



Ravished By the Reaper (Matchmaker Monster Romance: Prequel)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Don't fear the reaper. Especially when he haunts your filthiest fantasies.

She died ten years ago.

I brought her back.

I stalk her dreams every night.

My obsession.

My haunted Hayden.

My fated mate.

Now I've made a deal with a matchmaking demon so she'll be mine forever.

But can I save her from the revenants coming for her world? Or will this house of monsters be our last dance of death?

Ravished by the Reaper is a steamy prequel to the Matchmaker Monster Romance series. All books in the series have a happily ever after, fated mates, strong heroines, obsessed heroes, monstrous sexy times, and a cute mini monster familiar.

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CHAPTER ONE

Hayden

“ O oooh .” While the ghost in my passenger seat doesn’t rattle chains, she might as well drape a sheet over her head with the clichéd sound she makes as she helps herself to scattered artwork from my portfolio.

Not the architectural designs.

No, she goes straight for the monster smut.

Thank goodness she waited until I’d stopped at the last red light in town to pop out of nowhere.

“What will you call this one?” she asks, pointing to the dark shadows of a death specter sketched around a naked woman with her mouth parted in ecstasy.

If anyone else had seen my monster art, I would probably blush, but Good Time Glenda—whose name comes from her oversized shirt that says Here For A Groovy Good Time—won’t judge if the woman in the drawing has my hair, my figure, or...hell, heat rushes to my cheeks. Guess I’m blushing after all.

Focusing on Glenda’s question instead of my mortification, I say, “I was thinking an old-school romance novel sort of name. Something along the lines of Ravished by the Reaper. Too much?”

She shakes her head, not looking away from the sketch. “I dig it.”

Her sixties slang makes me grin despite the pounding headache that has steadily gotten worse these last few miles of driving up the California coast. “Thanks. I’m still working on the shading.”

“You planning to share it with anyone else?”

“No.” God no. My fans count on quirky and even creepy vibes from me. After all, I’m known on social media as @HauntedHayden. But they expect dramatically-lit gothic architecture or my historical narratives on macabre landmarks. “They want reality. Not monster smut.”

“Are you sure? This artwork is far out.” When the light goes green and traffic moves, she settles into the passenger seat as much as a ghost can while floating above the leather. “You don’t have to tell everyone he’s the spooky shadow man from your dreams.”

Don’t judge me for sharing my filthiest fantasies with a ghost. It’s not like I can tell anyone else I have a reaper lover who only visits me in my sleep. “No one would believe me.”

“They might.”

“Doubtful. Most people don’t die and then get shoved back into their bodies. Especially not by a sexy reaper who says he’ll come for you again...and you’ll be coming every night until then.”

“Depends. Sounds like something we groupies might’ve dreamed up while tripping on acid and following the band in a hip camper van like this. Hey, what’s your reaper’s name? There’s big power in names.”

“Wren.” I savor the way his name tastes on my tongue, the delightful shiver it sends through me even as I try to banish my building arousal. I am not showing up to the first day of an architectural consult with raging hormones that might as well scream WannaBe Reaper Slut as much as Glenda’s shirt will eternally define her.

“Hmm, Wren. It could be tribute to the badass little bird.”

“Or maybe he was named for the famous architect who designed so much of London after the Great Fire.”

“Only your brain immediately goes to history and architecture.”

“Probably,” I admit. “But it’s super on brand for me.”

“True. You start a new gig today?”

“Yep, a month-long history consultation.”

“Why’d you agree to such a long one? You spend a couple of days max at most places.”

“This one’s for charity. If I rough it for a few weeks and figure out the history of the house, a huge donation goes to the brain injury treatment center that helped me. A bunch of influencers applied for this job, and I won. There’s no way I could turn it down with a prize like that on the line. Think of all the people it could help.”

“Won’t you get bored?” she asks.

“Maybe.” I squint as rays of sunlight seem to reach through my custom-tinted windows like icepicks going straight for my head. “But get this, I already searched for the cliffside manor’s building and design records, and I found nada. There aren’t

even permits for renovations or news of local craftsman working on the place. No historic registry applications. Nothing. It's like it poofed into existence."

"Like this?" Glenda's question cuts out as she disappears, only to come back when she returns. "Guess you'll have to rely on your smarts and your secret sources." She preens. "It helps to have ghost friends."

"No kidding, and there should be plenty of ghosts around willing to talk. While the manor is missing a normal history when it comes to blueprints or building plans, it's infamous for murders and seances." I'm ready to launch into highlights of its gruesome past when a burst of pain across my temple has me gasping.

"You sure you should start a job with your headache so gnarly it practically called me to you?" Glenda asks. "I mean I stayed for the monster smut and the company, but you really should be curled up in a dark room."

"Is it that obvious?" The traumatic brain injury that brought me my sexy reaper and the ability to see ghosts also brought non-fun times like migraines, light sensitivity, and vertigo. The massively dark shades I wear everywhere help, but the California sun is brutal even while sinking into the ocean. All its rippling waves shimmer like bright, blinding little blades.

"I sensed your pain across the Veil so...yeah, I would call that obvious."

So much for thinking I could soldier through another migraine. "The treatment center needs that donation, I'm almost to the manor, and I'm super early. I'll pop a pill and close my eyes while I wait for the corporate type I've been talking to about the consulting job. A corporation called Underworld, Inc. bought the house. Wild, right?"

"Ugh, why would a company need a house? I hate the greedy more than actual demons."

I snap my gaze to her. The movement sends sickness rolling through me, yet I can't miss a chance to ask her, "You've met actual demons?"

She snorts a laugh. "You crush on a reaper and talk to ghosts. But yeah, some of the demons are kind of rad. I met a demon princess once. She has a major thing for reality television."

"Okay," I drawl. Because what else can I say to that ? "We're here." I swing the van into the drive and stop in front of an iron gate. "Let me enter the code, and we'll?—"

"Noooo." Glenda vibrates with a magical energy field I've never seen before. It radiates fear. But what could scare a ghost? "Wren isn't for a bird or an architect. It's for Render."

"What's a Render?"

She vanishes, leaving my question hanging unanswered in the air.

The gate swings open. I'm so rattled by Glenda's terror that I make it halfway up the drive to the magnificent manor in all its ruin and disrepair when I realize I didn't finish entering the access code.

What kind of place is this? Chills race over my skin, and lines zigzag across my vision. Adrenaline spikes the agony already screaming in my head.

Clearing the trees, I spot a man standing atop the few stairs leading to the front door of the house, staring as though he has been waiting for me.

When I'm hours early.

There's no car, no obvious way for him to have arrived. Yet there he stands, a few

miles from the nearest town.

At least his presence explains the gate opening without a code. He must've done it remotely after he saw or heard me pull in from the main road. Except the crashing ocean below would've muffled the quiet sound of my top-of-the-line electric van, and the trees blocked my view so how could he have seen me?

The pain roaring through my head has to be what's making me spiral into crazy conspiracy-level suspicions.

I take a deep breath and stare at the manor, trying to reason through at least the one thing that has made sense no matter where I travel or what historical weirdness I unearth. But the architectural mishmash of this house doesn't compute. I've toured the world, yet I've never seen another cobbling of contradictory towers, dilapidated balconies, and clashing eaves to rival the jumble before me.

Worse, not a single ghost comes out to see who has arrived. Ghosts are nosy by nature. If none have rushed to get the gossip first, the house isn't haunted.

Which means I'll need to pray to the history gods I can find some architectural clues inside.

My headache just got exponentially worse.

I pull to stop at a point close enough to give the guy who is way too hot for a corporate gig a friendly wave while I dig in my purse for my pills. Let him think I'm a social media diva who needs to touch up my lipstick before climbing out of the van.

I glance into my bag. It takes me two—okay, maybe three—seconds to grab my meds from the zippered pocket where I always keep them, but when I look up, the scarily hot guy is outside my driver's door window. My heart flies into my throat which

doesn't help my growing nausea.

How in the world did he get down the stairs, across the drive, and around my van so fast?

I shove at the door, ready to ask him, when he sweeps it open for me.

“Hello, Hayden.”

I swear a flash of scarlet gleams in his eyes.

What the hell is this guy? Because he definitely doesn't move like a human.

Or my migraine is epically worse than I thought.

Why couldn't I have taken my medication sooner? Or had a ghost host committee here to greet me rather than Mr. Corporate Evil?

I fight a groan. Clearly, I've been listening to Glenda's anti-establishment rants for far too long.

Dropping the pills back into my bag, I remind myself this is for charity, square my shoulders, and step out of the van.

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CHAPTER TWO

Wren

She's here.

My fated mate.

My love.

My obsession.

After ten long years of only being able to haunt her dreams.

To be with her, I would tear apart this dimension.

I offered a dealing demon my services as a Render if he could arrange a meeting in this realm and magic me the ability to become corporeal around Hayden. Theodopolis is the best matchmaker in history—and also the owner of this horrific house.

But why would he bring her here ? The revenants who torment this manor are by far the worst I've ever encountered. They could drive thousands of humans mad, yet this demon dares to expose my mate to them.

I leave for one day to handle a special op in another realm, and he Brings. Her. Here.

Fuck that.

She's signing something, her head bent low over a table inside her van. Her dark hair is swept over her shoulder, leaving her slender neck vulnerable and exposed.

I charge outside, prepared to rip him to pieces. He meets my gaze, and his human glamour wavers, his true form flickering into monstrous existence behind her. Within reach of her neck. A snap of his claws or a bite of his fangs, and he could kill her.

I won't let that happen. I unfurl my shadows, letting them writhe like tentacles ready to strangle the demon prince.

Except Hayden looks up and lifts a hand to rub at her forehead, the sunlight catching on her dark glasses and her brown skin. She's even more beautiful today than she was ten years ago when I poured her soul back into her body, unwilling to let my fated mate slip beyond my reach.

I freeze, not wanting to scare her in my full shadow glory, but it's too late.

She slips off her glasses and reveals those haunted hazel eyes that stalk my fantasies.

"Wren?" Her whisper of my name and the joy in her voice when she says it? It undoes me.

But then she gasps and crumples forward, holding her head.

Theodopolis reaches for her, and I push him away with a shadow, preparing to wrap it around his neck, but he teleports out of the path to reappear with a scowl.

Hayden goes limp, each muscle in her glorious body going lax. I sweep toward her, aiming my shadows her way while keeping the demon at a distance. Wrapping my true self around her in corporeal form, feeling her lush curves against me in more than a fantasy, seeing her in sunlight where I can spot the freckles her makeup or the

darkness usually hides—it's primal.

I'll never let her go.

"Humans," Theodopolis says. "They're so fragile." He drops his glamour, the scarlet skin and blazing eyes of his true form revealed. "Her fainting at first sight doesn't bode well for your match."

"She wasn't afraid," I argue. "It's her headaches. You shouldn't have brought her here."

"You wanted your fated mate. I have delivered her, complete with a signed matching contract." He flicks his claws toward the table where he and Hayden stood so close. Too close.

"Stay away from my mate."

"Gods save us from possessive monsters. You spend years as the most ruthless Render among reapers and now you think you get to walk into the land of the living and simply claim your happily ever after with the human whose life you spared?"

I growl because I can't kill him without setting Hayden down, and I won't risk that. Not until he understands the danger he has put her in. "I thought you guaranteed the safety of your matches. Isn't that part of the contract you dealing demons force upon them?"

His wings flare. I've hit a demonic nerve. Good. "The terms of the bargain," he says, "guarantee she will come to no harm by your hand...er, shadow tentacle things."

"I'll never hurt her. She's my fated mate."

“I know. I confirmed it before bringing her here.”

“Then you should’ve known I’d be outraged at you for putting her life in jeopardy.”

“I have plans for this house, so I did what was necessary to ensure you get rid of the revenants.” He sweeps his claws toward Hayden. “She arrived damaged.”

“She’s not damaged.”

“Whatever you call her current condition, it’s obviously excluded from our contract. Like I said, humans.” He lifts his shoulders in a shrug and his wings follow. “Weak.”

“May you be so lucky that the Fates match you with a human who is half as strong as my Hayden.”

“I would put up with a frail match for the exponential level up in magic the mating would give me.”

“It’s not always about power, my prince. Sometimes, it’s about love.” Obsession. Addiction.

He scoffs, his royal persona firmly in place from the tilt of his pointed chin to the spread of his wings. “If we’re done here?—”

“Your machinations gave her this migraine so the least you could do is magic us a healing potion from your realm. One crafted by your alchemist dwarf. Just make sure it’s from her first aid stack and not the explosive one.”

“Fine. Want a sedative added?”

I glance at Hayden, wrapped in my darkness with only the purple of my magic

skimming over her brown skin and dark hair as if it reaches for her as much as I have this last decade. Now, she's mine. Mine to hold. Mine to possess. Mine to care for. "A sedative would be good. Rest will help her headache."

The demon teleports away, and I'm left with my love.

With one shadow, I ease open the side door of her van. At least she hasn't changed this setup since I visited her here a week ago. Or was it months ago? Time passes so differently in the realms I wander between—looking for her. Pulling the bed into the center for a comfortable enough nest to allow her to sleep, I lay her on the mattress, putting away her protective sunglasses. She won't need those as long as I'm around.

Theodopolis appears in the open doorway. A small blue bottle stands out starkly against his red palm.

"Thank your alchemist for me," I tell him, easing Hayden into a sitting position. Her head turns to rest against my darkness, and her instinctive need to seek comfort from me makes me want to curl around her.

I don't resist the temptation to stroke a shadow along her cheek before turning to the task at hand. I sweep lower, to trace over her mouth. A thirst more tangible than being trapped for an eternity in a desert dimension takes hold of me, and I long for this woman. She is even softer in reality than in her dream state. "Open for me, Hayden. Take your medicine."

Her eyelashes flutter. She doesn't open her eyes, but she parts her lips on a heavy sigh. "Okay, Shadow Daddy."

The name she calls me in her dreams sends a jolt of lust and something heavier through me. Love, I know it. I've known it for years of watching her, stalking her, haunting her. "That's my good girl. Rest now."

Hayden snuggles closer, allowing sleep to take over.

Excellent. The healing can begin.

“Well, then,” Theodopolis drawls. For fuck’s sake, the demon’s still here. I’d hoped he might’ve teleported off to wherever pissy demon princes go. “I’ll leave you to wooing your mate. It seems you might not need the full month.”

I take one last chance to remind him of the danger he has put her in. “If the revenants hurt her because you forced her here, I’ll?—”

“I know, rip me apart. I’ve dealt with enough overprotective mates to quote all the threats by now.”

Gods save me from asshole demons. I settle with Hayden against the lumpy mattress, deciding I’ll hold her all night to keep her safe and comfortable. She smells better than ambrosia nectar from the Valley of the Gods.

“Maximus,” I call toward the house, figuring the stray pup I picked up a few trips ago might help comfort my mate.

Theodopolis looks toward the manor as though expecting something much bigger than my dog to come barreling out of the front door. “Keep Hayden away from the portals inside,” he says ominously.

“Why? You demon royals are the only ones who can open them, and you won’t jeopardize your contract.”

He doesn’t answer for a long moment. “Something strange is happening lately.”

“Stranger than a reaper coming to a demon for a matchmaking contract?”

“You didn’t hear this,” he says in a low voice. “But portals are opening when they shouldn’t.”

Fuck. That could spell disaster for this and every other world. But I have my own problems. Win my mate. Vanquish the revenants. The demons can deal with the portals. “I’ll protect Hayden at all costs. If it means torching your ruin to the ground, so be it. You can find another house to use as a trap for whatever women you plan to lure here.”

He shoots me a suspicious look. “What do you know of my?—”

Happy barks cut him off. Maximus ghosts through the door and charges for the van, his three skeleton heads bouncing atop a tiny body with a wagging tail. The tallest of his ears comes to the demon’s shin.

“What the fuck is that?” Theodopolis asks.

“A hellhound.” With a shadow, I scoop Maximus into the van.

“That’s no hellho?—”

I silence the demon with a look. If Maximus wants to believe he’s a hellhound to escape whatever trauma the fuzzy chihuahua obviously went through in his last life, then he can be a fucking hellhound. My dog curls up in furry pup form next to Hayden.

Theodopolis rears back as if Maximus has offended him worse than peeing on his tail. “I would never allow such hairy vermin in my bed.”

“You will if it pleases your mate,” I tell him with the cockiness of a reaper who knows what makes my woman happy.

“You have one month. To win her and to end the revenants.” He vanishes before I can tell him to piss off and leave us in peace.

“Glad he’s gone,” I say to Maximus, closing the van door and wrapping all my shadows around Hayden except for the dog’s spot near her shoulder. “Take out the revenants. Win the girl. Yeah, this won’t be so hard.”

I hope.

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CHAPTER THREE

Hayden

Pale early light peeks over the mountains to the east, casting the house in a desolate grey. I wrap my sweater tighter, not wanting to know what makes fog constantly surround the place as I plunge through it on my way inside.

There's a lot I'm ignoring this morning.

Like how I can't remember pulling the camper van's bed out last night or climbing into it or anything really after signing the non-disclosure agreement with the rep from Underworld. I couldn't even read the contract completely.

I let the headache go too long, and the migraine aura messed with my vision. But I reviewed it in the emails the rep and I exchanged, and I've signed a ton of consulting agreements over the years. They're all boilerplate, standard stuff. Other than the annoying clause he insisted on that keeps me from posting about my stay at the manor. No matter. It's worth a month of radio silence for charity. I've already prepped content and tested satellite internet so I can keep my followers happy and the algorithms fed while I'm here.

Yesterday evening, I'd barely been able to stand, let alone negotiate. Still, I must not have embarrassed myself too much in front of the pretty boy rep since he didn't toss me from the property.

That's a win.

Also a victory? The text from my therapist's office confirming my next telehealth visit won't be for another month. It'll give me a much needed break to process our last discussion of my abandonment issues from growing up an orphan, the awkwardness of being a trust fund baby who didn't fit in at my posh schools, or flashbacks to the mugging that had my skull connecting with a curb.

But I won't talk to my therapist about the ghosts.

Never the ghosts, or I'll end up on antipsychotics again.

I certainly don't mention Wren.

Not to anyone living.

Which makes me wish Glenda was here. Where'd she go? Why'd she take off so fast? I miss her chatter and the way she slips in words like groovy.

Shaking off my thoughts, I move from room to room inside the manor, doing a preliminary sweep of the interior features, taking snapshots of the windows, the crown molding, the door frames. None of which match, coordinate, or suggest any continuity in the design. By the time I reach the top of the third flight of stairs, I still have no better idea who built this house or when.

Worse, I'm so distracted that not even architecture, history, or the weird lack of ghosts can keep my attention. I could swear Wren held me all night. Not just in a dream, but on the thin mattress of the camper van.

He'd seemed so real.

I appreciate whatever miracle he worked on me. My headaches usually last for days if I don't medicate quickly enough. This morning, last night's migraine had disappeared

other than a dull ache.

He knows details about my headaches, my traumatic brain injury, my entire life that no one else would guess. We've shared more than physical intimacy during the thousands of nights we've spent together. He gets me. From my weaknesses to my fears to my obsession with macabre architectural details, he'll listen. More importantly, he knows when I need silence.

He's the perfect guy, even if he's not human. Maybe because he's not human. My past relationships fizzled more than they ever sizzled. But Wren...he's everything I could want in a man, reaper, whatever.

Which is crazy considering I've never seen him outside of dreams and...well, dying. When I teetered between life and death? The first time I saw that purple skull mask he magically up sometimes to wear beneath his hood and he said, Not yet, my beauty, in his gravelly voice? I should've been scared out of my mind, not turned on and wishing he'd wrap me up in his shadows and darkness.

Now, I live for the nights when he comes to me in sleep, teasing me until I'm begging my Shadow Daddy not to stop. He surrounds me in shadow, yet my body knows the weight of him, the heaviness of muscles I can press against but can't see.

The memory of all those times he has touched me, the sweet, kinda stalkery words he has whispered, the way he makes me feel like a queen—it sends heat to my belly and has my panties going damp.

A strange scratching from nearby interrupts my daydreams before they can become truly depraved.

Snick, snick, snick .

Is that the wind?

Or could it be a ghost?

God, I hope so.

My breath catches in my throat, excitement and curiosity winning out over any fear. I hurry into the closest room. “Hello?”

There’s no one there.

Light barely shines through the grimy windows. Turning my camera’s flashlight on at its lowest setting so as not to irritate a possible ghost source by blinding them, I double check the corners and shadows. A broken bed frame stands against a wall, exposed electrical wires run along another, and dust covers everything, its particles glittering in the lone beam.

“Anyone there?” I ask, hoping for an answer. What kind of historic home doesn’t have a single ghost?

A whine comes from behind the bed frame. I circle closer, my heart thrumming too loud.

I can do this.

I’ve been brave my entire life.

I’m in love with a reaper, for goodness sake. Though I haven’t confessed that truth to anyone. I take a steadying breath and swing the light to shine in the crack where the bed frame meets the wall.

Two bright eyes reflect back at me from ankle high.

Not a ghost. A stray.

“Oh, hello. Come on out,” I coax. “I won’t hurt you.”

The tiniest dog I’ve ever seen crawls forward. His fluffy black fur stands up in odd places, and his tongue pokes out. He hesitates, stopping a few feet from me. I step back so I don’t tower over him too much and sit cross legged on the ground, careful to avoid exposed nails or broken boards. He scuttles over to sniff at me, then wags his tail.

“Aren’t you the cutest?” I let him smell the back of my hand, giving him space and keeping my movements slow. “How’d you end up here? Huh?”

He whimpers and nudges my fingers, demanding a pet.

“You got a name, big guy? Can I call you Sparky?”

He huffs his discontent.

“Okay, what about Jet? Or Midnight?”

His pitiful, small snarls make me smile.

“Let’s get you something to eat.” I stocked my van’s kitchenette with enough food to last a week. There must be something in there for my new friend who trots at my feet.

A deep growl comes from behind us, making the hairs on my arms stand up. The little dog barks a yip big enough to make him bounce on his paws.

That's no animal, no ghost, no anything I've heard before.

The howl that comes next is even more terrifying. I scoop up my tiny friend and run. Adrenaline pushes me faster, my breath burning in my lungs because god knows I don't bother with a gym. These curves are fueled by coffee, carbs, and chocolate. No cardio necessary. Sure, my figure might not be popular on fashion runways, but my fans adore my fabulous look.

Obviously, whatever is chasing us? Not a fan.

Hugging the dog close, I round the last flight of stairs. My chest aches, my legs cramp, and I'm seriously regretting my choice of strappy sandals over sneakers, but I'm almost to the front door.

I glance behind us. Terrible grey beasts streak down the stairs, bones visible through their festering skin. Large antlers rise from their heads.

Shit .

What are those things?

Yanking at the door with shaking hands, I manage to tear it open as the vicious snarls and snapping come closer. The little dog jumps from my arms.

"No!" My scream comes out as more of a strangled gasp.

He's so small his legs make my fingers look giant, and his entire body doesn't come close to the size of one of their paws.

Except he doesn't fall to his certain doom or become a snack for those scary beasts. No, he transforms into a three-headed glowing skeleton of a dog.

I freeze. “What the heck?”

Ghosts, I can handle. But this? What is he? Worse, what are they ?

Time crawls, slithering in sickeningly slow seconds as I realize these might be my last moments. Will Wren come for me again when I die this time?

The beasts lunge at my little grim reaper dog, at me, and I can’t move. The world spins, and I can’t find my center.

Deep violet pulses through the air, around me and over my freaky friend’s three heads. A heaviness settles me, and I know before I spin to confirm what my body has already accepted with absolute certainty.

He’s here.

Wren.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wren

Hayden looks at me as though she's waiting for me to let her die.

Not a fucking chance.

I wrap her in darkness, shielding her eyes from the brightness of my magic and yanking her behind me as I tear apart the revenants who threatened her. Sometimes being a Render is tedious, cruel work that brings no satisfaction. But today, I delight in tormenting those who dared come after my mate. I rend the shattered pieces of them into smaller and smaller slivers until they are dust.

Hayden presses her hand to my back, and the ability to feel her touch in this form? It means everything.

"Am I still dreaming?" she asks.

"Does it feel like a dream?" My shadows swirl around her, brushing her skin.

"Maybe." She leans into me, and gods, I need to claim her as mine in waking hours as much as I have in dreams. "But I don't have nightmares of being chased through houses. Not since I met you."

No, I dominate her dreams, an apex predator who scares the other monsters away. "You should still be sleeping."

“Which means I’m awake.” A smile teases her voice. “Not dreaming after all.”

The gravity of how close I came to losing her forever hits me. “No, the revenants could’ve driven you insane, could’ve forced you into suicide. If I’d been seconds later returning?—”

“But you weren’t.” She moves beside me, and I wrap a shadow around her waist to keep her from going farther. Pointing toward Maximus, she says, “I guess he didn’t need me looking out for him, did he?”

It’s hard to hold onto my rage with her pushing against me and Maximus kicking at the dust leftovers of the revenants with his hind paws like he’s scratching up dirt to cover the mess. He yips with all three heads as though he’s the conquering hero.

“He didn’t,” I admit, “but the fact that you thought of saving him simply speaks to who you are. Maximus, check the rest of the house.” The dog stops barking, spins, and walks through a wall.

“Maximus,” she whispers. “No wonder he didn’t agree with any of the names I tried out. And yet, your three-headed dog disappearing isn’t the most unbelievable thing to happen today.”

I glance down to find her staring at me like there’s no one and nothing else here. As though she isn’t standing on the threshold of her worst nightmare, as though we weren’t just in the midst of monsters she should never have to deal with, as though she has all the answers she needs in my shadows.

This is my mate.

A shiver runs through her body, and my darkness instinctively tightens around her. Gods, to touch her, to have her look at me with the same heat and desire of her

dreams rather than fear like everyone does.

The scent of arousal mixes with the sweat on her skin. My every shadow reaches for her. The darkness at the core of my being is consumed by the need to touch and taste and claim her.

She's mine .

The word rings in my head, vibrates in my magic's veins, and pulses through me like no power I've ever known. I need to own her soul the same as she possesses whatever phantom of one I could imagine having.

Sunlight crests the mountains, sending rays of light through windows above and flooding the area where we stand. She squints, and I immediately surround her in darkness.

"You're really here?" The hope shining in her voice, the tender way in which she speaks the question—it holds the same need, the same obsession, the same certainty that lives in me. We're fated to be together.

"I told you I would come for you again."

She steps closer, and my darkness wraps us tighter in shadows. I savor each touch.

My body aches with the desire to pull her close. My every instinct demands that I make her mine. But I can't claim her, can't sink inside her. Not yet. Not until she makes that decision of her own free will instead of feeling pressured by a demon's bargain.

She places a palm flat on my chest. The pressure is more real than any dream, any fantasy, anything I imagined.

I am truly here with my Hayden.

“But I’m still alive,” she says, doubt creeping into her words. “Right?”

“You are.”

She banishes whatever uncertainty lingered with one of my favorite things about Hayden other than her glorious tits and that round ass—her immense curiosity. “Then how are you here with me now? While I’m awake?”

“I’ll tell you after you’re away from danger.” I nudge her farther out of the house. “I can’t risk you if more revenants come through.”

“Is that what those were? Revenants?” She doesn’t move, lost in thought and endless questions. “I’ve never seen them before. Are they a kind of spirit? Like pissed-off beast ghosts? Speaking of which, where are all the ghosts?”

I need her to stop thinking, stop asking questions, and let me get her to safety. She’s still rambling about the lack of afterlife on the property when I sweep her off the ground and into the shadows closest to where my magical core thrums the same as a human heart might. Hayden cuts off on a lovely, shocked squeak yet she doesn’t fight my touch. If anything, she curls closer.

While I walk with her wrapped in my shadow arms, I satisfy her inquisitive nature since I won’t be able to fulfill my own desires until I get her full consent to the mating bond. “Revenants are abominations, created by a necromancer who disrespected the dead he rose by stitching together pieces of their souls into those beasts. I still don’t know how many more he has made in addition to the ones already trapped inside the manor?—”

“A necromancer?”

I keep going because if I stop for every question, it'll be nightfall before I answer her biggest one. "As for the reason we can finally touch while you're awake? I made a deal with a demon prince. The same as you did."

"I. Did. Not."

Her outrage holds not a hint of fear. It's part of what drew me to her in the first place. Humans resist when a reaper comes for them. They can't win, but they try. Oh, do they try. Survival instinct combined with terror makes them fight or freeze. But not Hayden. She looked at me as though puzzling out who I was—who I really was.

Not a reaper come to collect her soul.

Not a monster.

But a man.

A mate.

It's as intoxicating now as it was ten years ago, as it has been every night I've visited her and teased her to pleasure in fantasies when I couldn't in reality. No, I can't think of how she looks when she comes undone beneath me. Not until we have this dreadful, necessary conversation.

"Does the name Theodopolis mean anything to you?" I ask.

"No." She scrunches her nose in the most adorable expression. "Wait, Theo? The corporate rep who was here to meet me? He's a demon?"

"He's crown prince of the hell dimensions."

“I knew there had to be something shady about a company calling itself Underworld, but they offered to give a ton of money to charity so I figured how bad could it be? I read the contract in advance, and there was nothing weird.”

“Are you sure it was the same contract that you signed?”

She tenses against me. “No. With the headache...”

“You don’t need to explain.” Spending every night together for ten years means we shared more than sex. We shared secrets. I know this woman as well as I know myself. “He tricked you. That’s what demons do.”

“But why ? Why would he need a social media influencer to tell him the history of the house? Why run a contest?”

“To lure you in. It’s my fault, actually,” I admit. “I should have warned you sooner. I would have if I’d had any idea he would dare bring you into this danger.”

“What danger? And how could this be your fault?”

I stay quiet until we reach her van and the wards I set around it before dawn. “See these markings?”

She glances down to the intricate salt, iron, and amethyst design I burned into the ground. “Oh, wow, this was hidden by the fog earlier. A mandala inside a pentagram.” My mate squirms in my shadows, leaning for a closer look, and I have to tighten my hold on her to keep her upright.

Her trust in me is touching, and I vow to myself to spend each day earning it.

“What is it?” she asks.

“It’s a protection ward.”

“Such radial symmetry and geometric harmony. Did you draw this?”

Of course she would be as fascinated by the artistry as she might be by the magical properties. “I did, and as long as you’re inside it, the revenants can’t get to you.”

“I’m in favor of the scary ghost beasts not being able to eat me.”

I tangle a shadow through her hair, letting the silky strands slide over my darkness rather than through it. “They wouldn’t devour you. Although I could go for a taste of you right now.”

She wiggles against me. “Okay, Shadow...” Her eyes go wide, and a flush steals over her brown skin.

“Yes, my beauty?” Because she’s the most beautiful vision—both inside and out—I’ve beheld in the years I’ve roamed between realms. I’ve known it from the first moment we met when I could see the threads of her soul reaching for me, drawing me in.

She sucks in a breath, and gods, how I wish to hear that sweet sound again when I sink between her legs. “I can’t say that out loud,” she mumbles. “I mean, what I call you in my dreams, I don’t know if I can...”

“You did last night in front of the demon.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

Hayden

“ I didn’t.” I could die of embarrassment. Although the death part isn’t as funny with a literal reaper carrying me when I’m finally able to touch him, to feel him the same as though my fantasies have become reality. But still? I said that in front of an actual demon prince?

“You most certainly did.”

This is a thousand times worse than Good Time Glenda finding my latest monster smut art.

Deflect ! I can’t dwell on my mortification, or I’ll become an awkward, rambling mess.

Instead, I say, “Let’s get back to why you needed to build a protection ward, which oh my god, I’ve never seen a real one. Or maybe how you think me signing a demon contract was your fault?”

He moves to put me down, and I hate the separation. I tighten my hold on him, forcing him not to let go, and I’m rewarded by the deep violet thrum of the magical core he once told me sits at the heart of his shadows. I’m guessing by his reaction that he likes me snuggling close and being a needy girlfriend.

Good, because I’m about to be the clingiest boo ever if he thinks I’m going to stay in

the van while he wages war against those ghost beasties inside the house.

Although he could leave the dog with me. Preferably the one-headed, fluffy version, but the other could be cute in his own weird way.

“I set the wards before I left because the revenants are attracted to human souls,” he says, tackling what I imagine to be the easier of the questions first. “They would drive you and any other human they touch insane and suicidal within moments.”

“Okay, that’s bad.” A thousand questions about them circle in my mind, but I put a pin in those for now. “And the contract?”

He doesn’t wear his magical skull mask so I can see his face, but with the shadows and the hood, he’s hard to read. His eyes have no pupils so I have to judge by the shade of magic shining through the openings in his shadows. Luckily, he doesn’t flash his mouth full of fangs. So at least he’s not pissed, just annoyed.

Fine, he can be annoyed.

I distract myself from the discomfort of studying him like he’s an architectural masterpiece by wrapping his arms—does he call them arms? Because they feel like arms.—around me and waiting not so patiently until he answers. Other than his shadowy cloak and hood, my reaper rocks the look of Slender Man’s tentacle action with hints of the broad shoulders and a solid chest I’ve felt in my dreams. Those shadows aren’t wisps. They’re solid beneath my fingers, and I can’t stop touching him. No matter how alphahole withholding of information he’s acting.

“First,” he says, “you have to promise not to step outside the wards without me, and you cannot under any circumstances go inside the house.”

“Nuh uh, you don’t get to avoid the question, and I’m getting inside that house

because whatever else was in the demon's bargain, I agreed to give him its history within the next month."

"There is no human history to the construction of this house. Or at least not one that isn't woven with magic."

"Damn it, I don't even know how to process what you just said except that demon bastard still better pay up to the charity."

"Oh, he will. I'll make sure of that."

"The contract? The whole luring thing?" When his magical heart fades to lavender-grey, I add, "Oh no, those were your words. I'm just repeating them back to you." When he stays quiet, I soften my tone. "Don't I deserve an explanation for why I'm here? How you're here?"

"Remember when I told you we are fated mates?"

"Like in romance novels." I can't help but think of my latest drawing of him. "I remember."

"We are destined to be together. Theodopolis is a matchmaker—the best matchmaker. He confirmed we're fated mates and agreed to have you enter into a matching contract if I would clear the house of the revenants. I should have been here when you woke this morning."

Ookay, so I have to ask one more question before we get back to the demon thing. "Where did you go?" Because honestly, why'd he leave me on his very first day of us being able to be together?

"I was tracking down the remaining lairs of the necromancer who created the

revenants.”

I can’t argue with him trying to save the world from creatures who can drive humans insane and ultimately lead to terrifying deaths.

He keeps going. “If I can cut off their creation, then I will limit them to the ones already trapped inside the house or with a direct connection to it. It’s the only way I’ll be able to rend them all in a month.”

“Rend?” What was it Good Time Glenda said before she vanished? “Render?”

“Yes.” At my confused look, he continues, “I thought I’d told you.”

“Nope, can safely say you’ve never used that word around me.” Or I would’ve recognized it before my ghost friend disappeared.

“I’m a Render.”

“You’re a reaper.” Yeah, I feel stupid arguing with him about who or what he is, but seriously...our whole first encounter at my death, the hood, the flowing robe of shadows—it all adds up to reaper. Plus, he’s definitely mentioned being a reaper before. “That’s how we met. Not a storybook meet cute, but it worked out, right?”

His magical heart pulses violet again, and his mouth twists into a smirk. “I would say it has more than worked out.”

Oh god, if he keeps talking like that, I’ll forget any of my questions about demons and ghosts so we can cut straight to the sexy times. “A Render?” My voice comes out breathy. Yep, gonna need to skip the talking and see if my Shadow Daddy won’t reenact one of our best nights from the lengthy highlights reel playing in my head.

“It’s not pretty. I tear apart souls of those condemned to a fate worse than damnation.”

“But not...normal ghosts?” I realize it’s not normal to discuss any ghosts, but hey, I’m talking to my reaper or Reaper boyfriend.

“No. Never the soul of a human.” He tightens his grip on me for a moment. “Most reapers spend their lives guiding the dead to the Bridge of Souls so they can cross to the other side with the help of the gargoyle queen.”

Who created a bridge worthy of transporting souls? Is it a tangible bridge like we have in the human world or more of an imaginary construct? Is it made of beams, cables, or arches? While I’m still fighting my need to demand an answer to design questions, my mind races to a more troubling issue. “Wait, did I go to this bridge? Did they reject me? I don’t remember meeting any gargoyles.”

“I was supposed to take you, but I couldn’t let you go.” He slides a shadow through my hair and along the nape of my neck. “There was an emergency in the After Worlds, and I filled in for a regular reaper that night. The Fates truly meant for us to meet. Normally, I only work special ops.”

“A warrior reaper?”

“As close to that as my kind have.”

“Oh my god, my guy’s the Seal Team Six of reapers.”

“Yours?” The violet deep within his chest flickers to a dangerous, dark shade, but before I can ask why, he speaks again, “I signed a deal with a demon to have a chance of being together with you in this realm.”

“I thought it was about you agreeing to clear the house of revenants.”

He slides his shadows along my collarbone and lower. “For a chance to touch you, I would’ve agreed to anything. For a chance at forever together, I would’ve torn the souls of anyone apart. I have no boundaries when it comes to loving you.”

My brain goes to absolute mush. I can’t remember why we talked instead of jumping each other on first sight. Given his crazy I’ll Rend The World For You speech, the heat of his shadows tracing my breast and then dipping inside my top should not be making my heart beat faster. And I should absolutely not be wondering what happens if I drag him against a horizontal surface. A vertical surface. Hell, in midair if he’s willing and able to make my fantasies a reality.

I suck in a breath as his shadow moves down and over the curve of my hip.

This is my Shadow Daddy, my reaper, my mate.

Mate?

Fated mate, yes.

“Prove it,” I whisper.

He teases me, his shadows playing along my jaw, the curve of my breast, hiking up my dress to brush the edge of my panties. His mouth comes close enough to brush my ear in the softest whisper, his fangs a delicate graze over my skin. His touch is barely there and yet my skin comes alive. The dark magic of him being against me makes me forget everything except for my reaper.

“Say yes,” he says on a growl. His mouth closes over mine. This kiss isn’t gentle, isn’t teasing. It’s all tongue and fangs. The scrape of his fangs across my bottom lip

sends another spike of heat straight to my core. “Tell me to make your sketch a reality.”

My breath catches in my throat, my head fuzzy with hormones and want and need .
“Wh...what?”

“Your art. The way you drew us together. You looked so gorgeous in the throes of climax, a mirror of the look I love when I bring you to orgasm again and again. You crave that pleasure now, don’t you?”

I can’t even work up the energy to be embarrassed he’s seen my very intimate artwork of us in our most erotic moments. I’m so wrapped up in him I can only say one word.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER SIX

Wren

My mate.

My sole desire.

My universe.

I unleash all that I am, all that I want to give her. My shadows engulf her, my essence sliding against her skin, teasing her breasts, thighs, and ass. Having spent the last decade focusing on her pleasure, I cheat by going straight to the touches I know she likes best.

Skimming a shadow over her dark hair, I stop at the purple highlights, the color so close to my magic's. "Is this for me?"

"Y...yes." She stutters, my beautifully articulate Hayden, as I cheat by stealing her attention with parting her thighs to slip between.

I slide my mouth near the upper curve of her ear, my tongue teasing the delicate skin there in what I know will make her shiver. My magic plays with the fabric of her dress, tugging at the material until it slides up to her waist.

Hayden reaches down, her fingers closing around one of my shadows. I pulse for her, making sure the shadow she has grabbed grows beneath her fingertips, and she

shivers when I send a throb of power to zing against her hand. She gasps, her lips parting as the energy sparks against her, my shadows enveloping us both—to keep her safe, to keep her hidden, to keep what’s mine exclusively for my pleasure alone.

“Beg me, my beauty.” I need to hear those sweet cries she makes when she submits. “Beg for what you want, what we both want. You coming on my shadows. Scream for it.”

A whimper falls from her lips. She glances down between us. My shadows pulse under her touch while the raging violet of my magic lights her in a flickering play of darkness and light. She looks exquisite riding my shadows, chasing her own pleasure.

“More. P...please.” There’s that lovely stammer again. The proof she’s as lost in desire as she has been for thousands of nights beneath my touch. Except this time it’s real.

My magic swirls between her thighs. I need her. My hunger is like an ocean that won’t stop rising. I could take us both below its waves.

She rocks her hips and squeezes her thighs tight against my shadow. “I n...need more. I need all of you.”

Ah, so she remembers from our fantasy play how stretched she feels when I fuck her fully. She knows this is but the tiniest tease.

I play with the edge of her panties, slicking a thin shadow through her silky wetness.

She lifts her chin. A challenge? A test of my patience?

She will fail.

My mate, my lover.

“Take what I give you,” I tell her. “ Trust what I give you.”

Hayden surrenders herself completely into my hold, letting me keep her body suspended while I toy with her. Controlling her pleasure, knowing I can make her scream? It’s intoxicating. I use my shadows to strip her panties from her, tracing each inch of skin as they pass from her thick thighs to her knees and finally slipping over those toes painted with purple polish.

She doesn’t struggle when I lift her into the air, parting her thighs to bring her sweet pussy to my face. “Gods, your scent is addictive. You will be my undoing.”

Fear should have her fighting against bringing her most private places within nipping range of my multitude of fangs, but she gives herself to me the same as she has every night.

“Spread your legs wide for me,” I demand.

She lets me hold her open, wrapped in my darkness with no light except the violet of my magic painted vivid with lust flickering across her skin.

I lick into her, and the taste of her is exhilarating—even more than the dream version. Not bothering with slow or gentle, I devour her.

My obsession grows stronger than the already monstrous level that had me sending her back to this life.

I will never get enough of her.

One decade has only made me need more. I can’t imagine being less ravenous if we

get another dozen together.

I want to mark her skin, and when my fangs skim her inner thigh, I nip her gently.

She moans and squirms against my shadows.

I lift my head from between her thighs to gaze into her face, needing to see every expression, every change, as she comes. I can do more with my tongue than any human male could with his cock, changing its shape, form, and length to dive wickedly inside her. With my shadows, I caress every part of her, savoring the weight of a breast, the softness of her belly, the space where her spine dips in a delicate curve above her ass, and, of course, her clit.

She clamps around me, her cries filling the darkness.

My Hayden comes so beautifully, so divinely. Her mouth falls open, and her eyes flutter shut, her hair a wild mess of waves from the tug of my shadows against her. The sound of her ecstasy has my erection throbbing, but I ignore the ache.

I can't.

We can't.

Not yet anyway.

Not until she understands the stakes. Fucking in fantasies is one thing. But sex with my fated mate in reality? It would seal the mating bond. She would be mine forever . Yet the demon's bargain requires her consent with full understanding of the consequences.

As much as I despise the demon prince, he's not wrong.

I pushed Hayden into the last ten years because I wanted her. Forcing her back into her body, back into this life without a choice of going to the After Worlds? That was because of my obsession, not out of consideration for her.

Letting her down until her feet almost touch the ground, I straighten her dress, although her panties...those I don't return.

"Even better in reality than the hottest fantasies," she whispers.

"So much better."

A lazy smile curves her lips, and she slides a hand through my shadows. "And we've only begun."

At that, I finally let her go, sweeping a shadow along her jaw. "No, I have to woo you properly first."

She rises on her tiptoes, pressing against me. "Consider me wooed."

"There are things you have to know before we?—"

"I thought we knew each other pretty well after ten years of shared secrets."

"Yes, but—" I stop mid-sentence, lifting my head at the sounds from the gate that shields the property and pushing her behind me. I've warded her van against revenants. What I failed to ward was the property against outsiders. Damn .
"Someone's here."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Hayden

Good Time Glenda's voice reaches me before I make it to the gate with Wren trying to shield me the entire way. I break into a run, pushing past him as I round the last curve. "Glenda, thank goodness you're okay."

"Me?" She clings to the gate like she's wrapping her ghost fingers around prison bars. "We came to bust you out before the Big Bad tears apart your soul."

We? I glance around at the ragtag crew, blinking against the sunlight because I forgot to grab my prescription shades. They'd been the last thing on my mind when I'd been wrapped in thrumming shadows, surrounded by seductive darkness, and one moment away from insisting Wren have his way with me.

Wooing .

Who the hell needs wooing? Not me. Not after ten long years of teasing and endless sexual tension only he can satisfy.

Sure, I had one glorious orgasm with him eating me out like I was a gourmet delicacy.

Fine, it'd been absolute bliss to have him lift me as though I weigh nothing and run his shadows beneath my dress to the point I felt more exposed than I've ever been naked.

More than that—I felt worshipped.

But when had my Shadow Daddy decided I needed to be babied rather than bossed around?

Glenda's hands pass through the gate as she reaches for me. "We've come to help you escape. I gathered everyone who haunts the local graveyards and the few others willing to brave a Render. Bertie the Bard here says a Render can't pass through iron bars." She gestures toward a ghost who looks as though he escaped from a muddy Ren Faire with a turkey leg still gripped firmly in his fist.

Wren's magic wraps around me, his shadows teasing against my ear. "Bertie the Bard should've studied his folklore better," he whispers, his deep voice making me shiver regardless of how mad I was at him only seconds before. "Iron works against fae, maybe a few witches, and some ghosts—although obviously not this half-dressed one."

"She's my friend," I tell him. "It's not her fault she died without pants. Or a skirt." Or probably undies although I've never looked too closely because her shirt's bubble-lettered Here For A Groovy Good Time seemed a clear sign not to. "Would iron do anything to revenants?"

He pauses. "It might stun them. I've never tried."

"Does iron hurt you?"

"Definitely not. It has no effect on reapers. I used it in my own wards to keep you safe. Give me a moment, and I'll deal with these intruders."

"No." I move to the gate, pressing my fingers as best I can to Glenda's ghostly ones. "Wren won't hurt me. Just like he won't hurt you, right?" I call to him over my

shoulder.

“Depends,” he mutters. “Will she interfere in my wooing you?”

“I don’t need wooing,” I say.

“Ooh, wooing,” Glenda announces at the same time with a not at all scary wooooo ghost sound. “Every woman deserves wooing.”

“See,” Wren argues. “Your friend agrees with me.” Suddenly, he’s a Glenda fan. Sort of. Close enough.

Maximus chooses to appear that very moment in his fuzzy chihuahua form, tongue out and tail wagging.

“The legendary black dog,” Bertie the Bard calls out on a wheeze. “A portent of death. We’re doomed.”

Okay, the oooh ghost noise is getting old. Also, I’m pretty sure Bertie choked on that turkey leg he’s waving around.

“We’re already dead, dummy,” Glenda says.

I pick Maximus up and cuddle him before the weird medieval-wannabe ghost creeps him out. It doesn’t matter that the pup can transform into whatever wee three-headed beastie he became before. No one needs to be picked on. Especially not by a doomcaster like Bertie.

“Wren isn’t here for you,” I tell them. “Nor is Maximus. They’re after the revenants.”

“Sure.” Bertie huffs a mean laugh. “Like anyone will believe those exist. You’re just

lying to cover for your soul-eating boyfriend.” He disappears before Wren can get past the arm I fling out to stop him.

My Render has magicked his purple skull mask on and he looks ready to tear through the Veil to get to the little weasel. The sneer that stretches from ear to ear across Wren’s face shouldn’t be so scary. Or so hot.

“Bertie’s a crackpot,” Glenda says, interrupting my lust fest over my thirst trap of a boyfriend who is totally rocking the Special Ops Reaper look right now. “No one’s buying what he’s selling. Right, guys?” One by one the ghosts behind her vanish, leaving her standing alone on the other side of the gate. “Chickens,” she mutters.

“Thanks for checking on me,” I tell her. “Seriously, you risked everything and came to rescue me. You’re the best friend ever.” I glance at Wren. “It doesn’t matter that I didn’t need saving.”

He makes a stiff bow that seems oddly gentleman-like considering the contempt in his voice earlier when he’d been talking about the ghosts in general and Glenda’s lack of pants.

Maximus leaps from my arms, through the iron bars, and into my friend’s waiting hands. Her face immediately lights with a giant grin. “Who’s a good baby ghost dog, huh?” she asks on a coo. “You are. Yes, you are.”

I glance at Wren, startled because Glenda can hold the dog and—what the hell—I’ve held the dog, things that should be mutually inconsistent. “How come your tiny dog is a ghost with a corporeal form?” I keep my voice low which is likely unnecessary between the dog’s excited yips and Glenda’s steady praise. “Did Maximus make a deal with a demon, too?”

Wren’s mask contorts into a look of shock before he drops it altogether. “No, but my

bargain probably explains your ability to pick him up right now. When I found Maximus, he'd been abused and abandoned in his life in this realm, and his spirit was fading on the other side."

"He's a rescue?"

"I couldn't just leave him there," Wren says as though he's explaining a simple fact.

Except the truth has to be that someone else did. Probably multiple someone elses.

"So you saved him like you did me?"

"You weren't a rescue. You're my mate. You also had a life to return to. He didn't. I imbued him with some of my magic to keep him from fading into nothing. Look closely at his coloring, and you'll see it."

I do as he asks, taking in the pup licking my friend's face from his pointed ears to his curled tail. His fur gleams black, but in the sunlight, the deep purple undertone beneath the glossy ebony is obvious.

My Render shared his magic, his essence, his friggin' life force with a rescue dog. Talk about a massive moral compass.

Suddenly, his insistence that he be allowed to woo me before we go further physically makes an odd sort of sense. It could even be considered charming and old-fashioned instead of condescending.

I stare up at him, his face hooded and undetectable now except for his eyes. "How long do you plan for this wooing to take?"

"The month Theodopolis has given us. Time enough to make sure you're convinced we're mates destined to spend whatever time the gods grant us."

“I don’t need?—”

“Because a mating bond requires full consent, to know that you’ll be with me for the rest of our years—for better or for?—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know the spiel.” I don’t remind him how I’ve literally been with no one else but him in fantasy form for the past decade. “I’ll give you two weeks to figure out I made up my mind years ago.”

“Three weeks,” he counters. “I won’t rush this. Not like I did last time.”

I want to ask him what he means, but he closes off. The purple of his magic goes dim, shrouded entirely in shadows. He is offering to compromise on his timeline. I should probably take the win even though my body screams now , now , now . “Fine. Deal?”

“Deal,” he says solemnly.

My hormones hate me already.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Wren

We've only had a half dozen revenant attacks in the tortuously long weeks since I promised to woo my mate. When I arrived, they swarmed a half dozen times a day. These latest assaults have been smaller with fewer beasts to rend. I'm hoping that means I've found and destroyed most of them.

I return from wrecking what should be the last necromancer lair to find my mate sitting with her ghost friend in matching lawn chairs on top of the camper van, her feet propped on a cooler with cotton balls between her toes.

Maximus blinks from my side to her lap. Smart dog.

"Happy hunting?" she asks him.

He bounces on his hind paws, trying to lick her face. Okay, not terribly smart since he could leap a few inches when he just magicked his way across the drive and atop a van, but he's got the right idea.

"What's this?" She slips the delicate chain from around his neck, holding up the iridescent black crystal attached to it.

"Your next gift," I tell her. "A charm from my home."

"In the Shadow Realm?" she asks, twisting the polished stone to inspect it in the

moonlight. Happiness and curiosity fill her voice, and I'm pleased that, once again, I've picked a perfect gift for my mate.

Her friend floats through the table between them for a closer look. "How's that work? I mean, if it's from a realm of shadows, how come it's solid?"

Hayden smiles. "I know this one. Because it's a realm inhabited by shadow beings like Wren, not literally made up of shadows. Although the legendary shadow monsters who terrorized the hell dimensions for centuries aren't allowed to live there, which seems understandable if they're that scary."

She remembers everything I've told her about my home world. Yet another sign we're meant to be together.

"Thank you for my gift," she says to me. "Glenda has kept me company while I redid my polish." She wiggles her toes. "Purple passion."

"It sparkles," Glenda adds.

"We've been moon bathing." Hayden makes it sound fun, light-hearted. Not as though she grieves her inability to enjoy sunlight like other humans.

Or as if she blames me for her light sensitivity along with her headaches.

I haven't been able to ask her. I've tried. I can discuss anything else, except my fear of her not choosing me.

Can I really walk away from her if she decides she doesn't want to be mated to a monster?

No.

Absolutely not. I'm still the same reaper who couldn't let her go ten years ago.

I need her to love me. To accept or even forgive the choice I took away from her then by giving her one now.

If she says no and the demon's matching contract runs out, then I'll be relegated back to her dream world. That can't happen. Which is why I've used these weeks to keep her safe, bring her gifts, answer her endless questions, and give her multiple orgasms every day.

Also, I've made an effort not to protest her weird ghosts wandering the property except when they interrupt my attempts at wooing.

"You have plans for the rest of the night?" I ask her. "If not, I thought you might want to continue your exploration of the house." Where I'll have her to myself. Thank the gods the ghosts don't come inside the house so I'm not distracted while looking out for my mate.

"The cavern?" she asks.

Why didn't I put limits on her exploration? "As long as it's safe enough."

She jumps from her chair, pulling away the cotton balls and shoving her feet into sandals. "You okay with me abandoning you until tomorrow, Glenda?"

"Sure," the ghosts says, waving her off. "Have fun. Maybe toss out the three-week rule and have some real fun." She disappears before I can say anything.

Frustrating, free-loving phantom.

"Here, can you take Maximus?" Hayden leans over the side of the camper van,

handing the tiny dog to me even though it's obvious he could get down by himself. He blinks pitiful eyes at me, and I take him rather than remind her he's a ghost.

Then I reach for her instead of letting her take the ladder.

"Oh." Her sweet sound of surprise makes my move worth it.

I run a shadow below the curve of her generous ass, using the excuse of holding her close while I lower her to the ground. Three weeks, and we have only a few days left to go. Yet my control frays with each passing hour. "We could stay here instead," I suggest, thinking of new ways to make her come. The advantage of having a shadow form means there are endless variations to try and pleasure my woman.

"Cavern," she says. "Now. Wait, no. First, help me put on my new bracelet you brought me, then we go exploring." She holds up her hand with the chain and crystal.

Creating the tiniest tendrils of shadow, I fasten the clasp and spin it so the charm is on top. "Do you like it?"

"It's my favorite of the treasures you've brought me."

"You say that every time."

"Because I love them all, from the pixie-sized door to the nymph-crafted sketching reeds, but this is special because it's from your home." She reaches toward me, and I pull her into my side.

The fact that she loves my realm's artwork best delights me. If only I could take her there one day. But for now, I'm content to simply accompany her into the house for her research.

Maximus trails behind us.

“You say it’s always dark in your home realm?” she asks as we head through the front door.

“There is some light, but only enough to let us travel from shadow to shadow. We don’t require more.”

“How would someone like me get there?”

“You mean a mate?” I ask. If I had a heart, it would skip a beat at the thought of her wanting to live in the Shadow Realm.

“I meant human,” she says, her hazel eyes teasing. “But sure. Is there a way to travel there if you’re not a shadow being?”

“You’d need a royal demon to either teleport you or open a portal for you.”

“Like the portal you said you felt in the basement here? By the way, that basement makes no sense from a structural viewpoint. Why build a staircase to nothing?”

“Because it leads somewhere when a portal is open. The fact it’s below ground suggests a connection to the underground realms. Maybe the minotaur king’s labyrinth or one of the dwarves’ jewel mines. No, I’ve not been to either, but I’ve heard stories.”

To my surprise, she doesn’t question me on those realms. Instead, she simply snuggles into my shadows. “Hmm. Nothing about this house adds up. Mismatched wings, doors to nowhere, a window that opens to a wall.”

“Does it match what your ghosts tell you?” I ask.

“None of them remembers even a rumor about when it was built or for what family. The exterior appearance has changed versions from a ceremonial temple to Rancho Adobe to whatever bastardization of Victorian this is.” She gestures at the narrow hallway we’re in with its high ceilings and hidden nooks. “Apparently, it has burned multiple times, but the house simply comes back. They say it’s cursed.”

I consider the several species other than human who could’ve crafted such a place to protect the ley lines, but only one stands out given the portal access and fire resistance. “More likely it’s demon built.”

“Like the one who led us both here.”

“Exactly.” We reach the end of the hall where a steep drop off leads to a cavern carved into the cliffside. At the bottom of what looks to be rickety stairs, a grotto of bottomless water sparkles. I hold tight to Hayden.

“Sit, Maximus,” she says. “It’s not safe.”

To my surprise, the dog drops onto his butt, shaking anxiously as he awaits her praise.

“He can’t be hurt,” I remind her. “You should be more worried about your safety.”

“Why?” She glances up at me without a trace of fear in her eyes. “You wouldn’t let me fall.”

Her trust in me? It means everything.

Peering over the side, she asks, “What would a demon want with a pool of water in their house?”

“Access to the ocean is my best guess.”

She frowns. “For something like a smuggling operation?”

“To make it easier for sea monsters to come inside.” I don’t fight her when she takes a large step back from the edge of the drop off.

“Wouldn’t they have a problem with the stairs?”

“Not necessarily. Some can walk on land. Others could find a way. You’ve seen what I can do with shadow tentacles.” To my immense satisfaction, she licks her lips as if she remembers exactly how I’ve pleased her with them.

She clears her throat. “Any other hypotheses for the cavern’s uses?”

“In the Valley of the Gods, there are demigods who can cross worlds by riding sea horses that don’t need a portal. I can think of several reasons the demons would have wanted this cavern. I can think of even more why you shouldn’t go down there.”

Rather than argue immediately, she hesitates. “What am I supposed to tell the demon who brought us here when he expects me to give him a history of the house?”

“Ask him who in his family built the damn thing. Or who he pissed off enough to have revenants sent here.” I hate Theodopolis for dragging her into this and using her career against her. He used our being fated mates and the matching contract as a trap to make sure I wouldn’t let her leave, no matter the danger.

“You gonna beat him up for me if he doesn’t like those answers?” Her voice turns coy, teasing.

“Worse, we can send your friend Glenda to haunt him.”

She laughs. “You’ll never forgive her for popping up in the van that day, will you?”

“For interrupting us when you were about to come on my shadows? No. It’s why she’s banned from inside the van. Why all of them are banned from it. The last thing I need is to rend Bertie the Idiot Bard’s soul into pieces because I caught the creeper watching you in the little shower you have in there.”

She traces her hand through my shadows. “I would let you watch me in the shower.”

I scoop her up and move through the house toward the van like a monster possessed.
“Excellent idea.”

CHAPTER NINE

Hayden

Maximus pants, wagging his tail and looking out the window at the coast, the setting sun, or whatever has captured his doggy attention so thoroughly. Glenda sits cross-legged above the passenger seat and still, he's so tiny, he perches on one of her thighs.

"He's such a happy pup," she says, stroking a finger over his head. "Who's a good boy? Who's a soft boy?"

He bounces my way, but I shake my head. "Nope, I'm driving, and we both know you will sink right through me." Without Wren in the van, the pup can't keep his corporeal form. I wasn't even sure he could go with us on our supply runs. Yet here he is on his third trip.

"We'll be back soon and you can sit in Hayden's lap since we know she's your favorite," Glenda says. "Maybe while she sits in her Shadow Daddy's lap."

"Not that you'll be allowed to watch," I tell her. "Interrupt any more sexy times, and Wren may ban you from the property."

"He's still holding that against me? I popped in by accident once, and I was cheering him on. We're in the middle of a groovy sexual liberation. His making you wait is so last century. I love the wooing, but what's his deal?"

“I’m honestly not sure anymore. According to him, if we have sex, it’ll complete the mating bond, and we’ll be locked together for the rest of our lives.”

“Heavy. Like marriage. Or prison.”

“Riiight,” I drawl, trying to piece together why Glenda sees those two things as equal, then deciding I’m not opening that coffin of undead trauma. “So it becomes how could we make that work when we’re from two different worlds. Literally.”

“But you can’t go to his home,” Glenda argues.

“According to Wren, the demon who brought us together this time could take me there, but it’d be a one-way trip.”

“I’m guessing by your tone that you don’t want that.”

“I’d love to visit his world, but I like this one too. I have friends?—”

“All of whom are ghosts,” she argues.

“Still counts. I love chocolate and electricity and modern plumbing. None of which Wren’s world has. Plus, I would miss my career. There are still so many places I dream of seeing, and I get messages from all over the world from women who say I inspire them to study architecture, history, or both.”

“Well, you are the most popular influencer on television.”

“Social media,” I correct although Glenda sees a smartphone as a really small TV. “I love what I do—the travel, the architecture, meeting new people, all of it. Wren says he gets how important my job is.”

“It’s good to have a man who respects your work.”

“You don’t think it’s selfish?”

“I don’t see you asking him to give up what he does. Or demanding he stay in this world.”

“But how do we make it work between us if we’re not even in the same realm? Wren thinks everything will work out because he defied death itself to send me back and the gods still made us mates.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet.” Glenda’s voice has Maximus climbing to lick her chin. “Maybe he’s right. If you’re destined to be together, you’ve got to have hope it’ll work out to make you both happy. Whatever gods he believes in certainly seem to be on your side.”

“It was a demon who brought us together,” I remind her. “Not a divinity.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I’m talking about how he’s already gotten rid of most of those creatures. We’ve seen—what? A handful? Only one or two made it out of the house. He said there were hundreds mobbing the property when he first showed up, enough to drive cities mad. Hey, you don’t think they can make us ghosts crazy, do you?”

“Wren says whatever madness the revenants cause should only work on humans.”

“Should?”

“It’s not like he’s asked for a ghost volunteer to test the theory.” I pull into the market’s lot and park.

“Don’t forget the candy,” she says.

“The kind that crackles so you can listen to it. I’ll look for it,” I promise. “Anything else?”

“Not unless you’re low on peppermint oil for your headaches. Although it seems you’ve been having less of them.”

She’s right. For the first time in years, I’ve found some relief. “I’ve been taking my meds, and with sleeping through most days and working at night, I feel better than ever.”

“Could be all the orgasms giving you a natural high.”

“Or the bangxiety short-circuiting my brain,” I mutter. “I can’t believe that shower show I put on for him didn’t work.” It turned me on, but still, my Render held out.

“Do you want to be mated to him?” She asks the question so plainly, without judgment, without expectation, without all the angst I’ve wrapped up in overthinking it. “Would being with him for the rest of your life make you happy?”

Maximus tilts his head, looking as though he’s literally all ears.

“No guilting her into this, little dude,” she whispers to him.

“Yeah.” The truth is right there on my tongue, screaming to come out. “Yeah, I do, but I don’t know how it’s going to?—”

“Don’t overthink it,” she says. “You’ve come back from death because a reaper fell for you at first sight. A demon prince brought you together. You have ghost friends...human and canine alike. Maybe let that beautiful brain?—”

“Damaged brain,” I interrupt.

“Beautiful brain,” she says again, breaking the words down like they’ll get through my formerly fractured skull if she stresses each syllable. “If you give the worries a rest, who knows? Maybe you’ll make space for magic.”

Well, damn. Good Time Glenda is a guru, a flippin’ genius.

Her words follow me even if she and Maximus physically don’t as I move through the aisles, filling my basket with way too much fizzy candy. The colorful packaging and bright lights blur together behind my dark lens while mentally, I’m already making detailed plans as precise as any architectural wonder because I have a mission.

I’m going to ravish my reaper.

CHAPTER TEN

Wren

Hayden returns from her latest supply run, driving the van's tires through the wards on almost the same treads as where she left which will make repairs easier.

Her ghost friend pushes out of the passenger side, Maximus in her arms. "Good luck, Render."

What does she mean? Has something happened to Hayden? Were the lights in town too much for her? Or the headlights on her drive back? Has she had another headache? How fast can I summon Theodopolis for a healing potion? Regardless of how much I hate the demon, his alchemist crafts better potions than wizards in multiple realms.

The damn ghost disappears with my dog before I can ask.

I wrench open the driver's door, prepared to wrap Hayden in darkness until I can find a fix for whatever's hurting.

"Hello, mate." She steps out of the van and into my shadows, toeing off her sneakers. "Let me be very clear about what I want. I want you. Now and for as long as whoever you say fated us to be together will let us have."

My mind short circuits, my magic surges, and I can't catch a thought. Not a single one. I stare at her in my shadows, at the way my darkness moves around her. It loves

her like I love her.

She strips her leggings to her ankles and lifts her shirt before my brain kicks in. Wrapping shadows around her wrists like manacles, I take over while she's still struggling to free herself from the fabric twisted at her feet.

The scent of her desire? I need a taste of that.

I run a shadow along the neckline of her shirt, ready to pull it down and see which of her pretty animal-print bras she wears today.

"You're mine now," I say in a low, demanding voice. "Trapped so I can do whatever I want to you." I stroke a teasing touch along the place where her thighs are pressed so close together in her temporary binding. I could get used to this. Especially the way she shivers. I should've restrained her more in our play. "What do you say to that?"

Licking her lips, she says, "Take me. Claim me."

She doesn't know what she's asking for. I freeze, struggling to keep control over my desires when she uses such dangerous words. A true claiming. My cock aches to sink inside her heat, and I touch my tongue to my fangs where I can almost taste her blood.

In that moment, I see decades with her.

The fantasy made real.

A future.

"I'm sure of it," she rushes to add. "I don't need a moment more to think about it.

Whatever is keeping you from truly making me yours, whatever reason you had for this delay, don't let it stop you. Us being together will work out, just like you said." Her eyes go wide. "Unless you don't really want forever with me."

What? No .

Barking explodes from the house, Maximus appearing in three-headed form in the doorway with revenants running his way. He blinks out of existence, reforming a second later to attack the hind leg of one of the beasts.

"Stay here," I tell Hayden and rush toward the house.

The abominations flood out like a legion. Where did they all come from? I destroyed the labs, the necromancer's stashes, each of his lairs. Had these creatures all waited in the ley lines beneath the house?

"Maximus!" Hayden's scared cry tears at me. My mate doesn't fear much, didn't fear me upon first sight. "Wren, I can't see him." Her footfalls sound as though she's running.

Absolutely not. She could get hurt. I snap a shadow to hold her back. "Don't you dare come closer. Stay behind the wards."

The wards. Fuck . I didn't reinforce the wards after she came back.

I lash out at the revenants, whipping my magic in purple snares to cut through them. They fall one by one as I rend them into nothing, but there are so many. I concentrate on stopping them from getting to my mate.

"Revenants!" Glenda's yell comes from behind me. "Everyone protect Hayden. Draw them away."

Maximus yips, reappearing and taking on a creature who looms above him.

“To Hayden,” I order him. He vanishes.

I glance back to see her standing in her shirt and panties atop the van with the three-headed pup at her feet, growling and snapping at any revenant who comes close. She wouldn't be any safer inside the van. In fact, I'm grateful she has taken the high ground, wielding the wrought iron pieces I brought her from a seventeenth-century architectural marvel like they're stakes. I don't know if iron works against revenants, but I appreciate her fierce spirit.

Ghosts zoom around my mate, drawing away the creatures who follow a human soul—alive or dead. Bertie the Bard sings off-key as he floats back and forth to lead creatures away. Glenda darts in front of Hayden as a ghostly shield. Her befriending the ghosts may save her life. With them, I have more than a fighting shot at making it through this with my fated mate.

Maximus snaps and growls with all three skulls, ferociously defending her. Or at least her ankles. She still grips the iron, swinging it when the rare creature makes it past me to chase her phantom protectors.

I target around the ghosts to rend each revenant, picking them off easily now.

“Why tell me we're fated mates in the first place?” Hayden asks on a shout.

“Because we are.” What the hell dimensions is she thinking?

“Then why don't you want the mating bond?”

Snagging another revenant out of the air, I rend it into specks so infinitesimal that the pieces of the pieces of souls stitched together couldn't be resurrected by a god. “I do

.”

“What aren’t you telling me? Why keep secrets when I say I’m ready to be your mate?” The tense set of her jaw and the grip she has on those iron pieces—by gods, she’s fiery. My brave and beautiful mate would take on revenants, risk madness to challenge me and make me a better reaper.

I can’t deny her the truth, not when she’s putting hers out there for everyone to hear. “I wanted you to have a choice since I took that away the night you died. I brought you back. Selfishly.” I slam another revenant to the ground. “ I’m the reason you have the headaches.” Holding the creature, I take out two more. “ I’m why you’re in pain.” With a snarl to rival the worst wolverine fiend, I finish off the trio with far more violence than necessary. “You should have a choice this time.”

“Well, I choose you.” She shakes an iron bar my way. “I love you . So there. Choice made.”

She loves me.

My mate loves me.

Like an obsessed crusader, I tear through the last of the revenants, rending them ruthlessly to get to her so I can drag her off the roof and into my shadows. My magic pulses around us. I bury my face against her neck, needing to sink my fangs into that sweet spot on her shoulder and claim, take, possess.

Maximus yips, jumping into my shadows to lick at her face before disappearing again.

“Time to finish what I started,” Hayden says, seduction dripping from her tone.

“Ooh,” Glenda interrupts, clapping from the top of the van with my dog at her feet. “I knew the revenants had interrupted something big given the whole missing pants situation. We could be twins! Talk about Bangus Interruptus.”

I will not rend my mate’s best friend. I will not rend?—

“Time to go, Glenda,” Hayden says.

“Right.” The ghost giggles. “Be sure to have a real good time.” With that, she vanishes, taking Maximus with her.

With her ghosts gone, the revenants defeated, and my magic swirling around us, we have the rest of our lives to celebrate what the gods have granted us.

To bond.

To finally finish what I started that fateful night.

To claim the one woman meant to be mine.

She will be my forever mate.

Starting right now.

“You made your choice.” I bind her to me with my shadows, remembering what she said the first time I touched her in this form. Prove it. Her playful taunt repeats in my mind, a teasing challenge I’ll never stop trying to meet. I tighten my grip until she lets out a sigh of submission. “Let me prove to you why it was the right choice.”

“ Yes , Shadow Daddy.”

I can't wait to claim this woman. She's everything.

Minx.

Miracle.

Mate.

Mine .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hayden

Wren wraps shadows around my arms, my thighs, even my hair to tug it so that I'm forced to tip my head back in surrender. Like this, I feel him everywhere. He pins me against the van, and I push against his hold, testing the bonds while not wanting him to release me.

His warm breath against my throat makes me shiver. "Stay there while I fix the wards," he orders.

He can demand whatever he desires. The promise in his voice tells me I'll get what I want, what we both want in the end.

A swirl of his shadows lifts me in the air like I weigh nothing to him. His darkness cocoons my heat, a sharp contrast to the cool metal at my back. The thin fabric of my shirt and panties seems so confining when all I can think about is pushing against him to show him how much I crave him, need him. The adrenaline rush from the fight with the revenants and our argument has me buzzing.

Turning his attention from me, he keeps me pinned while patching the wards where I drove the van through his beautiful designs.

My brain knows he's doing this to protect me in case we haven't seen the last revenant, and the artistry and detail of his warding sparks my curiosity. But the brat in me wants to demand he pay attention entirely to me. I squirm against his shadows,

trying to force him to focus on me.

The shadows tighten, one slipping to rub against the cotton of my panties. “Stay. There.” The rumble beneath his words, the dark command in his voice makes me wet, so wet there’s no way he won’t discover it as he brushes back and forth over the fabric.

“I want?—”

“I’ll give you what you want. As soon as the wards are finished.” Despite the bossy, detached way he says the last, he continues teasing me with his shadows—a sweep beneath my panties, a pinch of my nipples, a stroke of my collarbone, a rougher hold on my hair.

My legs shake, and my knees threaten to buckle, but he holds me steady, toying with me while he painstakingly repairs each line and curve. He drags my pleasure to the precipice of a climax, only to withdraw and leave me panting.

“Don’t you need to concentrate on the spell?” I ask, gasping past the godawful ache in my core so I might fake the same level of control he possesses.

“Spells are about intentions. Intentions are everything.” He keeps teasing me, using his intimate knowledge of my body to edge me again and again. “I intend to protect you, to fight for you, to love you for the rest of our lives.”

Love me.

He loves me.

No matter how restrained he might be in his sweet torture of me, his easy admission spirals round and round in me.

Instead of letting the ecstasy building inside me spark and blaze into the inferno simmering beneath my skin, he leaves me writhing and wanting. Sweat dampens my face, the nape of my neck. I drag my nails over his shadows, the van, my shirt, anything that might bring relief if I can just come. “Please, Wren.”

He rolls a lingering touch over my clit, and my core clenches as he says on a growl, “I intend to pleasure my mate, to cherish you, to worship you forever and a day. I will take my time. I will drive you as insane with desire for the rest of our lives as you have me for the last ten years. Because you are mine. Say it.”

“I’m yours.” It’s the truth, but right now, I’m pretty sure I’d say anything, do anything if he’ll simply stop teasing me.

He drags a shadow through my folds, dipping inside and spreading me open for him like he owns me until he taps my clit, and my body rockets like a fireworks show. My breathing goes erratic; my muscles twitch and tremble. His magic, his darkness, his everything has me drowning in him. In pleasure.

I tense from my toes to my jaw, and an orgasm breaks me apart as though I’ve shattered into a thousand pieces. Pieces he strokes and pets back together with a tenderness that feels like worship.

His eyes flash brilliant violet. A dark intensity I don’t understand shines from his gaze. “If you promise me forever, I’ll spend every day making you glad you did.”

“Yes,” I whisper, boneless still from the mind-shattering orgasm he pulled from my body. “Claim me.”

“A true claiming would require a bondage bite. It goes beyond the mating bond which is more than I’ve ever hoped for.”

“A bite?”

“It would mean everything in my world.”

“The reaper world?”

“No, the Shadow Realm. Shadow beings aren’t all reapers, and reapers aren’t all shadow beings. But a bite mark? A claiming? It would show the world we’re bound for life.”

A visible symbol for everyone to see. Like a wedding ring. “Do I get to bite you?”

His gaze goes wild, hungry. “Anywhere you wish, anytime you wish.”

“All right, then. I expect a claiming,” I tell him. “No more holding back.”

He trails shadows along my jaw while undressing me as though I’m a present he has waited ten long years to unwrap. “What would you like, my beauty? We’ve tried it all in fantasies—knotting, double dicks, tentacles. What does my mate want for a first time in this form? Our first time of forever?”

“You.” I reach for him, the light of his magic glinting off the bracelet he gave me. “I want you.”

With a dark growl, he catches my wrists, stretching my arms above my head. He binds my ankles so my legs are spread wide for him.

A delicious shiver ripples over me when I try to close my thighs but can’t. I’m at his mercy.

He uses his shadows to explore me like he’s memorizing my body. He rubs me from

my breasts down over my belly, then between my thighs until I'm squirming to rub against him, to get pressure where I need it for another release.

He leaves me for a moment, moving his head as if admiring his handiwork—his shadows pinning me in place for him.

“You have never been more beautiful,” he murmurs.

A whimper leaves me when he drags his erection along my inner thigh. I strain to meet him, but I can't get free. He holds me spread and open for him, pinned and captive. He makes a sound of appreciation when I struggle against him. I can't do anything more than writhe, and he likes that.

With my arms stretched above me and my back arching to rub against him, his shadows spread over me like a second skin. “I have waited a decade for this.” He presses the tip of his cock to my entrance and holds there. “You. Are. Mine.”

He shoves inside me with one thrust—stretching me, filling me, making my body give to the point of pain. Only he twists, his shadows finding the most sensitive parts of me, sending pleasure shooting through me.

I cry out, my inner walls rippling around his length like he belongs here. Like I've waited ten long years for this. Like I'll crave it the rest of my life and never get enough.

“Forever, Wren,” I whisper.

His magic flickers in his eyes and across his body, a shimmer of lightning and darkness all at once. “Forever,” he echoes with a thrust.

His shadows pulse, teasing my body as he pumps into me with the strength of a

supernatural being. When he rolls my clit between two shadows, I shatter around him, my body going taut and tight, and still he takes me in slow, sure thrusts. He strokes deep into me, dragging against the places I need his touch most and drawing waves of ecstasy into one never-ending surge that has my core rippling with spasms that seem unending.

His shadows tighten on me, binding us together even as his slow circles on my clit threaten to trigger yet another orgasm. To the point I almost beg him for mercy.

Except he hesitates.

“I love you.” He says the words like a confession.

My heart flutters. There’s a vulnerability in this version of my reaper.

“Say it back,” he commands.

“I love you. I have for years. You are the best of my fantasies, come to life.”

The magic in his eyes sparks and flickers with violet lightning, the darkness in his shadows becoming a mist like smoke as he pulls a scream from my lips, as he spills himself inside me with his own release, as he sinks his fangs into the curve where my shoulder meets my collarbone.

The claim causes a blinding rush of euphoria that feels so much bigger than the burn of the bite. When he laps at it, sucking and soothing the bite, I surrender myself to his shadows, letting him hold me up.

We did it .

A connection stronger than sex, more hypnotic than any fantasy, deeper than anything

I could have imagined settles between us.

Wren wraps his darkness around me as if he'll never let me go. I give myself over to the tangle of shadows, to the tenderness of this new certainty. When he gently lays me on the bed, I whisper, "You're mine now."

"As you are mine. My love. My heart. My home."

His home. I rest my head on his chest, tracing the charm on the bracelet he gave me.

"I wish I could see your home."

My vision blurs, the world around me goes cold, and the solid muscle beneath my cheek vanishes.

"Wren?" Panic shoots through me. "Wren!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wren

Hayden disappears from my hold, vanishing as though she has become shadow.

“Hayden?” My roar brings Maximus, Glenda, and all the ghosts.

“Where is she?” Glenda asks, flickering in a frantic pattern as though she’s searching multiple spaces at once. Or so terrified she can’t keep her form.

Maximus barks with one head, howls with another, and whines with the last.

The ghosts all talk at once.

“Quiet,” I demand. “Nothing could’ve gotten through the wards. Whatever magic took her?—”

“Pardon me, don’t rend me, Sir Reaper, but...” Bertie the Bard sweeps his turkey leg in an odd bow.

“What?” I snap.

“I read the matching contract Hayden signed with the demon.”

I do not want to discuss Theodopolis right now. “Get to the point, ghost.”

“What if this is related to the mating magic mentioned in the contract? It seemed very important in the terms of the agreement?—”

“Mating magic.” My voice goes almost as hoarse as Bertie’s. Demons select their partners solely for the increase in magical abilities brought on by a completed mating bond—a level up for both parties. If I’m freaking the fuck out, what might my human be feeling if she suddenly acquired a new power?

Glenda tugs on her Groovy Good Time shirt. “Can you find Hayden?” Her voice breaks on a quiet sob.

Hayden .

My mate.

My world.

I block out everything but the connection we forged. Feeling her come apart around me. Knowing I wouldn’t have to wait for her dreams ever again. Finding the best parts of me in loving her. Yet here, I only sense an emptiness. “She spoke of home.”

“She’s a wanderer,” Glenda says. “She doesn’t have a home.”

“ My home,” I whisper. “What if...”

I don’t take the time to finish the thought. “Come, Maximus.”

Traveling through shadows, I hurry to my home realm, to the fortress surrounded by water, mirrors, prisms, and all manners of light reflection in case the dreaded, banished shadow eldritch horrors who predate us ever return. My magic pulses the closer I get to my rooms. I burst into the long shadows of my bedroom, praying to

any deities in the Valley of the Gods who might hear me that I guessed right.

Hayden stands, wrapped in a blanket pulled from my bed. “You live in a castle?”

She’s safe.

She’s here in my home.

A feeling of contentment so deep, so heavy it drags me down like the gravity of an iron-forged realm settles in my chest. Magic pulses through my shadows, stronger than ever before. I step beside her, gathering her to me, not sure how she came to be here or what she sees when she looks at my world, but reveling in the happiness shining on her face.

“A fortress, but yeah, sure,” I say, not wanting to break whatever peaceful spell this is with a demand for certainty or...gods forbid...anything that might scare her. Not when she stares at my room in astonishment.

Maximus paws at her legs, his tail wagging.

“I thought only the demon could send me here,” she says. “So how did you?”

“I didn’t. I think you did with whatever magic you got from our mating bond.”

“I have magic?” She smiles. “Epic.”

Terrifying . “You said you wanted to visit my home?—”

“And poof I was here,” she finishes for me. “It’s beautiful. The glass domed ceiling, the arched windows, the view of the night sky—it’s like stepping into a painting. You said once it’s always night here?”

“Yes. We only need enough light to cast the shadows we travel through.”

“I could get used to this,” she whispers, staring at the purple glow my magic casts over the stone floors and heavy drapes—galaxies of color and shade swirling around us. “How did you find me?”

“I sensed you. You said home , but when I got here, it felt right. The sensation mirrored the way I found you through your dreams.”

“That’s some advanced stalker shit.”

“Necessary if my mate is going to walk between worlds.” I remember the ghosts, Glenda’s tears. “Your friends are worried about you.” I don’t add that I was out of my mind to find her.

Her eyes widen. “I don’t know how to get back. If I can get back.” Her words come faster, her tone taking on a thread of fear.

No . I don’t want her afraid. “No matter what magic you have, we can face it together.”

“All right. Here goes?—”

She vanishes before finishing the statement.

I travel through shadow again, following her. This time the tie between us tugs me along without any doubt of where she has landed...leading me to my true home. Where she is.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:17 am

Hayden

A year later ...

Closing out a television contract for six episodes of Haunted Hayden that brings a sizable donation to several charities, I celebrate with a moonlit party outside a historic ruin in French wine country. No other humans allowed. When the guests are all ghosts, it makes hosting super easy.

Glenda dances atop a stone column in time to music provided by a ghostly band who joined us somewhere outside Madrid.

Maximus prances at my feet, transforming from solid pup to three-headed skeleton when we pass through shadows and slices of silvery moonlight. The dog's arrival makes my heart soar, not only because of his cute company, but because his presence announces that Wren waits nearby in the darkness.

It's time to slip away to his soothing world of shadows. Meeting other shadow beings and exploring an entire realm has been a great adventure, but we always come back to our room where night is eternal and my Ravished by the Reaper drawing hangs framed by the doorway.

Tonight, I've already said my thanks to all the dead who helped me with historic details for the show. The same ghosts gave me the history of the now un-haunted house since Glenda swears Wren's presence there cleared the house of hauntings for at least another decade.

Apparently ghosts don't adore my Render like I do.

But ridding the house of the revenants and having its full history clinched a deal with demon prince Theo for a lifetime supply of healing potions from his alchemist to treat my migraines. It also secured Wren's demand that we never have to see him again.

I step into the shadows and find myself wrapped in Wren's darkness.

"Ready to go, love?" he asks.

"With my reaper? Always."

The End...

Or is it? Find out more about Theo and his matchmaking adventures in the Matchmaker Monster Romance series by Luna Joya.

Each book promises a happily ever after for each of the four friends who walk into a (not so) haunted house, not knowing that monsters are real. Or that they've been matched to the monsters inside.

Keep reading for a look at Matched to the Minotaur .

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:17 am

Haunted houses have never been my idea of a good time. Perched on a staggering cliff along the California coastline, the freaky mansion has turrets and stained-glass windows jutting out at odd angles.

How could my three best friends think this was the perfect way to celebrate our college graduation?

Reaching into the pocket of my hoodie, I close my fingers over my latest game piece creation to settle my nerves. I carved this miniature to be the star of my newest tabletop game design—Mutter Udder Maniacs. Too bad I don't share my character's badassery. Lady Snarl would ace a haunted house tour.

Unfortunately, Theo, the way-too-hot tour guide has decided I have to kick off our tour alone.

Unlucky me .

“You may, of course,” he explains, “rejoin your friends after you complete your own mission.”

“A mission?” My gamer brain perks up like an over-caffeinated toddler. “Like a quest?”

“Exactly that.” He opens a door to the left of the entrance. Your journey begins here.”

I glance inside to stairs that lead downward into darkness. “Oh, hell no. I'm not going into the basement. I saw that slasher flick. Everyone has seen it.” Backing away, I

curl my fingers around Lady Snarl until her horns poke me in the palm. “

He tips his head to the side, studying me as though he can read every fear screaming in my brain. “You wouldn’t let down the other players when they’re your best friends, would you?”

The appeal lands hard with my team-player self, who has hated every role-playing guild where I’ve been ditched mid-battle with the big boss. “What’s down there?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Little white lights flicker along the wall, dancing downward in a dizzying spiral. “What if I can’t?” I whisper.

“Then you’ll activate the band you’re wearing.” He taps the bracelet he made each of us wear, where the biggest sigil lines up with a trio of my freckles. “Press and hold for five seconds, and I’ll come check on you. No matter where you are.”

“In the basement?” Since that’s where he’s sending me.

“Yes,” he agrees with quick certainty, but something in his gaze wavers and makes me think he’s lying. “Leander will be your guide below.”

I edge the toes of my sneakers to the top stair. “I have to go now?”

“The sooner you go, the sooner I can check on your friend, who seems to have gotten lost in the house.”

Ava. I can’t hear water running or footsteps or anything that would clue me in to where she might be. “I should?—”

He stretches his arm in front of me, not quite touching me, but definitely stopping me.

“It’d be safer that you stay on your own path. I promise to find your friend.”

Talk about some cryptic shit. How much training did this guy receive in creeping out guests with words alone? So far, this house looks scary on the outside, normal on the inside, and not at all what I expected. But Theo’s solemnness sends shivers up my spine that have me damn near shaking. My heart triple-bangs like a gong being clanged as a battle rattle, and my breath catches in a panic-punch that burns like a flame charm in my favorite online game.

Gripping the miniature in my fist, I stop before I break her. What would Lady Snarl do ? She would march her ass down the stairs and let Theo find Ava, since he’ll be faster. Right now, I hate my own creation.

“Okay,” I mumble and slow drudge down the first few steps. My feet feel as though they weigh a thousand pounds each. I’m more of a lumbering orc than the graceful healer I play in most games. “Wait—” I spin toward the door that slams in my face. So much for an easy exit.

The lights twinkle happily in a path that leads me down, down, down. “Hello?” I call, cringing when my voice echoes back to me. How far does this staircase go? To the seven circles of hell?

I lower my voice to a whisper-yell. “Leander?”

No one answers. I’m not sure if I’m stressed or relieved to be alone. A purr from below has me jumping. A tiny kitty with huge eyes stares up at me before winding around my legs, brushing its fur against my jeans in a swish.

I stoop to pet the sweet baby who rewards me with a head butt. “You must be Leander.”

“Mwrr.” The squeaky meow seems to be all the answer I’ll get.

A shimmering pool of color appears a few stairs below.

Let the terror begin .

Haunted houses go to the top of my “nope out” list for future fun. I debate sitting on the steps with the kitten and waiting until Theo comes back to find me. Except he mentioned a mission, and I don’t like to leave things unfinished. It would be the same as abandoning a half-carved game set. Sacrilege .

My furry new friend darts down the stairs into the rainbow abyss, stopping long enough to look back at me with a you coming? taunt, and my loyalty rushes forward. I can’t let an itty-bitty kitty tread into the unknown with grown-ass me too afraid to follow. Not when I want to level up from healer to warrior more than anything. I stumble ahead, leading with borrowed courage instead of brains. The lights flicker again in a ripple. Hurry , I can imagine them saying. Intensity and impatience thrum through me.

I rush through the colors, my head spinning and my stomach threatening to be sick on a roiling wave. Don’t pass out becomes my new goal.

“Leander?” I murmur, hoping the kitty can hear my pitiful rasp.

“I’m here, Meg.” A deep voice full of gravel and grit booms from above. That definitely doesn’t belong to a teeny black cat.

The rustle of movement and a rush of warm air has me looking way up. A beast looms over me. Darkness swirls, and my vision goes hazy.

Looks like I might pass out after all.

I come to in a princess bed—which startles me as much as anything else in a haunted house could. My childhood dreams revolved around me being a knight in dented

armor or a sorcerer with full spell robes—not a pretty, poufy dress in sight. The scents of earth, damp stone, and spices fill my nose. A netting draped around the four posters hangs in perfect symmetry, as though someone designed this room and this bed for the gauzy, sheer veil that separates me from whatever waits beyond.

Panic has me bolting to a sit. How long did I sleep? Where are my friends? And why did they leave me down here? I grab for the bracelet, ready to call Theo so I can tell him how shitty his establishment is. Ava’s mom would love to sue them for whatever trippy drugs they piped in to make me pass out. Add moving me while I was knocked out, and she’ll be screaming six figure settlement for emotional distress.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.” It’s the same deep voice from earlier.

My pulse picks up in a fast thump thump that makes me freeze, and a thrill runs through me. Stop it. Just because he sounds like the bad boy version of my favorite streaming gaming channel host doesn’t mean my body should react. I can’t let hormones stand in the way of me getting out of here. The kitten picks that moment to jump through a gap in the netting and pad across the bedding. With a purr to rival a toy freight train and a swish of a tail, he curls into a ball and settles in for a nap.

“I’m guessing the cat isn’t Leander,” I say to the darkness, since I can’t see anyone else in the room. Maybe hiding in the shadows comes with the haunted house care package.

A sin-soaked chuckle rolls over me, and I push down desire. That’s it. I’m joining a hookup-heavy dating app when my friends and I get back to civilization. I don’t need a relationship messing with my mind or any commentary from asshole boyfriends about my weight, my appetite, my clothes, my hobbies, or anything else, but if I’m going to fantasize about a laugh? It means my dry spell has gone on far too long.

“The cat’s name is Oggie.” The voice moves. “Or at least he goes by that name in his other form. I assume he took this one to lure you through the portal before any of my

rivals showed.”

My brain stalls. Theo’s old-timey talk was one thing, but who trained this guy? The Villains’ Mastermind School? “What do you mean, his other form?” The rest of what he said replays in my mind. “What portal? And who has rivals? Like an arch-nemesis?”

Yeah, I speed-read comics and binge-watch sci-fi. No, I’m not going to be ashamed about my hobbies ever again. I stroke the kitten’s soft fur while I wait for answers. He cuddles closer. This freakshow may be a colossal fail as a haunted house, but the pet perks are phenomenal. I stare past the flickering candles but see nothing.

He—or I assume that barrel-chested rumble comes from a man—stalks the shadows just beyond the light. “I have multiple enemies, I refer to the dimensional portal that transported you to me, and Oggie’s short for Oggdalon.” His matter-of-fact delivery sounds as if he ticks off each answer, as though he’s running through a grocery list. The guy should have shelves lined with shiny awards, given his superb method acting. “Oggie’s a sentinel demon.”

“What?” I swallow a shriek and yank my hand away from the kitten as the possibility that I’m petting a demon puts my lungs in a chokehold. “A d-demon?” Said demon yowls, giving me an indignant look before shoving his head against my fingers for more neck scratches.

“One with the important responsibility of standing watch at the portals.”

I can’t even process this conversation, my mind bumping along at a stumbling speed. “So your enemies don’t come through?” Who wrote this awful script?

“Exactly.” The deep rumble is reassuring, but the fact that I can’t see who’s talking has my gut churning.

He sounds big, and big can mean dangerous when pissed off. Even my scrawny cheating ex turned nasty and scary within minutes of being caught. So much so that I took off from the apartment that we shared, not imagining that he would snatch and sell every game board I had hand-crafted. I found out when he broke up with me a week later. If my sniveling ex could be so diabolical after claiming to love me, what might a complete stranger hiding himself in the shadows be capable of?

“Listen.” I struggle to keep my voice calm without the tremor that has my mouth quivering. “I appreciate you taking care of me after I...” Lost consciousness? Passed out? Had a hysterical meltdown when convinced I’d seen a beast of a man? None of those seem like the safest word choices. I settle on a neutral option. “After I fell, but I really need to be going. My friends will worry about me.” I push to a stand, but my body goes tight and still at the quick sounds of rustling fabric and the clack of hard-soled shoes. Fear traces a ghostly finger of ice along my spine, and chills skate across my flesh.

“You can’t leave. The portal has closed.” He doesn’t sound ominous, merely surprised I hadn’t come to this insane and illogical conclusion myself.

My patience snaps with a crack of my temper. “I’m done with this haunted house nonsense. Your training has clearly been thorough, but you can quit playing whatever part the corporation assigned you.”

“Corporation?” He sounds unsure, and I want to yell at him to stop messing around. “There’s no one else involved in our arrangement. Just you, me, and the matchmaker.”

“Matchmaker?” My heart rabbits in my chest, my throat goes dry, and the word comes out strangled. “What matchmaker?”

“In the human world, he goes by Theo.”

“Theo’s a tour guide. A hot one, I’ll grant you?—”

He snickers. “Hot as the hell dimension he escaped from, I’m sure, although I don’t understand how you know this.” His tone goes frosty. “Did he touch you?” He bites out the question in a cruel, vicious clip. “Is that why you seek to call off our bargain? To summon him?” The last comes on a growl that makes me shiver.

Adrenaline races through me in fight-or-flight instinct, with logic yelling at me to run, and my pride insisting that I don’t need to take this jealousy from someone whose face I haven’t even seen.

“Okay, stalker.” Yeah, yeah, redheaded rage—I’ve heard all the jokes, but in my case, there’s truth to the cliché. “You have zero right to question who I talk to or who I allow to touch me. I wouldn’t bother meeting any matchmaker, because I don’t want a relationship. What I need is time, and another jerk of a boyfriend won’t help me with that.”

“Another—?”

I cut off his interruption. “We have no bargain . Now, stop skulking in the shadows, and come out where I can see who I’m arguing with. Or are you the one who’s scared, instead of the one doing the scaring?” A sliver of dread slams into me, hinting that perhaps I should’ve stopped before throwing down a challenge.

“You don’t want me to come out into the light.”

“Yes, I really do.”

No, you don’t , the primitive part of my brain whispers.

He hesitates, remaining hidden. “On second thought, summon Theo and ask him about our bargain.”

Summon him? How? Oh yeah, the stupid plastic jewelry. Theo said to hold the middle sigil for five seconds. I squeeze the center button on my bracelet, expecting a buzz, or a light, or something to indicate that I activated my Host Signal. Reminding myself that this is reality and not a scene from a comic book, I cross my arms over my chest and wait in the silence that's interrupted only by the demon kitty's purring.

"Meg?" Theo's voice comes over a speaker I can't see.

"Theo?" I feel like an idiot talking when I can't see him.

His face comes through a mirror across the room, at a pretty vanity like I've only seen in movies. Neat trick. I guess the Underworld spent all their money on acting lessons and a special effects mirror, instead of bothering with actual horror scenes. "Are you in danger?" he asks. "Did Leander not find you?"

"I'm here," my unseen companion says in a grumble. "She doubts our arrangement, though she doesn't appear feeble-minded."

"Hey!" I snap.

"Which means the fault must lie with you." My companion quits insulting me and switches to Theo. He continues talking to the trick mirror that glimmers with Theo's face. "It would seem, demon, that you left out some of the details of the deal."

Demon? Deal? What the fresh hell is he talking about? Anxiety spirals in my belly, and I feel sick. I'm finished with both these pranksters and their stupid haunted house. "This isn't funny, Theo. I want my friends." I want to go home. "Call off whatever scene this is so I can go." And I can warn everyone away from this place that has gone past creepy and into just plain strange.

Mirror Theo looks straight into my eyes, as if he can see me. "You and your friends really should learn to read contracts before signing them, little human. Your

negligence doesn't negate the authenticity." Glancing toward the shadows where my unseen not-a-friend lurks, Theo says, "I'll forward the contract. It's valid and binding. She's yours for fourteen days—until the new moon. Now, I have a situation that's an actual emergency." He waves his hand in front of his face and fades from view.

Hope sinks in my chest like a worry stone. The contract? The liability waiver on the tablet that I signed without reading what it said. My friend Val's mention of kink and sex acts. How she assumed the corporation had screwed up the contracts. What the hell did I agree to?

The mirror transforms into a giant screen with text, and I sprint across the stone floor to scroll through the long paragraphs of legalese. The more I read, the more lightheaded I feel. My skin goes clammy.

How did I miss the binding of two weeks, the descriptions of mate and arranged match, the kinky acts that I haven't seen outside of my naughtiest romance novels? I blush while skimming the page of intimate acts that Val must've crossed out. But the most vanilla sexual acts from penetrative to oral? They remain in straight-forward, unapologetic bold print.

I signed a sex contract.

With most of the sex stuff marked out, but still... Me—who doesn't get those much-talked-about butterflies in her stomach, or anywhere lower, for anything other than an excellent scene in a book. I agreed to this. And without Ava or her lawyer mother, I don't know an easy way to get out of it. My supposed match's talk of portals, dimensions, and sentinel demons circles round and round in my head. I close my eyes, needing the blank space to process instead of drawing connections from one game point to the next stop.

"Oh, no." My whisper holds all the horror that this house didn't come close to conjuring. I can't go home for two weeks. What will my mom think? Who will feed

the stray cats in the neighborhood? How will I pay my rent?

The gravelly voice comes from close behind me this time, and I don't turn, don't look, don't pause the panic attack that no mythical healing spell in any game could cure. Remembering my mom's instructions for not spiraling, I mentally list off her five steps to managing the manic before it controls me.

1. Realize this is panic. Check. A thousand times over, I can check this one off.
2. Breathe. I inhale through my nose and exhale through my mouth in a slow, measured stream. Better.
3. No mental time traveling. Digging in, I move to the next step because I can only go forward, not back. I can't undo what has already been done.
4. Step outside the situation and imagine the best and worst possible scenarios for the predicament . Okay, best-case scenario? I'm stuck with two psychos who think it's funny to paranormally punk a woman into believing she has made a sex deal with a demon to be matched to someone named Leander. Worst case? I'm trapped for two weeks in another dimension, which can't be possible because those don't exist outside of movies and video games, right?
5. Fake normal until the pretense becomes reality. Except I can't. This was supposed to be "pretend," where my friends and I got a tiny thrill and then left, not a real nightmare that will last from sleep to waking to sleep again.

I can't stop the spiral. Fatigue and dizziness drag at me. Flashes of color spot behind my closed eyelids, and I squeeze them tighter.

"I don't want your fear." When the voice comes along with warmth in my hair and over the nape of my neck, I don't flinch.

An unhinged laugh bubbles through the room—crazed and desperate. It takes a moment before I realize it came from me. Maybe Dirk the Jerk was right with one of his taunts. My curves may be fabulous, my wit stellar when it comes to gaming, and my interests vast. But I might not have a firm grip on sanity. If I don't look, maybe the delusion might disappear.

"It seems we share a common problem," Leander says.

I keep my eyes closed, but the weight of him, the solidness of him behind me comforts when the nearness of this stranger should terrify me. He makes me doubt what I've been told all my life about my size—too tall, too sturdy, too round—with his overwhelming presence. Yet he doesn't sound as though he means me harm. No, the concern in his voice makes me think he's caught in this trap as much as I may be.

Another giggle soaked in a sob edges out of me. "Did you sign a sex contract with a demon, too?" I wobble on my feet, and strong hands wrap around my upper arms in a hold that keeps me upright without caging me.

"I did. It's part of the matchmaking agreement, along with promising to protect you, provide for you, never harm you?—"

"Sounds like you got the short end of the bargain." My joke falls flat, but I didn't see any of those things listed in my requirements when I scrolled this time. No, my deal centered on sex. "I take it that you're Leander?" Because who else could he be?

"Yes, and I'm your matched mate. While he's a trickster, Theo's matchmaking is flawless. Won't you even consider the possibility that we're meant to be together?"

Beneath the rolling rumble of his voice, there's a vulnerability that calls to the same in me. Could my romance novels have gotten it right? What if I'm the princess of this story? "You think you're my handsome prince?" This time my teasing comes out steady, the shake in my voice giving way to strength. I open my eyes, catching the

part of his reflection in the mirror that shadows don't cloak.

His broad shoulders, massive chest, and the shaggy black hair falling from the face of a beast. A bull's head with giant horns and a piercing through his snout where a nose should be. Dark, fathomless eyes stare back at me. Sharp-nailed claws grip my arms.

I scream. I will never stop screaming.