gaze—"if you ever want to be alone or would rather I not participate, all you have to do is tell me. Okay? I would never expect you to always include me if that's not what you enjoy or are used to."

Nodding, Arit places his hands on my thighs and squeezes. "Thank you. I can count on two hands the number of times I've felt the need to seek out a partner. I have little to no drive sexually anyway, so it was never a big deal. Most reapers would say the

same.” Arit moves his hands up my thighs and then around to cup my ass, where he squeezes me again, making me want to moan out loud. “But I have a feeling all of that is about to change.”

Staring at my beautiful man, icy eyes blown, lips swollen, black hair splayed out around him, I am losing my train of thought. Arit is totally distracting, and his suggestion that we might get to fool around is making my dick throb. But still, I manage to squeeze out a “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think we’re made that way on purpose. But now that my path has changed, now that I have a mate, I can already tell I’m more responsive. I’m drawn to you on every level. And my dick is excited to get to know you better.”

“Thank fuck.” I sigh. “Because I really need to get you out of these jeans.” Then, I kiss my way down Arit’s chest, stopping to lick and tease his nipples before moving down the valley of his abs.

As Arit has explained, he’s not overly muscly or even bulky because the coming phase in human evolution is slimmer bodies and taller frames. Where once he looked more primitive, with lots of body hair and robust facial features, he’s evolved alongside humans throughout the millennia. As I lick the slight trail of dark hair leading down into his waistband, I find myself thankful to be able to see all his gorgeously defined muscles.

When I look up, seeking Arit’s permission to pop the button on his jeans, he nods, but his eyes have gone molten. He looks lust drunk as he clutches the sheet bunched around his hips. If he looks this good and we’ve barely gotten started, I can’t wait to see what he looks like coming apart against my tongue.

“Please,” he begs. “I need you. I’ve never felt like this before. This ache. This heat. It’s making me crazy, and I don’t know how to handle it.”

Pressing a quick kiss to Arit's hip, I hum my approval. "I do. Just hang in there, babe, and you'll be feeling better in no time."

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to enjoy watching me squirm?"

That makes me smile despite how turned on I am. "Not this time, I'm afraid. I need you too much to make either of us wait. But in the future, that sounds like a definite plan." Then I reach for his waistband and unfasten the button on his pants. The drag of his zipper lowering is muted by his panting breaths. When I tap his hip, asking him to raise up, he moans and leverages himself so I can slip his pants over his ass.

The absolutely stunning cock that springs free and slaps against his abs makes my mouth instantly water. "Fuck, babe. You're gorgeous." The fact that Arit isn't wearing underwear is also a nice bonus. I know I'll need to study his cock up close in much, much greater detail later, but for now, I help him kick off his shoes and then slide his pants off his feet.

Sitting back, I quickly give my man a once-over, beginning at the top of his head and working my way down, tracing every dip and valley of his skin with my gaze. If we can somehow make a bargain with Fate and I can keep Arit, I know I'll never get tired of looking at him naked.

"Damn. I am one lucky man."

Arit looks close to losing his cool and taking matters into his own hands, so deciding enough is enough, I reach out and glide my hands up his thighs. His entire body tenses and contracts, his abs popping. Leaning down, I hear him suck in a breath as I drop a trail of kisses from his hip bone to the juncture of his thigh.

"Cosmos above, you're a tease." Arit reaches out to gently card his fingers through my hair, sighing in pleasure when I finally reach out and take his cock in hand.

“Sorry. Just trying not to rush. I don’t want this to be over too quickly.” When I meet Arit’s gaze, the wonder and emotion there has me ready to say screw it and climb him like a tree, but I shove that aside, reminding myself that he has waited for me for millennia. The least I can do is take my time and make his first blow job a good one.

Giving him a slow tug, I take a moment to get a feel for his size and shape. He’s uncut, not having much foreskin to speak of, but he’s long and thick, and I can’t help wondering if human anatomy will shift more toward sex organs being used for pleasure rather than function. At the rate science is going, humans may never need to reproduce the old-fashioned way again.

Arit lets out a low moan at the first swipe of my tongue. “I never...”

He falls silent when I do it again, the sweet nectar of his essence exploding across my tongue. I expect he has no need for semen, so the delicious substance dribbling down his cock must be purely for his partner’s sake.

Leaning closer, I finally wrap my lips around him and give a gentle suck, loving the low vibration of energy I can feel radiating from his skin. He’s strung tight, and the usual buzz between us feels even more intense.

That thought makes me wonder what it will feel like when we finally have sex.

Taking my time, I get a better feel for Arit in my mouth, swirling my tongue around his cockhead and getting him nice and wet. He moans and clutches the sheets again when I get my other hand involved and gently cup his balls. His sack is gloriously heavy, and when I pull off his cock to nuzzle his balls, I notice he has no body odor.

Tucking that thought aside, I get back to my mission of pleasing my man and making him moan.

And moan he does when I give him a lick from his balls back up his cock, and then I suck him down, careful not to go too far so I don't choke. He's big, and it's going to take me a few tries to get used to his cock in my throat.

Arit is breathing hard by the time I work up to a moderate but leisurely rhythm, one hand working his cock and the other massaging his balls. "Nix. Feels so good." His voice is like gravel and liquid sex, dripping down my spine and making my own cock ache in my jeans. "I don't know how I've survived this long without you. Without having this connection with you. I've never felt anything like this. My balls are tingling and my—" Arit nearly chokes when I trail my fingers down his taint and brush over his hole. "Oh Gods."

I pick up speed, gradually increasing suction on Arit's cock at the same time I seek out his hole and apply gentle pressure with the pad of my thumb. Arit is rambling, writhing, and gripping the bed, telling me he doesn't want to come yet because I need pleasure too. That only makes me want to slow things down and draw this out longer, Arit's thoughtfulness and consideration a turn on in its own right.

But I wouldn't do that to him in his current state, needing him to come first after all he's done for me. This sweet, beautiful, selfless man, who has been serving others for millions of years, needs to know how desired he is, how trusted and accepted and loved he is. Because I know without a shadow of a doubt, I love Arit more than the sun and moon and stars combined.

Doubling down, I work my man with my hand, hollowing my cheeks and moving my other hand up to place it over his chest, right where his life force pulses the strongest.

Arit gasps, covers my hand with his, and bucks up, calling out my name as he finally comes, filling my mouth with his honeyed release. I drink him down, gently working him through his orgasm, until he slumps, hips still despite his cock remaining proud. When I finally pull off, wiping my mouth on the back of my hand, I meet Arit's gaze,

only to find his eyes look damp with unshed tears.

“I’m okay,” he says softly, reading the concern and question in my eyes. “More okay than I’ve ever been.” He reaches out a hand for me to take. “I didn’t know it was possible. That I was capable of feeling so much at once. Eon after eon I’ve been merely surviving. But now, with you, I feel alive for the first time. I love you more than the entire universe, Nixon, and I’ll do whatever I have to do to keep you with me. Always.”

My heart leaps and sings, overjoyed with his confession, and I dive for him, laughing and pressing kisses to every part of him I can reach. Arit joins me, happier than I’ve ever seen him, when I say, “I love you. I love you. I love you forever. To the end of time and beyond, you’ll always be mine.”

Chapter nineteen

Arit

Never, in millions of lifetimes, have I ever felt what Nixon has made me feel in a matter of days. Meeting him, getting to know him, and becoming intimate with him is like the culmination of an epic journey I didn't know I was on.

Not only is Nixon kind and thoughtful, he's sexy and assertive in a way I hadn't expected. My spur-of-the-moment decision to bring us to Paris hadn't been a prelude to any ulterior plans, but there was no way I was going to turn down the suggestion in Nixon's eyes. Seeing the reverence in his expression—the way he thought he was the one getting an incredible gift—feeling the sincerity and desire in his touch, and then finally getting to feel his lips on my body... It was all a shock to my system.

Every notion I've ever had about being lonely, about the mundane and solitary existence I've endured, was rewritten in that moment. When Nixon put his hand on my chest and drew upon my energy to complete a bond between us that defies explanation, I knew I would never be alone again. I can't explain how or why, but I've never been more certain about anything in all my long years.

But after that mind-altering orgasm and stripping Nixon out of his pants to return the favor, we're back in his apartment, and Nixon has been sleeping for almost ten hours. And as much as my confidence in our union was dead-on back in Paris, I'm now detecting a faint, wobbling tug on the thread I feel connecting Nixon's soul to me.

There is something going on with him that's making me anxious. And I don't like the

feeling one tiny bit.

After twelve hours and eleven minutes, Nixon finally stirs. When he rubs his eyes and stretches, he gasps and curls into a ball, a small whimper escaping when he raises his gaze to find me. He looks pale, and I absolutely loathe the tinge of gray his usually rosy skin has taken on.

“Arit,” he murmurs, voice broken and eyes glassy. “Something is wrong. Everything hurts.”

I reach for him, scooting closer and taking his hand. “I can sense it too. There’s a tug drawing me to you, and it has nothing to do with our connection.”

Nixon makes a pained sound and pulls my hand to his face, resting his overly warm cheek against the back of my hand. “I can’t lose you. I don’t want to go,” he whispers so softly I would have missed it if I didn’t have superior hearing. “I thought I was getting better. I thought you were healing me. But now I feel worse than I’ve ever felt in my life.” He looks up again, and even though I can tell he’s severely unwell, there’s a teasing glint in his eyes. “What is your cum made of because I thought it tasted too good to be true.”

My lips twitch, but there’s really nothing to joke about at the moment.

I refuse to exist in a world without Nixon’s soul. Keeping Nixon himself would be the ideal endgame, but if I lose him and still get to keep his soul, at least I know there’s a chance I can meet him again. In another life. In another body. But his soul is the key to both our happiness, so failure is not an option.

Finding Fate and making a bargain we can all live with is my top priority.

Instead of answering Nixon’s joke, I lean down to stroke my fingers along his temple

and jaw and drop a lingering kiss to his lips. When I pull back, not wanting Nixon to strain himself, I rest my forehead against his. “Rest, love. I’m going to do some research. If you’re not feeling better in a couple of hours, I want you to call Linc or your mom. I’ll try to be quick, but I also have my duties to attend to. I don’t want you to be alone. Okay?”

“Do you have to go? I don’t want to be apart. That will only make me feel worse.”

Sighing, I know exactly what he means. I know I’ll be unable to focus without him nearby either. “All right. I’ll read what I can here, but once I’ve exhausted my reading material, I’ll need to seek out other sources.” I kiss him again, and he doesn’t fight me when I get up to grab the stack of books I borrowed from The Owner of The Magic Shop.

Settling in next to Nixon, I get started on the seven books I was able to acquire, only one of which is in English. As I read, skimming through the sections that don’t pertain to my needs, Nixon dozes, always close enough that some part of him is touching me.

But the more I read, the more research I do, the more confused I get.

Don’t ask me why, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I always thought Fate would be a forest dweller. Or perhaps a being on the celestial plane. Someone close to nature who would have limitless power and psychic abilities. The bits and pieces of information I’m scanning, however, seem to suggest a completely different philosophy.

Where I assumed Fate was one entity, similar to a reaper in some ways, The Book of Ancient Folklore is suggesting Fate is a shared consciousness dwelling in multiple bodies.

Secrets of Life and Death , while proposing multiple ideas, including but not limited to God, the devil, angels, demons, and other deities, does have a small section on Fate, saying only that Fate is rumored to be an overseeing entity with the power to choose who lives and who dies and when. Interestingly, a single sentence stands out in the small section.

“Fate holds the power to create, to bind, and to strip, for the souls of the world are many and unique, and each soul has its own purpose and path to follow.”

That phrase sends a chill down my spine that has nothing to do with the temperature in Nixon’s small room. Didn’t Rai mention something similar? That each soul had a purpose? Is it really the purpose of Nixon’s soul to finally be at peace now that he’s found me?

I don’t know, but I reread that passage several times, even though I can already recite it from memory.

Does Fate have the power to bind as well? I know without question that Nixon and I are meant to be together. He is my other half just as I am his. If he goes, what will happen to me?

And how can Fate exist in multiple bodies? And where would I begin looking for one of these beings?

As I continue on, reaching the last book in the stack, Mythology of Sacred Places , I wonder how long it would take for me to visit each place mentioned in the book. Probably not too long, but researching whether Fate is there would take time. And as Nixon shifts and moves closer, reaching out to hug my thigh, I know time is not on our side.

I keep tossing around ideas, thinking of all the places Fate might be found, but my

thoughts keep circling back to something I told Nixon a while ago. If reapers are created, if Fate is actually my maker, do I still have some kind of connection with Her? Do I have some kind of internal compass, like how Nixon used his DNA to find me? Could I do the same thing to find Fate? Would the magician's portal work for us too?

I ponder my readings as I attend to my duties, ferrying two old souls to their beautiful utopias—a well-loved rocking chair on a low porch overlooking the Spanish-moss covered bayou, and an endless sky over the plains of a red-dirt ranch, horses calling out their hellos, saddled and ready for whatever adventures await, while sheet lightning flickers in the distance. And while the serenity of ferrying my charges is still present, it's overshadowed by an aching need to get back to Nixon.

Over the span of a month, the foundation of who I am has completely shifted. Nixon is my top priority, and I'm no longer sure where that leaves me in the universal order of things.

When Nixon wakes again, it's early morning. He looks about the same. A gray undertone still tints his normally healthy complexion, but he's even weaker now, smiling feebly and asking for help to the bathroom. When he's done, he shoots off a text to his boss, and I follow him to the kitchen.

While he rummages around, finally settling on a cup of yogurt and bagel to nibble on, I sit at the small table and reach for him to sit on my lap when he's ready. Nixon's quiet laugh and the way he ducks his head bashfully, like he's worried about hurting me because of his size, are too sweet for words. "I'm practically immortal, Nix. You could never hurt me. Besides, I need you close."

Nixon can't argue with that, his amber-brown eyes sad and forlorn. "I need you close too. It probably makes me seem like a bad person, but I don't like it when you have to go away." He looks off for a second, and when he returns his gaze to me, he quickly

lowers it again and stares at his bagel instead.

Gently placing my fingers below his chin, I encourage him to look up and meet my gaze. Despite his obvious ill-looking pallor, he's still strikingly handsome. His coppery-red hair, with a curl that's not quite wavy, his closely trimmed beard outlining pale pink lips with the perfect cupid's bow, his freckles, his straight nose and lightly defined cheekbones, and his eyes, loving, honest, and the true windows to his soul. I could get lost in his eyes and never care to find my way back. This man is my reason for being. He's the reason I exist.

"You could never be a bad person, my love. I've seen your soul, and it's beautiful."

Nixon's breakfast is forgotten as he wraps his arms around my neck, his breath warm and damp against my skin. I pull him close in return, loving the feel of him against me. "I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I know I don't want to lose you. I can't. Now that I've found you, you're the only thing that matters. We need to figure something out. We can't be apart."

"I know. Just the thought of that happening is driving me mad." I run a gentle hand up and down his back. "Once you've eaten, I have an idea. I'd like to go back to The Magic Shop and see if your portal will take us to Fate. If I'm Fate's creation, I should have some connection to Her, and since you're connected to me, with both of us there, I think we could have a real chance of finding Her."

Nixon pulls back, a ray of hope shining in his eyes. "You think so? You think you're really connected to Her?"

I shrug because I don't have any answers. "I don't know, but I'd like to think so. I think we're all connected to Her in some way. Even if it's minor. I'm hoping my connection is a little stronger since I'm a direct descendant. If it doesn't work, I'll keep reading and start asking around. Maybe some of the other supernaturals will

have more information.”

That seems to pique Nixon’s interest even more, and he perks up, nibbling his lower lip. “Can I come with you? I’ve never met any other supernatural beings.”

“Of course.” I smile softly. “You’re just as much in need of the information as I am. Maybe even more so. And I’m sure you’ve met someone at some point. Even The Owner of The Magic Shop was giving off odd vibes, though I have no idea what he is other than human.”

Nixon nods knowingly. “He was an interesting guy.” Leaning forward, Nixon presses a kiss to my lips. “Even though I don’t feel like it, I should probably actually eat something rather than just picking at this bagel, and then I’ll shower real quick and we can go? The sooner we get answers, the better. Plus, I really want to ride your chariot again.” He wags his eyebrows suggestively, a sexy little taunt entering his eyes.

The idea of him riding my chariot makes my long-dormant cock sit up at the obvious innuendo in his voice. I slide my hand up his thigh and around to squeeze his ass. It’s crazy to me that in only a few days my body has completely changed, already recognizing Nixon and responding to his presence, his scent, and his voice. It’s been decades since I last had any kind of physical desire. But I have a feeling I’ll never get enough of being close to this man.

“I would love that. You have no idea. But we need answers, and we need you better. Then any riding we do will be all the more special, because hopefully, we’ll have saved your soul, and mine along with it. I want to know you’ll always be mine. No matter what.”

Nixon’s smile is sweet and full of promise. “Always and forever. And maybe even beyond.”

Chapter twenty

Nixon

Despite feeling terrible, I manage to stuff down some food and then shower with the hottest water I can stand.

I wouldn't describe the achy feeling I have as flu-like. It's more like a throbbing wound in the center of my chest that seems to be radiating outward toward my limbs, winding through my muscles, and causing my nerve endings to cringe and shrivel. All I want to do is curl up in a ball and sleep next to Arit. Hopefully, I won't feel the gnawing tear going on inside me if I'm unconscious.

I know if I were to go to the emergency room, doctors wouldn't be able to find anything wrong with me. There is nothing wrong with me physically. What's happening inside me is on a different level. My soul is literally being pulled from my bones and ligaments, stripped from my very essence as its time draws near.

I don't want to freak Arit out, but I'm not sure how much time I have left. If things keep going the way they seem to have been escalating, it'll only be a matter of days.

That thought makes me want to puke, my stomach twisting violently at the idea of losing Arit so soon. Without the comfort of knowing I can find him again in another life, the very notion of losing my soul mate is unfathomable.

And what will happen to Arit after I go? He'll be destined to walk this earth without me, knowing the endless eons he has to come, he'll never see me again. Never

encounter this soul or feel any kind of comfort. He'll be crushed by memories of the scant few days we managed to eke out together. Ultimate happiness usurped by bitter betrayal.

Can Fate really be so cruel? Especially to one of Her own?

As I pull on some sweats and my comfiest tee, I very much intend to find out. "Ready?" I ask, determination straightening my spine. Arit meets my gaze head-on, already sensing the change in my demeanor.

"Let's do this. If the portal doesn't work, we'll find Fate the hard way." He holds out his hand for me to join him, and I step close as he summons his chariot once again.

I've got to say, the chariot is the coolest mode of transportation I've ever, or never, thought I would encounter. It's like stepping onto a pedestal and simply willing it to move. With sleek lines, Arit's chariot is matte black with black wheels, and the front rounded panel comes to mid-thigh. Where the usual pole or shaft that would attach to whatever animal was pulling the cart would be, there's simply nothing, and the chariot balances perfectly on two wheels.

I can't help wondering if Arit's chariot has evolved alongside him and was at one time modeled after ancient Greek or Roman versions. That thought makes me smile as I wrap my arm behind Arit's back. My reaper is seriously impressive.

"Ready?" Arit checks, pressing a kiss to my temple. He has the borrowed books tucked under his other arm.

I reach up and cup his smooth cheek, drawing him in for a sweet kiss. "Mm-hm."

He smiles adoringly and then begins to weave his magic, the same golden-hued shimmer I noticed the first two times appearing out of thin air. I couldn't begin to

guess what type of magic or energy he's using, but whatever it is, I'm glad he's the one wielding it and not some government agency.

As before, the chariot moves effortlessly forward, gliding into the golden dimension that allows us to travel instantaneously to our destination. No one notices our arrival on the sidewalk outside The Magic Shop. Just as in Paris, I'm overwhelmed in the best way and demonstrate my thanks and joy with a quick kiss to Arit's cheek. "You're incredible."

Bashful is adorable on my man.

"Let's go," he says and guides me toward the entrance.

The shop looks exactly the same as I remember, and we walk up to the counter, where Arit drops his stack of books. As I look around, I wonder where everyone is. Come to think of it, there was no one here the last time I was in either.

"It's so quiet in here," I whisper, feeling an odd sensation lurking in the empty store that sends goose bumps along my arms and raises the hair on the back of my neck.

Arit merely bumps my shoulder, and I look over to see him smirking. "There is a presence here you cannot see. But don't worry, love. Others know who I am, and they won't bother us."

I raise an eyebrow, impressed. "You're some kind of supernatural guard dog? The Grim Reaper no one messes with?"

That makes him smile in full, and he tips his head slightly to the right. "Something like that. You're safe. We only need to wait for them to finish up."

"I wasn't worried," I remark, even though Arit can probably tell I actually was

unsettled.

He drops his arm over my shoulders and pulls me close. “I know.” He turns his attention toward the far back corner of the store but lowers his voice when he says, “They’re almost done. There is a spirit here looking to gain the strength they need to contact a lost family member. Usually it’s the living who try to contact the dead, but sometimes the dead have unfinished business and refuse to come when we’re called to carry them. Cases of hauntings or poltergeist activity are usually spirits with unfinished business. This chap knows who I am and what I can do. He doesn’t want to come any closer to me for fear of being taken before his business is concluded.”

I stare wide eyed toward where Arit is looking, hardly able to process what he’s telling me. I suppose I’ve never been sure one way or the other whether ghosts or spirits were real or not. People are always saying they’ve seen ghosts or have video proof, but I always assumed the videos were fake. Or never thought too much about it in the first place to care one way or the other.

But hearing Arit say there are indeed restless souls who refuse to go to their afterlife because they have unfinished business is kind of freaky. Or maybe more than kind of freaky and leading into terrifying.

I swallow and press closer into Arit’s side, not at all sure I’m ready to encounter my first ghost, friendly or otherwise.

As he murmurs reassurances into my hair, I settle slightly until The Owner calls out a greeting. “Thank you ever so much for your patience.” He appears, top hat in place, from a back aisle, his welcoming smile turning cautious when he sees us standing at the counter. “My apologies for the delay, gentlemen. How may I assist you today? Were the books helpful?”

Arit nudges the books forward for The Owner to take. “Marginally. We’ve come to

seek the use of your portal. We were so pleased with how well it worked in bringing us together, we had high hopes it would bring a favorable outcome to our current situation. Time is of the essence. There is nothing I wouldn't do to get what I need. And what I need is an audience with Fate."

The Owner swallows, taking the books into his arms protectively.

I can't help smirking to myself. So this is how Arit gets things done. No threat. Just as he told me. All he needs is the suggestion that he would be disappointed if things didn't work out in his favor. And The Owner knows enough about Arit to be unsettled by his statement.

"Of course. I'll do what I can to assist." The Owner backs away, then motions for us to follow. "Though please understand I've never used the portal in that way. If we should be unsuccessful..." He leaves the statement unfinished, and I can't help wondering if he's contemplating what Arit might do to him.

"Then we'll have to try other means," Arit supplies darkly. "Which would be most inconvenient, because my mate is dying, and that is something I cannot allow. Your success is imperative to our future happiness."

The Owner stops then and turns to look at me. I level him with my best don't fuck this up, this is serious look, and he must decide it's in his best interest to believe us. "Then let's get started," he says, straightening his spine and urging us behind the curtain.

After setting the returned books aside, The Owner leads us to his workbench. As before, he gathers a slew of ingredients. "The water used to wash the body of a dead male leatherworker. A pinch of dust from a ground moon rock. One petal from a blossoming nightshade flower. Gold flakes." He rummages around a bit more, grabbing what looks like honey but probably isn't, a root of some kind, and a possible

lump of coal. “We’ll need your blood offering as before,” he says to me, and then he turns to Arit. “What will your contribution be? No blood, I assume.”

That catches me off guard as Arit shakes his head and pulls out a couple of strands of hair. I mean, I know Arit is not human, but the sudden realization that he doesn’t have blood in his veins, or possibly even veins at all, is a little shocking. I’ve gotten so used to his humanlike ways and appearance that I’ve almost completely ignored his otherworldliness.

Arit previously mentioned getting his energy from the universe, but how and what exactly does that mean? I can feel his life force thrumming in his chest, but how does that work to keep him “alive” for millions of years?

The Owner takes the offering with a remarkable degree of awed reverence, perhaps realizing the significance of Arit’s very presence and his own mortality where a being like Arit is concerned. He may not know exactly what Arit is, but anyone with eyes and a regular dealing with supernatural entities can tell he’s special. “Thank you.” He looks up and meets Arit’s gaze, something unspoken passing between them.

Arit narrows his eyes ever so slightly and tugs a few more strands loose, handing them over in what I assume is The Owner’s odd request for payment. The Owner practically bows, his hat never moving from his head, and then straightens and produces the same blessed blade he used to slice my hand the last time I was here.

A low, menacing growl vibrates the air, and I turn a raised eyebrow Arit’s way. “What?” he says, unaffected. “I don’t have to like the terms, even if they are acceptable. I never want to see you hurt. For any reason.”

As much as his words affect me, I refrain from getting too emotional in front of The Owner. I pat Arit’s chest affectionately. “Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but I’m already prone to injury. You’ve seen that firsthand. Thank you for your concern

though. I think we're in need of an exception this time."

Arit has no such compunctions about showing his affection, and he pulls my hand up, pressing a kiss to my palm. "Only because we need it. From now on, as long as I'm around, no harm will come to you."

Sweet though his sentiment is, it's not exactly practical or realistic. "Thank you. I know you'll do your best. But"—I place his hand on my aching chest—"for now, maybe we can get back to the reason we're here. I'm kind of in need of saving at the moment."

That immediately snaps Arit out of his chivalrous musings, and he turns an intensely serious look The Owner's way, urgency mixing with desperation. "Help us. Please." And he takes my hand and holds it out to The Owner, his fear and love bleeding together in a plea I'll never forget.

Chapter twenty-one

Arit

The image of The Owner slashing Nixon's hand, coupled with the feeling of incompetence to keep my mate safe, will stay with me for years to come. I know the wound is a means to an end, but seeing Nixon hurt while in my care goes against everything in my nature where he is concerned. While he hasn't had any major accidents in a few days, the welling of the ruby-red blood in his palm, along with his hiss of pain, makes my life force throb with the need to protect.

I've been a guardian of souls for millions of years, and now that the most important soul I've ever encountered is in jeopardy, I loathe the fact that the one way to help it is to cause Nixon's body harm. Why would Fate see him suffer so? Is this the price She demands for his survival?

"Relax," Nixon whispers, handing me a small greenish bottle of some kind. "Help me spread this tincture on the cut, and it'll heal in a few minutes."

Narrowing my eyes, I do as he asks. "You'll be healed in a few minutes?"

"Yes, sorry. I should have told you that. I didn't have a gaping wound the last time I found you, did I?"

"No, thankfully." I dip my fingers into the bottle and smooth the salve over his wound, mixing his blood with whatever is in the whitish substance. I turn a quick glance toward The Owner, who is now grinding the collected ingredients in a bowl.

“Thank you for this,” I say and wave the bottle a bit until the man looks up.

“No thanks necessary,” he says earnestly. “If we could gain our offering another way, that would be ideal. But I do think the willingness of an individual to allow the sacrifice helps in creating a stronger potion. There is intent and commitment behind the offer. That goes a long way toward achieving one’s goals. Especially when the path is unclear.”

My approval of this surprising ally ratchets up a notch. I nod but turn my attention back to Nixon’s hand, relieved and impressed to see the bleeding has nearly stopped. “Doing okay?” I ask my mate, gently grasping his shoulder to give it a squeeze.

“Not really, but I’m trying to fake it until I make it,” he replies, a smile that looks more like a grimace appearing on his handsome face. “Hopefully this potion works because my energy is fading fast.”

Unsettled, my life force urges me to act. I turn just in time to see The Owner lighting my offered hair on fire and blowing the smoke into the potion he’s crafting. He stirs the mixture one more time. “That should do it.”

Nixon wraps his arm behind my back, leaning his weight against me. “Help me over to the portal? I assume we’ll both have to drink the potion, even though you don’t usually eat or drink anything.”

“That would be my advice, unless you can think of another way to ingest the potion,” The Owner says, gathering the bowl, a bundle of leaves, a lighter, and some chalk.

“I’ll drink it,” I say. “Whatever is fastest. A little potion is certainly not going to kill me.”

I feel Nixon chuckle against my side, and I pull him closer, needing his warmth and

vitality to soothe my ruffled state. Having him near me is becoming an addiction I know I can never give up.

The Owner hands the bowl to Nixon and turns back to his work. He pulls aside a dark red curtain, which reveals his spelled portal. He lights the leaves on fire, touching the burning tips to the crystals embedded in the portal's structure, and then draws runes on the floor around us, all the while murmuring words to some long-remembered spell. Leaving him be, I return my attention to Nixon.

"Ready? Do we have to do anything?" I ask him.

"Just drink and focus on the outcome you desire. Then, when everything is ready, we'll walk through together."

I nod and watch as Nixon holds the bowl up to his lips and takes a small sip, cringing at the smell and taste. While he is probably disgusted at having to drink his own blood, the idea is strangely appealing to me. Having some of Nixon's very essence—his life-sustaining marrow—inside me, binding and fusing with my own life force, is not only brilliant, the notion is arousingly sensual and dark.

If we survive this ordeal and manage to save Nixon's soul, I'll have to revisit these thoughts and see how Nixon feels about sharing himself that way. I've already consumed his seed, but the thought of consuming his blood is making my dick swell.

As if sensing my thoughts, Nixon's cheeks, which have been dully lacking in color, pinken, and I can hear his breathing change. Is he just as aroused at the thought of consuming a part of me?

He passes me the bowl, never breaking eye contact, and I take a hearty swallow, ignoring the fact that I don't taste anything at all. When I finish, my cock is half hard, and I lean in, nosing around Nixon's neck and breathing deeply. Now that I've had a

sample of his blood, I can practically smell how turned on he is. His blood is pumping hard and traveling south to pool in his groin.

Nixon reaches out with his injured hand and pulls me against him more firmly, his hard cock already digging into my thigh. “I feel you. I love you. I need you,” he breathes. “I’ll do anything to keep you.”

“I’ll do anything to keep you too. Anything.” I wrap my arm tighter around him.

“Gentlemen, if you will,” The Owner murmurs nearby, his presence all but forgotten as he takes the bowl from me. “The potion is working. All you need to do is step through the portal. I bid you both farewell and wish you luck.”

Closing my eyes, I press a kiss to Nixon’s neck. “On three.”

He counts us down, and every moment I’ve ever felt alone, every time I longed for someone to love, every time I never understood what it meant to be loved flashes through my mind, and I project my need to keep this man, to find Fate and save Nixon so I can love him until the end of time.

Then together, we step through the portal.

A rush of wind greets us, so forceful it threatens to rip Nixon from my arms, but I’m never letting him go and only tighten my hold on his body. I hear him grunt, but I’m not sure if the sound is because of me or the thrashing we’re getting as we’re lifted off the ground and tumbled around.

“Hold on to me,” I call over the noise, and maybe I’m only imagining what I want to hear, but I swear I feel Nixon’s reply of Always in my mind. Either way, I bury my face in his neck and wrap a protective arm around his head, trying to block any potential hazards from causing him harm.

Lights flash, or maybe we're just traveling between light and shadow, but the air changes, the pressure heavy and then lifting, thickening again, and turning damp. I smell the unmistakable scent of ozone and exhaust, but deeper, mixing in around the edges, is brine and salt.

Our tumbling calms gradually, and we're ever so gently set to rights, our feet touching down on what feels like sand. Nixon's heavy breathing fills my ears, but slowly other sounds penetrate—the hushing sway of leaves in the breeze, possible engine noise from a distant airplane, and the call of gulls overhead.

I have no idea where we are or if we've even gone anywhere other than leaving The Magic Shop, but just when I open my mouth to ask Nixon if he's okay, his knees give out, and I rush to firm my grip around his torso, my eyes popping open in response. “Love?” I call shakily. “Are you all right?”

Nixon's groan is not encouraging.

When he still doesn't answer, I gently maneuver him, lowering him down to the soft white sand under our feet. A quick glance shows we're on a pristine empty beach lined with palm trees and a series of thatched huts up a small bluff to my left. The sky is crystal clear and the air is warm, but I have no idea what part of the world we're in.

When I look down, Nixon's eyes are pinched shut as he attempts to curl himself into a ball. With nothing available to use to help him, I pull my shirt off and wedge it up under his head. I stroke a hand down the side of his face and then back into his hair. “Doing okay?”

He groans again and turns his nose into my shirt. “Hurts” is all he manages, but at least he's talking.

I'm no expert on the human condition, so I have no idea what might make him feel

better. “Do you want me to stay with you, or should I go look around and see where we are? When you used the portal last time it spat you out on my doorstep. There are some huts over there, so hopefully we won’t have to go far to get answers.”

“Go. I’ll just be here dying a slow death.” But he reaches out in search of my hand.

I take his hand in mine and give it a squeeze. “Not funny.” I lean down and press a kiss to his cheek. “I’ll be right back. Just rest.”

He squeezes my hand in acknowledgement. “Love you.”

“I love you too.” With one more kiss, I stand, making sure Nixon is as comfortable as he can be, and then I summon my chariot and am almost instantly at the door to the nearest and largest hut.

“Come in, my darling. I’ve been waiting for you” calls a tinkling voice from inside.

I suppose I should be surprised, but frankly, I’m just not. If this really is Fate, then of course She knew I would be coming.

Reaching out, I grasp the doorknob and let myself in. I don’t know what I was expecting other than a nautical-themed beach hut, but the modern room decked out with sleek sofas and a big screen TV was not it. There’s a woman with a book in her lap sitting cross-legged in a wicker papasan chair next to an open window, the white curtain billowing in the delicate breeze.

“Arit,” she chirps, setting her book aside and rising to greet me in one fluid movement. From what I can tell, she looks to be middle aged, with bare feet, a flowing white skirt, a floral blouse, and long, silvery-gray hair worn straight down her back. Before she reaches me, she peers around my frame with a quizzical look. “Where’s Nixon? He should be here too. I’m eager to meet him.”

I'm not sure what to say to that, or what to think of this meeting so far, so I simply say, "He's outside. He's unwell. The portal was too distressing for him in his condition."

She frowns but still comes up to give me a once-over, complete with her hands on my shoulders as she looks me up and down. "You should have brought him inside. I have a bed waiting downstairs." Then she smiles, little wrinkles popping at the corners of her ice-blue eyes. "It is good to see you, though. Made me wait long enough. Practically had to twist your arm to get you to come visit."

She lets me go and vanishes into thin air. When I spin around to see where she went, I hear her tinkling call from outside. "Come help your mate, darling. He's far too fair for all this sunshine."

I just about fly out the door, racing to see what's going on only to see the woman kneeling next to Nixon, brushing his damp hair off his forehead. I rush over and she moves aside, allowing me to check on Nixon myself. I take his hand and press a kiss to the back. "You okay?" I ask, not liking the fact that he hasn't opened his eyes.

When he doesn't answer, my life force pulses a jolt of energy through me unlike anything I've ever felt. I'm momentarily stunned and look up to see the woman watching us with a frown.

"He's farther along than I'd expected. Why don't you help him inside, and we'll get him some of my special tea. That should rouse him long enough for us to have a conversation about how you'd like to proceed."

I have no idea what she's talking about or who she is, for that matter, but I carefully get Nixon into my arms and follow her back to the house. I am gratified to note that Nixon's head is resting on my shoulder and not lolling listlessly to the side. That has to be a good thing, right?

“We’ll get him settled in your room. You’re off duty until further notice, by the way. Six million years is a long time without a break, don’t you think?” the woman asks offhandedly, turning to glance at me over her shoulder once we enter the house. Her kind eyes hold too many mysteries for me to decipher. But she turns her attention back to leading me along, through the small room and into a hallway I wouldn’t have guessed was there based on the size of the house from the outside.

“Here we are. Just down these stairs,” she explains as I follow her down a wide staircase into a semiformal sitting area. There are three hallways leading off in different directions, but she takes us down the one farthest to the left. “I like to keep the upper floor more welcoming, so all business matters and guests stay downstairs. The island is at your disposal, however, so feel free to explore whatever you’d like. Once Nixon is feeling better, you’re more than welcome to move to one of our guest huts as well.”

That catches me off guard as she stops outside the third door. “Is Nixon going to be feeling better?”

Her smile is as enigmatic as it is sheepish. “Of course, darling. No need to worry.”

But I get the feeling there’s a lot she’s not saying. Obviously we’ve both been worried sick over Nixon’s condition. Why else would we have sought Fate out? “Who are you?” I ask, needing to clear up that part of this mystery at least.

Now the woman puts a hand on her hip, and her sigh of frustration is borderline comical. “You know, you wouldn’t have to ask that if you came around more often. The lengths I’ve had to go to just to get you to come home are ridiculous.”

“Home?” I ask, my eyes the size of saucers and my eyebrows in my hairline.

“Yes, home.” She scrunches her brow but still ushers me into the nicely appointed

bedroom. “I’ll admit it’s changed a bit over the years, and we’ve had to relocate a few times, but for all intents and purposes, this is your home. And no, I may not be your creator, but I am a direct descendant. Now come, Nixon is waiting on us. The rest of your questions can be answered in time.”

And boy do I have questions.

Chapter twenty-two

Nixon

Sleep sounds nice.

If I wasn't in pain before we used the portal, which, let's face it, I was, I most certainly am now. It feels like my limbs have been mounted to a stretcher, and all my muscles are being scraped off my bones with a rusty spoon. My insides feel like they were tossed into a blender and poured back inside my empty and desiccated chest cavity, only to then be tumbled across the ocean floor by the most powerful waves on earth.

And let's not get started on my head.

So despite recognizing Arit's concerned and worried voice, there's no way I can answer him. The only thing I want to do is sleep. Maybe for the rest of my life. Which, at this point, doesn't seem like it's going to be very long.

I can just make out the sound of muffled conversation as my body is lifted into strong arms. I have no energy to hold on to Arit, but I do what I can to keep my head near his, needing that closeness at the very least.

I must pass out completely at some point because the next thing I know, Arit's warm hand is stroking down the side of my face and he's asking me to drink something.

"I know you're tired and hurting, babe, but I need you to have a few sips of this tea.

It's supposed to make you feel better."

I like the sound of that, but I just don't have the energy to move or open my mouth. My entire body is buried under a million pounds of concrete.

"Please, love. I need you to try." Arit gently repositions me, propping me up against the softest pillows I've ever felt. Like clouds and cotton candy, the perfect combination of weightlessness. "I'm going to spoon a little into your mouth, okay? All you have to do is lie there and swallow."

That almost makes me snicker. I'd happily swallow Arit for the rest of time if I could only move my mouth and tongue. The fact that I only got to taste him once is hugely disappointing. He has such a nice cock.

My lips are parted and steaming lemony sweetness rolls across my tongue. It feels like years since I last ate or drank anything, my mouth as dry as the Sahara. But another spoonful of relief joins the first, and it's enough to make me swallow.

"That's it. Good job, babe. Let's get a bit more into you so you feel better. We have a lot to talk about once you're ready."

More liquid rolls into my mouth, coating my tongue and swirling around my teeth. It feels heavenly to relieve the parched sandpaper dryness I have going on. Arit keeps at it, bless him, and even with the few swallows I've managed, I can feel the faintest traces of relief, like the noose around my limbs is lessening, and my head doesn't feel quite so run over by a parade of steamrollers.

After another couple of spoonfuls, I somehow find the strength to pry my eyes open.

"Thank the cosmos," Arit exclaims, dropping his head to my chest.

I want so badly to reach out and comfort him, but I'll need another barrel of that witch's brew before that happens.

"Hello, Nixon," says a voice I don't recognize. I blink a few times and finally focus on the figure leaning against the doorframe. An older woman is smiling serenely with her hands clasped together at her bosom. "It's lovely to finally meet you."

I have no idea who this lady is, but I'm not in any position to ask questions at the moment.

Arit lifts his head and meets my gaze, the relief and love in his ice-blue eyes obvious. "Hi, love. It's good to see you. You scared me."

I try to convey everything I'm feeling—my love for him, my thanks, my appreciation that he's taking care of me, my relief at even the minor amount of comfort I'm gaining from that tea, the unasked questions about where we are—and Arit narrows his eyes and tilts his head to one side, studying me intently. I have no idea if he understands me, but I project wanting a kiss, using my eyes to ask without words.

Now a small smile tips the corners of his lips, and he leans in close, running his nose along the length of mine. "I love you," he whispers, his breath its own balm to my fried soul, then kisses me, slow and sweet. When he pulls back, his eyes are closed. "More tea, then more kisses. I'm going to need you to be able to use your lips next time, okay?"

And my tongue? I ask cheekily.

Arit opens his eyes and pins me with a heated look I take to mean yes. "Tea. Now." Then he slowly and steadily spoon feeds me tea until the cup is almost empty, and I can move my fingers enough to brush his thigh.

The pain has reduced considerably, and my hazy thoughts are becoming clearer. “What happened?” I ask, and Arit knows I mean more than just my collapse.

He sets the cup of tea aside and takes my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Apparently portal travel doesn’t agree with you.”

“Your portal agrees with me just fine.”

Arit smirks, using his free hand to run the backs of his fingers down the side of my face. “It does indeed. But my portal is part of me, whereas magical portals awakened by sorcery or divination are not as kind on the body and have no compunctions about tossing a being this way or that. Combined with your already weakened state, it was no wonder you collapsed.

“Ada was waiting for us and already had this room set up. We’re in some sort of underground housing built into the side of the hill. She says you’re going to be fine, by the way, though I have no idea how. And also, apparently I’m home.” Arit shrugs. “Who knew?”

“Home?” That catches my attention, along with that bit about my recovery. “Have you ever been here before?”

“No. He hasn’t,” Ada confirms in a somewhat pouty tone. When I look over, she’s giving Arit a put-upon glare.

She steps into the room just as Arit says, “Apparently I was supposed to visit. Again, I say, who knew?”

“Yes, well. You left me no choice. I had to take drastic measures. My apologies, Nixon. I did get you here though, didn’t I?” A proud smile transforms her face, making her look years younger.

I can't help noticing the odd resemblance between Arit and Ada. Their striking pale eyes are so similar it's kind of eerie.

"You did this to Nixon?" Arit asks, his tone dark as he glares at her over his shoulder.

"Yes. But I already told you he would be fine." Her haughty air reminds me of the way siblings argue over who did what when one of them is about to get into trouble. "You'd think after millions of years you'd finally want a break and some downtime, but no, not you," she says, waving her arms. "You just keep searching for him. Over and over. Lifetime after lifetime. Always searching."

"So, I decided the only way to get you to chillax was to change things up. Now Nixon can see you, you don't have to search for him anymore, and you're home. I'd say it's a job well done. You're welcome." She sniffs, the self-satisfied lift of her chin making it obvious how she feels about messing with our lives.

I have literally no idea what to make of her declaration since I'm going to need a minute to process, but Arit, superior being that he is, has no such trouble. He looks back at me, glances over his shoulder again, and then stands and goes over to hug Ada fiercely.

If I wasn't completely shocked, I'd probably get all teary eyed. I'm not sure who Ada is to Arit, but it's obvious there's some kind of connection there.

"Thank you," I hear Arit murmur, then in another language he says something that sounds far more serious. When they part, Ada nods and repeats the phrase back to him. I have no idea what it means, but I assume it's a more formal sentiment, perhaps from some ancient time gone by.

Arit comes back over to my bedside and takes my hand, his expression intense but his eyes hopeful. When he squeezes, I squeeze back, the tea working wonders on my

aches and pains. “I guess this means I can finally stop looking for you.”

“So it seems.” I take his hand and press a kiss to the back, holding it against my cheek. “But I’m only just getting started looking at you. I have millions of years to catch up on, after all.”

The grin that lights Arit’s face takes my breath away, and he dives for me, laughing and wrapping me up in the biggest hug. I hug him back, almost totally over my ailments, and completely and utterly grateful to the universe for allowing our paths to cross.

Or maybe, I’m grateful to Ada.

But either way, I plan on making every second I get with Arit count. If his fate is to finally rest, I’m going to be by his side for all of it.

Chapter twenty-three

Arit

Nixon and I spend the next hour helping each other feel better, which thankfully includes no clothing. Feeling his warm skin against mine, seeing the light back in his eyes, and listening to his moans of pleasure rather than pain is soothing the frayed edges of my own life force.

Never, in all my years on earth, have I ever been more worried or paralyzed with fear for another being than I was by what was happening to Nixon. Learning to love another was scary, but to see that love challenged so soon after its inception was terrifying. To say my understanding of humans and their wildly fluctuating emotions has changed would be a gross understatement. Now, more than ever, I know exactly why people react the way they do when their loved ones are at risk. And I know firsthand the lengths they would go to in order to save them. Although I do believe Nixon and I got off easy compared to others.

When we finally emerge from our room, needing food for Nixon and answers for both of us, we find Ada in the sitting room off our hallway. “Well aren’t you two looking better?” she remarks, and I can tell without even looking that Nixon is blushing. I’m not sure what’s happening between us, but the connection I share with Nixon is expanding and shifting to allow us more insight into each other’s thoughts and feelings. I swear sometimes I can hear him thinking in my head.

“We’re feeling better,” I reply since I know Nixon is embarrassed. He shouldn’t be. I’m not embarrassed for loving and needing him. I give his hand a squeeze. “Thank

you for helping Nixon. We have a lot of questions, including how long that tea will last, but for now, is there something Nixon can eat? And somewhere we can sit together to talk?"

"Of course!" Ada pops up and motions for us to follow down another hallway. "There is a lot to discuss, but we'll get to it over time. You're welcome to explore the grounds. I just ask that you stay out of the east wing here since that's where the other Fates work."

"Other Fates?" Nixon asks, awe clear in his voice.

"Sure," Ada answers, looking over her shoulder with a humorous smirk. "There are hundreds of us. Not all here, of course, but all over the world. There are a lot of lives that need looking after. As the population changes, so too do our numbers. Just like the reapers."

She turns into a large common area full of casual and more formal seating, where I see two people sitting together, talking quietly. When they notice us, they both turn, seemingly curious about the newcomers. I can tell immediately the woman is a reaper, but strangely, I can't feel her presence. The man she's with looks human, but there's a bright, ice-blue ring around his brown irises that I don't understand.

Ada waves to them. "Dee. Trey. I'm glad you're here. This is Arit and his mate, Nixon. They're just learning what their connection means and have yet to make their choice. Once they're more in the know, would you guys be up to chatting with them? I'm sure they'll have questions that would be best answered by another mated couple."

Bright smiles greet Ada's words as the couple stands to come over and meet us, while I momentarily pick my jaw up off the floor. I'm stunned to hear Ada so casually reference that there's another reaper who has found a mate. Like there are a lot of us

out there, and Dee and Trey just happen to be one couple out of dozens. Maybe more. I can tell Nixon is just as shocked, but I can also feel him mulling over the word choice . I send him back a mental question mark, indicating I have no idea what that comment meant either.

“Of course,” the woman offers, holding out her hand to shake. She’s got black hair like mine, pulled back into a long ponytail that makes her look quite young. If I had to guess, I’d say she was less than half a million years old, though I’ve definitely never met her before. “I’m Dee, and this is my mate, Trey.” I detect a hint of a Latin American accent but figure we can swap our backstories later.

“Nice to meet you guys,” Trey adds as he shakes Nixon’s hand and then mine.

“You guys too. I’m kind of speechless at the moment. I have no idea what’s going on, not that I knew anything about reapers before a month ago, but now, apparently, they have mates? And human ones, at that? I’m going to need a minute to process,” Nixon says, taking the words right out of my mouth.

Everyone else laughs like this is a perfectly normal conversation to be having and Nixon is just the funniest guy, but I’m not laughing as I drape my arm over his shoulders and pull him to me for a hug. “What the fuck is going on?” I whisper to him so quietly it’s almost on the verge of being a thought rather than words.

He hugs me back, thankfully ignoring everyone else for the time being. “I have no idea.” He squeezes me, and I can feel him mentally trying to reassure me that everything is going to be fine even though he’s borderline freaking out himself.

His false bravado is somehow more reassuring than his words, and it makes me smile. I press a kiss to his neck before pulling back to take his hand again. “Then let’s get some answers,” I say, more to him than anyone else, but when I turn back to look at our small audience, they’re staring with a mixture of confusion, bewilderment, and

pride.

“See.” Ada gestures to us, a beaming smile on her face. “Not even fully mated yet and already showing signs of their bond. I should have given Nixon his sight eons ago, but then, he wouldn’t have been Nixon, now would he?” She beckons us along. “Thanks, Dee and Trey. We’ll catch up with you guys later. Nixon needs food, and these two need answers.”

Dee and Trey bid us goodbye, saying they’ll see us later, and we follow Ada into a quiet but functional kitchen. Everything is self-serve, and as Ada points things out, Nixon grabs an apple, a muffin, and a cup of single-serve coffee. The fact that the Fates, or whoever runs this place, thought to include a kitchen at all is interesting and has me wondering if the Fates exist the same way I do.

Ada leads us up a small back staircase with an exterior door that pushes out onto a secluded lanai with a partial view of the ocean in one direction and the lush green valley beyond in another. “You’re welcome to come out here any time,” she explains. “There are a few of these off each wing, so everyone can take breaks, get some fresh air, or just hit up a small trail to enjoy the scenery. Our jobs are demanding, so enjoying our downtime is important.” She gives me a significant look, making me feel like a properly scolded child.

We take up residence at a comfortable table with cushioned chairs. “Now,” Ada begins as Nixon sips his coffee and peels back the wrapper on his muffin. “Who would like to start?”

The way she says that makes me want to laugh, and I finally relax a bit more next to Nixon. “I’ll start so you can eat,” I offer, nudging him with my knee. Nixon sends me a kiss in my mind, and that right there gives me the perfect opening. I turn to look at Ada. “What’s happening to us? Why can I hear Nixon in my head?”

“Because he’s your mate,” she answers simply, her long hair fluttering gently in the breeze. “You two are fated to be together. Soul mates, as I’m sure you’ve surmised. As your bond grows stronger and your connection closer to being sealed, you’re beginning to be more in tune with each other and each other’s minds. Once you’re fully mated, and your choice enacted, you should be able to communicate across space and time without the need for words.”

That has me raising my eyebrows. Nixon looks just as shocked when he glances at me. While I’m tempted to sit here for the next hour trying that mental link out, I turn back to Ada. “And this choice you keep mentioning? What choice?”

Ada looks between us, more serious than I’ve seen her yet. “Whether Arit will give up his purpose to live a mortal life with you, where you might have a family of your own, but where you will both eventually die and your souls will finally rest, together forever in peace. Or whether Nixon will give up his mortality to join you in eternity, forever bound by your purpose in the service of others, but together, even at the expense of any family or friends.

“Whatever you choose, one soul will be divided to give to the other so that they may share your life, whether through a heartbeat or through a life force, to dwell in their body until whatever end awaits you both. In exchange for this sacrifice, the recipient will bear the mark of the other in the form of a ring around the iris, a permanent indicator to all that your souls are joined and that the gift of their sacrifice is accepted.”

Ada folds her hands on the tabletop, and her movement breaks me out of my staring. I turn to look at Nixon, my life force thrumming like crazy in my chest. I can already feel Nixon’s shock, confusion, and worry, coupled with dread, love, need, and sorrow. He’s overwhelmed and understandably so. I didn’t know finding and keeping my soul mate would mean the end of everything I know either.

Nixon's eyes are brimming with tears, even though he hasn't blinked or looked away from Ada. "I know this seems like a lot," she says. "Like a choice you didn't sign up expecting to make. But the alternative is that you each go your separate ways"—Nixon whimpers and grips my hand fiercely—"which I know neither of you want to do. So the kindest way to support you is for you to be together. And that means you need to be together in one form or another."

"Trey's eyes," I murmur, realizing now why they looked so different.

"Yes," Ada confirms. "Dee has shared her life force with him."

"And he had to give up his family?" Nixon asks, his voice small and unsure.

Ada smiles sadly at my mate. "Not everyone has a family as kind as yours, my dear. For some, the choice is easy to make." Resting her hands flat on the table, Ada takes a deep breath and blows it out. "I'll give you some time to talk. This is not a decision to be taken lightly. But just know, no matter what you decide, you'll both be welcome here anytime you like. This is Arit's home, whether he's mortal or not. That will never change." She stands and comes around the table, resting a hand on each of our shoulders. "I'll be in my room if you have questions. Mine is the first door down your hallway. Trey and Dee are in the second room, if you'd like to talk to them."

And with that, she leaves us in stunned silence.

For as long as I've been alive, I've never felt as off-balance as I do right now. There was nothing that could have prepared me for what Ada had to say. And if I'm feeling like my world has just imploded, I can only imagine how Nixon is feeling. Just this morning he thought he was dying, and now, that might be more true than ever.

Even though I've already made my choice, I turn in my seat to check on Nixon, only to be met with his shuddered breaths and his arms encircling my neck. I pull him

close, needing him just as much. “It’ll be okay, love. Everything will work out.” But the panic and desperation I can sense blanking Nixon’s mind tells me immediately, he’s not so sure.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Chapter twenty-four

Nixon

I can't think.

I can't breathe.

The only thing I can do is cling to Arit like my life depends on it.

And fucking weird as it appears, it totally does. Because I can't live without him, and if I want to keep him, I have to die.

A sob wrenches out of my throat, and I'm powerless to stop the others that follow. Arit is murmuring what I assume are reassurances, if the calm and collected vibe I'm getting off him is any indication. If I wasn't freaking the fuck out, I'd be worried for his sanity. How can he be so calm right now? My life has been turned upside down.

Just a month ago I was blissfully unaware of anything outside my ordinary trek to and from work, my friends, and my family. I had no idea about supernatural beings of any kind; I'd never envisioned myself traveling through portals or taking midnight jaunts to Paris. I had never contemplated giving up my family or the chance of having a family of my own. I had never thought about living forever.

As I cling to Arit, the literal other half of my soul, I can't help but ask myself if I really am prepared to do anything to keep him.

“It’s okay, Nixy,” Arit soothes, running his hand up and down my back and reminding me of all the times Linc and my mother have called me the same thing.

“How can you say that?” I choke out, my breath raspy from all my crying. “Either you have to give up your life, or I have to give up mine. There is nothing okay about that.”

Arit pulls back, not that I give him up without a fight, and his small smile only slightly eases the tangle of crazed emotions writhing inside me. He takes my face in his hands, using his thumbs to wipe away my tears. “Can you do something for me?” he asks, his voice low and gentle.

I nod because I can tell he’s trying to help.

“Close your eyes.” I do, sniffing a little as the jungle around us fades behind my eyelids. Arit takes my hands in his. “I want you to imagine something. Imagine there’s a dry green forest, with sparse trees and grassland, where a human-like being is running for his life, panting and exhausted, with nothing but a rock and stick to defend himself. He runs on two legs but has little trouble using his hands to scramble around when necessary.

“There’s a crack, the rustle of leaves, the snap and snarl of the pack-hunting dogs chomping at his heels. The being is quickly overtaken, subdued with ease, leaving behind a female of his species and their offspring.

“Picture a family unit, not like yours, but one that communicates with gestures and sounds, possibly the beginnings of basic language. There are young and old members with knowledge that is passed down. They live in caves and small enclosures made of branches and sticks, not huts, not yet, but getting there.

“The little girl loves flowers and helping her mom collect wild berries and plants

while her dad hunts using stone tools. But the little girl is young, and she trips, cutting her leg on a sharp rock. Slowly, over the course of several weeks, despite the care of the clan, the girl loses the use of her leg as the infection spreads, and she succumbs to her minor injury. Her family mourns her loss and buries her in a remote cave system.

“Now there’s a raging battle where a soldier is mounted on horseback, sword and shield in hand. He’s terrified and frantic, but he follows his fellow soldiers, slashing and fighting for his life. The air is rank with the scent of blood and death, horses and man alike.

“Clanging metal on metal, sparks and screams rising toward the heavens. The soldier knows he’s going to die, nothing but a number in line with others just like him. A jarring jolt sends him flying off his horse, where he’s now in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. His leathers are only going to protect him for so long, and he’s swinging and dodging blows while trying not to trip over a gurgling corpse at his feet.

“Tiring quickly from the weight of the sword, the man takes a glancing blow to his right forearm, a quick stream of blood stinging as it seeps out of the open wound. His enemy knows he’s injured and takes advantage, striking the soldier again and sending him to his knees. The last thing the soldier thinks is that he loves his wife and child. Then his head is cut off to land in the blood-soaked field next to more just like his.”

Arit squeezes my hands, and I nearly jolt, so caught up in his storytelling that I’ve forgotten what’s going on. “Now picture the love of a family. Of home and hearth. Of sex, and laughter, and wine, and tuna fish sandwiches. And picture a man who has never once been part of that.” There’s a catch in Arit’s voice that makes my eyes pop open. He’s staring at me like I’m his only reason for breathing. “Now picture a man who is being given a second chance. A chance to live for the first time. To love and be loved. To rest.

“My dearest, Nixon. I have seen too many things—horrible and awful things, wonderful and unforgettable things—but never have I woken up on a cold winter’s morning next to a warm body. Never have I tasted the salt off your skin after a swim in the ocean. I can speak a hundred languages, but I’ve never spoken them to you. And never, in all my years on this planet, have I shed a single tear. Please let me cry in your arms. Please let me sleep in your bed. And please, please, please let me share your life with you.

“I’ve never asked for anything because my purpose is to serve, but I ask you this now: will you share your soul with me, Nixon? Will you share your life with me? I’d give up forever if your answer is yes. To a family. To me. To us. To—”

I can’t wait another second for Arit to stop blathering as I launch myself forward and kiss him with everything I am. This man. This gorgeous, selfless, immortal being would give it all up just to make a life with me. How in the Fates I got so lucky I will never know. But I take his face between my hands and angle my head to kiss him deeper, demanding entrance as I plunge my tongue into his warm and waiting mouth.

Arit kisses me back, just as breathless and bordering on frantic. I can feel his emotions like they are my own, and I can’t help wondering if this moment, if his declaration, means our connection is even stronger now.

If we choose a mortal life, will we still be able to hear each other’s thoughts?

I break our kiss, even though it’s the last thing I ever want to do. “We should talk about this,” I say, my heart racing and my breathing erratic. Arit looks dazed but amused, like he’ll never quite understand humans and their conflicting and crazy thoughts.

“Are you sure you’d rather talk than take this back to our bedroom?”

I gasp playfully. “How dare you try to manipulate me with sex.”

Arit’s smile is a mile wide. “Is it working? Sex sounds like a fabulous idea.”

I laugh and wrap my arms around my man. Arit holds me close in return, teasing me with wandering fingers down my back and into the waistband of my shorts. I gently slip out of his hold and take his hand in mine. “I love you.” The warm smile I get in return combined with the perfect feeling of contentment blanketing my mind has my heart swooning even more. “But yes, I do think we should talk about this. Are you sure you want to give up forever? That’s a huge sacrifice, Arit. Like, way beyond me becoming immortal. I mean, giving up my family would suck, but we’d get millions of years to be together in exchange. We could go anywhere, do anything, see everything together.”

“And never live?” he challenges. “I’ve already seen almost every corner of this globe. I’ve witnessed wars, famine, genocide, the rise and fall of empires, the development of modern science and medicine, the extinction of too many species to count. But I’ve never tasted apple pie. I’ve never taken a walk to a park and lain on a blanket with the person I love. I’ve never taken a bubble bath. I’ve never owned anything . I’ve never had anything. And things like dreams and families are just words. I’m a servant, Nix, constantly on call.

“I understand that we’d be together forever, that we’d pop over to Paris or Tokyo or Rio whenever we felt like going, but after a while, the world begins to feel pretty small. You’d never have a home again. Never have the need for food or water. Never have a conversation with anyone who wasn’t a reaper. And you’d constantly be surrounded by death. Is that really what you want?”

Arit pulls my hand up and kisses the back. “Because to me, I can’t imagine anything better than being free to grow old with you.”

I can't help a snuffle. "Well, geez, man. When you put it like that..."

Arit's laugh is everything.

He kisses me soundly. "Shall we go tell Ada the good news?"

"You don't even want to talk to Dee and Trey first?"

"Meh. If I'm not off the mark, Dee is less than half a million years old. She's going to have a wildly different opinion on living forever than most."

That makes me laugh in disbelief. "You're crazy. And practically ancient. Are you really ready to stub your toe? To have sore muscles after a workout? To be starving but think nothing sounds good to eat? To have bad dreams? Or get scared? Or be frustrated by traffic?"

Arit's slowly spreading smile makes my heart beat faster. "Yes. To all of that. And to you. To making friends, to trying new things, to getting a paper cut, to sleeping, to learning what foods I like, to having a family. I've been alone for millions of years, love. The more people I can squeeze into my life, the better." Arit pauses for a second, a far-off look entering his eyes. When he doesn't continue, I squeeze his hand to bring him back. He blinks and suddenly looks a little overwhelmed.

"What? What is it?"

"Were you going to have kids?" he whispers, trepidation and awe battling for dominance in his tone.

I can tell my answer to his question is important, and despite what I want to say, I ask, "Would you like to have kids?"

“I’ve never thought about it before. It was never an option for me.” He runs a hand through his hair and stares off into the distance again. When he eventually comes back to me, he lifts one corner of his lips in apology. “Sorry. Just got lost in thought there. I think getting a dog would be fun. Humans seem to love their pets.”

I lean in and press a kiss to his lips. “Then we’ll figure something out. We’re going to have a lot to think about. Like where we’re going to live. What you’re going to do for work. How we’re going to afford to travel to Paris or Tokyo or Rio whenever we want.”

He smirks, but that quickly transforms into a full-blown smile. “I can’t wait. You’re going to have so much to teach me.”

“And you’re going to have so much to teach me, Mr. I’m-Older-Than-Dirt. You’d make a fantastic history teacher.”

“Or an anthropologist. I could make some incredible ‘discoveries.’”

“Oh my God, you totally could! You’re going to be the next Indiana Jones!”

“Who?”

I sigh dramatically. “Oh boy. We are going to have our work cut out for us.”

And we both laugh as we stand and make our way inside to tell Ada the good news.

Chapter twenty-five

Arit

A da isn't surprised in the least about our decision, and she hugs us both and reminds us that we'll always be welcome here. It turns out here is a privately owned island, one of many off the coast of Belize. I can't help dwelling on the fact that I've finally been told I have a home just in time for me to make my home with Nixon. Having a home a million or five years ago would have been nice, but I'm still happy with having two homes now.

And just the concept of having a home is completely foreign. I've been a nomad my entire life. What will it feel like to have someplace I actually belong? That's mine? Where I sleep every night with Nixon at my side? I can't wrap my head around it. Or my suddenly limited time frame.

Yesterday, I had millions of years ahead of me. Endless days and nights filled with service. An eternity to remember the limited time I had with the most important person in my existence. To watch him grow old and die without being able to stop it. Would I have traded my soul to save Nixon? Yes. But either of us living without the other would have been a cruel punishment to bear.

Now, I get to spend the rest of my time in this realm loving Nixon from the depths of both our souls because I will carry a piece of him with me forever.

Ada explains that our transition can wait a little while, but not too long unless we want Nixon's symptoms to return. Apparently her tea is only slightly magical in

terms of alleviating Nixon's soul situation. The cure is evidently me. Or us, actually. Our union.

As we talk some more, we learn that Nixon's symptoms were set in motion the first time we met in person. We both felt drawn to each other, that we had a connection, and Fate, or Ada, was nudging us to this very moment. Everything that's happened, every life Nixon has lived, has led us to this. Our souls knew it, we just needed a helping hand to see it too.

Ada sounds intrigued as we explain how we found her, our use of the magical portal, and the fact that our combined essences, for lack of a better term, connected us to her. She explains that my creator was one in a long line of Fate Mothers, the beings in charge of perpetuating the Fates and reapers alike. As beings are created, so then do they die, and the cycle continues. Ada was the being created by my Fate Mother to replace her when she chose to retire her post and live out her days in human form, much the same way I'm doing with Nixon.

The outpost we're on, nicknamed Bells Two, is one of dozens of similar sites across the globe, not all of them in a tropical paradise, however. When Ada takes us on a tour of the working wing of the outpost, I'm not the only one shocked at what I see. Nixon is transfixed, asking a million questions about the use of modern surveillance systems, the database used to store information, and how all of this goes unnoticed by the world at large.

Ada just grins, mischief in her eyes, and says I'm not the only one whose superpowers have evolved over time.

When we're finally ready to have some time to ourselves, we stop by the kitchen to grab some snacks for Nixon and then make our way back outside.

"Besides Paris, this is the coolest place I've ever been," Nixon gushes as we head up

the path toward the rest of the visitors' huts.

"You didn't even see Paris," I remind him.

He looks back at me with hooded eyes. "I was a little distracted, yes. But Paris will forever be our place. It's the place I fell in love with you."

I wrap my arm around his back as we draw nearer to the huts. "I think I probably already loved you at that point, seeing as I've been obsessed with you for a while." Nixon laughs. "But yes, I'd agree. Paris was incredibly special." I press a kiss to his shoulder. "I've never had a place like that before."

"Like what?"

"A place that means something. A place that's important to me."

"Mm. Well, from now on we're going to have lots of those places. I'll make it my mission."

We stop at the top of the path and turn to look out at the view. "Paris and Bells Two," I muse, watching tranquil blue-green waves roll onto shore over the pristine white-sand beach. "Not a bad start for a month."

"Don't forget our park bench."

I snort out a laugh. "Right. Where you ran away from me. Such fond memories."

Nixon snickers and elbows me in the side. "You were talking about some crazy shit, my love." He sighs happily and rests his head on my shoulder. "But Ada was already working her magic. And you know what else?"

“What?”

“I haven’t nearly died in weeks. Well, except for my soul situation.”

I’d noticed Nixon’s surer footing of late but hadn’t found a reason to bring it up. I’m not sure if it’s because he’s more confident or if it has something to do with our connection, but I just hum thoughtfully and say, “Thank the Fates for that.”

We stand there for a few more minutes, soaking up the scenery, but eventually make our way to one of the unoccupied huts. We open all the windows and doors and cuddle together on the bed while Nixon snacks. Neither of us makes a move to do anything more intimate than remove our shirts or explore the other’s warm skin, but I’m more than okay with that. The next time we’re together that way, I want to be human. I want to know my soul is connected to Nixon’s and feel that part of him throbbing in my chest in return. I want to taste him with human senses and make love the way I’ve only ever dreamed would be possible.

Nixon is my dream come true, the soul I’ve been chasing across eternity. To have him in my arms, to know I will always be with him, is enough to make me wish I could cry already. But I pull Nixon tighter, drop a kiss to his shoulder, and tell him I love him.

Our ceremony is tonight, and that’s when I’ll finally fulfill my destiny, six million years in the making. So much time has passed, but only now it seems like I’m finally living. And I owe it all to Fate.

“Are you sure?” Nixon asks for the third time in less than half an hour. We’re dressed in white linen shirts and khaki shorts, the basic menswear that’s kept on hand for guests in need, as we make our way to the reflecting pool to meet Ada. The sun has set, but the moon has not yet fully risen. “I know you keep saying you are, but this is forever we’re talking about, not just what color to paint the living room. We can’t

undo this, Arit.”

I stop along the path that leads uphill and away from the main dwellings. In the distance, I can already hear a waterfall, which I suspect will be near where we’re heading. The vast array of flora and fauna on the island is remarkable. The macaws alone are some I’ve never seen anywhere else. I turn Nixon to face me and rest my hands on his shoulders. “You’re right.”

He pauses mid-speech, his mouth ready to form the words he’d prepared to keep arguing his point. “What do you mean?” he asks instead of saying whatever he was going to say originally.

“I mean you’re right. Maybe I should rethink this. Forever with you does sound nice.”

“Nice?” He looks almost offended.

“Yeah. I know so many amazing places we could visit. Did you know that sometimes I like to break into museums after hours? I mean, I am usually invisible and I can walk through walls, so I just go wherever whenever, right? But the Louvre and the British Museum, the Uffizi and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo are all fantastic. But what’s interesting is that I remember a lot of what’s on display. Not the actual items of course, but similar objects that people today find remarkable. And they are, don’t get me wrong, but let’s just take King Tutankhamun, shall we?”

Nixon is looking at me like I’ve suddenly lost my marbles, but he doesn’t interrupt. He just waits for me to continue.

“Did you know he ruled from 1332 to 1323 BC?” Nixon shakes his head. “Right, so quick math, roughly three thousand, five hundred, fifty years ago, give or take. Modern society considers anything two to five thousand years old ancient. Recorded

history is only five thousand years old, dating back to the first written language of Cuneiform.

“Now, humor me and close your eyes for a second.” Nixon sighs but does as I ask. “I want you to put some serious thought into this, okay? If the first written record of history is only five thousand years old, and that was made using a reed pressed into clay slabs, what do you think the next five thousand years will hold?”

Nixon furrows his brow but doesn't say anything out loud. From our connection, I can get a vague sense of his thoughts circling around to flying cars and interspace travel.

“Good. Now jump ahead another five, ten, fifty thousand years. Will humans still be living on this planet? What kind of damage will they have done to the environment by then? How will they treat anyone who's different as they evolve to adapt? Now add five million years and tell me what you see.”

Nixon slowly opens his eyes. He still doesn't say anything, but he holds my gaze, a more pensive expression on his face, then he leans in and presses a soft kiss to my lips. “I'm ready when you are,” he finally whispers, and this time I know he means it.

I take his hand in mine, press a kiss to the back, and we walk the rest of the way to the reflecting pool in silence.

Ada is already at the top of the path and senses our introspective moods. She comes over to greet us both with a hug. “Good evening. I'm set to begin, so if you'll follow me, we'll get started.”

Nixon squeezes my hand.

The narrow path Ada leads us along widens, verdant vegetation giving way to a rock-

enclosed pool with a small waterfall at one end. The turquoise water is not entirely clear, a silty hue making it appear slightly milky, but whether the silt has anything to do with it or not, the water appears to glow from within, almost like some kind of bioluminescent reaction is taking place. The scenery is beautiful, and I know I've never seen another place like it.

“This is one of only a few moon pools in existence,” Ada begins, stopping at the edge of the water. “As the moon rises and we enter the pool, the water will clear, and we'll be able to see things in the reflection that are not otherwise visible with the naked eye. This is when we'll transfer your connection, Arit. Once you are no longer bound to your purpose, to me, Nixon will claim you and you two will be bound to each other. I'll take care of creating your human form, but this is also when Nixon will need to surrender part of his soul.”

I glance at Nixon to gauge his mood. I can tell he's nervous, but he's also determined, his unwavering love for me stronger than any of his concerns.

He meets my gaze, ready and willing. “Let's do this. You and me, together forever.”

I couldn't ask for anything more.

Chapter twenty-six

Nixon

Despite Ada's preface of what to expect, I'm still shocked when we all walk out into the cool, glowing water and the murkiness dissipates within seconds. The water is still strangely luminous, but now, instead of seeing the overhanging trees and foliage reflected back at us, I see the reflection of the moon and our three bodies. And connected to us is an unmistakable tether, thicker than a string but not quite like a rope either.

I stare, transfixed, tempted to wave my hand in the space where Arit's tether connects him to Ada. For some reason, seeing that cable connecting Arit to his purpose brings tears to my eyes. My beautiful man has been a slave to that tether for longer than I can fathom. I yearn to free him. To give him a new purpose that doesn't require him to serve anyone except himself.

Arit squeezes my hand, and when I meet his gaze, his expression is both sorrowful and filled with hope. Longing replaces compliance. Desire replaces loneliness. And overpowering everything is love. His fierce love for me shines as bright as the moon and stars above and the ethereal water below. I can feel his energy surging just under his skin. He's anxious and excited and can't wait to feel me too.

"Are you ready?" Ada asks, looking between us for confirmation.

"I was ready when Nixon's soul was created," Arit replies, making me want to swoon and roll my eyes at the same time.

“You could have just said yes,” I add. “How am I supposed to top that?”

Arit grins at me. “Sorry not sorry. I’ve been waiting for you for four thousand, two hundred, and forty-two lifetimes. I think I’m allowed to win this one.”

I huff out a laugh and have to hold myself back from throwing my arms around him. That doesn’t stop me from sending him a hug in my mind though. Arit’s smile softens, and I turn to face Ada again. “Yes, I’d say we’re both ready,” I confirm.

Ada’s own smile is one of genuine pleasure, like she’s truly happy for us and can’t wait to see what our future holds. She reaches into the water and grabs Arit’s tether. “Then I’m thrilled to have the honor of joining your souls, once and for all, until you part this realm and enter the next. Together forever in peace.” She closes her eyes, mutters something under her breath, and Arit gasps.

When I look over, Arit’s eyes are huge, and he’s clutching his chest, breathing shallowly as he follows Ada’s every move. Under the water, she hands me Arit’s tether, only the cable-like rope I noticed before is gone, and in its place is a softly coiling thread, reaching and yearning, wrapping itself around my hand and wrist, straining to get closer as its silky filaments undulate over my skin.

I’m speechless. It’s like I’ve never in my life felt anything as soft, as welcoming, or as tender as Arit’s life bond. No longer is he bound by duty. He’s choosing to join with me, his thread strong as it reaches out to wind itself around my leg. Only, it doesn’t stop there. Coiling upward, Arit’s new thread makes its way under my shirt, wrapping around my torso before stopping over my heart.

We both gasp this time, not in pain but in awe. I can’t see what’s happening because of my shirt, but the end of Arit’s thread has grown roots, and those roots are now burrowing into my chest, slithering outward toward my arms and legs, as well as winding themselves around my heart.

Don't ask me how, but I can sense a question pulsing through the filaments as they seek out every nook and cranny of my body. And without saying a thing, my soul answers for me, gently, willingly, tenderly splitting down the middle and sending itself outward, where it's absorbed and accepted by Arit's life bond.

I hear him gasp again, and when I look up, lost as I was by what was happening to me, I see tears in Arit's crystal-clear eyes, which are now sporting a brown ring around the irises. Knowing how long my man has been waiting for this moment, I ignore the rest of my inner goings-on and step forward to take Arit into my arms.

"Thank you," he breathes, and his chest hitches. I feel a resounding sense of gratitude and bone-deep happiness expel like a sigh from within. I respond to his inner self-expression by sending back my own. Love, joy, excitement, peace, desire—it all comes pouring out, and Arit laughs, holding me tighter and picking me up to spin us in a splashing circle. His joy is radiant and pulsing, a living, tangible thing.

When he sets me back on my feet and takes my face in his hands, tears are flowing freely down his cheeks. "I'm human," he says, awe and reverence clear in his tone. "I'm human and I'm free. And it's all because of you." Then he kisses me like I've never been kissed before.

Salty tears mingle with an unfamiliar taste, like sugar and spice but laced with passion, and I realize with a start that Arit finally is human. For as long as I've known him, Arit has never had an odor, never had a taste, only his cum being sweetly addictive. But as he pulls back and stares at me in awe, I know he can taste me too.

"Holy shit," he whispers, and that makes me laugh because that's the most human thing he's ever said.

"Good?" I ask, a tease I accompany with my nibbling lip.

Arit's cock bucks against me in response. "I can taste you," he says. "The first thing I've ever tasted."

Well, that makes me wish I'd packed my toothbrush, but Arit doesn't seem to mind. "You taste pretty good too. I've always thought it was odd that you never had a taste or scent."

"And I do now?" he asks eagerly, like my answer will confirm his humanity.

With an indulgent smile, I dip my head and burrow my nose into his neck, snuffling around like a bloodhound. Arit laughs and squirms away, a sudden shriek of disbelief escaping his mouth.

"What?" I ask, already knowing it's nothing bad.

"Your beard. I'm ticklish." The wonder in his voice makes my heart expand even more for my newly fragile boyfriend.

"Then I'll be careful with you until I can use that to my advantage." I shoot him a wink.

Arit's smile seems like it will never dim. "I can't wait."

After several long seconds of simply staring at each other and smiling like two lovestruck fools, Arit finally turns his attention to Ada, who has been silently giving us our space. "Thank you," he says earnestly, and Ada dips her head respectfully.

"My pleasure," she replies. "After all your years of service, I only wish you could have had this sooner."

Arit looks back at me, his wonder and joy shining from his eyes. "I don't. This is

exactly how our story was supposed to go. You and me, together forever.”

And I swear I feel his life bond give my soul a squeeze. I take his hand in mine, needing to get Arit alone, and look back at Ada. She dips her head in that same considerate manner, her radiant warmth and friendly personage making her the perfect Fate Mother. I send her a grateful smile, squeeze Arit’s hand, and led him back out of the pool.

Neither of us speak as we carefully make our way back to our hut, the only light to guide us being that of tonight’s ethereal moon. Without Arit’s superior senses and surefootedness, I do manage to stumble once or twice, but he does too, and every time it makes him laugh.

With matching smiles, we ascend our small porch and enter our temporary home.

We stand there, bathed in the partial moonlight of the open front door, and the only thing I can think to say, the one thought running on a loop in my head, is “I love you.”

Arit cups my cheek, his thumb tracing over the trimmed edge of my beard, and says, “I love you too. Forevermore.”

We meet in the middle, both of us leaning in at the same time, and this kiss is even better than our first. Now, we take our time, making the kiss slow and sweet, in no rush to hurry to the finish. Tender sweeps of our tongues against each other set off a slow ember of need that I know will only grow. As Arit holds the back of my head, I wrap my arms around his neck, keeping him as close as I possibly can, breathing him in and tilting my head to get better access.

Arit gives everything he has and more, using his free hand to hold my side, pulling me against him and pressing his erection against me. By some unspoken signal, we

break our kiss and immediately pull our shirts over our heads, too eager to get back to each other to fiddle with buttons. The moan that escapes Arit's throat when we're skin to skin ratchets my need even higher.

"You feel incredible," Arit murmurs, moving his attention to my neck and ear. "You always felt good, exactly the right shape and size, the perfect fit to hold in my arms, but now, you're even better. Warm, strong, with this musky sweetness, you're"—he licks a strip up my neck—"irresistible. I'm going to taste every single part of you." Then he nibbles my earlobe, sending a shiver down my spine.

I'm putty in this man's arms.

Together, we make our way to the bed, uncaring of the open door, and shed the rest of our clothes. Arit stands next to me, completely naked, but the only thing he seems to notice is me.

"You're so beautiful, my Nixy love. Creamy skin, freckles, this dusting of amber hair." He reaches out and rubs his palms over my chest. "You're sweet and fiery, and I can't believe you're mine. That after all these years we're finally together."

Reaching out, I copy my man's move and place my hands on Arit's chest, right over his heart. The usual hum and low-level vibration I'm accustomed to feeling from Arit's life force is gone, but in its place is now the strong and unmistakable rhythm of his steadily beating heart. I close my eyes to soak in the sensation. Incredible is too mundane a word to describe everything that's happened between us, to us, for us. Miracle comes close, but even then I know it has more to do with Fate. This is how our lives were always meant to be.

I lean in and gently place a kiss on his chest. Arit cups the back of my head, and I look up, knowing how much this means to him too. His eyes are intense, not only with emotion but with lust and love as well.

“Make love to me,” he says, his voice low and gravelly. “I need to feel you. All of you.”

“I know.” And when our lips meet again, we barely come up for air.

Arit follows me down to the bed, our lips never breaking contact, and when he drapes his body over mine, all hard and perfect, we both groan at the feeling. “That’s it, babe. I love the way you feel on me,” I say. Arit breaks our kiss and buries his face in my neck, breathing with me as I run my hands up and down his muscular back. “You feel so good.”

Pressing one more kiss to my neck, Arit pushes up, looking down at me as he holds his upper body away from mine. He doesn’t say anything, but everything he’s feeling and thinking is clear in his eyes. And thankfully, I can hear him. At least we didn’t lose our mental link when Arit transitioned.

Without saying a word, I know Arit is overwhelmed. He’s feeling too many things to give voice to, but aside from love, which is sitting at the forefront of his thoughts, he’s so profoundly grateful—to be here, to be with me, to be human. And he wants more than anything to connect with me on every level.

I stare right back, resting my hands on Arit’s hips and letting him see that I feel exactly the same way. The moment is intense in its own way, not sexually motivated, but brought to life by our mutual desire for each other. A desire that encompasses more than just the physical.

But the way Arit’s cock is digging into my thigh is also making me long for the physical part of this union to take a front seat.

Arit reads me perfectly, a sexy little smirk tugging his lips as his eyes turn molten. He repositions himself and rolls his hips, his cock rubbing decadently alongside mine. I

stare at him, trying to keep my eyes open as he does that again, repeating his languid thrusts as I map his hips and ass with my hands.

The way his gorgeous hair falls over his face, dark against his brilliant, liquid eyes, his kiss-swollen lips, and his panted breaths, he's like the perfect Adonis, made just for me. And as I brush my fingertips over his crease, Arit stills, his eyes fixed on mine.

"Do it again," he rasps, so of course I comply. This time I make no move to hide my actions, dipping in farther and repeating the move until I brush over his hole. Arit sucks in a breath, a shudder working its way through his body. "Sensitive."

"I know. Feels really good during rimming." A flash of Arit doing that to me passes through his mind, but it's quickly replaced by me doing that to him. I smile and tease his hole again, sending him a mental image of us being able to do this whenever we want from now on. He grins wickedly, rolls his hips one more time, and then lowers himself down, only to wrap his arms around me and suddenly flip us both over.

I give a mental fist pump that I now have control and take full advantage, spending long minutes peppering kisses to Arit's neck, his chest, and downward to his abs. I give his cock a few leisurely strokes with my hand, cupping his balls and tugging them gently. With Arit splayed out for my perusal, I look my fill, enjoying his panted breaths, the way he grips the sheets, and the way his cock bucks in my hand. I press a kiss to the tip of his cock. "Knees up to your chest," I say, and I'm rewarded with a bead of precum that wells at his tip.

Holding Arit's gaze, I lower my head and lap at his cockhead, closing my eyes as I savor his flavor. That same honeyed nectar is still there, and I know without a doubt, I'm going to spend my life on my knees for this man, drinking his cum like it's candy.

Arit's rumble of approval at my indecent thoughts brings me back to the present, and he does as I ask, bringing his knees up to his chest and presenting his hole to me, his virgin hole that has never belonged to anyone else. That thought sends a flash of primal possession through me, and I reach out, rubbing my hands up the backs of his thighs and down over the rounded globes of his ass, watching as his hole clenches under my gaze.

Arit's cock bucks and dribbles a glob of precum down onto his abs, smearing into his skin as he pulls his legs tighter against himself. "I need you," he says, desperation bleeding into his voice.

At the moment, I don't want Arit to be desperate. I want him to be satisfied, and I want him to come apart on my tongue. So I lean forward, lap at his cockhead one more time, then make my way downward, alternating kissing and licking as I go. Using my thumbs, I gently apply pressure to widen Arit's hole, take a deep breath of his most intimate scent, and then lick a long stripe straight over his star, loving the way he squirms and gasps, moaning my name the whole time.

I must spend twenty minutes lapping, sucking, and nibbling at Arit's hole because by the time I sit back, saliva dripping down my chin and out of Arit's soft, pink pucker, we're both dribbling a steady trail of precum from our cocks. Arit looks half crazed, his pupils completely blown and his hair a tangled mess, but the gorgeous pink flush running down his neck and across his chest is more beautiful than any sunset I've ever seen. This man is alive, and he's reaching for me, kissing me senseless, and asking me to fuck him for the first time.

And who am I to deny him?

I need to make love to Arit just as much as he needs to make love to me. "I've got you, baby, hold on. We're almost there."

Chapter twenty-seven

Arit

If Nixon doesn't get his cock inside me, I swear I'm going to combust. I've never felt need like this, this all-encompassing thing that's pulsing through my body, warming my groin, and tightening my balls. My cock is throbbing in time with my heartbeat, my actual heartbeat, because I have a heart and blood that's pounding in my ears and demanding I do something about the fire between my legs.

My hole feels absolutely destroyed, wet and loose from Nixon's demanding mouth, but I also feel so insanely empty it's like my insides are hollow and need to be filled, and only Nixon has the key to my door. I reach for him again, needing more of something—him, his body on mine, his tongue in my ass—but he only swats me away with a grunted laugh.

"I'll never be able to get my cock in you if you keep grabbing at me like that. I need to find some lube."

And in my stress-induced state, I actually send up a prayer to the universe for a bottle of lube to magically appear on our bedside table.

"Ah ha! Thank the Cosmos!" Nixon slams a drawer shut in the bathroom and quickly scrambles back to the bed, his flushed cock bobbing proudly between his legs. I'm too caught up in need and all the new sensations running through me to do much for him at the moment, but hopefully as I become accustomed to regular sex, I'll be able to control myself a bit more and pleasure him the way he's doing for me.

“Hurry, it aches,” I manage and reach for my cock just as Nixon gets the stupid safety seal open on the bottle. I give myself a rough squeeze, attempting to dull the incessant roar of my cock, but only seconds later, a cool dribble of liquid slithers down my cock.

“Stroke yourself while I get you ready,” Nixon demands, and the bark in his tone has my cock bucking even harder. I may actually whimper as I go to town on my cock.

Nixon dribbles a generous amount of lube down my taint and his fingers are immediately there, already slick, probing my hole to see if I’m still open. He grunts in satisfaction but diligently stretches me even more, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on my stroking hand. I wish he was the one stroking me, but I know he’s trying to make sure I’m ready for my first time.

But suddenly, his other hand joins mine and he nudges me out of the way. “You only need to tell me what you want. I’d do anything for you to feel good. Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

I reach for him, grateful for our mental connection, and I project an image of his cock sliding inside me. Nixon grunts again, and I’m distantly pleased I’ve reduced him to his baser needs so all he can manage is a grunt. But that thought passes as quickly as it came because Nixon is already lubing his cock, gritting his teeth as he squeezes the base to keep from coming too soon.

“I don’t have any condoms, but I was tested after my last relationship ended. Are you sure you want to do this bare?”

I growl at him, a primal threat of warning that if he doesn’t get his stupid, perfect cock inside me this second, I’m going to pounce on him and impale myself. Nixon only narrows his eyes, his own rumble of need making him advance on my threat.

His fingers are gone from my ass in my next breath, and my eyes widen at the loss only to widen even more as he suddenly lines up his cock, looks me dead in the eye, and pushes inside like he owns me. The sting of his invasion is minimal, but I still suck in a breath, overcome by literally everything; the way he fills me, the ache in my ass, the throbbing in my cock, the weight of him on top of me, the pain of being human. I'm stunned into silence by this man.

Nixon lifts his torso immediately, searching my eyes to see what's wrong. But there is absolutely nothing wrong in this moment. Everything is so completely right it brings tears to my eyes.

"Okay?" he asks, still thoughtful and considerate of my needs despite being totally blissed out. He shifts slightly and the move eases some tension I didn't know I was holding.

"Beyond okay. So far beyond okay."

Then he wipes my tears with his thumb, presses a kiss to my lips, and begins a slow rhythm that hurts just as much as it feels divine. I hook my legs around his ass, urging him not to treat me like a paper doll, and after a few more careful and measured thrusts, Nixon picks up speed, and I'm lost to oblivion. Bombarded on every front, I'm never going to last. I know Nixon isn't going to care and will likely blow just as quickly as I will, but I still do my best to please him, to stroke his back and sides and ass, to show him how much this moment means to me.

I pull his head down for a quick but dirty kiss, and he shifts his weight to accommodate, only the new angle of entry nails a spark inside me, and I shout out his name as he does it again and again and again. My beautiful, sexy, demanding man is going to tear me apart and put me back together again.

Panting, I call out, "I'm going to come. Please, it feels too good. I'm dying. I need..."

I need. You. Fuck. Now!”

And Nixon takes me home—wrapping his hand around my cock, he strokes me in time with his thrusts, calling out my name and telling me how perfect I am, how amazing I feel, and how much he loves me. I come first, the tingling in my balls coalescing into something truly out of this world, and I shoot my load all over our abs, babbling nonsense and clutching Nixon as close as I can get him.

Nixon follows only seconds later, holding himself deep and still as his cock spews and spurts inside me, a sensation I know I’ll beg him to feel every day of my life. He’s panting and sweaty and smells like heaven, like sex and love and home. Like everything that was missing in my life.

Out of all the memories I have accumulated from my time on earth, there is no question that everything about tonight is my favorite.

When Nixon finally withdraws, searching my face to see how I’m doing, I let him see my tears, my smile, and I pull him close. “I’m perfect, Nix. I’m so fucking perfect, with you.”

He holds me while I cry, telling me how happy I make him, and how he can’t wait to share a life together.

When I finally wrangle my tears into submission, I take Nixon’s hand and pull him outside, and together we run straight into the warm ocean waves. I hoist him into my arms, loving the sound of his laughter, and when I bring him back to me, waves frothing at our waists, I lean in and taste the salt on his skin.

For the first time in my long life, I’m not sure what tomorrow will hold. But with Nixon at my side, I’m finally free to find out. And I can’t wait.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:50 am

Arit

B ecoming human was the best thing that's ever happened to me, aside from meeting Nixon, of course. In the last six months I've done more, learned more, and felt more than I had in the last million years. I might be book-smart, but where the ways of the world are concerned, I'm still a newborn.

Nixon has been my constant strength. Where I once thought being human would be a piece of cake, it turns out there's a lot more to it than I ever would have guessed. But together, we've tackled it all, from trying tuna fish sandwiches and apple pie, to enjoying relaxing baths and having sex so good it makes my toes curl. Nearly every single thing we do is new to me like the day I met Nixon's family, and I was so nervous I thought I might throw up. Who knew humans could go through so many emotions in such a short amount of time?

And getting sick? Horrible and wonderful in equal measure.

But so much has changed for us.

I was able to stay with Nixon for about a month before the living conditions in his apartment became unbearable. Thankfully, when Ada created a new life for me, that life came complete with an identity and a decent little purse. We've since moved into a one-bedroom flat to the south of Columbia but closer to Central Park. Nixon still walks to work, and I'm currently working my way through a highly accelerated degree program while he works.

It makes me laugh every time I complete a knowledge exam in whatever subject my

advisor hands me, and I get either a perfect score or perhaps I miss a question or two, and his eyes bug out and he asks me again where I went to school, how I haven't earned three degrees already, and am I sure anthropology is where I want to focus? So far, college is turning out to be a piece of cake, so maybe I'll stick around and get a degree in history or math, or linguistics as well.

I must say, however, that aside from the first night I spent with Nixon in Paris, and the night I became human, the most important thing to happen to me was the night Nixon proposed. There is definitely something to be said for the ability to cry because that night I cried like a baby, and Nixon held me through it all.

So now we're planning a spring wedding, we're talking about getting a dog but we might hold off if an invitation to attend my first archeological dig comes through, and Ada wants to stop by for a chat because she has an engagement-slash-wedding gift she wants to give us.

All in all, it's been a crazy six months, but I wouldn't change one single thing about it. I love Nixon more every moment I'm alive, every smile he sends me, and every touch we share. Our lives have blended together so seamlessly, I can't even fathom how I managed alone for so long.

I startle, lost in thought as I was, as Nixon comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. His smile is my entire world. "Staring at your eyes again?" he teases, slipping his fingers just inside the top of the knotted towel around my hips.

I must admit, Nixon has caught me staring at my reflection more times in the last few months than is probably normal or healthy. But cosmos above, I cannot get over how fucking sexy it is to see that amber-brown ring outlining my ice-blue irises. Just thinking about how many times I've jumped Nixon's bones, jacked off, or begged to be fucked in front of the mirror, so Nixon could claim me again and again, turning my eyes even darker for a few precious seconds has my blood heating and my cock thickening behind my towel. If we didn't have company coming over soon, I'd

happily drop to my knees right now.

“Not this time, sadly,” I reply. “Just thinking about you and our wedding and everything that’s happened. I just spaced out for a minute.”

Nixon’s smile turns warm and incredibly tender. He presses a kiss to my shoulder, his beard still tickling my skin. “It has been a busy few months.”

Reaching up, I nudge his chin so I can twist to kiss him properly. “I’ve loved every second.”

“Me too.” Nixon removes his fingers from behind the towel and tucks my damp hair behind my ear. “I just came to see what was taking you so long. Ada’s going to be here soon.”

Turning around, I lean my butt against the edge of the sink and pull Nixon close, letting him feel my arousal as our groins meet. I nuzzle his neck and trail a line of kisses from his ear to his shirt collar. “I know. Twelve minutes. More than enough time to get dressed and still suck you off.”

Through our mental link, I can tell Nixon would love to agree, sending me an image of us switching places against the sink with me kneeling at his feet, taking his cock like a champ. But despite his encouraging train of thought, he still laughs and nudges me in the ribs. “Not enough time. I like where that thought was headed, but we can be decent for an hour and keep our hands to ourselves.”

I send him an image of me keeping my hands to myself and my lips on him.

Nixon laughs again, but this time he presses up to kiss me instead of telling me to get dressed. I do my best to encourage him, opening easily and slipping a hand into his hair to hold him close. Our kiss only lasts about a minute before Nixon pulls away, already breathless and flushed. “Nice try, mister. Ten minutes. We can get back to

what you started later. Though I think the addition of some rope and a blindfold could be fun.”

Before I manage to pick my jaw up off the floor, Nixon slips from my arms and winks on his way back out of the bathroom. The idea of getting kinky with my man later is not helping my current situation. Adjusting my cock, I call out, “Tease,” to which Nixon laughs, but I relent and head to our bedroom to get ready for our guest.

I still can’t believe that in less than six months I’m going to be married to the man of my dreams. I mean, I know Nixon is mine beyond any shadow of a doubt, but love and marriage were things I never thought about. I had no concept of what it meant to love. I was just going through my days, endlessly plodding along as duty demanded.

Now, my days are full of a different kind of purpose, one of my own choosing.

Throwing on some dark-wash jeans and a pale blue sweater with tiny reindeer on it—I love having an ever-changing wardrobe more than I probably should—I quickly finish getting ready, and meet Nixon in the living room, where he’s arranging and rearranging the couch pillows.

I can’t help laughing. “Babe, I don’t think Ada is going to care what our cushions look like.”

Nixon looks up, his furrowed brow melting into a smile when he sees me. “You look good.” Coming over, pillows forgotten, Nixon wraps his arms around my waist and kisses me. “And I know, but she’s your Fate Mother. It’s her first time visiting. I just want her to see that our life is good. That we’re happy with our choice.”

“And you think rearranging the pillows will show her that?” I tease.

Nixon swats my ass. “Don’t be mean. I’m nervous. We haven’t seen her since everything happened. I just don’t want her to think—”

I shut Nixon up with a kiss, encouraging him to join when he initially resists. I only pull back when there's a knock on the door. Nixon startles away from me with wide eyes, and I can't help a smirk. "Time's up. Don't worry, Nix. She's Fate. She knows what she's doing. She knows we're happy."

Despite looking like he wants to argue, Nixon takes a deep breath and blows it out, nodding as he comes to take my hand. "I know. Sorry for freaking out."

I pull his hand up to press a kiss to the back, and together we go open the door.

Ada beams at us, looking like she just stepped off a tropical island and not like it's winter in New York City. "My boys! How are you?" She steps inside and hugs us both, pulling back to look at me with her hand on my shoulder. "Arit. You look so good. Like you were always meant to be."

Wrapping my arm behind Nixon's back, I say, "Thank you. I am good. We are good. Best decision I've ever made, becoming human."

She smiles warmly. "Indeed." She reaches behind her to close the door and then turns her attention our way again, a mysterious smile teasing her lips. "Congratulations on the engagement. It was lovely to receive your announcement."

I can feel Nixon's happiness like it's my own. "Thanks," he responds. "I'd marry him tomorrow if he'd let me, but he wants to wait and make a whole big deal about it."

I huff, knowing he's secretly thrilled to be having a more traditional wedding with both our families there. "Like you're not more into the wedding planning than I am. I believe it's you who is still undecided on venue—"

Nixon slaps a hand over my mouth with a laugh. "All right, fine." Ada and I join him. "We're only getting married once." He looks at me like I hung the freaking moon. "I want it to be the best day of our lives."

I can't help leaning in to kiss him softly. "The best day of my life was the day you allowed me into your heart. Every other day I get to spend with you is icing on the cake."

Ada sighs happily while Nixon shakes his head in amusement, swatting my stomach to keep things light. "You're too much." He turns back to Ada, holding out his arm in greeting. "Come inside, Ada. How have you been? How are things at Bells Two?"

We spend the next few minutes catching up, listening as Ada mentions things are busier than ever. But while she hasn't created any new Fates or reapers in the last few months, an outpost in Ireland has created two of each. I can tell Nixon is bubbling with curiosity about how that process happens, but he reigns himself in when talk turns to when we might visit Bells Two again.

"On that note," Ada says. "This is a good segue into why I'm here."

Nixon squeezes my hand, glancing at me with a giddy smile before he turns back to Ada. "Your gift. It's going to be our first wedding present!"

Ada smiles indulgently over Nixon's enthusiasm. "Precisely so. I hope you'll use it often and think of me when you do. Perhaps you can use it to come visit more frequently as well." She sends me a wink, and my heart suddenly takes up a gallop in my chest.

"What did you do?" I ask, scooting forward in anticipation, an anxious energy filling my veins.

"Just a little something to make your new life together that much more enjoyable." She glances at Nixon, who looks ready to combust, and then back to me before producing a small, golden band from inside her skirt pocket. Handing it to me, I gasp the second I feel the cool metal against my skin, and I know my eyes have gone wide.

A gentle hum, like a low-level buzz of energy, radiates into my palm and travels up my arm toward my chest. But I know from experience, this is no ordinary hum.

“What is it?” Nixon asks, probably sensing something from our bond but obviously not knowing the full extent of what this gift means. “What is that ring for?”

I look at Nixon, the man who is my future in every way while tears gather in my eyes. “It’s a portal,” I whisper shakily, glancing quickly at Ada, who beams and nods toward Nixon. I look back at the love of my life and say, “She’s just given us a key to the world.”

“What?” Nixon gasps, his head on a swivel as he looks at Ada, the band in my hand, and then back at me.

“It’s an energy portal. Or at least a way to channel energy to create a portal.”

“Holy. Shitballs.” Nixon’s eyes are huge, but a massive grin spreads across his face. “A portal? Like when you had your chariot?”

“My chariot was just a means of transportation. The portal was all me, using cosmic energy to dip through time and space.”

“That’s right,” Ada confirms. “Just because you’re human now doesn’t mean you don’t know how to channel that energy still. You only need a conduit. Put it on, Arit,” she urges, looking between us eagerly. I do and once the ring is on my finger, I feel an instant and comfortably familiar buzz surging through me. “Now,” she says, a peculiar twinkle in her eye. “Where would you like to go first?”

And I can’t contain my laugh as I launch myself at a giddy Nixon, more than ready to explore the world anew with him at my side.