



A
SHADOW
IN THE
REAPING

A NOVEL BY
BRYNNE WEAVER

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*For all the writers out there.
Keep writing. Keep dreaming. I see you.*

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CHAPTER 1

Vlad the Impaler had a beautiful singing voice.

I bet you didn't know that. Most people think of him for his penchant for putting bodies on sticks. That and for being a vampire. Which he was, by the way. The whole staking thing was more of a prop. But nobody seems to really talk about how he captured so many people to impale in the first place. Just by sheer might? By the strength of his army?

No.

He subdued them with his song.

And he was exceptional with a melody. His voice was as bright as sunlight on steel. When he sang, it was like being swept up in the terror and allure of a god. He was fearsome and intimidating, but his voice was warm and inviting. You wanted to stand in his presence, even though you were terrified of his gaze lingering on your skin. You wanted his attention, for him to sing to you, despite the nefarious gleam in his dark eyes. He might be romancing you, or he might be about to kill you. There was lust, and danger, and fury. Vlad was adept at balancing horror with desire.

But one thing Vlad was shit at was flying undercover.

The ego. *Holy fuck*. The *ego* on that man. It was a time in history when there was room to spare for the narcissism of madmen. Eventually, however, even the Reapers couldn't turn a blind eye. They caught up with Vlad. They ambushed him with silver arrows, their points alight with hellfire. And then they left him to the terrified survivors of his years of rampage. The humans burned his body and scattered his ashes in water and earth so that they would never be whole again.

I mean, the lengths they went to... it was all a bit much. Humans back then were very dramatic. Their superstitions were ridiculous. Garlic, crosses, holy water, incantations. The only thing they got right was silver. I mean, *honestly*. Vlad was dead. He was beheaded and burned. Spreading his ashes here, there and everywhere was unnecessary. And they didn't even leave something for me to keep. *Me*, his maker.

Frankly, it was super uncool. So, I felt the need to kill most of them for being such dicks. And they never expected some sweet-faced, unassuming, quiet young woman would be the true epicenter of all the chaos and destruction. It could never be a woman. They always underestimate us. They always overlook us. *Always*.

Just like Jessie Bates.

Men like Jessie Bates are all the same. They've been this way for millennia, and they will be like this for centuries to come. Jessie assumed he could demean my boss, because Jessie is a man who has enjoyed pushing the boundaries of consequence. An athletic, preppy, Hilfiger-wearing, college frat boy? He loves getting away with things. A little quip here about Bian's Vietnamese accent. A laugh there about her stature. And trust me, Bian can look after herself. She can fight her own battles, and I promised myself I wouldn't fight them for her.

But that all changed when Mr. Bates assumed he could disrespect *me*.

All right, so maybe I made myself seem extra vulnerable when I saw him in the foyer or when I passed him walking alone to the dining room. I wanted him to cross the line. I guess in terms of your human semi-moralities that would be *entrapment*. But honestly, I don't think I even needed to do anything at all. Jessie Bates would have been a misogynistic douchebag to me without any help from me pretending to be weak.

At first it was just a sneer or his lingering stare at my tits. Which, by the way, aren't anything more than average. But eventually, predictably, he went too far.

I still remember the smell of cheap scotch and cologne as he stumbled down the hallway after the bachelor party and caged me between his arms as he pressed his palms to the wall.

"Why don't we go to my room... Lu?.." he had asked, tapping a wobbling finger to my name tag. His voice was thick, like it was stuck in rancid syrup. I remember shaking my head and looking down at the carpet, wondering how anyone had come up with the unfortunate design of purple

and orange circles and dreamed up the absurd idea to put it on a floor. The 1970s were the worst.

Jessie pulled me out of my thoughts of interior design. Literally. He tugged my ponytail over my shoulder in a gesture that he must have thought was a little seductive, a little aggressive. "What, you got nothing to say? I'll be real sweet, I promise."

I had met Jessie's bloodshot, watery gaze, swallowing down my desires. Not *those* desires. *Gross*. I meant my desire to tear out his throat and lick his blood off the hideous carpet.

When I shook my head again, he rolled his eyes and laughed. I felt the gleam of the red light grow behind my pupils and closed my eyes.

Not here. I can't do it here.

It felt like I swallowed flame. Every breath of Jessie's scent had made it burn hotter in my throat. I tried to steady the thunder of my heart. I felt his finger trace a line down the column of my throat, past my collarbones, down the center of my chest. I wanted to tear that finger right off and stick it up his asshole. But I didn't. He seemed to take that as permission to go a step further. He placed a hot palm over my breast and squeezed.

A sudden *whack* jolted his hand off my body. Jessie had yelped in surprise and another whack quickly followed.

"You let her go!" Bian yelled. I heard her shoeless footfalls thudding on the carpet as she ran to come and save me.

"Did you just throw a shoe at me?"

"Security is coming! You let her go and get out. Get out!"

I opened my eyes and watched as Bian rushed toward us, picking up one of her wayward shoes only to throw it at Jessie again. She chased him down the hall and after that he was quietly kicked out of the Swan Inn.

But it's not like he went far.

The wedding he was here for happened yesterday, and I know it was a wild one. Andy told me the police were called twice to break up rowdy, drunken fights. And a man like Jessie Bates is never far from the center of trouble. If he just happens to go missing, I'm sure there will be plenty of suspects.

Normally, I don't hunt in my hometown.

But for Jessie Bates, I'll make an exception.

CHAPTER 2

Jessie Bates has no idea I'm about to suck him dry.
Ugh *no*. Not like *that*.
I'm going to *kill* Jessie Bates, and I'm going to enjoy it.

And I'm an excellent hunter. It's one of the few things you humans got right in your myths about us. We are the ultimate predators. Sneaky, stealthy, alluring when we want to be. We can stand out or we can blend in. We can be charming or we can be terrifying. We can be political agents or we can slip through society unnoticed. We are shapeshifters not because we change into other creatures, but because we change into other versions of ourselves. We adapt to what you need us to be in that moment, so that we can get exactly what we want from you.

Most everything else you believe about vampires is wrong.

Sunlight? Dude. *Please*.

Bats? *Seriously?* Do I look like the kind of girl to have a collection of sky mice? *Hell no*. I might be too cold to incubate rabies, but I don't want to douse myself in it either.

I don't sparkle, I don't sleep in a coffin, I don't live in a crypt. Garlic doesn't deter me and holy water doesn't burn me. In fact, enchanted water is exactly where my life as an immortal began. I'm pretty enough with thick black lashes and bright hazel eyes, long hair the color of melted chocolate and flawless olive skin. With a bit of makeup I can be a knockout, but why would I want you to remember my face in a crowd? It's in my best interest to be forgettable, particularly given my... history.

But I guess there are a few things you got right. Like my preternatural senses. And right now, all I can smell is that big hunk of sweaty, fleshy, frat

boy man candy. Like I said, I don't usually hunt on my home turf. I don't like to draw attention to myself, and more than anything I want to keep trouble away from Bian's doorstep. But this time I can't help it. I'm just so hungry.

Any thought of repercussions drifts away on the breeze carrying Jessie's warm, musky scent. He just smells so divine.

I start humming a little tune.

At first, Jessie doesn't really notice. He keeps walking, past the closed shops, beneath the streetlights where the moths ping against the yellowed plastic. His gym bag is slung over his shoulder. He's checking his phone, his attention focused on the light of his little screen. I say a prayer of thanks that he isn't wearing headphones. Headphones are the bane of a siren's existence. Seriously, how in the fuck am I supposed to seduce my prey if they're always listening to their shitty playlist on Spotify or whatever-

Come on, focus. I'm so easily distracted when I'm hungry. I home in on Jessie's broad, mouth-watering back and start humming louder. I see the instant the sound finally registers in his peanut-sized brain. When Jessie's head tilts to the side and his pace slows, I start putting words to my tune. It's not so much *what* I sing, it's *how* I sing it. And I don't like the crusty old tunes of my people, songs about the sea and ancient ships and Odysseus, that crafty fucker.

I like a challenge.

I start singing some of the lyrics from *WAP* by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. It's a modern masterpiece and I will fight you if you say otherwise. And I can sing it sweet. So sweet it sounds like a church hymn.

I want you to park that big Mack truck

Right in this little garage

Make it cream, make me scream

Out in public, make a scene

I don't cook, I don't clean

But let me tell you how I got this ring...

Jessie slows to a near stop. He's entranced by my lilting soprano (told you so). I catch up with him and grab his hand, pulling him with me. I keep singing, swinging his hand in mine as though we're two high school lovers taking an evening stroll.

I lead Jessie toward the narrow alley between the Cheese Louise cheese store and Puptown dog grooming. The combined smell of cheese and dog is

revolting. But Jessie doesn't mind. He follows me willingly. He's completely under my control. And I don't mind either, really. I'm just so fucking hungry that you could bathe a dog in cheese, wipe it on Jessie's thick neck, and I'd still bite down and call it heaven.

I pull Jessie away from the lamplight, into the shadow. I do prefer to hunt in the night, you humans did get that part of our tale correct. When we're far enough away from the empty sidewalk that I know we won't be seen, I stop and turn to face Jessie. His expression is wistful. His eyes are caught in the middle distance. His thoughts are far from me. It's a kindness that we vampires offer. Peace before death. What other creature can offer such a guarantee?

I gently push Jessie until his back is against the cold brick. It'll make it easier when his legs give out. Fuck, he's so tall. I usually pick smaller prey, but he was such a dick the other day at the Inn and I really feel like he deserves it. I'm just gonna have to climb him like a tree.

My canines elongate and I graze the tip of my tongue along the needled point. I taste the sweet venom. My stomach rumbles. I can only see the throbbing vein in Jessie's neck. I can only hear the beat of his heart. I grip onto his shoulders and haul myself up, inhaling his delicious combination of hangover sweat and cologne. I close my eyes and smile, then open my mouth and prepare to bite-

"Oh no you don't," a deep voice says behind me. A large and powerful hand grips my shoulder with unnatural strength and whirls me away from Jessie. My eyes land on the broad chest of a man. A black button-up shirt. Swirling smoke. A blade of silver and rippling fire in the hand not still clasped around my shoulder. Black tattoos snake up from under his collar, covering the side of his neck to the edge of his short dark hair. The pupils of his rich brown eyes are consumed with flame.

A Reaper.

Holy fuck.

Holy fucking fuck.

Fuuuuuuuuck.

This is it. This is how I die. Five thousand fucking years I've been alive, and I'm gonna die behind Cheese Louise.

They've found me. After all this time. They found me in fucking Sanford, of all places.

...fuck.

The Reaper's gaze makes a slow path across my face as though memorizing every detail. He's probably savoring the moment. He probably wants to see the look in my eyes when he slips his sword between my ribs. He's about to be famous among his clan and the anticipation must be almost as great as the victory itself.

"Are you skilled with a blade?" he asks.

He wants me to... fight him? ... That's a little sadistic, considering he's, like, twice my size and *he's a fucking Reaper*. He's born to take immortal lives. I might be a great predator and all but a Reaper is hard to kill. *Really* hard. And I would know.

Still... I'll take any chance I can get, no matter how small.

I nod.

"Good," he says. He lifts his hand from my shoulder and withdraws a second silver sword from a scabbard strapped across his back. "Werewolves are coming. They've caught your scent. I'm here to reap the Alpha for the Crime of Abomination. Defend yourself."

De-*what* myself?

The Reaper takes a step back from me. His gaze is snagged on mine like a hook in the gills of a fish. I'm still trying to work out exactly what in the hell is going on and why I'm not dead. I realize I'm staring at him with a dumbass look on my face and I try to school my expression into something that looks less confused and panicky. I'm not convinced by my efforts and by the frown on the Reaper's face, neither is he.

"I am Ashen of House Urbigu. What is your name?"

I nearly burst out laughing. He has no fucking clue. By some insane miracle, he must not have heard me sing to Jessie. He has no idea he's standing in front of the vampire bounty kill of an immortal lifetime.

If I answer his question, he'll be pretty quick to figure it out. Not because of my name, I could give him any name I wanted. Bertha. Ethel. I could even give him the random computer bee-boop of Grimes and Elon Musk's baby name. If I speak one word, he'll hear it in my voice. He'll know exactly who I am.

Ashen of House Urbigu narrows his eyes at me. He opens his mouth to repeat his question.

And I never thought I'd say this before, but thank fuck for werewolves.

CHAPTER 3

*I*t starts with a silver mist. It creeps toward us until it envelops our legs. Ashen gives me a last sweeping look, his gaze lingering a fraction longer on my lips as his eyes burn through me. He still expects an answer to his question about my name, I guess, but he's not getting one. I glance at Jessie, who smiles wistfully into the distance, then back at the Reaper standing before me.

"You can still have him afterward, if you wish. If you survive. I am not here to come between you and your meal," Ashen says, his eyes carving a disinterested, repulsed path across the human. In a swift motion, he clips Jessie's temple with the handle of his sword, rendering him unconscious. He then turns his gaze to me with the same disinterested expression. For an instant, the flame brightens within his pupils. "Make no mistake, vampire. I am not here to protect you. I am here to reap the Alpha. If you manage to kill a werewolf or two whilst defending yourself it will make my job easier."

A werewolf or two... this Reaper motherfucker. Just because I haven't said a word doesn't mean I can't look after myself. I crinkle my brow and look as fiercely vampiric as I can against a Reaper, leaning just a little toward him in a challenge as I swing my borrowed sword in an arc. The Reaper tilts his head, his eyes narrowing even further.

"I'm sorry to interrupt what is clearly a heartfelt moment, but I must insist we take the vampire," a man says from the shadow and mist of the alley. Ashen lets his gaze linger on me a moment longer before turning to face the pairs of eyes lurking in the distance. They shine in the dim light like those of a cat. The man who spoke steps into a thin shaft of moonlight

filtering into the gloom. A young face but silver hair, a sharp suit, a new Omega watch that glints in the light as he adjusts his cufflinks. He smiles. "Ah, a Reaper. Whatever her crime, our pack is happy to carry out your sentence. No need to trouble yourself with a solitary vampire."

"I'm not here for her," Ashen says. "Bring me your Alpha." He takes a step forward into the mist. His broad back obstructs some of the shadowy figures of the pack from my view. There must be at least thirty werewolves here, more than enough to subdue your average vampire.

The man laughs, running his fingers down the front of his blazer. I can see the impeccable tailoring, even with the distance and dim light. It's another thing I guess you humans got right. My eyesight is kickass, and I like the symmetry of good stitching. Shame he's about to ruin such a nice jacket.

"Tisk-tisk, Reaper," the man says. "You didn't say please."

"I need no permission from your clan. Your Alpha has committed the Crime of Abomination. He has made a hybrid with the blood of both vampire and werewolf."

"Says who? Everyone knows that can't be done."

"Says House Urbigu," Ashen says, the flame on his silver sword rippling as he brings it forward to curl his other palm around the handle. "Bring him to me."

The man in the distance bends his head, shaking it in feigned resignation. He looks up at us again. He looks at me. "Apologies, Reaper. But no-can-do."

"Then I will reap you all," Ashen says, with no anger or emotion evident in his voice.

Fucking hell. Balls of steel. He doesn't seem very troubled that we're about to face an entire pack of werewolves. It's as though he was picking up his laundry or ordering a latte. It's like he went into a bakery to buy one donut and thought, *you know what, fuck it. I burn a shitload of calories killing other immortal creatures, I can eat whatever the hell I want. I'll just have them all.* I imagine him at the donut counter, staring down at a case of pastries, and saying to some zitty teenager *I will reap them all.*

I burst out laughing.

Like, properly laughing.

Fuck.

At least I didn't talk.

The Reaper looks back at me with an assessing gaze as my laughter dies in my throat. I feel like he's close to working something out, and I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. I put up my hands in apology and then sweep them toward the pack ahead in an invitation to continue. The Reaper's brow furrows. He finally turns back to the spokesman of the pack and I let go of the breath I've been holding.

"This is your last chance, wolf. Bring your Alpha to me."

There is a moment of quiet before the sound of ripping fabric fills the air between us. The suit tears across the transforming body of the werewolf as he drops into the fog. There are sounds of pain, bones breaking and remaking. I can hear the fur sprouting through their skin. I can hear their teeth sliding through their gums. There's the nasal sound of snarling and the throaty sound of growling. When they rise as wolves in the mist, they are all focused on me, as though the Reaper between us didn't even exist.

Ashen looks over his shoulder and pins me with his eyes of flame. My heart kicks to a halt. One sweep of his sword and he could kill me. One sweep of mine, and I could fell another Reaper. Another demon dying on my sword for the sister they took from me. But I don't raise my sword to him, and I don't know why. I hold his gaze.

"Are you ready, vampire?" the Reaper asks.

I turn my glowing red eyes to the line of wolves in the mist.

I nod.

I'm ready.

The lesser ranking pack members are the first to advance. They stalk forward, snarling their fury, their heads below the line of fog but their eyes glowing within it. As the first bursts out of the mist, the Reaper is already swinging.

The blade tears through muscle and slides against bone. I smell the wolfblood. The beast yowls in pain and drops from the Reaper's blade, falling to the slick asphalt of the alley. Embers and ash lift starward as the body falls apart.

The Reaper kills the next two before I finally get a shot.

A wolf with black fur and shining orange eyes explodes from the fog. He leaps past the Reaper, whose sword is pressed to the hilt within the body of another. The black wolf snarls at me and I hiss in his face as I bury my sword in his neck.

I love hissing. It sounds vicious and I don't get to do it enough.

Same with killing werewolves.

As I turn my sword away and kick the werewolf free of my blade, I realize I've been missing this mayhem in my quiet, under-cover life. Lately, I only hunt for food, not for fun anymore. It feels good to use my strength again.

I pass the Reaper and meet the next wolf before he has the chance to jump. My shoulders roll as I sweep the sword in a seamless arc. The edge of the blade splits the vertebrae apart, severs tendon and flesh. The wolf's head slips free of his body. The heart pumps a spray of blood across my face.

I lick my lips and look over my shoulder at Ashen with a joyous smile. A crease appears between his brows as he gives me a dark and thoughtful frown. When I turn back to the wolves, they are no longer holding their ranks back.

They send everyone.

They surround us. Ashen and I position ourselves to fight back-to-back. Some of the werewolves push into one another as they close ranks. Two of them snap and snarl as they bump shoulders. Predictable. Werewolves are always jostling for position. But the Reaper and I, our blood is liquid patience. We wait. We wait for the wolves to make the first move.

I still and listen to the cadence of my breath. I hear the slow thrum of my heart. I feel the heat of the Reaper behind me and see flashes of the hellfire on his blade as it cuts through the air, swinging like a pendulum from one side to the next.

The first wolves surge ahead. These ones are bigger, stronger. But I don't see the distinctive, electric blue eyes of an Alpha among them. Time seems to speed up as Ashen and I cut and slash and stab and spin. We dance. Our swords never touch. We're like strings of the same instrument, meant to play a melody together.

I shake my head. *A melody?* ... For fucksakes. You know what? It's true. We vampires have a problem separating danger and desire.

I refocus on the task at hand, namely slicing werewolves and hissing venomously while I can. I should have kept a tally of kills; I'd like to shove it in the Reaper's face once this battle is done. But then, I might not get the chance. I think he's going to figure it out. He's going to realize that I'm not just any vampire.

I'm starting to think about what's going to happen at the end of all this bloodshed and that's when I let myself get distracted. It's been

like...decades...since I fought a battle. I'm out of practice, okay? And as soon as I let my guard down, a werewolf clamps its slimy teeth around my arm.

I howl in pain and hiss in fury. I let the blade drop from my ruined arm. With my left hand, I withdraw a silver dagger hidden on my belt. I drive it through the top of the werewolf's skull and pull my arm free as his jaws go slack.

I grit out a growl of pain just as a warm palm slides over my hip and halts low against my stomach. A surge of heat coils across my spine. My breath hitches and burns in my lungs at the unexpected touch. The Reaper spins us to position himself in the worst of the fight.

"All right, vampire?" he asks, glancing down over his shoulder at me. I don't answer, and he twists further to catch a glimpse of the thick black blood rolling down my arm. When he meets my eyes again I swallow and give a nod. "Good," he says as his hand slips away. My skin gives an unwelcome tingle at the absence of his warmth. Ashen doesn't seem to notice the tension it renders in my muscle and bone as he refocuses on the fight in front of him. "Now retrieve your sword."

I sheath my dagger and pick up the sword with my good hand. This is the first time I realize that Ashen might not be as confident about the outcome of our battle as it seems. He needs me in this fight with him. No matter how many wolves we fell, there just seem to be more.

We keep pushing them back, and I'm so busy slashing that I could have missed it. One blink, one turn, one distraction. But I catch a glimpse of them, a line of eyes in shadow. Werewolves in their human forms. Something metallic catches the light of the moon and I'm already dropping through the mist when the Reaper pushes me down.

There's a pop, and then a whooshing, whirling sound. Something scrapes and clatters against the brick wall behind us. Beneath the mist, I meet the Reaper's fiery eyes, and when the next pop fires he pushes me away from the net of silver that spirals between us.

"Stay down," he whispers, and I keep low. I shelter my glowing red gaze with my hand, but I still watch through the slits in my fingers. Ashen closes his eyes and draws his body away from mine, his movement slow and soundless as he crawls in the direction of the wolves. Beneath the cover of mist there is an empty space where I can see their legs and the

disintegrating bodies of their brethren. They are stalking us, and Ashen is stalking them.

He fells the werewolf with the weapon first, cutting the man's legs off below the knees and then kicking the metal tube out of the path of the pack. He takes two more before I scramble beneath the fog and join him, cutting down three with my left hand as I clutch my throbbing right arm to my chest. Between us, we kill eight, and when the last one falls the mist starts to dispel.

We kneel facing one another, both heaving for breath. I wonder for the first time what this mist is made of. Aerosol werewolf juices? So gross. I try to convince my lungs to slow down, but they rebel, and I suck those juices right in like air candy.

Holy fuck my arm hurts.

Don't get me wrong, I've been injured before. But like I said, it's been a while. I forgot how painful a werewolf bite is. The venom in their saliva won't kill me, but I'll be hurting, and if I want to keep my arm I'll have to treat it. I grip the handle of the blade at my hip so tightly I might crush it within my palm. I've got my injured arm clutched to my hammering heart when I feel a set of warm fingers curl around my wrist, guiding the ruin of flesh into the moonlight.

The Reaper takes my elbow in his other hand and twists it carefully under his scrutiny. Blood as dark as the midnight sky curls across my skin. "You need to feed or the venom will take hold," he says, pressing his fingers close to an oozing puncture. I nod when he meets my eyes, and his own narrow in question.

Here it is. Here's the moment I've been either dreading or hoping for. Maybe it's for the best that all this running comes to an end. Or maybe, just maybe, another Reaper can pay for the family they stole from me. Either way, it seems like I can't lose. So why do I feel the sting of disappointment in my chest?

"Who are you, vampire?"

As an obsidian blade pierces above the Reaper's heart and his demon blood sizzles hot across my neck, I think of an unexpected refrain for the second time tonight:

Thank fuck for werewolves.

CHAPTER 4

A woman leans over the Reaper's shoulder. Her eyes dance as she pushes her blade further into Ashen's body. The polished black point glints like it's whispering to me in the night.

I meet the Reaper's eyes. They are fixed on mine, their flame rippling as he tries to control his breath and pain.

"Attraction yields distraction. Distraction yields destruction," she says into the Reaper's ear.

Well that's fucking ridiculous.

I keep my eyes on the Reaper as I throw my dagger at a werewolf in the periphery. He drops the net gun he had silently picked up. My dagger twitches with the last beat of his heart.

I want to quip something cool, like *Arrogance yields annihilation*. But I don't. I yank the Reaper forward off the obsidian blade and launch myself at the shewolf. Her back smacks onto the grimy asphalt. I tear the tendons from her wrist and she howls as the blade falls from her limp hand. I bring my face close to hers and smile so she can see her blood on my teeth. Her eyes are wide, full of both fear and fury. My arm throbs and the Reaper's words ring through my mind. *You need to feed.*

Yes. Yes, I do.

I latch my teeth to the shewolf's neck and she squeals as I draw her blood down my throat. Werewolf is not really my taste. A little musky, a little smoky. Not sweet like a human. But the pain in my arm is starting to dissipate. So you know what? I'll take it. I draw quickly, my venom rapidly thinning her blood and paralyzing her limbs. I take just enough to get my

thirst under control and my arm back into working order, and then I snap her neck with a hiss that will follow her into the afterlife.

I get up and retrieve my silver dagger from the body of the other werewolf, wiping it on his jacket before sheathing it at my side. I hear a groan of pain and look back at the Reaper. His dimming eyes are fixed to mine. His breath is shallow. His heart is slowing. His blood sizzles on the asphalt. I could leave him here to die or finish him myself with the obsidian blade. There's a hint of resignation in his eyes. He seems to expect nothing less.

And I know what you're thinking, that it's a pretty shitty thing to do just leaving him to bleed out behind Cheese Louise. But he's a demon, it's not like he'll really die. He'll go back to the Shadow Realm of the Reapers. The next time he's called to assassinate someone, I mean, *reap* someone, he'll be back. And the next person he'll probably come for is me.

Look, I'm not typically inclined to agree with werewolves, but this whole Crime of Abomination business is bullshit. Everyone knows it cannot be done, this hybrid of werewolf and vampire. I realize they had silver nets, but that's not uncommon. We vampires and werewolves don't really get along, you know? We like to kill one another in creative ways. Just like Reapers enjoy falsifying crimes to assassinate us for. House Urbigu has made up a claim in order to reap an Alpha for some political end. A pack that's grown too large, a vampire too brazen, a witch's coven too powerful. It's all the same with the Reapers. Make up a charge. Take a soul. And Ashen is no different from the rest. Just like the Reaper that killed Aglaope.

I turn away from the Reaper, but something just doesn't feel right. My gaze catches on the obsidian blade lying next to the shewolf. I look at the Reaper again. His shoulder is shaking. When the breeze picks up, I catch the faintest scent.

Angelwing poison.

They knew the Reaper was coming. They found the rarest poison, one that shouldn't even exist. And they've used it to escape a reaping for a crime that shouldn't be possible.

I skitter across the pavement and roll Ashen onto his back. The fire in his eyes is little more than the flicker of a candle flame. It's the first time I look at him. Really *look* at him. He's beautiful. There's something ancient about him, something timeless. Strong cheekbones, straight nose, full lips.

Thick, dark lashes, eyes the color of cognac. Eyes that won't let go of mine. Eyes that are dimming with every struggling breath.

I break my gaze away and tear his shirt open above the wound. Black, geometric tattoos cover his chest, looping up the sides of his neck. Symmetrical patterns of honeycomb, flowers, and stars flow like layers of scales away from the face of a jackal on his sternum. The words *Shalasu Ningsisa* scroll beneath the jackal's muzzle. *Merciful Justice*. I swallow down the urge to snort and I meet his eyes. They break from mine only to blink, pressing closed with pain.

I can smell his demon blood as it flows from the wound. I can barely detect the poison, but it's there. And if I'm right, there's only one way to stop it.

I bite down into my wrist and then hold my arm close to my chest. I meet Ashen's eyes with a question in mine. He gives the slightest nod and braces for pain.

Holding my wrist above his chest, my blood drips into the wound. The mix of my cold, black blood with the heat of his produces an acrid smoke. Ashen's eyes are still closed and his expression is going slack. I already know that vampire blood isn't enough to stop him from dying an everlasting death.

I clear my throat. I can't believe I'm doing this. I'm not even one hundred percent sure I know what I'm doing. In five thousand years, I should have taken more time to memorize witch's spells. But there was always other stuff to do... wars, eating, more wars, hiding... So if Ashen winds up with the head of a snake, I take no responsibility.

I take a deep breath. The Reaper's eyes haven't opened. I might just luck out if he stays unconscious.

"Gasaan tiildibba me zi ab. Dul susi giskasilim tilla."

My voice finds its way into the air so infrequently that it sounds almost unfamiliar. But even to me, its owner, I know its power. It's like a rainbow unspooling to scatter color across the sky. It's like the most precious gem that multiplies in your palm. It's a promise of all your hopes and dreams fulfilled, if you'll just lean a little closer. It's brought the mightiest kings and queens to their knees, begging for one more word.

Despite all the beauty of my spoken mysteries, the Reaper doesn't stir. I glance around. The mist from the werewolves is gone and I don't hear

anyone else around us. It's just the ragged, shallow breathing of the Reaper and the discordant drum of our hearts.

"Niglulli дума galu barama niingar. Tirrama salutti sa kassapti sa ruhie ipusu supii arkis upuus."

Still nothing from the Reaper. His breath stalls. He might have spent his last with my words. I can barely hear a faint, slow beat within his chest. I squeeze more blood into his wound and close my eyes.

"Saggiu Ashen giu. Suna sitaba kilal azuus. Sunu liiktisuma. Asallah libakkunu, arrus maratuktuk."

I WAIT. I listen for any change. But there's no sound between us.

I bend my head and kneel back. I should feel relieved. Another Reaper gone, one that can never come back to collect another soul.

I don't know why I even tried in the first place. Maybe it was because it seemed unfair for a demon to die by a poison from the heavens.

My palm splays across my stomach as I remember the warmth of his hand. Ashen had pulled me from the battle, if even for a moment. But he didn't know who I was, and he needed me. He needed me to finish a reaping and I'm pretty sure the Alpha is still out there.

I take a deep breath. When I finally open my eyes, a pair of bright pupils shine back at me, the black consumed with flame. They burn into me with the blinding light of epiphany.

"Leucosia," he whispers.

...Fuck.

"Amah haass muhhaki usaanna teenki," I say, and with the handle of his sword I hit the Reaper hard enough in the head to undo all the good work I've just done.

CHAPTER 5

"Holy goddess on a stick, you look like shit," Ediye says, yanking me off her haint blue porch and into the comfort of her cottage. And she's right, I know I look like shit. I ran for two hours straight to get here.

She wafts some smoking sage around us and then leads the way through the living room. An unkind person would call the interior of Ediye's house *chaotic*. A gentler soul would say *eclectic*. But I know there is an order to the stacks of books and the herbs that hang from the ceiling, the candles lining shelves and the feathers poking out of vases. Ediye is a skilled witch and a collector of history. Ediye has also been my best friend for over three centuries, and so I know she's about to give me so much shit for what I've just done.

"I think I need help," I say, following her to the kitchen. Her turquoise maxi dress swirls around her legs, a bright contrast to her skin, the richest, warmest hue of midnight.

Ediye throws me a heavy look over her shoulder as she fills a kettle, her ebony eyes scoring my skin like knives. "I've been telling you that for decades. You need help. Serious help."

"I mean, like...*more* help. More help than usual."

"Yeah, I can tell by looking at you. Did you kill the whole village of Sanford?"

"No. Only some werewolves I didn't recognize," I say, sitting on one of the barstools at the kitchen island. I roll up my sleeve and extend my arm onto the counter so she can see the bite and she crinkles her nose in a show of sympathy. She takes up my arm and examines it, then turns back to the sink.

"That looks partially healed. I take it from the state of your face that you were able to feed?"

"A little," I reply as she hurtles a wet washcloth at my head. I catch it with my left hand, but the water still splatters across my skin.

"Hold up. What the fuck is *that*?" Ediye points to the bite mark on my wrist. I cringe and her eyes narrow.

"It's the other thing I need help with?.."

"You gave blood to save someone," she says, and I nod. "You made a vampire?"

I shake my head.

"You *helped* a vampire."

I grimace and shake my head again.

"A witch? A werewolf? A human? Was it Bian, is she okay? What about Andy?" Ediye sighs as I shake my head with every guess. "Stop playing the mute siren and help me out here."

"A Reaper."

I hear Ediye's breath catch in her lungs. I hear the whoosh in her veins as her heart pumps adrenaline through her body. I bring my fingers to my lips and give her the saddest Puss In Boots eyes I can manage. It doesn't work.

"You saved a Reaper? What the fuck is wrong with you? Were you hit in the head harder than usual?"

"I fought the werewolves with him. They tried to kill him with an obsidian blade laced with Angelwing and I didn't feel right leaving him to die behind Cheese Louise."

"Couldn't you have dragged him behind the Hair's To Ya salon? That's a more honorable place to die."

I snort and shrug. She's probably right and I wish I'd thought of that. I watch as Ediye pulls two mugs from the shelf and rustles through teabags of her own concoction to find something that will help to heal what's left of my wounds. She finds whatever she's looking for and pours water over the scent of lemon in sunshine and lavender picked from a box on her sill. There are other things in it too, weird things that I don't want to think too much about. A hummingbird feather that I'm not sure she washed. A clipping from a dog claw, ground into dust. It's gross, but I know it'll work.

Ediye passes me the mug and eyes me with a worried look. I take her hand. It's warm and comforting beneath mine, and for the second time

tonight I think of the Reaper's palm on my stomach, like it's a ghost that lives on my skin. Ediye notices the distance in my thoughts and narrows her eyes at me. I see the moment that the realization dawns in her expression, and she snatches her hand away with an incredulous laugh.

"You didn't just give him your blood and hope for the best, did you. You spellcast."

"...Maybe?"

"Oh fuck a duck, Lu. For real?"

I nod. Ediye pushes her tea aside and turns away to grab two shot glasses and a bottle of tequila from a shelf. She pours the shots and downs them both while looking me dead in the eye, then pours two more and hands me one.

"All right, vampire," she says, opening a notebook and uncapping a pen. "Give it to me, line by line, exactly as you said it."

I down a shot of tequila. Yes, I can drink tequila. Yes, I will get drunk, eventually. Yes, I might do so tonight.

I nod, take a deep breath, and close my eyes.

"*Gasaan tiildibba me zi ab. Dul susi giskasilim tilla. Niglulli duma galu barama niingar,*" I say, replicating every intonation exactly as I gave it. Ediye scribbles furiously as I speak.

"All right, that's a decent start," she says as she reviews her notes. *Awesome*, maybe I actually did remember something from witches' incantations over the past few millennia. I start to do some happy claps but Ediye smacks my hand. "Let's just wait to see how badly you fucked the rest of it up before celebrating, shall we?"

I give a little pout. "Boo. For a witch, you can be a real downer, you know?" I smile at her dramatic eye roll and go for another shot of tequila, but Ediye pushes the mug of tea into my hand instead. It's my turn to roll my eyes but I take a sip when she glares at me. "So? Tell me, I want to see if I really said what I thought I said."

"That's not how spellcasting is supposed to work, Lu. You're supposed to know what you're going to say before you actually say it."

"Yeah, but I like to just dive in, you know? Really *go for it*. Besides, it's not like I had time to come over and get your grimoire. The Reaper was dying."

Ediye keeps her eyes fixed on her paper, but they sharpen in a statement that says death would have been the preferred choice. "All right. So far, I

have: *Queen that gives life to the dying. The weapon of sweet voice. My music let no man make.* So, you set yourself as the agent of the spell and the Reaper's benefactor. You've protected your most critical weapon, your voice."

I brush my shoulders off and wriggle in my seat. I feel the build of anticipation. I have to admit, I do love getting away with something. This is the most excitement I've had since last year when I killed Barbossa 'Bobby' Sarno on the roof of his own club. I'd been waiting for over three centuries for another chance to catch up with that warlock motherfucker for selling me out and sending me underground. Rat bastard. I can almost feel his veiny temples in my hands as I-

Ediye snaps her fingers in front of my face, pulling me out of my memories. "Lu, focus. What's next in your spell?"

I sigh, thinking I'll have to revisit that memory later on. "*Tirrama salutti sa kassapti sa ruhie ipusu supii arkis upuus,*" I say, watching as Ediye nods her head while she writes. She picks up her notebook and reviews the words she's written as she walks to the fridge. She pulls out a blood bag and empties the contents into another mug for me. "You spoil me, my friend," I say, lining up my options of blood, tequila, and tea.

"Yeah, well. I'm doing it for my own benefit as much as yours. You're too distracted when you're hungry and it gets annoying. So, this one is *Turn away the enmity of the sorceress who has employed venom. Make clean quickly the one bewitched.* That's pretty good too. Was it a woman who poisoned him?"

"Yes, a high-ranking pack member, I think."

"Okay good. It's precise and specific. So far, so good, Lu."

I smile at Ediye but I can tell she's still worried. She has good reason to be. I have a gift for fucking things up in a creative ways. But life would be kinda boring otherwise...right?..

"What else?"

"*Saggiu Ashen giu,*" I reply.

Ediye's brow furrows. "Your Reaper's name is Ashen?"

"He's not *my* Reaper," I say, feeling the closest thing to blush in my cheeks that a vampire body can produce.

Ediye looks at me and her eyes spark with mischief. I glare at her and she glues her eyes back down to her notes. "Okaaaaay then. Noted. Not *your* Reaper." Ediye suppresses a laugh and tilts her head as a question

seems to emerge in her thoughts. "*Oh heart of Ashen be reconciled. Was he stabbed in the heart?*"

"Close enough," I say with a shrug.

"Close? Or actually *in* the heart?"

"I dunno, Ediye. Close, but not right through it?"

Ediye smiles again but keeps her gaze fixed on her paper. "All right. Interesting choice of words you made there, that's all."

I definitely feel heat in my cheeks. I press my fingers to them and then fidget with my choice of drinks, settling on the hot tea and holding it close to my face to obstruct Ediye's gaze if she glances up. I see her smile through the steam and I'm certain she knows exactly what I'm up to.

"What's next, vampire?" she asks without looking up, the smile ringing in her voice. I roll my eyes.

"*Suna sitaba kilal azzus.*"

Ediye's eyes narrow and her brows knit. Her head tilts. "*His shining weapon is suspended at thy side.* Wow, Lu. That's really good."

"I know, right?" I say, beaming a smile at her. It's the first time I see a spark of excitement in Ediye's eyes. I think maybe I didn't fuck it up after all. And I think Ediye is starting to believe it, too.

"Your pronouns are a little messed up between that line and the first phase of the spell, but it still works. He can't kill you by his own hand. How much more?"

"Uhh... Two more lines of the main incantation..."

"What do you mean the *main incantation*?"

I take the shot of tequila and snatch the bottle before Ediye can even blink. The fear kills the hope in her eyes and I put down the shot glass, drinking directly from the bottle until she pulls it from my hand to do the same.

"Tell me," she says.

"So, next I said *Suna liiktisuma. Asallah libakkunu, assus maratuktuk.*"

Ediye gives a tentative laugh, but I can tell she's holding onto her joy because she knows the worst is yet to come. "What is it with you and this Reaper's heart?"

"There is *nothing*, for fucksakes."

"Well judging by your incantation, there is definitely *something*. Is he hot? I bet he's really hot."

"He's a demon, so yeah, he runs a little on the warm side."

Ediye rolls her eyes and gives me a knowing smile. "That's not what I meant." When I let out a low hiss she puts her hands up in surrender. "All right, scary vampire. Well, the good news is that you've bound him to you, and you have apparently cast to overcome his heart."

I groan, resting my forehead in my hands. "What in the hell. Is that a love spell I cast?"

Ediye laughs and pats my hand. "No, that cannot be done, Lu. Not for real. He might have a bit of a crush perhaps, for a day or two at most. This is more about breaking barriers, not about winning affections. So, it's probably a good thing. Unfortunately, however, there is a complexity in *Suna liiktisuma*. You have not just bound him to you, but you to him. Whatever the reason he's here, you have obligated yourself to help him fulfil his mission."

I take a heavy breath and look away to the window, thinking about the crime he is here to collect for and the Alpha he has not yet reaped. If I need to help him kill more werewolves, that might not be the worst thing, I guess.

But there's just one little flaw in that plan...

"So, herein lies the problem," I start as I fidget with my fingers. The ones on my right hand are still a little numb, and I take a sip from both mugs and then the bottle of tequila as Ebiye makes a face at me that deftly combines disgust with fear. "When I cast the spell, Ashen seemed to be unconscious. I thought he wasn't going to make it. And then he opened his eyes... And then he... said my name. My *real* name."

Ediye pushes herself back from the counter as though it's burst into flame. "What the fuck, Lu. What in the actual *fuck*."

"But that's when I said *Amah haas muhhaki usaanna teenki* and hit him super hard in the head with his sword. Like, so hard I might have re-killed him."

"You totally didn't re-kill him, did you."

"No, but I did hit him. Really super hard."

A long, silent moment passes. We just look at one another, barely even blinking. Despite all my arrogant quips and my stupid jokes, the truth is, I'm scared. For the first time in a long time, I'm really fucking scared. And Ediye knows it. It's in her eyes too.

Ediye reaches for my hand and I give it. There is not just fear there, but sadness.

"You said *I strike your skull, I confuse your mind*," she whispers, and I nod. "There's too much room for error in your words, Lu. You've left the future unfinished, unprotected. The next time he sees you, he might remember exactly who you are. And it will be a reaping worse than death."

There's only the sound of flickering candle flame and shallow breath and beating hearts between us. Ediye squeezes my hand.

"There is only one thing I can say to help you, Lu."

I think it before she even says it out loud.

I need to run.

CHAPTER 6

*Y*eah, I'll totally run. After I finish my shift. I'm not one to leave Bian hanging.

Working in housekeeping at the Swan Inn is really the perfect job for a vampire. I get access to literally everywhere in the hotel. I can even get into the surprisingly well-equipped security room, a relic from the days of the Neighborhood Watch Alliance. You might remember it from the news? The whole Village of the Year Award fiasco? Anyway, aside from granting me the ability to tamper with security footage, cleaning rooms also gives me access to guests' personal details, which is super handy when I want to hunt down douchebags like Jessie in their hometowns.

...Shit.

Shit fucking shit.

Jessie.

I totally forgot him in the alley.

On the plus side, I also left the Reaper in the alley. I kind of wish I'd stayed on the roof to watch that meet-and-greet play out instead of running to Birdlip to see Ediye.

So yeah, anyway, working at the Swan is kind of the perfect job for me right now. It doesn't pay much but I don't need much. I've got little caches of cash (get it?) all over the place, and if I need more, I can steal more. Bian lets me stay in the ironically named, closet-sized Castle Room, so for the past fifteen years this is what I've been up to. Hanging out in Sanford, cleaning rooms, not talking.

I know what you're thinking: *Lu, that sounds fucking depressing.* But really, it's not. I might be on the periphery of the goings-on in Sanford, but the village accepts me as the mute that works at the Swan. Some people probably still think of me as an oddball, but I'm not the only unusual character in Sanford. If you think that, you clearly haven't met Lurch. All he says is 'Yarp' for yes and 'Narp' for no.

Last night did make me realize, however, that I've been stuck in a bit of a self-imposed rut. Fighting those werewolves was *exciting*. Smashing the Reaper in the side of the head was *fun*. Deciphering my half-assed spells with Ediye was... *refreshing*. And I've been in Sanford for a while. Everyone around me is aging, but I'm not. I never do. I can change my hair or my makeup or my clothing style, but I'm still twenty-five on the outside. I'll always be twenty-five. I think.

So yeah, I guess it's time to go.

I know I should have run for it last night, but, honestly, it's not just about the shift. It's hard to say goodbye. It feels like that's all I ever do. Even when I know it's safer for everyone if I go, it still just hurts.

I packed last night, so once my shift is over all I have to do is grab my bag and head down the hall. I don't even bother getting changed out of my uniform. I know Bian will be at the front desk, working on a crossword. I think she knows I could disappear at any given time. I think she knows more is up with me than my mutism.

So, I'll pass her the note I wrote that says I need to leave for a while. And then I'll just never come back. If she needs me to stay and help with anything for a couple of hours, I can do that too. I owe her that much. Besides, I ran all over town last night to throw any stalkers off my scent.

Which... totally didn't work. Like, not at all.

I come to an abrupt halt as I enter the lobby. The Reaper is there, sitting in a blue wingback chair, his legs crossed, reading yesterday's copy of the Sanford Citizen. He looks effortlessly cool with his black pants and polished brogues and black button-up shirt. The sleeves are rolled up past his elbows, his tattoos flowing from beneath the fabric.

His gaze collides with mine and does not let go.

Fuck.

I let my bag slide from my shoulder and drop on the floor next to the front desk with a sad little thud. I look at Bian, her pen hovering over the

crossword as she works out the problem before her. "You have a visitor," she says, without looking up.

But it's then that I realize she doesn't mean the Reaper.

In all the mayhem, I totally forgot it's Tuesday. Tuesday is Scrabble Day.

Andy stands up from a seat on the other side of the lobby, a wide grin on his face. His hands are clutched around the ceramic pot of what looks like a rubber plant. He extends it toward me like some kind of ancient offering. Behind him, the Scrabble board is already set up on the round oak table next to the unlit hearth.

Oh my God this is so awkward. Why is this so awkward.

I try not to look at the Reaper but I feel his eyes in the periphery, boring into my skull like tiny drills. Andy doesn't even flick his gaze in Ashen's direction. This is probably a good time to mention that Andy Cartwright is a detective with the local police department, but not a very observant one.

I give Andy the brightest smile I can manage and walk toward him.

"It's a peace lily," Andy says, thrusting the plant in my direction as I draw to a halt. "Sergeant Angel says it helps him think and oxygenates the room... or something."

I smile a little wider and put my hand over my heart in a gesture of thanks. I realize there are pink marks visible on my arm where the werewolf bite is still healing, but Andy doesn't notice, or if he does he makes no comment. I chance a look over at Ashen whose gaze follows the movement of my arm with the acuity of a falcon hunting a pheasant. He watches as I lower it, then flicks his gaze back up to mine. His expression is unreadable. When I narrow my eyes at him he tilts his head, some kind of assessment of my simmering fury. I swallow down a sudden burst of nerves and turn away to take the plant from Andy's hands, placing it down on the hearth.

I settle in my chair at the table and fold my hands in my lap like the most prim and proper, well-bred vampire you've ever seen. Over the last several months, our weekly Scrabble game has been my main source of entertainment. I know, I know. You're asking yourself, *Why is a siren-slash-vampire who knows all the lyrics to WAP sitting around on a Tuesday night playing Scrabble with a small town detective?* Well, for one thing, it's a great source of information. Exhibit A, the rowdy wedding where Mr. Bates was caught up in a minor altercation. Such gossip is useful information for a vampire that hunts douchebags to live.

Also, I'm really fucking bored, and Scrabble is fun.

So I'm letting myself be courted... By the inept but sweet, mustachioed detective Cartwright...

...With the power of peace lilies and Scrabble...

...*Scrabble*.

Jesus H. Christ. I definitely need to get out of Sanford.

As we start to play, Andy talks about the latest gossip at the station, which isn't much today. Mr. Staker's swan escaped. There was some graffiti in the town square. Some teenage hoodies were arrested and will probably be cleaning the spray-painted bricks with toothbrushes for the next few weeks of their summer break.

I smile and nod at all the right places as we lay down a few words on the board. I'm getting a little more comfortable with Ashen's presence in the room, simply because he hasn't killed me yet. But by comfortable I mean I'm only ninety percent ready to shit my pants, down from the ninety-nine percent of ten minutes ago. I steal glances at him and every time I do, he's feigned interest in his paper. Except for this time. We lock eyes and I can't make myself look away.

"You know," Andy begins, and I startle so viciously that my knee slams into the underside of the table. "You okay? Jeez, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to scare you," he says, patting my hand. I glance over at Ashen whose eyes are still fixed to mine as though we've been soldered together. When I look back at Andy, he hasn't even noticed our wordless exchange.

Christ, he is a bit dim, bless him. Sweet, but dim.

"There is one unusual thing that happened," Andy continues as he places the word '*average*' on the board. "A man came into the station last night claiming he saw a demon with a sword on fire in the alley behind Cheese Louise."

I raise my eyebrows in my best *Oh really?* look as I put the word '*fuck*' down on the board. *What?* We play with swears. And it makes Andy laugh...

...Every. Single. Time.

Andy smirks at my word and places '*heart*' on the board. I scowl at the game until I realize what my face is doing. When Andy looks up I put on my shiniest smile mask. "Yeah, he came in claiming he was minding his own business one moment, and the next he woke up in the alley with a sword-wielding smoke demon staring down at him with fiery eyes."

The Reaper snorts a laugh that he covers with a cough. I glance over, but he's snapped his newspaper up like a shield.

I put the word '*off*' on the board.

Andy snickers as he puts '*twat*' into the game. "Yeah, well. Looks like he had a good bash to the head, so we took him into hospital. Must have been some dream. But you know what they say about eating *cheese Louise* before bed," he says with a wink. He laughs as though it's a genuinely clever joke and I give an encouraging smile. When I glance at Ashen his eye is poking out at me from the edge of his paper. I see the frown in the curve of his mouth and realize he's confused.

Finally, I get to put my serendipitous word down on the board. '*Reaper*'.
Fuck off, Reaper.

Andy is busy tallying points and I point down at the board as I glare at Ashen, mouthing the words with every jam of my finger. *Fuck. Off. Reaper.*

His eyes narrow at me, and I mouth them over and over again until Andy looks up. I give a sweet smile in return.

"Haha, look at that! *Fuck off, reaper*. Yeah, not today, Skeletor! Right Lu?"

I nod enthusiastically.

Andy starts singing and I grit my teeth beneath my smile. "*We'll be able to fly, don't fear the reaper, Baby, I'm your maaaaan.*"

I hear Bian snort behind the counter and I die a little on the inside. When I look at the Reaper he's scowling daggers at me.

After the little interlude of off-key song, we finish our game and then play another. When it's finally time for Andy to leave, he dances around the question of asking me out on a proper date, as he's done for the last three visits. I somehow manage to dodge the impending question without uttering a word, as I always do, and I thank him again for the random-ass plant with a point and a hand over my heart. I even give him a kiss on the cheek. His mustache brushes my skin. He gives me the most genuine, bashful smile. And this right here is why I like him. He's sincere. He's sweet. He's thoughtful.

And he's lonely. I'm lonely too. When Andy is around, I feel a little less alone.

"Same time next week, Lu?" he asks as I follow him to the lobby door. I nod and smile, and this time it's not a mask. I watch as he walks outside,

gets into his patrol car, and drives away.

When I turn around, the Reaper is looming over me.

His warm, spiritous eyes flare with flame. His hand curls around my arm, just above the bite I gave myself to save his life.

"We have much to discuss, vampire," he says, and drags me into the sun.

CHAPTER 7

*G*od, the look on your face. Don't be so worried. Remember what I said? Sunlight doesn't harm me. Back in the old days, the *old* old days, I used to chill on the beach for days on end with my sisters, waiting for ships to sail by so that we could crush their hulls against the rocks with nothing more than the power of our voices. It was great. I had a wicked tan.

Nonetheless, dragging me anywhere is super uncool. So I tell the Reaper exactly how I feel about it. By punching him in the face.

Which accomplishes very little, by the way, aside from making him look even more pissed off. I am happy to say that there is a nice purple bruise on his temple from the smash I gave him with his sword last night, however.

Note to self: smash Reaper with harder objects than fists.

Ashen pulls me across the street to the park, only slowing once he seems satisfied that we're clear of prying eyes and eavesdroppers. *Pfft*. He's clearly spent no time at all in a place like Sandford, because such a mystical location within town limits simply doesn't exist. If this is where he's going to kill me, humans are definitely going to notice.

He stops us beneath the boughs of a weeping willow, keeping hold of my arm as I squirm in protest. He looks down at me with all the fury of his realm embedded in his eyes like smoldering ash. "What is your name," he demands.

Well. That might be a good sign for my spellcasting efforts.

I point to my name tag above my heart, which says simply, *Lu*.

"Lu," he says, and frowns.

In retrospect, I probably should have picked a name less like Leucosia, but it was just easier that way. It's something I know I will respond to. And it reminds me of my sisters. And, really, no one thinks I've been alive since the 1700s, so I figured I could get away with it. And I love to get away with things.

The Reaper is still frowning. "Lu what? Tell me your second name."

I shake my head and point to my name tag. *Just Lu.*

"You're named Lu Lu? That's... unfortunate."

I roll my eyes and shake my head, pointing to my name tag and then raising my index finger uncomfortably close to his face. *One name, you fucker. Lu.*

"One name? What, like Beyoncé?"

I whip my right hand back and let a punch fly, but he catches my fist before it can connect. I see the faintest trace of a smile on his lips that disappears as quickly as it came. *Motherfucker.*

"Why don't you talk?"

I hold his gaze for a long moment. The anger in my eyes subsides as the seconds tick by. I look down, making a sad face that I hope has the right amount *I've overcome so much hardship mixed with I've made it this far, don't fuck with me.* When I look back up at Ashen his expression is unreadable.

"So, you *won't* talk, or you *can't* talk, which is it?"

I roll my eyes at the lack of effect from my sad face. I'm not sure what kind of reaction I was expecting. I put two fingers up for *can't talk*, which is technically true. I can't talk, because if I do he'll eviscerate me right here on the lawn.

Ashen's eyes narrow. His grip tightens around my arm. Black smoke curls between us and I can see the struggle in his face to keep his instincts under control. "Interesting. Because when I met you, you had subdued a human with your power. How exactly did you accomplish that without a song, vampire?"

I give the most sarcastic, saccharine smile I can manage, and sign the words *Enchanted fucking sign language, bitch.*

By the look on his face, he doesn't know sign language.

"I don't know sign language."

I shrug with a look that says *that's not my problem.*

Ashen's eyes are still laced with suspicion, but they soften just a little. I feel his thumb coast a slow path across the two pink bumps on my left wrist, so slow that he must be hoping I won't notice. But I do. A trail of heat tingles through my skin like the tail of a comet. "The last thing I remember from last night, you bit down into your arm to heal my wound."

I swallow and nod. The Reaper keeps his eyes fixed to mine as he tightens his grip and lifts his arm. I see the suspicion fold into his eyes as he points to a tattoo of scrolling letters on his forearm. I recognize the words. It's my spell, written in a careful, calligraphic script, all in black except the words *Sunu liiktisuma* in a shimmering shade of white. Ashen points to my forearm. When he twists it in the sun, I see it for the first time in my skin. One line, sparkling like an opal in the light.

Sunu liiktisuma.

May they be bound.

"How did you do this if you cannot speak?" Ashen asks. "How did you even cast this spell? You're not a witch."

Okay, look. Ashen's annoyingly insightful questions aside, here's the problem I have. I might not act like the prissy, elegant vampire of your imagination. But I do have manners. I chose to speak last night, to put myself in danger to help this ungrateful douchebag. His assumption that I can't accomplish things without my voice irks me. It's unfair. And if we're now bound together, he's about to find out he's wrong. I can do a lot without speaking a single word, and one of those things might just be murdering him in his sleep.

I don't move, I don't point, I don't sign anything. I just glare at him, waiting for him to give up, to say something worth my time.

He just glares back, unrelenting.

I finally crack and jam my finger onto the spot on his chest where I know the wound is still healing. He flinches. I jab it again and he moves to swipe my hand away but I'm faster than he anticipates.

I point to my other arm, still encased in his grasp. I point to him again and mouth the words *You're welcome, asshole*. I give him a jab for each syllable as I mouth *ASS-HOLE* again, then rip free of his grasp and turn to stalk back to the Swan.

"Wait! Wait," he says, appearing in front of me, obstructing my path. I try to get around him but can't. I glare at him and he glares back, a spark of fire in his eyes, a flash of vampiric red in mine. "Why?"

I give him a questioning look and fold my arms across my chest.

"Why did you do it? You have no allegiance to Reapers. No one does unless it is for their own benefit. As far as I can discern, there is nothing you wanted from me. You had a bag at the Inn when you entered the lobby. You were getting ready to run." Ashen takes a step toward me and waits as though he expects I might suddenly start talking. "You could have let me die, but you did not. So why did you save me?"

Even if I could speak to him, there is nothing to say. Because I don't know. I don't know why I did it. I probably shouldn't have. His kind have killed off most of my sisters after all, and the earliest generations of vampires that followed us who had enough magic in their blood to cast a spell. Same with the shapeshifting witches who once roamed remote places as creatures of the wild, or the earliest werewolves whose incredible strength followed them in their human form. Those with the most power were the most likely to be guilty of crimes. The Reapers have taken so many of us immortals over the centuries, always without trial, often without reason. Really, he's the last person I should be resurrecting from the brink of everlasting death.

Maybe I did it because he must be onto something with the whole Crime of Abomination business? It's an interesting mystery, but it's his mystery and I don't really want to be involved. Maybe it was because it didn't seem right for him to die when he'd protected me first, even if it was just to keep me in the fight. He's right that I have nothing to gain from him, nothing but misery and potentially death.

My gaze falls away from him, because I know I'm just telling myself I don't know why. I think I do know the reasons why. I can sense them beneath the lid of a box in my mind.

So, I do what I always do. I sit on the lid.

I shake my head to clear my confusing thoughts and Ashen lets me maneuver around him as I train my gaze on the doors of the Swan, desperate to be back in my room. I know he can't kill me himself, not with the spell that I cast. But there are other ways to hurt me, and he will, if he finds out who I am. He'll probably hurt me without that kind of motivation. He'll probably do it just by virtue of who he is. A demon. An executioner. A Reaper of Souls.

"The werewolves succeeded, you know," he calls after me, but I don't turn around. "They will try to make another hybrid. They are capturing

vampires not to kill them but for a fate worse than death. They will regroup to come for you. You will assist me in uncovering their secrets and finishing this reaping, vampire."

I hear him follow me for a few steps. His footfalls slow behind me until they stop on the sidewalk as I cross the road.

"We are bound together, vampire. There is nowhere you can run where I won't find you."

His words hit like a blade in my chest. He doesn't know they strike in a way he doesn't intend. He doesn't know it might mean something to me to have someone, anyone, that I can't run from.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I press the lid of the box in my mind more tightly closed.

It's not until I'm sitting on my bed alone with my head in my hands that I realize he never said thank you.

Asshole.

CHAPTER 8

*A*shen has been in my life for a week and I've already thought through at least fifty different ways to kill him. My favorite so far is stabbing him in the guts with a dirty toilet brush. The reason? He has engaged in a strategic, effective campaign of warfare against his enemy.

Me.

First, he checked into the Swan. He seemed wary of Bian so waited until the bubbly, petite, pretty blond Anna was working the desk and charmed his way into the room directly across from mine. I didn't know it was possible for a Reaper to be charming, but that's exactly what he was. I watched him do it too. I'm convinced he waited until I was there in the lobby. He even had the audacity to wink at me as he turned away from the desk, flipping the key card between his knuckles. I flipped him my middle finger in reply.

The second day he spent skulking around the hotel. My first encounter was to find him examining the alarm trigger on the emergency door on the second floor. An hour later, I caught him nosing around the stairs to the roof. Every floor I was on, he conveniently seemed to be there. I managed to slip away to the security room in the afternoon and watched him check out cameras and exits for a while until I got bored.

On the third day, he decided to make conversation with whoever he deemed important to the daily operations of the Swan Inn. First, it was Peter Staker, who does maintenance for us when he's not losing swans or mowing the lawn at the church. Next, he spoke to Deb, the chef whose Sunday roast attracts half the town to the hotel restaurant every week. He even got Bian

to warm up when he helped her with her crossword, though she still darted her eyes to me as they spoke. She's always looking out for me. At least one person is loyal. I later saw Ashen with Anna at the bar, swirling a scotch in his hand as he spoke in low tones and she laughed gratuitously. I swallowed down an unexpected swell of rage and found Peter for a brooding game of cribbage.

At the end of each day, Ashen felt the need to appear at his door just as I entered my room for the night, relaying a critical piece of information from his day. *Does it not concern you, vampire, that a person might successfully request the room across from yours without raising any questions from management?* (No. I'm a vampire, I could probably just kill them, as I might do to you.) *Are you aware, vampire, that the door alarm to the roof has been cut?* (Yes. I'm the one that cut it.) *Vampire, did you know there were a series of murders in the village back in 2007 and a mansion was blown up and a deactivated sea mine exploded?* (Yes. I was here. It was totally awesome.)

On the fourth day, Ashen disappeared, and for some reason I want to kill him for that too.

I tried to play it cool on the fifth day. *If he wants to disappear, that's his problem. Maybe it's for the best. Maybe I can finally get back to my quiet village life.*

When he didn't reappear the next day I scoured through every inch of his room, which I had been avoiding up to that point. I even went as far as sniffing down his bedsheets before ripping them off the bed. Yeah, I know that's pretty weird. But there was nothing, absolutely *nothing* there. It was like he never even existed. I started to wonder if the whole thing was some kind of hallucination, but then my tattoo started getting itchy. *Really* itchy. And then I had weird dreams about Ashen, and the alley, and about him travelling somewhere by car. Somehow, I inherently knew that if I needed to, I could find him. It might have taken me days, even weeks. Some part of me knew that there's nowhere on Earth he could go that I couldn't find him. But even still... I felt and still feel a sense of unease. As much as I don't want him to be here, he *should* be here. And yet he is not.

Maybe this is all karma. I have claimed a lot of lives, being a vampire and all. I probably deserve a bit of cosmic payback like a significant break from reality that makes me question whether or not I actually exist in the Matrix.

So, here we are. It's now day seven, and I don't know what to make of myself, or life, or reality anymore. *How the fuck did this happen to me?* Rather than hunting down the Reaper or filling a bathtub with tequila and sucking it down with a straw, I figure the best thing I can do is just focus on my work.

I spend my shift and then some giving everything a next-level clean. I mean, I scrub tiles with a toothbrush in straight-up bleach with my bare hands. I take screens off windows and vacuum up the dead bugs. When I haul bedding to the laundry room, I take the dials off the machines and polish the plastic beneath until it's sparkling. It's not until I'm cleaning the front desk phone buttons with rubbing alcohol and a Q-tip that someone finally steps in.

"Stop it," Bian orders, snatching the Q-tip from my hand.

I give her a sad face and a pout, reaching for the Q-tip. She bends it in half like a madwoman and I gasp with semi-pretend horror as she throws it in the bin. We stare at one another, both of us narrowing our eyes until we're glaring viciously. I'm the first one to cave. Bian might be barely five feet to my five-foot-eight, human to my vampire, but she still scares the shit out of me. She snatches a notepad and a pen from the desk and thrusts them into my chest.

I roll my eyes. Bian scowls at me.

I scribble a note.

Did the guy across from me check out? I write.

I pass the note back to her and she smirks.

"No," she says. She pulls the pen from my fingers as she pins me with a glare, but her eyes hold a spark of amusement beneath the sharpness on the surface. I do not like that. Bian's gaze flicks to the door and she sits down at the front desk, opening her dog-eared crossword book. "Scrabble," she says, nodding toward the lobby door without looking up.

Shit. Scrabble.

Andy walks into the lobby of the Swan with a hopeful grin and the Scrabble board tucked under his arm. I do my best to give a sincere smile in response, but I know it doesn't reach my eyes. I feel the weight of this week pressing on the bones in my face, laying its burden in my chest.

We play three games, and I make some morose words, like *loneliness*, and *darkness*, and *wallow*. Don't judge me. I'm a vampire. We like to be dramatic and melancholy at times. But it's ridiculous, I know that. I

shouldn't feel sad at all. I should be rejoicing if the Reaper has disappeared from my life. And that's probably what's happened. My tattoo doesn't itch today. I've had no more disconcerting dreams. I'm shit at spellcasting, so the enchantment has probably worn off, thank fuck. Life will go back to normal now. So when Andy is leaving and finally plucks up the courage to ask me on a proper date to the movies, I nod yes.

I'm now staring at a crack in the paint on the ceiling of my room, wondering how in the fuck my five thousand years have culminated in this exact moment in time.

Three quiet knocks tap at my door.

"Vampire," a whisper sounds from the other side.

I press the heels of my palms to my eyes. I don't know whether I'm relieved, or disappointed, or both.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

"Vampire."

I sigh and roll off the edge of the bed, landing with barely a sound on my fingertips and toes in a plank position. I've been pretending to be human for so long that it's kind of fun to remember I can do these things too.

I stand and fidget with the sleeves on my shirt, rolling them up to hide the worn cuffs. When I open the door, Ashen's hand is raised as though he's about to knock again, his other one positioned behind his back. As always seems to be the case, he looks immaculate. A freshly pressed black shirt, black jeans. I suddenly feel underdressed at the threshold of my own room.

"You don't look well," Ashen says, and I move to slam the door shut but his foot is in the way, "What's wrong with you?"

I draw a big circle with my index finger in the air in front of his face. *You*, I mouth.

Ashen catches my hand out of the space between us and brings my fingertips closer to his nose. "Why does your hand smell like that?" he asks as I pull it from his grasp. "It smells vile."

The bleach. Note to self: the demon does not like bleach. I give a sarcastic smile and mimic the motion of spraying and wiping the doorframe. *It's called 'work'*, I mouth.

"It's called derp?"

I roll my eyes and shake my head, mouthing the word *work* again.

"Here," he says, pulling something from the hand behind his back. I smell new leather and unblemished paper. He passes me a notebook with a

black leather cover and a long, thin box. I look at him for a moment before I take them in my hands.

The leather of the journal is embossed with a gold border of flowers and vines. I flip the sheafs beneath my thumb. The ivory paper is creamy and thick, the outside edges coated in gold. I glance up at Ashen, but his eyes are fixed to the box. I open it, and inside rests a fountain pen with a sparkling abalone body. It is all the colors of the sea. A gold ring with a design of tiny fish encircles the cap.

I swallow a sudden tightness in my throat.

"I thought it would be easier than trying to lip read," he says. His words are practical, his voice even and deep. I nod, but I don't look up and meet his eyes. "I also brought you this."

He holds a sheathed *katana* above the box and the book in my hands. I gasp. I set the other objects on the floor and he lays the sword across both my palms. My fingers start to shake.

"I noticed your dagger the other night. It's a silver-infused *kaiken*. I recognized the craftsmanship. You spent time in Japan many years ago, didn't you."

I nod. I hold my breath. I grasp the handle of the sword and pull the *saya* far enough down the blade that I can see the initials of its maker.

It's true. I can't believe it's true. I can't believe what I hold in my hands still exists.

I close my eyes. They burn with unshed tears.

"You fought with Tomoe Gozen?" Ashen asks, and I nod, not opening my eyes. I press my lips closed. "I reaped the werewolf that killed her, and then I took back her sword. It's yours now. It should be with someone that knew her."

It was many lifetimes ago, and yet the memories still overwhelm my soul. My throat burns as though I'm choking in the grip of a python. This is the hardest part of being a vampire. Trying to forget when you remember everything.

We stand in silence for a long moment until I'm sure I won't let a tear fall. When I open my eyes, I can feel their glow. I reach down and open the notebook. I uncap my new pen.

Thank you.

I hold the note up so he can read it. His gaze meets mine. My eyes are still glassy. My heart feels like it's been put in a blender. The Reaper

watches me for a long moment before he gives a nod and turns back toward his room.

"Vampire," he says at the threshold of his door, looking over his shoulder at me. There is flame in his pupils, a dark look of warning in his face. "If someone asks, none of this came from me."

I tilt my head in question, clutching the sword and the book and the pen to my chest.

"I wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong impression."

The Reaper's eyes hold onto mine for a moment that feels too long. Long enough for the hole in my heart to grow heavier. Long enough for me to understand. Long enough for me to be sure that when he says *anyone*, what he really means is me.

CHAPTER 9

It's six in the morning.

I haven't slept all night. And by all night, I mean *All. Fucking. Night.*

I sat for ages turning the sword over and over in my hands, drowning in an inescapable sea of memory. The sounds and smells of war, of riding after Tomoe Gozen into the bloody Battle of Awazu. The images of escaping the from famed samurai Hatakeyama Shigetada. Those memories of risk and camaraderie and reward and death followed me into the dark hours and kept me from sleep. Such is the curse of the vampire, to remember everything, even that which we wish to forget.

I spent hours more tossing on my bed, stressing about not being asleep. I smelled the faint aroma of bleach on my fingers and thought of more ideas for killing the Reaper, most of which involved large quantities of Javex. Even that didn't seem to help.

I did, however, reach a valuable conclusion.

My life before the Reaper was a little boring, yes, but there was a certain level of comfort and predictability to it that I enjoyed.

My life since the Reaper has been neither comfortable nor predictable.

Therefore, the only way out of my current state of misery is to either:

- A. Kill the Reaper
- B. Kill the Alpha
- C. Kill them both.

Despite how entertaining it's been planning various ways to engineer Ashen's demise, killing a Reaper is actually quite tricky. Reapers do claim the souls of immortals like myself, after all, so it kind of makes sense that

it's hard for us to do. Saving them, it seems, is much easier. Also, I have bound myself to Ashen and his task, so the killing part is probably not so straightforward anyway.

Killing the Alpha is a more achievable goal. I've killed Alphas before too.

Don't get me wrong, it's still tricky. Werewolves, as you'll recall from the Jessie Bates Dinnergate fiasco, are pack hunters. It can be pretty tough to take on thirty or more just to get to the one you want. So, it really pains me to the core to admit it, but I probably wouldn't have survived the other night without the Reaper's help. The wolves will be better prepared for next time now that they know I can fight.

I've decided I cannot kill the Reaper... for now... but I can work on getting this reaping done as quickly as possible. In the meantime, I can take great enjoyment in making Ashen's life awkward and weird as fuck. And as a *rap, rap, rap* sounds at my door, I pledge to relish every minute of it.

I grab my pen and my notebook. I am *so ready* to begin.

I open the door and Ashen is standing on the other side, dressed in the same dark palette as always and looking particularly sharp for six in the morning with a black suit jacket over a charcoal grey shirt. Not a thread is out of place. He frowns when he sees me. "Vampire. You look even worse today than you did yesterday."

I cast my pen across the paper with a furious hand and then turn the journal toward him with a smile brimming with malice.

Reaper. You sound like even more of an asshole today than you did yesterday. I didn't think it would be possible, and yet, here we are.

Ashen reads my note and his frown deepens. "Did I just offend you?"

Yes.

"How?" he asks.

At this rate? Existing, you obtuse motherfucker. But telling me I look about as good as a bag of dicks usually offends me, yes.

The Reaper's eyes flare with a little flame. "You are a particularly acerbic vampire, you know. I was merely remarking on the fact that you look unwell."

Yes, and it was so kind of you to do so. Thank you for reminding me that I didn't sleep at all. My infallible vampire memory might have failed me had you not.

The Reaper seems to think on this and opens his mouth to say something further, but I glare at him and he closes it. We stand motionless for a long moment that I start to fear will drag into eternity.

"Come for breakfast with me. I'd like to discuss how we will find and reap the Alpha," he finally demands. I get the sense he's not used to asking anyone for anything. He's used to demanding and receiving.

And so, I will take great pleasure in telling him:

NO.

I smile as I hold up my little note for him to read. He scowls over the edge of the journal at me.

"Why not? It is for your benefit as much as mine."

He waits as I scribble my reply, only the scratch of my pen and the sound of our breath between us.

Reason one: you didn't say please.

Reason two: I wouldn't want anyone to get the WRONG IMPRESSION. Imagine the gossip among the quaint townsfolk if we joined one another for breakfast so early.

Reason three: I haven't had my morning blofee.

The Reaper glances up at me as he reads and re-reads the note. He gives me an assessing look, like he's trying to work out a puzzle that started out fun and is now just frustrating. His eyes darken just a little as he trains his gaze on the paper.

"Please join me for lunch in that case, after your shift is finished. And what is bloffee?"

I roll my eyes and step back from the door, allowing The Reaper to enter. I head to the narrow side table along the wall to my one extravagance, my one significant investment in the last several years. My *Rocket Appartamento* espresso machine. I legit would have snuck back into the hotel just to grab this, had I successfully made a run for it. It is a thing of beauty.

I motion for Ashen to sit in one of the two faded armchairs next to the bricked-in fireplace. He looks suspicious of my motivations but sits nonetheless.

As the Reaper watches on with what looks like genuine interest, I set to work grinding coffee beans and prepping the machine. I place my 'I'm feeling FANGTASTIC' mug beneath the spout as the thick espresso pours into the cup, filling the room with the aroma of my morning ritual. Then I

head to the mini fridge and empty a quarter bag of blood with some milk into the stainless steel frothing pitcher and steam the fuck out of it until it's little more than a pink cloud. I smile sweetly at the Reaper in the corner as I pour the froth into the mug.

Blofee, I mouth.

He looks at me, motionless.

Want some blofee?

His eyes narrow.

I take the loudest, slurping sip I can manage. His eye twitches. I smile. He frowns. We stare.

I grab my journal and pen without taking my eyes from Ashen, trying to push away some surprising, unwanted thoughts that scuttle into my brain the longer I look at him. Thoughts about how far down his chest those tattoos might go... about what it might feel like to have his hands on my body... about what his blood might taste like as he-

What the fuuuuuuuck is wrong with me. A lot, I think. A lot is definitely wrong with me. I chalk it up to danger and desire, inseparable in the mind of a vampire.

I rip my gaze away and focus on writing a note that says:

Now that you know what blofee is, why the hell are you still here?

Ashen remains seated as he casts his gaze across my room. "I wanted to see where you live. For someone so integral to the daily operations of the Swan Inn, your room is very small. Why?"

I take a long sip from my cup, savoring the rich foam and the velvet espresso as I sit cross-legged on my bed. The *katana* lies next to me with the handle on the pillow, just in case. I set my coffee down on the nightstand and write my reply.

Because I like this room. It has a certain irony to it that I enjoy. Why do you need to know?

"Because I'm trying to figure you out. I want to know why they want you. What they are coming for. What makes you special."

It's my sparkling personality, I write. I give him a dazzling smile as I hold up my note.

"...No."

My face falls into a frown and I think I see the Reaper's lips twitch.

"It is one hundred percent not that."

My eyes narrow to slits as I glare at him, and I definitely see his lips twitch. I see a light in his eyes that isn't a flame. The echo of a smile is there. It detonates a thought in my brain that I never expected: *I wonder if I could ever make Ashen laugh.*

No. No, no, no. I don't need to take up that challenge. But there's a whisper from the box in my mind that's saying otherwise. The same part of me that loves to get away with something also loves an impossible challenge. Making the Reaper laugh absolutely fits the bill.

I clear my throat and push that idea to the darkest recesses of my mind where it can die of starvation and neglect. I look down at the journal and scribble a new note.

Who is 'they,' anyway?

"I think we killed the rest of 'them' off. It's just the Alpha now, until he inevitably finds a new pack to claim. It's Semyon Abdulov," Ashen says, his eyes sharpening in the slightest as he assesses my reaction. "Do you know him?"

I've heard the name around over the years.

"And? What have you heard, exactly?"

I dunno, Reaper. Werewolf stuff. Petty squabbles and scraps among their kind. None of it's good or interesting, really. I don't bother keeping track.

"Werewolves are your enemies, how can you not be interested in their movements and motivations?" the Reaper asks as his eyes narrow to thin slits.

I shrug. *I prefer cats,* I write.

The Reaper's shoulders drop. He looks away to the side of the room as though I'm both frustrating and exhausting. *Excellent.* "That's... nonsensical. And ludicrous. And does not scream of self-preservation."

I hold back a sly smile, happy to have irritated this ill-tempered, judgy demon taking up far too much space in my cramped room. *Since you're in an especially charming mood today, why don't you go away and charm someone else for a while.*

"Yes. I need to leave. You're going to be late for work," Ashen says as he stands. I'm not at all surprised that he's memorized my schedule, the nosy fucker. "Please knock at my door when your shift is done. We will get lunch."

I nod once.

Ashen pauses at my door and turns, his gaze lingering on my arm where the shimmering white tattoo is barely visible. He meets my eyes with a look of warning. "Keep your guard up, vampire. At least two others of your kind went missing before I got to you. It's only a matter of time until the Alpha gathers another pack and tries to find you, unless we can find the Alpha first."

He turns away to leave. I pick up a tube of hand lotion from the nightstand and throw it at the back of his head. It makes contact with a satisfying *thwack*, and the Reaper turns his fiery glare on me.

I'm not the only one the wolves are coming for. If they found Angelwing, they were expecting you, I write.

"I know," he says, pulling a plastic bag from the interior pocket of his blazer and tossing it onto the bed beside me. I pick it up, recognizing the obsidian blade within. I can smell his blood still lingering on its surface through the thin plastic.

"We're going to find the apothecary that made it. And your witch Ediye is going to help us."

CHAPTER 10

Here's only one thing that's been going through my head since the Reaper left my room this morning:
Ediye is going to murder me.

It will be a justifiable killing. I deserve it. I've brought trouble to Bian's doorstep with the presence of the Reaper in her Inn, and Ediye is next. She has been my only immortal friend and ally since I went into hiding three centuries ago. I thought I'd put trouble far enough behind me to live close to her again. Evidently, I was wrong. And now that Ashen knows her name and that a connection exists between us, I have failed in keeping her safe from harm.

And now here we are...

...In Ashen's car...

...Driving to her house.

Motherfucker had broken into my room and packed my bag as I worked. Even the *katana* was already in his car, lying across the black leather of the rear seat.

This is a massive invasion of privacy, asshole, I had scribbled onto a fresh page. I shoved it in his face and pointed at *asshole*. Then at him. Then at *asshole* again. Since then, I have been working on a page of *ASSHOLE* in different fonts and sizes. I show him my progress periodically and he seems to take more amusement in my graphic design efforts than I intended. And by amusement, I mean there's almost, *almost*, a smirk on his smug Reaper face.

We stop for lunch halfway along our drive and I'm scowling and broody when I slump down in the seat across from Ashen with my notebook

flipped to a fresh page and my pen in hand. There is a light in his eyes as he watches me, something akin to mirth. I want to punch it right off his beautiful face.

Ashen orders venison, I order black coffee, and we sit in simmering silence until the waitress brings a basket of warm bread to the table, eyeing my lunch companion as though he is a slightly terrifying yet intriguingly delicious menu item. When she leaves, Ashen sweeps a thick slab of butter across a piece of bread with a languid pass of his knife. I flip to the back of my book where I have started a collection of observations about my frenemy.

Note to self: Reaper likes butter. Must steal all the butter.

I give Ashen a saccharine smile and write a new message for him to read:

If you didn't want to give anyone the WRONG IMPRESSION, breaking into my room and kidnapping me for three days is just about the dumbest idea you could have, Reaper.

The Reaper gives the faintest trace of a smile and refocuses on adding more butter to his bread. "You seem very hung up on this comment I made. It's the second time you've referred to it. How interesting. Why?"

I write no response. I raise my coffee to my lips and blow across the surface just long enough for it to annoy him. He sighs, but there is a gleam in his skin, the radiance of mischief that he cannot hide.

"Not to worry, vampire. I mentioned to both Anna and Peter that you had an appointment out of town with a podiatrist for removal of persistent bunions. I am just being an honorable acquaintance and giving you a lift, since I was headed in that direction."

I roll my eyes and tap my pen on the notebook, watching as he keeps his gaze down on the bread as though he doesn't want me to see the amusement in his face. I decide to move along to more important questions:

How did you find Ediye?

"I am a Reaper. It's my job to find immortals," he says, then takes a bite of his bread with a look of self-satisfaction. As an immortal in hiding, I'm feeling a giant fucking wave of unease. He seems to sense my distress and sits back in his chair, watching me as he chews. He takes his time, drawing out my irritation. "When I left the other day, I went to speak with a warlock connection of mine. I wanted to see if there were any witches with no firm associations to local covens. Ediye was mentioned as a powerful, lone witch

who keeps her distance from the others. You are a powerful, solitary vampire with the ability to cast spells. I surmised there was a connection. Your face confirmed it when I said her name."

I crinkle my nose in a question.

The Reaper shrugs and then leans forward on his forearms, his shirt pulling taut across his shoulders. "You have a very expressive face."

I tilt my head. That almost sounded like a compliment. Apparently, that thought is in my face too, because his eyes darken.

"It is a disadvantage for a vampire. You should work on that."

Nope, definitely not a compliment.

Well YOU should work on not being such a dickhead. And leave Ediye the fuck alone. This is none of her business, I write, spinning the notebook and sliding it across the table toward him.

"She has committed no crime. If she helps us find the apothecary who created the poison, she has nothing to fear from me."

I roll my eyes and give him a derisive snort.

"Besides, her home is on the way."

To where, my podiatrist? I write.

"To my corridor."

Your 'corridor'. That sounds lame. What if I don't want to go to your 'corridor'? It sounds cramped and uncomfortable.

"You have no choice, vampire. We are bound and that is one place I cannot go without you. We need more information about Semyon's history. We need to understand what the connection is between you and the other vampires they have taken. There must be something I'm missing, and I need to find it if I'm going to stop them from making another hybrid."

There are questions I want to ask. Questions about what Ashen already knows, about the hybrid that the Reapers have supposedly found. But I'm also afraid to ask. I'm afraid to draw more attention to myself, for him to pry more into my life. I don't want to give him an opening. I was thorough when I covered my tracks three hundred years ago. If I stay quiet, I will keep hidden, even if it's in plain sight.

Maybe, if I go to this *corridor* with him, I can connect the dots and figure out what he's missing before he does, and then I can reap this Alpha myself and slip back into oblivion unscathed. It's not like I have much of a choice anyway.

I'm mulling over these thoughts as I take a sip of my coffee, which is bitter and bland compared to my bloffee from this morning.

The Reaper finishes the last bite of his bread and dusts the crumbs from the tablecloth with his fingers. "If you're worried about getting back in time for your date with Detective Cartwright, there is no reason for concern. We will be back by then."

The coffee catches in my throat and sputters from my mouth and out my nose.

And then the most unexpected thing happens. The Reaper laughs. It's more of a chuckle, really. Like the ghost of a laugh. But *oh my God*. It's low and luxurious. It's rich and warm, like hot chocolate spiced with chili. It's like whispering secrets over glasses of brandy next to a fire. A little bit dangerous. A little bit reckless. And I want to hear more.

I clean myself up with my napkin, watching the fleeting smile dissolve from Ashen's face as he takes on the task of putting an obscene amount of butter on another roll.

"Is he your mate?" he asks.

I nearly choke on the air itself. I have an intense urge to shout out WHAT THE FUCK as loud as I can. I manage to press my teeth together until my jaw aches as I write my reply.

Are you serious? Andy Cartwright? You're asking if Andy Cartwright is my 'mate'?

"Yes, the human. The police detective. The one that gave you the unsightly rubber plant."

It's a Japanese peace lily.

"It's still unsightly. It looks like it belongs in a dentist's office."

I offer a faint smile and a shrug, not glancing up from my notebook as I write.

Agreed. It is not the most attractive plant. But the thought was nice. And no, he is not my 'mate'.

"But he does want to mate *with* you."

Fuck my life, I think as I press my fingertips to my forehead. I take a deep breath, sit back in my chair, and pick up my butter knife. I flip it between my fingers as I consider stabbing the Reaper in the hand. When I glance up, I catch the dim spark of amusement in his eyes, hidden like a light beneath sheafs of dark paper.

He's fucking with you, I think to myself. *Fuck back.*

The Reaper is expecting I will tell him to shove his head back up his ass where it belongs. But that is not what I write. I send a silent prayer of thanks to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion for having my back with *WAP*.

Yes, I believe he does. Although, we don't call it mating. That's very last century of you, Reaper. No, he wants to park his big Mack truck right in my little garage.

I send my note across the table and the light dies in his eyes. He tries not to glare at me as a smile stalks across my face. I take my journal back.

In case it's unclear, Reaper, he wants to make it cream, make me scream.

There is a tiny flame growing in his pupils.

He intends to bring a bucket and a mop... would you like me describe what for? I can keep going if you like.

That one is the final straw for the Reaper. He lays his large hand across the paper and pulls it toward him with a fiery gleam in his eyes. We sit in blissfully awkward silence for the meal he doesn't finish, and my mediocre coffee suddenly tastes a lot less bitter.

The Reaper doesn't speak for the rest of the car ride. I spend most of the time working on a new design in my journal. The lyrics to *WAP* spiral outward from the drawing of a bucket and a mop. I show it to Ashen and he glares at the road as though it's a soul to be reaped.

When we arrive at Ediye's house, she's already standing on her porch waiting for us. I had texted her that we were coming and what the Reaper wanted to know, hoping that she would pull together some potential apothecaries to investigate. The less time she has to spend with Ashen, the better. Preferably no time at all.

We get out of the car and enter the gate of her garden, following the winding flagstone path through beds of herbs and exotic flowers. Ediye waits on her porch like a bastion between the world and the sanctuary of her home. She has a folded piece of paper in her hand, and she extends it toward us as we ascend the first three steps of her porch. The message is clear. We will not be entering her domain.

"This is your most likely option," Ediye says. She hands the paper to me, but her eyes cast a slow sweep of the Reaper, starting first with his cognac irises, then lingering on the tattoos that creep up from beneath the collar of his shirt, down the length of his body and back up again. She meets my gaze with a look that says: *you are so fucked, vampire.*

"Thank you, witch. Your assistance has been noted," the Reaper says.

Ediye eyes him, crossing her arms. I know she'd rather not be noted at all. She shifts her gaze to me. "Where is he taking you?"

His 'corridor', I write, holding it up for her to see.

Ediye's onyx eyes go wide. "The Shadow Realm?" she asks. Her voice shimmers with incredulity. I shake my head and point to my note. Ediye puffs a frustrated breath. "Yes, his *corridor*... the one that leads to the Shadow Realm... the Shadow Realm of the Reapers... for fucksakes Lu."

We look at one another for a long moment before cutting our combined glares to the Reaper, who is stoic and unmoving. Ediye takes a step from her porch, staring down at him in challenge. He does not balk, naturally. He could kill her in the time it would take her to blink. My heart swells in appreciation for my badass friend, who I know on the inside must be roiling with fear but who will never show it.

"She does not belong in your realm, Reaper," Ediye says.

Ashen does not look away. "I know. I have no choice," he says, and his voice is softer than I expect.

"It is dangerous for her there. You have a duty to keep her safe."

"I know."

"This," Ediye says as she yanks the journal from my hands. She flips through some of the pages and snorts a laugh as she comes upon my masterpiece of *ASSHOLE*. She holds it up in front of his face and points to it. "*This* is not all she is." She jabs a finger to his chest on the exact spot where his wound is still healing. "This? What she did for you? *This* is Lu."

He shifts the briefest glance to me before meeting Ediye's eyes once more. "I will bring her back unharmed."

"You'd better, or I will come for you, Reaper. I don't care who you are or how many souls you've taken. There will be no House in your Realm that will be able to hide you. Not from me."

I snatch the journal away and clasp Ediye in a brief but fierce hug, then I sign *I love you*. I turn away before I can see her reply stalking to the car with my head down and my glassy eyes trained on the silver flagstones. Sometimes having just one person left to stand for you reminds you how many you've lost.

As I sit in the car and wait for Ashen, I unfold Ediye's note.

Ammon Hassan, Wakalat al-Makwa, Khan el-Khalili.

There's a gold necklace taped inside, a hexagonal charm of lapis lazuli shining at me from beneath the cellophane. I pull it free of the note and cast my thumb across the blank space that it leaves behind. Hidden ink appears in the same shade of blue as the stone.

He's not the only one that can find you. Whisper Ninmen Eslal to the charm, I will come.

The Reaper enters the car and I fold the note as the ink disappears. He watches as I put the necklace on. As my hands are behind my neck he reaches across the console and pulls the note from where it rests on my lap. The skin of my thigh hums with gooseflesh even though he didn't touch me. The gesture is so simple yet feels intimate. I feel vulnerable, but unafraid. But I think I should.

"Khan el-Khalili. Cairo," Ashen says as he reads the note. His voice is quiet and low. He looks into the distance, his gaze angled away from me. Tension feathers along his jaw.

For just a moment, I wonder if he can feel anything he shouldn't, or if that's only ever just me.

CHAPTER 11

Dusk is falling behind a curtain of heavy fog when we arrive at the Ashen's 'corridor'. I retrieve the *katana* from the back seat as he grabs our bags, and we stand for a moment in front of the country home of the Reaper. Its red brick facade looms above us in the growing dark, two cast iron gas lamps lighting the sweeping grey staircase to a mahogany door. The house is framed by ancient elms and ferns that grow in their shadows.

I expected more unicorns. Maybe also a 'live, love, laugh' welcome mat, I write, and hold it up in front of the Reaper's face without taking my eyes off the house.

"Why am I not surprised," he says, and I can hear the faint trace of a smile in his voice.

We ascend the steps and Ashen pushes the door open. The interior lights come on as we enter but it still seems dim and atmospheric. There are oversized paintings on the walls and marble vases on ornate narrow tables, all flowing down a corridor of checkerboard tiles into the darker recesses of the house.

"Would you rather we leave for the Shadow Realm now or wait until the morning?" he asks as we near the end of the hall. It opens to a wide living room with high ceilings and windows that span the height of the wall. The grey light of the fog obscures everything beyond the sloping lawn.

How about not at all, I write.

"Not an option, I'm afraid."

I thought you might say that. I let him read the note and then clutch the journal and pen to my chest as I stand in front of the window and look out

at the mist. I breathe steam onto the glass and write *HELP! I'VE BEEN KIDNAPPED!* backwards as the Reaper watches.

"Is that necessary?"

I turn and give him a nod and my sweetest, most innocent smile. We watch each other for a long moment until my smile fades and I look away.

I'd rather go tomorrow. I need to eat before we leave. I doubt your realm caters to my tastes, I write, passing him the note.

"There are blood bags in the fridge," Ashen suggests. I tilt my head and narrow my eyes. His grip tightens on the strap of my bag. "I stocked up the other day when I came to retrieve the sword."

Thank you. But it's not quite the same.

"I know." I hear the intake of a breath and I think he's about to say something else, but Ashen presses his lips together instead. His gaze roams my face and then drifts to a wide staircase in the corner. "I'll show you to your room."

I follow him up the stairs and down another corridor, this one narrower than the first but with higher ceilings. Ashen stops at a door painted in black and pushes it open for me but doesn't enter.

The room is more feminine than anything I've seen in the house so far. There are pink and gold curtains framing a tall window and a matching bedspread neatly laid across the bed. Gauzy white curtains drape between the posts of the bed frame, swaying in the humid breeze from the open window. There's a collection of flowers on the sill, a crucifix orchid with bright orange flowers, a wind orchid with blooms like white stars. I walk to a small vanity and notice a thin film of dust across the wood frame of the mirror. The bedding still has creases from where it was folded in its packaging. It's brand new.

I look to the Reaper who waits at the threshold of the door. He sweeps his eyes across the room and gives a curt nod. When they find mine again, the flame within them gives light to the room. "There's nowhere on Earth that I can't find you, vampire," he says, and turns toward the unlit hall as he keeps hold of my gaze over his shoulder. "Just in case you're thinking of running too far."

I want to write something snappy, like *fuck you too, dickhead*, but for some reason I can't. I just watch him break his gaze away and shut the door behind him with a quiet click.

I stay in my room only long enough to get changed, then I head out the way we came in. I don't see Ashen. I can smell his scent. It's unlit cigars and brandy. It's silk and ink. It leads down the hall, down the stairs, and into a dark corridor on the other side of the living room. There's a light on there. I stop at the mouth of the corridor for just a moment. Part of me has an urge to see if Ashen is there and what he's doing. I imagine myself stopping at the doorway, our gazes meeting with no words spoken. I imagine his eyes simmering with something other than fury. My heart ratchets with the temptation of it, but my bones are fused to the floor. I don't go down the corridor.

I pass through the living room, but instead of going down the hallway to the front door, I detour through an unlit dining room and into the kitchen. It's all granite countertops and dark green cupboards and stainless-steel appliances. Expensive. Tasteful. There's an antique crystal chandelier that drips from the ceiling like a waterfall. There's a window the height of the room with an arch at the top. For some reason, I feel like this house is always dark, despite the tall windows and the grandiose lights.

I see the fridge and smile.

My canines elongate in anticipation as I open the fridge door and the cool air presses its kiss across my skin. It's not the blood I'm here for, though I'll take one of those for the road.

It's the butter.

I take the package out and carefully unwrap the edge of the foil, then I sink my fangs into the salty, creamy slab to leave an unmistakable vampire calling card.

That's for touching my underwear, motherfucker. I fold up the foil and place it back in the butter compartment.

I sip a bag of blood on my walk into town. I know the movies will tell you otherwise, but controlling your thirst is not the hardest part of being a vampire. Sure, that takes practice, but after a few decades you get the hang of that... most of the time, anyway. Even the emotional turmoil of eating people isn't that bad. You get over that surprisingly fast too. And you can make sustainable choices, like I do. My diet is exclusively douchebags like Jessie Bates. I'm doing the planet a favour. I'm playing my part in manifesting a better world.

It doesn't take me long to find a candidate.

You know those dudes that drive Honda civics and install a huge muffler on them so they sound like some kind of fucked-up race car but with the engine of a hairdryer and the body of a beater? Like a Frankencar? Yeah. I pick one of those guys. I'm doing us all a solid here, so you're welcome.

It's nearly three thirty in the morning when I finally make it back to the Reaper's country estate. I slip in the front door and glide down the hall, silent and lethal. I glance back at the corridor as I start up the stairs but it's dark. As I slide down the hallway like a shadow, I notice a door ajar across from mine. The lights are off. I have another wild thought, that I could push it open, that I could see what's on the other side. I could see if the Reaper is there in the dark. But I don't. I close my door and change into clothes absent of the scent of blood, and I lie down next to my *katana*. As I close my eyes, I hear the click of the door closing across the hall.

In the morning, the first thing I sense isn't the light or the chill from the cool air flowing through the open window.

It's the smell of coffee.

I get changed and clean myself up. I even put on a little bit of makeup. Just a little bit. Like... maybe a full face but *natural*. I know what you're thinking but I'm not catfishing so fuck off. If *you* were going to the Shadow Realm you'd probably do the same. Besides, I don't know who's there. I need to be presentable, and I'm sure the Reaper will be immaculate, as always, so I'm just trying to even the playing field.

When I arrive downstairs, Ashen is in the kitchen, pushing down the plunger of a coffee press. His back is to me but I know he heard me enter. I climb up onto a stool and sit at the island to watch.

It's a dark blue shirt today, the shade of midnight in the far North when the summer sun skirts the horizon but doesn't go down. When he turns his head, I see the edge of the tattoo skirting up from beneath his collar, the wing of a bird that disappears below his shirt.

"Good hunting?" he asks, and glances over his shoulder enough to see me nod. I smell something cooking and I can barely contain my smile.

Toast.

"It's not the same as your... blofee... but hopefully this will do," Ashen says as he turns and sets a steaming mug before me next to a small pitcher of cream and one of blood. I smile in reply. He looks at me like he doesn't recognize who I am. There's an element of confusion on his face. I wonder

if I've drawn a wonky eyebrow. Then I have the idea that I should draw slightly messed up makeup every day and see how long it takes for him to say something. A wonky brow here, a little asymmetrical contouring there... I'd probably end up with a full clown face before he utters a single word about it.

The Reaper seems wary of the delight this idea has sparked in my eyes and turns away as though I'm plotting his demise. Which maybe I am.

And suddenly I think up a new game. The *Attraction and Annihilation* game. I will subdue him with my feminine charms and then I will destroy him. Maybe I'll destroy them all. It's a plan that has the element of impossibility that I enjoy.

As I'm mulling over this idea, the toast pops.

I can barely contain myself as he turns away to retrieve the butter from the fridge. I busy my hands with making my coffee, watching as he brings the plate of toast and the package of butter to the island and sits across from me.

"We will go to the Shadow Realm first and try to gather any additional information we can find. From there, we can take a corridor to Cairo," Ashen says as he pours himself a cup of coffee. I nod, tapping my pen on my notebook.

Ashen takes the butter and starts unravelling the foil. I'm already writing a note, but I keep my eyes on him. As he peels the foil away from the fang marks, his gaze collides with mine in a dead-eyed glare. "Seriously?"

I spin my note to face him and push it across the polished marble. *The question is, Reaper... did I lick it?*

He stares at me, unblinking. I think I might have broken him. My smile blooms. The Reaper picks up his butter knife and flips it across his knuckles, and for a moment I think he might fire it at my chest. He looks at me the way he did the other day, like a puzzle, but this time he's understood something fundamental that he didn't see before. That it's not a puzzle after all, but a maze. And unless he keeps his head, he'll never find his way out.

The rotation of the blade in his hand stops when the serrated edge lodges in the butter through the imprint of my fangs. Something wicked flashes in Ashen's eyes. "If you think that is a disincentive, you're wrong," he says as he cuts a square of butter and deposits it on his toast, waiting for the heat of the bread to melt the edges. He looks at me with a gleam in his eyes, and I can't tell if it's fury or something more dangerous.

I give the Reaper a sweet smile as I pass him my reply. *Next time, I guess I'll just have to put it down my pants.*

The warm brown of his eyes seems to shimmer in the dim morning light. He gives me a lazy half smile. Ashen leans across the island, holding my gaze. His eyes land on my mouth for a fraction too long and my heart thuds a heavy beat in my chest. "That's not what I thought you meant when you said *make it cream.*"

I nearly let out a roaring laugh but I'm scared to make the sound. I almost busted myself the last time I did, when I imagined him reaping donuts. But I do give him a vibrant smile. I can't dampen the delight in my eyes, and I catch a glimpse of something in his that I didn't expect. Something real beneath the performative mask. It's like the ember of truth beneath the smoke that blinds you.

Desire.

And I know, better than anyone, that desire can get you killed.

I mustn't let myself forget. Not my sister's hands as she pushed me from the cliff and into the sea. Not the silver blade through her heart, the hellfire shimmering in the sun. Not the blood that spilled from her hands as she gripped the sword, taking it with her as she fell after me. I can't forget Aglaope. The second I do, I'll be next. And no whisper of desire will stand against the storm of their vengeance if the Reapers find out who I am.

Ashen is no different from the rest of his Realm. He's probably already planning my demise. It might not be his hand on the blade, but it will be his kill. Unless I kill first.

I write a note. I hold his gaze. I lean a little closer and there's only a whisper of space between us. I pass him my message, hiding my fangs behind my smile.

Be careful, Reaper. You're in danger of convincing yourself you know what to do with a woman like me.

I can see every shade of gold and honey in the rich brown depths of his eyes. I can see the ember brighten beneath the smoke. The Reaper can try to hide it, this spark of desire, but I'll still find it. I'll hunt it down. I'll fan it into a flame. And then I think I'll use it.

I think I'll use it to burn them all.

CHAPTER 12

Black smoke coils in a slow path toward the ceiling. It rises from a wide, flat cauldron resting on a dais in the center of the room. There are stones in the cauldron, black with shimmering seams of gold. There isn't a flame, and yet the smoke billows upward, trapped by the living room above. It flows across the ceiling and hovers among the tops of the brick pillars and arches that hold up the foundations of the house.

The Reaper takes a small, unlit torch from a basket by the door, holding it to the fire of a lamp along the wall. He casts it into the cauldron. Fire roars to life across the stones.

"Let's go," he says, walking toward the dais.

I look around as though there's some magical door to the Shadow Realm that might appear in all the embers spitting from the flame. The Reaper ascends the steps.

There is no door. There's no escape hatch.

The cauldron is the path to the Shadow Realm.

This parachute is a backpack and the backpack is on fucking fire.

I write a note and rip it from the journal, crumple it up, and throw it at the Reaper.

I miss.

It rolls down the interior edge of the cauldron and bursts into flame.

The Reaper turns and looks at me, and the note doesn't matter anymore. He gets the gist of it from my face. Which is:

Fuck you. I'm not getting in a cauldron of fire.

"This is the corridor," he says, pointing to the cauldron as though it's an obvious and perfectly reasonable request to stand in a flame. "Let's go, vampire."

I shake my head. I take a step backward.

"You will not burn," the Reaper says.

Sure, that's easy to say when you're a demon and your name is fucking *Ashen*. My jaw tightens and I give him a death stare. To demonstrate my point, I rip another piece of paper from my journal and compress it in my fist, then throw it into the fire. Again, it bursts into flame. Ashen looks at it, then at me.

"Okay... I understand your concern, but *you* will not burn. You are an immortal."

I shake my head and take another step back.

He *doesn't* understand. He doesn't understand *at all*.

I shift my gaze to the flame. My heart thunders in my chest. I taste bile, and coffee, and blood. I close my eyes.

I can still feel the rope that bound my body to the stake, the frayed edges burrowing into my wrists. I remember the rush of fire at my feet, the sear of heat through the leather soles of my boots. The way my clothes and skin became ash together, lifting from my body. I remember Bobby Sarno, standing in the back, watching with a smirk of vengeance on his face. I remember the voices of villagers. Incantations against the devil. Incantations against me. The smell of wool and flesh on fire. The sound of my scream.

No, he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand what I endured for a chance at another life. "This will be the only way to make them believe it," Ediye had said as we drew up our plan three hundred years ago. She would make the accusation. I would be convicted of witchcraft by the humans. I would burn at the stake, a vampire sentenced as a witch. "If we do everything right, the Reapers will believe the last of the original sirens has died. And for a long time, as you heal, you will wish you had."

And that's what we did. I burned. I burned until I begged to die. When the time was right, when I was little more than unrecognizable charcoal on the stake, Ediye used her magic to switch my body for that of another vampire, one she killed with silver and burned herself. And then she brought me back from the brink of death. Even with the healing abilities of

a vampire and aided by a witch, that took a fucking long time. I suffered for my second chance. Day and night, for months, I suffered.

Like so many of our memories that we collect over an immortal lifetime, this is one I cannot bear.

When I look toward the flame again, Ashen is there, standing between me and the cauldron. I don't meet his eyes, but I can feel them. They've melted to my skin like molten steel.

"This is the path," he says. His voice is low and quiet. "This is the corridor."

I feel a tear creep from my eye. Traitorous fucking thing. So much for all my tough talk of conquering the realm of the Reapers. I'm crying at the mere thought of taking the path to get there. I shake my head and glare at a pillar beyond Ashen's shoulder, trying to force the emotion back into my eyes. I could destroy that pillar. I could collapse the ceiling onto the cauldron. Take down this whole damn house, dismantle this whole stupid idea of going to the Shadow Realm.

But I know I need to go there. I need to get rid of this Alpha and the Reapers and this whole fucking insanity and get back to my quiet life. I just don't think I can pay the price of standing in flame.

I move to uncap my pen and write a note, but Ashen pulls them from my grasp and slides them into the inside pocket of his blazer. He takes my hand and I meet his eyes. I give him my fiercest vampire stare. His pupils are lit with flame but I don't see anger there.

Black smoke billows around us until we are blanketed in it. It smells like tobacco and ink. Ashen takes my other hand and my gaze darts around us, but all I see is him and the smoke.

"Just look at me, Lu," he says, and takes a step back. I meet his gaze as he takes another and draws my hands toward him, waiting patiently until I step with him.

I know there's fear in my eyes. I can't stop it. He must have seen fear in eyes like mine so many times before. But the way he looks at me, it's like he's seeing it for the very first time.

"Keep your eyes on me," Ashen says. We take slow steps across the room. He takes one backward, I take one forward. Another. Another. His weight shifts up as he takes his first step on the dais.

My hands are shaking. I can't stop the tears now. I close my eyes and bend my head, pressing my lips between my teeth. I feel terrified and

fucking ridiculous, both at the same time. I think I should control this, but I can't. The phantom fire burns reason and thought to ash.

A hand presses a warm touch on my face. A slow caress sweeps across my skin, first on one cheek and then the other. When Ashen's hand grasps mine again, it's damp with the tears I've shed.

"I won't let anything hurt you, Lu," he says. His voice sounds like a promise. He sounds like a warrior. He sounds like he will burn the world to keep his word.

I take my first step on the dais and my shoulders start shaking. I think I might vomit on Ashen's polished shoes. The *katana* strapped across my back feels heavier with every breath. I swear it whispers to me and I pull my hands away to cover my ears. Accusations and prayers flood my mind from memory. I want to fall to my knees. I wish I could spiral into myself until I'm away from this place and all the memories it evokes.

Ashen curls his hands around my elbows and pulls me with him to the platform of the dais. "We're almost there," he says, his lips close to the hand covering my ear. The heat of his breath warms my neck. I open my eyes as he pulls away to meet my gaze. There is enough fury there to destroy every realm. Somehow, I think I would be the only one spared.

"Do you like to swim?" Ashen asks.

I almost laugh. But I don't. I just nod.

"It's just like swimming." Ashen steps into the cauldron and I feel my panic swell, gripping my throat. His arm sweeps across my back. "Just like diving into deep water," he says, taking my weight. "You hold your breath. There's a pressure in your head. Then you open your eyes and you are in another world."

Ashen lifts me into the cauldron. The smoke is different here. I smell sulphur and cedar as it erupts around us. I see the light of the flame at my feet and let out a strangled sound as I try to stomp it away. Ashen's other arm folds me into an embrace, pressing me to his chest. For the first time in a very, very long time, I weep. I weep in the arms of the Reaper.

"Close your eyes, Lu. We're almost there."

I close my eyes. I push my face to the beat of his heart until I can't breathe. The pressure he promised fills my head as the flame coils up my arms. But he's right, it doesn't burn. It feels like silk caught in a breeze, caressing my skin.

There's a rushing, roaring sound as the flame envelops us and rises above our heads. And then a *whoosh*. The fire falls to our feet like a curtain in a magic trick. But Ashen does not let go. He pulls us out of the cauldron and away from the flame that ripples at our feet. It's only when we're a few steps away that he releases his embrace to place his hands on the sides of my face. I open my eyes. We are still blanketed by smoke.

Ashen's eyes burn with bright flame as they bounce between mine. He seems to find something there that he didn't want to. I can tell he realizes that wherever my panic came from, it was from no accident. That life can be callous and cruel. His gaze drops to my lips and his jaw tightens. "The ones who did this to you. Did you kill them?"

I nod.

"Good."

We stand unmoving for a long moment. I only notice now that my hands are curled around Ashen's wrists. His palms are still warm on my skin. His thumbs coast beneath my eyes and sweep the last of my tears away. I'm thinking makeup was a stupid idea after all. For some reason I don't delight in the fact that half of it is probably on Ashen's shirt.

"Do not go anywhere here without me. Ediye was right when she said you are not meant for this realm. It is a dangerous place," he says. His eyes flow across the contours of my face. "You are a bright soul here. You shine like a beacon, and everything here can see it."

I feel like layers are missing when I look into Ashen's eyes. I find fear in them, buried deep. I'm not sure what it's for, but I know I'm not meant to see.

I nod. I give a faint smile.

Ashen takes a deep breath. His eyes linger on my mouth for a heartbeat too long, and then his palms lift from my skin. My hands fall from his wrists, back to my sides. He takes a step away and the smoke around us dissolves into air.

"Welcome to the Shadow Realm."

CHAPTER 13

It's like you know the real world is there, behind a veil of shadow. You can feel it. You sense its presence. And every moment you spend in the Shadow Realm makes you wonder which world is truly real. You start to wonder if this is where you're meant to be.

It's really fucking weird.

Also weird: *feelings*. I'm feeling a lot of... feelings.

Firstly, though the panic is passing, I still feel its residue in my head. My thoughts are coated in it, clouded with it. And speaking of coated, my face. It's probably smeared with makeup but I can't really pull out a mirror and touch things up, you know? Also on the list of things that are coated: Ashen's shirt. I'm pretty sure I've left behind mascara and probably snot and definitely tears when I ugly cried into his chest.

Which leads me to embarrassment. I intended to come here all badass, like 'I'll burn you motherfuckers to the ground,' which was frankly an oversight on my part since Reapers are really into fire. So I guess I might... drown them? In my tears? ... *Fuck*. That is just so fucking lame.

Speaking of Reapers... and feelings...

...

.....

What the fuck is wrong with me.

I glance up at Ashen, who is looking straight ahead at the grand hall that stretches before us. I don't know what to make of the man I just saw, the man that led me through the smoke and into the fire. I think about the heat

of his arm sliding across my back. I hear the reassurance of his voice in my mind. *Just like diving into deep water.*

The desire to take his hand is almost overwhelming. Instead, I reach over and tap his jacket where my journal and pen are hidden. He looks down at me and then the jacket, pulling my possessions from his pocket to hand them to me.

Thank you for what you did, I write, and show it to him.

Ashen gives a single nod. The fire has gone from his eyes, but the tension still ticks in his jaw.

I pass him my journal again. *I'm sorry I fanged your butter.*

"No, you're not," he says. His eyes seem to dance with light.

I can feel my smile growing, though I try to hide it as I scrawl out another note. *You're right. It was great. Your face was worth it. I meant what I said, too.*

"About what, putting it down your pants next time?"

Yeah.

Ashen gives a half smile as his eyes fuse with mine. It feels like a key that fits a lock that hasn't been turned in a long time. "I know. I have no doubts about that," he says.

I pull my gaze from his to look at the palatial space around us. Smooth, polished stone pillars the color of dark bronze with seams of shining minerals ascend above us, framing a long and empty room. There's no decoration, no art or vases. Just the glint of color within the stone, and I think I could look at those pillars every day for eternity and always find something new.

Ashen is still looking down at me when footsteps echo from the other end of the room. We turn our gazes toward a woman whose heels click on the polished stone floor. Her beauty steals the breath from my chest. No mortal would think she belongs in their realm. She wears a fitted black dress that cuts just below the knee, the neckline scooping low on her breastbone to reveal the geometric face of a jackal identical to Ashen's. Tattoos of black honeycomb and birds flow upward to her neck, disappearing beneath the long sleeves of her dress. Her dark hair falls in a neat braid over her shoulder and her eyes dance in a smile as they home in on Ashen.

I feel a sudden surge of something hot beneath my collarbones. I don't know what it is, but I don't like it. Ashen takes a step forward, his shoulder

enough of a barrier between us to send a message. A message the woman receives, because her eyes immediately find mine.

"Brother. Welcome home," the woman says as she lays her hands on his shoulders and presses a kiss to each of his cheeks. She turns her honey-colored eyes to mine and smiles. "You brought a soul with you?"

"Yes. Ember, may I present Lu. Lu is... assisting me... with the reaping related to the hybrid. Lu, this is Ember, my sister."

The warmth beneath my bones recedes and I realize what it was. Jealousy. I almost roll my eyes at myself. The look Ediyé gave me at her cottage when she surveyed Ashen up and down appears in my mind. *You are so fucked, vampire.*

"It's a pleasure," Ember says, extending her hand with a smile. As soon as I take it, her sharp eyes find her brother's with a smile, then dart back to mine. "You are a vampire?"

I nod once.

Ember laughs. The sound is rich with musical delight. She lays a hand on her brother's arm and I feel the affection in her gesture. "You are always full of surprises, brother. Sometimes, I think you even find surprises with which to surprise yourself."

I give Ashen a *what the fuck* glance but his expression is unreadable. Ember loops her hand through his arm as we start to walk through the grand hall.

"How goes the hunt, brother?" Ember asks from the other side of Ashen, her hand still laying on his arm with a grace that seems unfair. I feel like I don't know what to do with my hands. One carries my notebook and pen while I occupy the other with the strap of the scabbard for my *katana*.

"Slow," he confesses. "I've run into complications."

"That's an unkind way to speak of Lu," Ember teases as she leans ahead of him and winks at me. I smile in reply, my affinity for this Reaper growing.

"No. I don't mean the vampire," he says, and the way his words roll from his tongue feel like a blade turning in my chest. "We fought the pack but they landed a blow with Angelwing poison. Lu saved me, and for the moment we are bound by the incantation she used."

Ember stops walking and we stop with her. She leans forward and meets my eyes, worry and pain embedded in hers. Her gaze roams my face and she swallows. "Angelwing? You saved my brother?"

I give her a nod. For a moment no one moves, until Ember crosses in front of Ashen to grasp my wrists. She looks into my eyes and I see sudden tears flaring in hers.

"Thank you." Ember pulls me into a tight embrace and I look over her shoulder to meet Ashen's eyes. His jaw ticks and he looks concerned, though I'm not sure who for. Ember releases me before I can figure it out. She loops my hand through her arm, the heat of her skin radiant beneath her sleeve.

"Tell me the story, Lu. It is so rare that Ashen is wounded. I want to hear every last detail," Ember says, bumping my shoulder as we start walking again. Though I can see the resemblance, she seems so unlike her brother. She gives affection freely, and her smile lights with ease. She's not what I would expect of a Reaper, and part of me longs to tell her everything.

"Lu can't talk," Ashen says. Ember turns to him and then to me, her eyes wide with alarm and curiosity.

"Did someone cut out your tongue?"

"Ember-"

"Humans were fond of that for a while. I am so sorry. What a terrible thing to endure."

"Leave her be, Ember."

No, I still have my tongue, I write, trying not to laugh as I pass her my note. She looks relieved, but then curious. *Damaged vocal cords*, I explain, which is of course a total lie that I actually feel a bit guilty for.

Ember gives a sad nod. "How very unfortunate for a vampire. It must make hunting difficult."

I shrug, glancing at Ashen who watches me with interest. *I have my ways*, I write.

"Yes, I am sure you do. Vampires are such adaptable creatures, after all," Ember says with a smile.

I glance behind her to Ashen and his eyes slide to mine. The flame is dim within them but I know what I see. Caution. Concern. He looks ahead when Ember turns to him.

"You'll just have to tell me the story then, brother," she says as we reach the end of the grand hall and turn past the last pillar to the right. There is a wide, curved set of stairs on each side of the room. I like the symmetry, the precision of the stonework. I look to the ceiling and the set of narrow

windows set high into the rear wall. Our footfalls echo through the empty space as we ascend to the higher reaches of the structure.

At the top of the stairs we follow a corridor, large mahogany doors lining its length. The ceiling stretches a distance that feels too high, up to skylights beyond which there seems to be no light. For all the height here, I sense a pressure descend upon me. The echo of our steps only adds to my unease. We stop at a door halfway down the hall, the number 8 in a golden script of vines.

"Vampires are such adaptable creatures," Ember says, replaying her earlier thought. Her gaze flows over my skin. Her expression warms as she lays her hands on my upper arms. I feel Ashen's presence behind me. "I'm sure you'll settle in here in no time."

"We aren't staying long. Just two days at the most," Ashen says. Ember keeps her eyes trained on me as her smile spreads.

"Well, that is a shame, brother. We could use some more bright souls around here. And Lu's soul is very bright indeed." Ember places a kiss on my cheek, moving to do the same on the other side. "Isn't that right..."

Ember leans close. Her lips touch my ear.

"...*Leucosia*," she whispers, for only me to hear.

CHAPTER 14

*M*y heart thrums in my chest. My stomach coils a burning path in my belly. Ember gives me a benevolent smile as she pulls away and looks in my eyes. There's neither threat nor comfort in her expression. "I'll see you soon, brother," she says as she turns her gaze over my shoulder. "Let me know if I can help in your hunt. Dinner tonight?"

I do not want to go to dinner. Like, *at all*. Hard pass.

I hear no sound behind me, but Ashen must nod because Ember's smile widens. "Good," she says, and her smile turns to me. "Bring Lu."

Fuck. I guess I'm going to dinner.

With one final smile, Ember turns away and drifts down the hall in her gravity-defying heels. I hear the door slide open against the stone floor behind me and I watch Ember disappear down the corridor without a backward glance before I turn to follow Ashen into the room.

The Reaper holds the door open for me, watching over his shoulder as I pass the threshold and enter the suite. It feels similar to his house on the other side; vases and gilt-edged tables and dark hues and oversized paintings. The carved ebony headboard of the wide bed stretches up the wall. I'm staring at the sheen on the midnight blue bedding, lost in my new wave of panic. I'm not really seeing what I'm looking at, but I'm staring at it nonetheless. There's only one thought swirling in my brain:

Shit.

Shit shit shit shit shit.

Shhhhhhhiiiiit.

"I would suggest that I can take another chamber and you have this one, but it is not safe for you to be in a separate room," Ashen says as he sets our bags down next to the bed. I'm listening, but not really understanding the meaning behind his comment. The refrain of 'shit' is still dominating my thoughts. The Reaper's head tilts. His eyes narrow in question and maybe concern. "I can sleep on the floor," he offers.

I shift my gaze to the floor and then back to him, still not processing the connection between his words and their meaning.

"Vampire..."

That snaps me out of my loop enough to glare at him. He introduced me as Lu just a moment ago, and now suddenly I'm a creature once more. Just *vampire*. I suppose I should be relieved it's that and not Leucosia, but for some reason the former only irks me more. At least I finally get that he's talking about the bed.

I think I can control myself, Reaper. We can share a bed like grownups, I write, tossing my journal next to him on the sea of midnight sheets. Ashen reads the message and gives me a questioning look over his shoulder, then opens his backpack to retrieve a black shirt from its depths.

"We will go first to pull records from the archives, and then we will meet Ember for dinner. Tomorrow we will head to Cairo," Ashen says, his back to me as he unbuttons his shirt. It slides down his shoulders, revealing the black tattoos that cascade across the muscles of his back. There are geometric flowers and stars, birds and black script. The entry wound from the werewolf's blade cuts a pink swath across a patch of scrolling honeycomb. The edges have nearly healed, the ink creeping back into the shining skin of the wound.

I watch for a moment as Ashen places the old shirt on the bed and folds it. He moves as though I'm not even here. The clean shirt flutters over his shoulders like a cape and he pushes an arm through one sleeve and then the next.

My heart is still rumbling in my chest as though it'll roll away and leave my body behind. Even the sight of Ashen's sick body isn't enough to take the chorus of 'shit' from my brain. It's now a proper Mariah Carey melody up in there. All I Want For Christmas is *shit*, apparently.

I walk to the far wall, looking out the tall, narrow window at a garden of mazed hedges as my thoughts storm through my mind. Ember could have killed me. She could have said my name to her brother. She could have

called in a contingent of Reapers to steal my soul. She did none of those things, but it doesn't mean she wants to get drunk together and make TikTok videos on a Saturday night either.

Whatever it is that she wants from me, I have the feeling Ember will soon seek to collect. Is this how my sisters found themselves backed into corners? Is this how they wound up with swords slicing through the meat of their hearts? I don't know how I've lived so long coming so close to death. Now here I am, in the realm of it, in the room of it. And not only that, but I am drawn to it. I can't look away from it.

I am so, so fucked.

I close my eyes and lean my forehead on the glass, its temperature only a fraction colder than my skin. It soothes my face but it cannot touch my soul. I've been here for what, ten minutes? Max? I'm pretty sure this is where I'm gonna die if I can't keep my shit under control for ten minutes. Fucksakes, I could barely even handle the journey to get here. I would rather die anywhere but here. Literally. Like, send me back to Cheese Louise and Puptown, I'll happily die in the smell of cheesy wet dog. How can I die *here* after everything I've done to live? I'm not sure what living means anymore, but to perish in some reckless tailspin just to feel *something* seems like a waste of all the suffering I've endured.

It doesn't register that Ashen is speaking to me as these thoughts are spiraling through my head. When his hand touches my arm, instinct kicks me from stasis to action. My hand whips the dagger from my belt and slices an arc from the air between us. Ashen catches my wrist and twists before I can strike him with the blade. The dagger falls into my other waiting hand. It isn't until I'm driving the knife up toward the Reaper's throat that I realize what I'm doing.

I meet his eyes and time feels like it grips onto the moment. I let the *kaiken* drop and it clatters on the stone floor.

I look down at the blade and back to him. My eyes must be enormous when I mouth the words *I'm sorry*. There's a faint trace of amusement in Ashen's expression.

"Do not startle the vampire. Duly noted," the Reaper says as he bends to retrieve the dagger from the floor. He straightens and holds it by the blade so I can take the handle. The point faces his heart. There's something vulnerable about it. There's trust in his eyes.

I pull the dagger from his hand and look at it for a long moment. Even if I'd struck him with it, I probably wouldn't have killed him. If I had, he would just come back. There are very few ways to kill a Reaper for good, and most of the time it's not worth it to try. You only incur the wrath of their kind. I guess we're alike in that way. When you kill my family, I get a little pissy about it too.

"All right, vampire?" Ashen asks, and the ghost of his touch from the last time he spoke those words heats the skin on my belly. I look from the knife to his face and his brow furrows. "You seem... strange."

I give him a look that says *what the fuck do you mean, 'strange'?*

"...Strange-er."

What the-

"Stranger than usual."

My look intensifies into a glare and I sheath my dagger as I turn to the bed. I sweep the pen and journal from the slick sheets.

I'll tell you what's strange, Reaper. The Shadow Realm. I've barely seen any of it and I can already tell this place is weird AF, I write, showing him the note.

His lips purse in the most adorably fucking annoying way as he looks to the ceiling to consider my words and then nods. "Yes, I can't really disagree there," he says, meeting my eyes before his narrow in mild suspicion. "It doesn't explain why you are acting strange, however."

The whole fire corridor of terror isn't enough of an explanation?

"No, I don't think so," Ashen says, and I throw up my hands in irritation.

Maybe it's your weird echoey building. Maybe it's your ridiculously perfect-yet-deadly Reaper sister. Maybe it's your freaky mazy hedge thing out there that's got me feeling a little on-edge, Reaper, I write, pointing out the window as he looks up from my note. I snatch my journal from his fingers. *Maybe it's your fucking sheets. Have you not heard of a weighted blanket? How is this supposed to be comfortable?*

Ashen fights a smile as he reads my note. "What's wrong with my sheets?"

They're slippery. And thin.

"Slippery?"

I turn to the bed and slide my hands across the surface in dramatic fashion. I pick up the edge of the thin fabric and flap it in the air to

demonstrate my point. *SLIPPERY*. See also, *THIN*, I write, staring him down as he battles his grin. He's losing.

He smiles. I frown. We stare.

And then, a realization. An epiphany.

Oh my fucking GOD. These are your sex sheets aren't they.

I pass him the note and Ashen laughs. Properly *laughs*. It's maybe the greatest sound I've ever heard. It's so warm. It's so rare. I would steer my ship onto the rocks just to hear it again, to see his face vibrant with its afterglow. But I know that game. I'm a siren, for fucksakes. So when his laugh tapers off and he repeats "sex sheets" in an incredulous voice, I do my best to nurture a fierce glare.

Yeah, Reaper. That's all these are good for. They certainly aren't good for sleeping.

Ashen laughs again. He looks to the bed like he's never seen it before. When he looks back at me there's a fire in his eyes. "I'll have you know they are quite luxurious."

My eyebrows raise in a challenge but he says nothing. For a long moment, neither of us moves. The glare dims in my eyes. The flame brightens in his. He takes a step closer. I stand my ground.

"What's the matter, vampire? Afraid you won't be able to keep your promise?"

What promise?

Ashen takes another step closer. A wicked gleam ignites in his eyes. "To control yourself."

This game is getting very dangerous. My desire is feeling very real. A coil of heat turns in my belly. My heart feels too hot beneath my bones.

I didn't promise anything. I said, 'I think I can control myself'. Does that sound like a promise to you? I pass him my note and watch as he reads. He meets my eyes as he hands the journal back. My fingertips graze his and the coil of warmth strokes my ribs.

"No," he says, his voice low, the timbre as thick and rich as honey. "In fact, it sounds like you expect you will fail."

I pull my notebook from his grasp. I write a message. I turn it to him.

It sounds like you WANT me to fail.

Ashen's gaze meets mine and then descends to my lips. The flame brightens just enough that my vampire eyes can see it. I feel the steady cadence of his breath. I hear the rush of blood through his heart.

We don't move. I feel caught between the things I want and the things I shouldn't. Things that are dangerous and things I desire. Memory and the need to be wanted. Secrets and the truths that blood and breath cannot hide.

Ashen's gaze is still soldered to my lips when I see the flame begin to dim in his eyes. He swallows. He takes a heavy breath. I know what he's doing. He's doing what I should be doing but can't seem to. He's putting on armor, from the inside out.

I take a step back before he can be the first to do it. I meet his eyes for only the beat of a heart before I turn away toward the door.

I already feel like I'm unravelling here. One moment, one word, one look at a time.

CHAPTER 15

*W*e leave Ashen's room and walk down the corridor with no sound between us except our echoing footsteps. It doesn't just feel awkward. It feels tense and restless and broody. Like, *really* broody. I don't know if it's just me, but I kinda think if I turned around and headed back to his room, Ashen would be right on my heels. I would probably rip his clothes off the second the door closed behind us and then we would-

Do you ever think of something so ridiculous that you suddenly talk out loud or make a super weird sound? Well, I don't do that.

But I do smack my face with my palm. So now I must seem not just 'strange' but straight-up nuts.

Ashen looks down at me with a furrowed brow but doesn't say a word.

This place is freaking me out, I confess, writing as we walk.

"I gathered. You're barely even out of the corridor and your strangeness level has reached new heights," he says as we near the top of the stairs.

I know. That's a fact that's freaking me out even more.

"While I cannot blame you, you're going to need to pull it together. It doesn't get any better when we leave the building."

By the time we reach the bottom of the stairs I feel like I want to melt out of my skin. I must have a look of utter desperation on my face when I glance up at Ashen because he seems legit concerned.

"Vampire-"

I hiss. *Fuck* that felt good. Therapeutic, even.

"Vam-"

I hiss again.

"Lu," Ashen says, slowing to a halt and pulling me with him. I struggle to meet his eyes. I'm antsy and restless and I feel like I can't stay still. Moments ago, the Shadow Realm felt like it could be the true reality, like the other world was the myth. But now it feels like a toxic gas. Somehow, I know I'm not meant to be here after all. I know it in my breath and bones. Ediye was right, and the fact that Ember knows who I am certainly doesn't help. It's like I've been tilted on my axis. Like my orbit is misaligned.

Ashen squeezes my wrist. "Lu."

What, I mouth as I look up with a question crinkling my forehead.

"I meant what I said. You will be safe. Just stay with me. Do not stray out on your own."

I have major doubts about that *being safe* shit, all things considered. But I do my best to suck it up. I realize that if I freak out too much, that will probably look a little suspicious. Judging by the Reaper's face, that ship has long sailed.

I give a nod. The Reaper gives me one in reply. We walk through the hall, past a row of cauldrons. I'm kind of regretting my earlier freak-out with the Fire Corridor of Terror, because I don't know which one would take us home.

We arrive at a tall set of mahogany doors inlaid with black glass. Ashen pushes one open for me. We step outside, standing motionless at the top of a wide set of stairs leading to a short pathway to a road.

For a moment, I'm unable to breathe. I slowly draw my pen across the paper, not even looking down at what I'm writing. I show it to the Reaper. It says:

WHAT THE FUCK.

"Yeah. Like I said, it doesn't get any better when you leave the building," the Reaper says.

The light from the veiled sky is barely more than twilight. The shadows around us seem too dark and pervasive. The pathway to the road is lit with cast iron gas lamps much like the ones outside the Reaper's country estate. They flow at regular intervals down the road itself, disappearing into the fog that blankets us. It's so thick that I can't see far past the black surface of the road ahead, which honestly is probably a good thing. Because this place is fuuuuuuuuuucked.

An old-timey black carriage is lumbering down the road in front of us. Its curtains are drawn. We can't see who is inside. There's no carriage

master to steer it, but that doesn't seem to matter. It clearly knows where it's going. There are chains leading from the seat where the driver should be to the iron yokes clamped around the necks of six souls.

Threadbare, colorless clothes float on their thin and featureless bodies. They walk in bare feet. They're expressionless aside from the burden of pulling the weight of the carriage with their throats. They look straight ahead, focused on the fog before them and some destination that's probably worse than my nightmares can imagine. They seem like something between a ghost and a person. Something transparent, yet solid. Something spectral, yet real.

We watch the carriage pass into the fog as I slowly raise my note again in front of the Reaper's face.

WHAT THE FUCK.

"They are souls."

WHAT THE FUCK.

"Reaped souls."

WHAT THE FUCK.

"What did you think happened to reaped souls?"

I glare up at the Reaper with a look that says *obviously not that*. I mean, *come on*, how was I supposed to guess *that* was what happened? I thought reaping was synonymous with death. Nonexistence. Nothingness. Apparently, I was wrong. Very wrong.

We watch the fog consume the coach, listening as the throughbrace leather straps squeak under the weight of the carriage. As the sound fades away into the distance, a black snout appears in the fog, followed by a set of amber eyes and tall, attentive ears. A black jackal stalks out of the mist, trotting down the middle of the road in the opposite direction of the coach. Its shoulder is nearly my height. It turns its head in our direction and sniffs the air, homing its gaze on me without breaking its stride. It disappears into the fog like a lethal shadow.

I hold my note up. This time I hit Ashen in the face with it.

WHAT THE FUCK.

"That's Urtur, our resident jackal."

I move to slap him again, but Ashen catches my journal and closes it before handing it back to me.

"Let's just assume you'll be *what the fucking* for the next while, shall we?"

I look up and try to give Ashen my fiercest glare, but there's too much *what the fuck* still rolling around in my head and it ends up more like a grimace. Ashen gives me a dark look, one that says he's forgotten somewhere along the course of his immortal life just how messed up this all is. Maybe he never knew in the first place. Maybe he was born and raised taking ghost carriages and playing with giant jackals. Who knows. I've never really thought about how Reapers are made. Regardless, I can tell he's looking at it through my eyes, and what he sees looks batshit crazy.

"Come on," he says. I feel the pressure of Ashen's hand on my back as we start to walk. The warmth seeps through my shirt and meets my cool skin. The wings of my vertebrae feel like tuning forks, humming beneath his touch.

We descend the stairs and I look behind us, twisting toward Ashen to glance up at the facade of the building over my shoulder. *URBIGU* hangs in gold letters near the roof, the face of a jackal in gold above the door. I turn back toward the road again, looking up at Ashen as I do. With his hand on my back and his body close to mine, he feels like the only reassuring thing about this place. It's in the details that are becoming familiar. The way his dark hair falls over his brow as he looks down at me. The rich brown hues of his eyes that seem to warm when his deeply buried feelings crawl close to the surface of his stoic facade.

I look back toward the path as we reach the bottom of the stairs. Though I try to keep my eyes on anything neutral, like the fog or the black surface of the road, my thoughts are consumed by the souls pulling the carriage. Once witches, or werewolves, or vampires like me. Vampires that once sang about the sea. Werewolves that once hunted in a pack, wild in the woods. Witches that cast spells to heal the wounded, like Ediye did for me. Maybe some were my enemies. Maybe some were friends. Maybe they committed crimes worthy of reaping, maybe they didn't. But I don't feel like this is what they deserve.

I try not to let my thoughts run further, to my sisters, or Vlad, or any others I've known and lost over the millennia to the rules of the Reapers. I try not to wonder what became of Aglaope. But I can still feel the press of her hands on my chest as she pushed me from the cliff, into the safety of the crystalline sea. The urgency in her eyes still claws at my mind, her final words at odds with the sweet timbre of her voice. *Find Barbossa Sarno, from the ship. Get a spell. Take the weapon and get revenge. And then the*

feeling of falling, weightless, watching the blade of fire strike through her chest as I plunged into the abyss. She was already dead by the time she fell into the water after me. Knowing now that it wasn't the end, it's hard not to wonder where her soul might have gone or what they have her doing here.

So, I guess it's for the best that I never fixed my rabid trash panda makeup situation, because tears start to gather along the edges of my eyes as we walk. I clutch the notebook and pen to my chest to hide the effort it takes to steady my breath. I try to focus on the cadence of my steps along the road. I turn my head so Ashen won't see the futile struggle to keep a tear from falling.

We don't break stride as Ashen's hand sweeps up my back to rest on the crest of bone where my neck meets my shoulders. His palm warms my bare skin. I swallow a thick and painful knot in my throat as I open my journal to a fresh page.

I'm fine, I write, which is a total lie. I show it to Ashen without looking at him.

"I know," he says, but he doesn't withdraw his touch.

I'm not crying.

"Okay."

I hear the wheels and leather straps of another coach in the distance along a side road in the fog. My muscles tense and I wipe one of my eyes with the knuckles of my clenched fist.

This place is fucked. And I lied.

"I know." Ashen's index finger travels a slow and careful path across my skin as the rest of his hand lays steady pressure across my bones. It's like a weighted blanket, soothing and heavy on my flesh. "Ediye was right about you," he says, his voice low and quiet.

What, about me not belonging here? I think we figured that out in the first ten minutes.

"We did. But that's not what I meant."

We don't talk or write anymore. We just walk. Ashen's hand drifts back down to the center of my back. I wonder if it's less for my benefit than it is to catch me if I run.

There is mostly silence as we travel the road, which has its own eeriness in the twilight. But sometimes there are sounds in the mist. Scuttling. Shuffling. At one point, a keening wail that sounds like a bird, but I don't think it is. The sorrowful cry carves an indelible memory in my heart.

A looming black shadow emerges ahead from the curl of the fog. A building comes into view. The stone is matte black, unpolished and ominous. A row of doric columns holds up the sharp peak of the roof. *GIRGINAKKU*, it says along the top of the facade. *Library*. Two souls stand guard beside the entrance, looking out upon the fog. They are chained by the wrists to the iron handles of the doors.

They won't let me in. I don't have a library card. Maybe we should go back, I write, holding it up to Ashen's face.

"They will let you in, not to worry," he says, his hand steady and strong on my back against the resistance of my slowing steps.

Nah, I think I'm good. If you take me back to your room I can just chill there. I'll watch something on Netflix.

"I don't have Netflix."

YOU ARE A MONSTER.

The puff of air from an almost-laugh escapes from Ashen's lungs. "Might I suggest a book for entertainment? I know where we can get one."

No it's fine, I'll do some yoga instead. Or I'll find the spa for a massage. Or maybe just stare at the wall. The world is my oyster in your fucked-up Shadow Realm.

"Now might be a good time to let you know that Urtur enjoys showing up to my room unannounced and he does not take kindly to visitors," Ashen says, looking down with a faint smile lifting one corner of his lips.

...the library of horrors it is, I write, and I heave a heavy sigh.

We ascend the steps and the souls grip the handles and open the doors for us to pass. Their chains clank as the links roll against one another. I fix my gaze to the spectre closest to me as I pass, forcing myself not to look away. His face is somehow empty of defining features. Thin lips, papery skin. A small nose that could be anyone's. Whispers of flowing gray hair on a round head. But the eyes are electric blue beneath a swirling cloud of grey. They land on me and seem to find focus. They follow me over the threshold as I pass, watching until the crack between the door closes shut behind us.

An Alpha werewolf, I write, holding the note up for Ashen.

"Yes," he says as we continue through a dark foyer, the low ceiling pressing the weight of its darkness upon us.

What did he do? What was his crime?

"I don't know."

I stop abruptly, Ashen halting at my side as I turn to face him.

So he has been chained there, opening the door for you Reapers for who-knows-how-long and you don't know what he did?

Ashen looks back toward the closed door for a long and quiet moment. The only sound is the ripple of candle flame trapped behind the black glass of the sconces on the walls. "No, I don't," he says as he turns his gaze down to me. His hand falls away from my back. I feel the tension in my brows as my eyes bounce between his. I'm looking for a reason to be angry with him. But all I see is sorrow and guilt, buried beneath the strata of time. And all I feel is sadness.

I turn away and continue to a set of interior doors whose smoky grey glass obscures the sanctum beyond. I'm eager to get this done, to be out of this place. I want to be anywhere but here.

I open the door and lurch to a halt. I feel like my veins have been seared with lightning. It's not the expanse of the room that steals the breath from my chest. It's not the rows and rows of ancient texts, lining three floors of shelves to the ceiling. It's not even the souls that wander in the shadows, listless and alone.

It's the three black marble slabs before me, inscribed with names in shimmering filaments of gold.

The one in the center is for House Urbigu.

Beneath the house name: *The Reaping*.

The first name on the list is Ember's.

The fifth name beneath hers is Aglaope.

Ember was the one who reaped my sister's soul.

And I killed the wrong Reaper.

CHAPTER 16

Well shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit.

That's not good. That's not good at all.

For one, no wonder the Reapers are so pissed. They would have been pissed regardless, seeing as how I killed one of their own. But accidentally killing the wrong one is *extra* bad. In my defense, I totally thought it was the guy I saw skulking around Anthemoessa when I climbed back onto the island, armed with the sword that killed Aglaope and a spell from Sarno in exchange for his freedom. The Reaper I encountered looked pretty shifty as I watched him rifling through Aglaope's home, so it seemed like an obvious conclusion to draw at the time.

...My bad...

So I guess that's how Ember recognized me, if she was the one that drove the blade through Aglaope's back. I never saw who it was, I only saw the sword of silver and hellfire as it pierced through Aglaope's chest. I only saw the fear in Aglaope's eyes. Not for herself, but for me. But even knowing now that it was Ember, it doesn't answer the question of what she wants, and she must want something. Otherwise, she would have cut me up the second she saw me in House Urbigu.

What's also pretty shit, however, is the obvious conundrum of now wanting, perhaps *needing*, to kill Ember, even though she's Ashen's sister. Whether I want to admit it or not, he's growing on me. Sure, it's a little complicated, considering I'm basically lying to him on the daily about my identity. Being bound together by my shitty spell doesn't really help either. Also, there's that tricky issue of me being supposedly dead but actually not, making me the biggest vampire bounty on the planet. Not super

straightforward when your new buddy (ugh *fine*, 'crush', but like, *mild* crush) is an executioner of immortals. Any way you slice it, killing Ember would go down like a lead balloon.

The one saving grace is that I don't recognize any of the names listed beneath Ashen's entry on the stone. That said, he does have nearly twice as many souls to his name as anyone else in House Urbigu.

Good for you, I write, sweeping a shopping channel hand toward his name. I give him the thumbs up, my face leaden with dead-eyed sarcasm when he looks down at me.

"Yeah, I guess..." Ashen gives the slightest grimace as his eyes shift from mine to the list of names beneath his own. "If it helps to ease your discomfort, this werewolf was an asshole, to use your favorite word," he says, pointing to a name halfway through his list. "You would have hated him. He stabbed me through the eye and killed me in the Living Realm. He sent me back here."

I like the sound of him already. I have a feeling we could have been BFFs. Tell me more. I look up at Ashen and smile as he gives me a side eye glare. *What's with this Cole guy? He doesn't have many souls to his name*, I write, pointing to the bottom of the stone and a Reaper with only three souls listed.

"He's new. And he's insufferable."

Oh good, I can't wait to meet him. I bet I'll like him too.

The Reaper lets out a quiet groan, his hand pressing to my back once more as he steers us away from the marble slabs. Part of me wants to stay and read the other tablets. I want to see who felled my other sisters, to see who killed friends and enemies and lovers long ago. But my eyes stay fixed to Aglaope's name until we pass the black stone.

We walk to the left of the vestibule and up a set of stairs to the second floor. A sign hangs over the landing, *EKIMMU* inscribed in black metallic letters. *Vampire*. We walk beneath the sign and the space opens to a wide foyer, books stacked along the rows and rows of shelves that line its perimeter. On the far wall is a wide marble slab with *KUD EKIMMU* carved at the top in the same shimmering gold as the lists of reaped souls in the vestibule. *Clan of the Vampire*.

I stray from Ashen's hand, drifting toward the marble wall, my eyes fixed to the tablet. Beneath the title, scrolling across the stone, are the names of my sisters. Gunura. Aya. Lamashtu. Nanaya. Ligeia. Parthenope.

Thelxiope. Molpe. Aglaope. And lastly, my name. Leucosia. Each of our names is crossed out, either in black or in gold.

My breath is trapped like a beast in my chest. All I can see is everything I've lost. All I can feel is memory, pressing its inescapable weight on my heart.

I sense Ashen next to me and I point to the top of the list. I clutch the journal and pen to my breast with my other hand. I can feel my heart hammering at my black blood, pressing it through my veins.

"The ones crossed in gold are souls that were reaped. The ones crossed in black are vampires that were killed by other means, by werewolves or witches or their own kind. Even by humans, on occasion. The ones without a mark are those that still live, though the list is not comprehensive. There were many vampires made by the earlier generations that are more difficult to track. The list is updated continuously."

I look up at the list of names beneath mine. Many of them have been struck through, and some are unaccounted for which gives me a certain sense of relief. Some live on, like Sora, who I made a vampire in the days when we fought together alongside Tomoe Gozen. If the record that stands before me is accurate, she has managed to survive for seven hundred years despite surely being in the thick of every battle she could find.

"This is one of the vampires that was captured for the creation of the hybrid," Ashen says, pointing to the top of the list beneath Aya's name. "Zara Sargan. She was one of the few first generation vampires left. This is another," he says, shifting his hand to point below Molpe's name. "Arne Larsen, a second generation vampire created in 1066 by a powerful vampire known only as Valentina. She passed much of her strength and abilities to the ones she created, but the line has since dwindled."

I feel Ashen's gaze shift to me, but I don't look at him. I keep reading, absorbing the map of history into my memory. I look for familiar names. I look for those that are missing from the list and I pray they stay hidden. I look for a thread between the two that were taken and myself, but there is nothing I can see that directly connects us.

"Where are you on this list, Lu? Are you here?" Ashen asks, his voice quiet and deep, like a creature surfacing from dark water.

My eyes flick in his direction and back to the stone. Ashen steps in front of me without fully obstructing my view. I feel the heat of his presence. I don't look in his eyes. I keep my gaze on the list, committing it to memory.

"Do you know Zara or Arne?"

I shake my head.

"Which generation are you, Lu?"

I don't make any movement to respond. I look across the first two generations down the line from my sisters and me. Nearly everyone is wiped out, except for Valentina and a vampire I created in Rome named Cassian Agnello. If I was willing to bet, and I am, they're in as much danger as me.

"Lu..." Ashen says. He steps further into my line of sight, though I still keep my eyes on the marble as I read and re-read the names. "Who created you?"

I shake my head. I honestly don't know who made me, so that part is not a lie. I don't remember my parents. I don't remember any other life. I just remember waking up on the island, on the sand by the sea. It was like I washed up on the shore never having been anything else but what I am.

"You have the ability to cast spells, most vampires cannot do that. It's an ability that seems absent in later generations. You must have been created many years ago, when more of the early vampires remained. Are you first or second generation? Third?"

Fucksakes, he's in full investigative mode.

I finally cut my gaze to Ashen. I give him a fierce look and try to bury my fear far beneath it. The way his eyes shift between mine makes me feel like he's hunting for it. Like he's trying to fish it from the depths.

"You can tell me. I owe you a life debt, Lu. It goes beyond the confines of the spell that you cast. You saved me from a death that would have been everlasting, even after I told you I would not protect you in the fight where we met." Ashen takes a step closer, a distance on the boundary between safety and suspicion should anyone see us together and wonder what kind of moment we're having.

My eyes narrow and I tilt my head as I regard him with scrutiny. I tear my journal from my chest and it feels like stripping off armor in the thick of battle. *But you did protect me in that fight. You pulled me out of the battle when I was bitten. Why?*

Ashen's eyes flick to my arm, the bite now healed. "You were injured."

That's not an explanation, I write.

We stand like two statues before the tablet of names, a Reaper and a Vampire. The last of the original sirens, the genesis of my clan. The

executioner who would have me killed if he knew what I was. Yet somehow, right now, it feels like we are simply a man and a woman just trying to figure each other out.

I fan the note before Ashen's face. *That's not an explanation.* I wait for an answer, trying to kill any hope for something bold and true.

"I don't know," Ashen says. But the spark of flame in his eyes, as dim as it is, makes me think otherwise. He moves a step closer. His eyes flow across my skin. I can almost feel the lick of their brightening flame. "But I do know that I meant what I said. I will not let any harm come to you."

Another small step closer. There's barely a breath of space between us. If someone comes up here, they are *definitely* going to have some questions.

"Tell me where you belong on this list, Lu. Help me figure out what I'm missing," Ashen says. He reaches up and sweeps a lock of hair from my ponytail back across my shoulder. His movement is slow and precise. His eyes stay locked to mine. "You can trust me."

Well *shit*.

I'll tell you one thing. If I've learned anything in my five thousand years on this hunk of space rock hurtling itself around the sun, it's this:

Nothing good ever came from those four words.

I look at every curve and angle of Ashen's face. He's like a beautiful creature from the depths of the sea that turns its lights to the darkness, luring its prey with promises it will never keep. Come for the allure of a beacon in black water. Stay for the bite that kills you.

I hold his gaze for a long moment before I turn my attention to the notebook.

Where is the hybrid? I write, turning my note toward him. His brow is creased when he looks up from the question to me.

"Here, in the Shadow Realm. In a building called Halba, near the House of Ushzu."

I look up to the list on the wall one last time. I look at my sisters and me, immortalized as nothing more than names carved in stone. I take a step away from the Reaper and cast my pen across the paper.

I do not know who made me. I only know I belong near the top. And I don't care who you are or what realm you're from, I owe you no name to put on this list of future souls ripe for stealing. Let me be a shadow in your reaping and we will call your debt fulfilled.

I let Ashen read the note. I take another step away. The flame brightens in his eyes as the red light rises in mine.

Get whatever texts you need here, Reaper, if you ever needed any at all, I write. Then take me to see the hybrid so I can finish this bond between us and be done with this realm for good.

I watch as his gaze shifts from my words to me. I hold his eyes long enough for the flame within his to grow brighter. Long enough for him to understand. Long enough for Ashen to be sure that when I say *this realm*, what I really mean is him.

CHAPTER 17

If I thought the walk to get to the library was tense, every step since our conversation on the second floor has been next-level awkward. Ashen says nothing. I write nothing. We shoot the occasional dark look at one another, but whenever our gazes collide, they repel.

We leave the library and walk along another road in the near dark. The fog still obscures most of our surroundings, but I get the vague sense we're walking back in the direction of House Urbigu, like we're on a giant circle that will eventually lead us there. The sounds in the mist are still unnerving, as is the quiet in between. There's no reassuring palm to guide me through the Realm this time. One of Ashen's hands stays in his pocket as we walk. The arm closest to me is wrapped around a stack of texts, lineages of werewolves and vampires and the crimes they say we have committed.

I can't say I blame Ashen for being extra frosty. But really, it's for the best this way. If he thinks he's going to be all flirty and I'm just going to tell him all my secrets and place my trust in him, he's got another thing coming. I haven't survived this long by letting my guard down to a hot guy with a sick body and some pretty words. Besides, he's a Reaper. A very successful Reaper. It's not like he has actual feelings for me, aside from the desire to kill.

Despite trying to focus on the darker side of Ashen and the instability he brings to my formerly quiet life, I still feel a little bad for pushing him away. I know it's just the residue of his lure in the dark. I have to remember, that's what he's meant to do. He gains access. He mines information. And then he kills. But part of me still can't help but believe he is different from

the rest, that he feels something about his role in this Realm. That he feels something for me.

These thoughts roll like marbles hitting one another in the confines of my mind, bouncing with every step in the silence of the fog. Just as I'm starting to think we'll be walking for an eternity, we finally arrive at Halba, a squat, circular building of grey stone.

There's nothing detailed or artistic about it other than its unusual shape. Compared to everything else I've seen here so far, it's a bit drab. It seems utilitarian, like a storage building or a post office. Maybe this is where Reapers' Amazon packages are delivered. Yes, I've decided this is where they pick up their Roombas or vitamins or hemorrhoid cream. I think Ashen is becoming attuned to my thoughts because I barely crack a faint smile and I can already feel his glare scorching the side of my face.

Ashen pulls open the door for me and a rush of cold air spills across my skin. There are compartments along the walls, each one numbered, each one with a silver handle. In the center of the circular room is a stone pedestal and a large book that lies open, a quill and ink at its side. Ashen passes by me, heading toward it. I watch as his finger traces through the numbers on the ledger.

"Forty-seven," he says, more to himself than to me as he places his books on the floor.

Is this a morgue? I ask in a note that I pass to him.

"Yes."

I guess I never thought about the Reapers wanting or needing a morgue. The crimes for which they reap our souls always seem so arbitrary, to the point that they're sometimes outlandish. It's not like there's ever a trial, or an opportunity to provide a defense. They just decide, accuse, and mete out their 'justice'. As such, I find it more than a little surprising that they would go to the trouble of bringing bodies back here. I have a fleeting image of Ashen dragging some poor immortal corpse into the cauldron but it catching fire so he winds up in the Shadow Realm with an armful of smoking bones. Again I start to smile, and again I feel him glare. This time I glare back until he huffs and folds his fingers around the handle of compartment forty-seven and pulls.

I've seen a lot of dead shit. I've seen a lot of fucked-up shit. But I've never seen anything like this.

The drawer slides open to reveal the hybrid, lying prone on the cold and clinical steel. A thin misting of silver fur flows across its body, and standing it must have been taller than Ashen. It's male, powerfully built, every muscle defined. Thick, elongated nails curve from the fingers and toes. It has a face that seems too human to be a wolf, and too doggish to be a person.

It's fuck-ugly.

So I write a note to Ashen that says:

It's fuck-ugly.

"Yeah, I know."

Was it in the middle of phasing between wolf and human?

A fleeting grimace passes across Ashen's face. "No."

Gross.

"It was once Arne Larsen, before this was done to him. That much we know."

I lift up the thin white sheet that lays over the creature's reproductive organs. Ahh *WAP*, always coming through for the win. All praise to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion.

Yikes. Not a garden snake, it's a king cobra.

The Reaper reads my note and sighs.

That's some next-level hentai shit right there.

The Reaper lifts his eyes from my message to my face with a slow, exhausted blink.

Do you think if he mated with a female hybrid they would get stuck together like wolves in the wild? What do they call that, a 'tie' I think?

"Your mind is a terrifying place."

Imagine how much money he could make on Onlyfans.

"Other than determining he has a disturbingly long dick, have you come up with any other stunning revelations about the hybrid?"

Not yet.

"Great."

I give Ashen a sweet smile and he gives me a weary glare in return. I look back at the hybrid, replacing the sheet. I try to find a wound on his body or head, but there's nothing obvious.

How did you kill it? I write.

"We didn't. It was already dead when Cole found it in one of Abdulov's shipping facilities."

So then how did it die?

"We don't know. There were no external wounds, no evidence of trauma."

I run my fingers across the chest to ensure I'm not missing something. There's no hidden Y-incision stitched beneath the fur.

You haven't performed an autopsy, so you don't know if it died by virtue of the fact it's a fucking frankencreature that's not meant to survive in the first place.

"The only Reaper who can perform one is hunting a warlock for the Crime of Exposure."

What, the warlock was on Onlyfans too?

Ashen rolls his eyes, pressing his fingers to the space between his brows. "He informed a human about the existence of immortals."

So what?

"He then proceeded to kill two werewolves to demonstrate his point."

Meh, two werewolves. Not much of a loss.

"Then he equipped the human with silver armor and weaponry and together they killed the entire pack."

Maybe that's a little bad, but still. WEREWOLVES.

"And following that the human dubbed himself Ghostface Wolfkiller and created a YouTube channel dedicated to his findings on werewolves and vampires."

Okay yeah, that's super bad.

Ashen's lips twitch in a faint smirk that fades as quickly as it appears. He jerks a nod toward the body. "Is there anything that you can find? Anything you can see that I can't? Anything you can... smell?"

I give Ashen a dead-eye glare as I cast my pen across the paper. *I'm not sniffing THAT*, my note says, and I point to the white sheet as I turn the message toward him and shake my head.

A tiny glimmer of flame shines in Ashen's eyes. "I'll make you a pitcher of fangria tonight if you do."

Fangria?

Ashen shrugs and breaks my gaze as though he doesn't want me to see the gleam of mischief that brightens his eyes. "I thought of it earlier, based on your idea of blofee. Sangria with blood. I brought some with us."

Why have I never thought of this idea before? It's fucking genius. I whip my pen across a fresh page.

A pitcher you say?

"Yes. The whole thing."

Well hold onto your butts, Reaper, because I'm about to sniff a hybrid's dick for clues.

Ashen hides a laugh in a cough and raises the sheet for me with a sweep of his hand as an invitation. "Enjoy."

Let me work my way there at least, for Christsakes, I write, and toss him my journal before starting at the hybrid's face. From the first sniff, there's an unexpected array of information in the smell, but I try to keep my expression stoic. I follow the scents across the hybrid's body, taking my time until I make it down to his lower abdomen. I straighten for a moment to gather myself and swallow the bile that shocks my throat with its burn before giving the Reaper a smug smile. He bites the edge of his lip and tries his hardest to cultivate a serious expression. I keep my eyes on him for as long as I can as I lean down and sniff the hybrid beneath the sheet.

"Don't be afraid, vampire, that anaconda won't bite."

I snort a laugh and pull away to regroup myself. Even at a distance the smell down there is fucking rank, but I need to get closer to pick up any nuances within the scent. I press my eyes closed as tight as they'll go, take a deep breath of clean air, and then move closer until I'm only a few inches away. I swallow and inhale, taking in as little of the scent I can, testing it in my nostrils and the back of my throat.

As soon as I've got what I need I jerk away, pressing my hand to my nose and mouth as I try to clear the smell from my nostrils. Ashen lets out a roaring laugh. I can't help the smile I beam at him as the rich, warm sound enlivens the empty space around us. I would stand in this room forever just to hear his laugh echo from the walls.

"Of all the immortals I've ever met, you are by far the strangest," Ashen says, and his smile is vibrant with delight.

Watch out, Reaper, you almost sound like that's a good thing, I write, giving him a teasing smile as he looks up from my note. *If you promise me an extra pitcher, I'll even tell you what I found.*

Ashen laughs again. "Deal."

"I don't know what's rarer around here," a male voice interrupts. A shadow materializes from the door. "A bright soul in the Shadow Realm, or Ashen laughing."

Ashen steps around the edge of the steel tray and the body, putting himself between me and the man who saunters toward us. He's young, tall. There's a surfer vibe about him with his shaggy blond hair and bright blue eyes. He's handsome in a boyish way, like his face is just that bit too vibrant or squishy with youth. The hands of time haven't yet carved the planes of his face into sharper angles, and they never will.

"What are you doing here, Cole," Ashen demands.

"Looking for you," Cole says as he comes to a halt a few feet away. His hands are in the pockets of his black jeans, the edges of his dark grey t-shirt pushed up by his tattooed wrists.

"What do you want?"

Cole's eyes glimmer in the dim light. "Aren't you going to introduce me?" His gaze hooks onto me and I see curiosity and interest. If there's malice, it's too well-hidden to find, but his presence causes a swell of adrenaline in my veins. I keep my expression blank as we assess one another and he smiles.

"Cole, may I present Lu. She is helping me with the hybrid case. Lu, this is Cole."

Cole extends his hand and I take it, his skin hot against my cool palm. I feel the heat of Ashen's body close to my side. His wariness is like a wave that washes through me the longer Cole grasps my hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Lu. How are you finding our realm so far?" Cole asks, holding onto my palm a moment longer than he needs to.

I tilt my head and raise my other hand, giving him a *so-so* gesture. He smiles in reply and finally lets go.

"What do you *want*, Cole," Ashen says, his voice thick with feigned boredom and irritation. He flicks his gaze toward me and I see the fire in his pupils. I see his worry embedded like seams of gold in the rich brown hues of his eyes.

Cole walks to the tray of compartment forty-seven and looms over the body, staring down into the hideous face. "I've got some info I thought you might like." There's a long moment of silence as Cole's gaze follows the patterns of the silver fur, the curve of the snout, the bow of the lips. He leans closer and I start to smirk at the idea of him making out with the fuck-ugly corpse.

Ashen steps closer, edging his shoulder between me and the newcomer. When I glance up at him I see a fleeting gleam of predatory malice in his

eyes, as though he's ready to kill this unexpected visitor. But I see something that looks a lot like fear there too. I'm not sure whether it's fear for me, or fear of where he knows my mind has predictably wandered off to.

"Are you going to enlighten us, or is this a game of twenty questions?" Ashen asks, turning his attention back to Cole. The boredom soars to new heights in his voice. Cole turns his head and meets Ashen's gaze while still leaning weirdly close to the corpse.

"I do love a good game," he says, looking once more toward the hybrid before he straightens and turns to face us. "But no. I've come to tell you that your Alpha has found a new pack. He's killed the former leader and taken control. It was Rosaria Wyre."

I look up at Ashen and his jaw tightens. The flame brightens in his eyes. "Rosaria's dead?"

"Yes, both she and her brother were killed last night. It's Semyon's pack now. I don't know if they were aware of what he's been up to. If they didn't know before, they know now. They've dispersed and he's gone underground." Cole turns his gaze to me, a flicker igniting in his eyes. "For now."

Ashen looks down at me and the flame grows bright in his pupils. Black smoke curls from beneath us, creeping through the room. He looks back to Cole and tips his head in a single nod of thanks. The young Reaper gives an untroubled smile in response and heads toward the door.

"Watch yourself, Lu," Cole says as he catches my gaze over his shoulder. "Don't go convincing yourself that it's any safer here than it is in the Living Realm. It's not." His eyes dart to Ashen before he looks my way again and gives a little salute. He turns back to the door, disappearing into the twilight and fog.

"Insufferable," Ashen mutters.

I didn't think he was that bad, I write, showing him my note with a shrug.

"You haven't known him long enough." Ashen's gaze stays fixed on the closed door for a long moment, until he seems sure that Cole won't return. When he looks back at me, the flame and smoke have dispersed, but he still seems unsettled. "What did you find on the body?"

Two pitchers?

"Two pitchers."

First of all, he didn't breed, thank fuck. I don't think I could handle the smell of hybrid vagina on top of decomposing dog dick today.

"Fair enough."

What I DID smell is a medical facility. Bandage adhesive. Rubbing alcohol. But something else, very faint. Clay. Anthracite. Ash. An old brickworks. I think they kept him in a repurposed factory before they moved him to where Cole found him.

Ashen's eyes light with excitement and he beams a bright smile at me. My heart turns over a heavy thud in my chest. "That is a solid lead, Lu," he says as he turns away to push the table back into compartment forty-seven.

If you promise to make me two more pitchers of fangria, I'll tell you the most interesting thing that I found, I write, grasping his arm to show him my note.

Ashen's eyes narrow, a conspiratorial smile pulling at the corners of his lips. "And what's that?"

You promise? Four pitchers? I fan my note in front of him with a coy smile.

"Deal, even though I might regret it when I have to carry you home."

I give Ashen a wicked smile at that intriguing possibility. I cast my pen across the paper. I turn my revelation toward him and I watch as he reads it, surprise igniting in his eyes when they meet mine.

The hybrid was poisoned, my note says. With Angelwing.

CHAPTER 18

I stand in front of the mirror and squeak my palm across the condensation on its surface. Yes, I know I'll leave streak marks. That's the point. Call it retribution for Ashen packing my underwear but not my hairdryer.

Though his shower is awesome with its eight thousand fucking jets that pressure wash the scent of hybrid off my body, it's woefully unprepared to accommodate a lady vampire such as myself.

First, there's no conditioner. Only shampoo.

Next, there's only mansoap, which smells like the juice of all the world's lemons was combined with the oil from an entire forest of cedars and condensed into a single bar. How Ashen smells like tobacco and ink I'll never know.

Lastly, there's no aforementioned hairdryer, which frankly sucks balls.

Annoying as it is, I'm weirdly relieved that there's no evidence of female activity in the bathroom, or anywhere else in his living quarters for that matter. Aside from the sex sheets, of course. Which are clean, thank fuck, and I can verify that because I totally sniff-tested them when he was in the shower before me.

I rummage through my bag, which contains a thoughtful assortment of shit I hardly ever wear. Exhibit A: a floor-length fitted black gown that I bought for Halloween with Ediye when we put on our own two-person murder mystery night. We solved the case in about fifteen minutes so got loaded on tequila and watched the Alien movies instead. I'm not sure why Ashen thought I might need it, but here we are. There are a few sweaters I hardly wear, so I guess he must have thought I *am* cold therefore I *feel* cold.

Which I don't. But thank fuck he packed my oversized orange hoodie that I haven't worn in two years, because he obviously just chucked it in my bag without realizing there was a dress beneath it on the hanger. And thus, he packed that too.

It's white. It's short. It's lacey and cute and sexy. It's got a flirty, flouncy skirt and a low v-neckline and an open back with delicate crisscross straps. It's perfect for a bright soul to attend a dinner in the Shadow Realm, especially when the lightest color I've seen anyone wear is charcoal grey.

Project Attraction and Annihilation is back on, baby.

Okay I know what you're thinking: *but Lu, that's not really flying undercover, you know?* And yeah, I totally get that. But you're forgetting a few things. First, I'm bored. Not *here*, not in the Shadow Realm. I mean just generally, in life. Things were pretty boring before Ashen came along. In fact, as strange and freaky as this place has been, in a weird way I'm having fun here in his realm. It's exciting. It's scary. I still feel like I want to tear the whole place down, but that's part of the attraction. Maybe it's also because I feel like Ashen is starting to see it the way that I do.

Also, you forget that I love getting away with things. And wearing a white dress to dinner in the Shadow Realm and getting drunk on fangria definitely feels like getting away with something. But don't worry, for a little extra insurance I cast a spell on myself in the shower. Ediyé gave it to me years ago. It makes me *actually* mute for twenty-four hours, just in case I have the impulse to let my voice fly in a drunken solo of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. And you already know I can slay that song. But mostly the spell is a real pain in the ass, because every single time I've used it I've met a douchebag so worthy of killing. Not singing to my meal makes things a lot... messier...

But dude, I'm not stupid.

The other thing is that I stole the obsidian blade from Ashen's suit jacket. To your credit, you couldn't have known that. You also couldn't have known that Angelwing poison really sticks to stuff. For a long, *long* time. So, I take a bit of damp toilet paper and I carefully, and I mean *oh so carefully*, wipe the obsidian down and transfer the poison to my *kaiken* and *katana*. Then I wash my hands. Like, six times.

I pull my hair up in a sleek bun since my hair will never dry in time and I put on some makeup. *Okay*, maybe a lot of makeup. A smoky eye. A bit of winged liner. Maybe some fake lashes, *whatever*. Ashen packed it all, so

blame him. Besides, it's a nice edgy contrast to my sweet little dress. Once my heels are on, I strap my *kaiken* to my upper thigh, the sheathed point of it visible just below the edge of my hem. It looks pretty hot if I do say so myself. *I'm a bitch and a boss and I shine like gloss.* All praise to Doja Cat for the hype song rolling through my mind. I step out of the bathroom, shoulders back and head high.

When I enter the main living area, Ashen is sitting on the edge of the bed, his ankle balanced on his knee, a book splayed across his leg. For a moment I just stop and look at him. Impeccable black suit, silk tie, polished shoes. His raised foot ticks like a clock. His hair falls over his brow, his eyes focused on the words in his lap. His fingers press a shifting pattern into the pulp of his lip. He's so engrossed in what he's reading that he doesn't notice me. It's like he has his own gravity in this room. A dark star, a celestial power, beautiful yet deadly. I feel like he pulls me in.

I write a note in my journal.

Time to pony up, Reaper. You owe me some pitchers.

I toss the notebook next to him on the bed. His head snaps to the side with the surprise of the impact. Then he looks at me.

For a second that feels too long, he doesn't move. It's as though he doesn't recognize me.

Something turns over in his brain and he sets his book to the side and stands.

"Lu... you..."

An eloquent start. I try not to smile as I raise my eyebrows in question. The Reaper swallows.

"You look... did I pack that?"

I grin as I walk to the bed and retrieve my journal. I make a point of turning around as I write so that he gets a full view of the low, open back.

You did pack it. What, you don't like it?

I show him my note with an innocent smile on my lips but a wicked gleam in my eyes.

"No, no-"

So you DON'T like it, then.

"No I meant yes, I do like it." Ashen's eyes stray to my bare shoulders, across my collarbones, down the chain from Ediye. His gaze follows the deep neckline of the dress that dips low between my breasts. A flush of gooseflesh tingles through my arms and the back of my neck as he looks

down to my legs, to the edge of the dagger that's strapped on my thigh. When he meets my eyes he looks both ravenous and petrified.

Are you sure? I can't tell from your face. It seems like you might not like it. I show him my note and then turn a full circle. I look down to my shoes and back up to Ashen again. *I can get changed,* I write, but there's no fucking way that I'm doing that.

"No, no. You look..."

Don't say I look like a hybrid or I swear I'll slap you.

"You look so beautiful, Lu."

All the mischief dies in my eyes as I look at Ashen. I knew he was going to say something like that, once he spat it out eventually, but it's the way he said it. It's the way he said my name. His voice is rich and warm and almost sad, like he's looking at something he's already lost.

I feel the heat of nerves swell and churn through my belly. I take a deep breath and refocus on my journal.

Thank you, you look pretty good yourself.

Ashen looks down at his suit and back to me with the faintest smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Thank you."

Usually you look like such a slob. It's nice to see you dress up for a change. I pass him my note and when he meets my eyes I wink. A spark flares in his pupils in response and he looks away, but I can see his smile grow.

"Come on, vampire," he says, lifting a bag from the bed. He slings it over his shoulder and then offers me his arm. "Your fangria awaits."

I loop my hand through Ashen's arm and we leave the room, walking down the corridor to the stairs. When we arrive in the grand entrance hall there are a few other Reapers in the vestibule. We pass a couple immersed in quiet conversation and they nod to Ashen as we approach, but their eyes are sharpened on me. I feel the weight of their scrutiny and I wonder if it looks bad for Ashen to be seen with a soul on his arm. For some reason, it doesn't excite me to make him feel uncomfortable. I'm not sure why.

I keep my eyes on the couple as I start to pull my hand away, and Ashen looks down, his brow furrowed. He follows my gaze and traps my escaping hand to his side, grasping my fingers with his other hand and placing it back where I feel like it belongs.

"It's all right," he says, not looking again at the couple. "They're just not used to seeing a bright soul here. Not one that shines like you."

I give him a questioning look but he doesn't respond. He only lays his hand over mine and stares down anyone else we pass as though challenging a question or comment. None are made.

We walk down the road, the same pervasive fog hovering over every surface, obscuring the worst of the Realm from our view. We turn down a side road this time, and I get the sense there are dwellings or buildings on either side, but I can't see them through the mist. It's only pathways and iron fences and tall hedges. Everything beyond is consumed by the opaque fog.

We cross another road and reach a tall iron gate, the words *Bit Akalum* wrought into the archway that stretches above us. *House of Food*. Ahead there are dim but twinkling lights, the sound of music drifting toward us through the mist. With my free hand I point to the *Bit Akalum* sign as we pass beneath it, with a sarcastic look on my face.

"Does what it says on the tin," Ashen says, and I can hear the smirk of agreement in his voice. "We might have to rename it to the *House of Fangria* after tonight."

I flash a smile up at him that says he read my mind. Which he totally just did.

We follow the path to a wide, black stone building with a covered porch. Lanterns hang from the ceiling, illuminating a few Reapers standing beneath the overhang with drinks in their hands. Music wafts toward us like a beacon in the mist, low and dark, minor chords, rich melodies in deep octaves. There are no vocals, only cello and piano, but I could make something. A song about this place. A song about ghosts in dark corners and fear in the fog. We ascend the steps but I don't notice the Reapers as we pass, I'm too caught in the current of the music around me.

"All right, vampire?" Ashen asks as we pass the Reapers on the patio and head through the open doors. He looks down at me with a crease between his brows.

I nod and give a faint smile, swirling my finger in a loop and tapping my ear. He frowns and I'm not sure why.

We enter a long room of circular tables with silver tablecloths and vases of dark flowers, candles throwing light and shadow across the Reapers and their drinks or plates of food. Enormous black French Empire crystal chandeliers cascade from the ceiling like frozen waterfalls. A bar stretches the length of the room on the left toward an empty dance floor and a small

stage where a cellist and pianist play. Their eyes are closed as they immerse themselves in the meaning behind their dark and winding melody.

"There," Ashen says, nodding his head in the direction of a table near the back of the room. Ember is facing us, elegant in a jumpsuit the shade of the deepest cold sea. Her long hair is scraped into a high ponytail that twists and drapes over her shoulder like rope. Cole is seated next to her and is probably the most informal person here with his T-shirt beneath a suit jacket. I was right when I guessed that I'd be wearing the lightest color here. Everyone else is in shades of grey or black, blue or even deep blood red. My white dress is a lantern in the Shadow Realm.

"Lovely to see you again so soon, Lu," Cole says, standing as we arrive at the table. Ashen pulls my seat out for me, placing me next to the newcomer. I assume he must deem Ashen 'insufferable' but a safer option than his sister. I agree.

I give Cole a salute and I turn my gaze to Ember as I rest my *katana* against the arm of my chair. We smile warmly at one another as though we're the very best of friends.

"You look so lovely, Lu. You're the shining light of *Bit Akalum* tonight. All the Reapers here have certainly taken note of the brightest soul they've ever had to glimmer in their midst," Ember says, sweeping her hand in the direction of the room behind me. Her smile is as placid as still water. I wonder if I'm the only one that knows how deceptive that stillness can be.

"I'll be right back," Ashen says, dropping his hand on my shoulder. I give a single nod but I don't take my eyes from Ember. Either Ashen doesn't notice the predatory gleam in her eyes or he doesn't believe she's a threat in this place. Maybe he figures I can hold my own with the blades at my side, which is truer than he knows. I hear his footfalls depart in the direction of the bar.

"How are you enjoying your time here in our Shadow Realm? Still so-so?" Cole asks, swirling the ice in his glass of whiskey within its ornate crystal cage.

Ember's smile grows across the rim of her wine glass. "Lu can't answer you, Cole. She can't speak."

"Really? Why?" Cole asks, and the concern and curiosity I hear in his words seems genuine.

"Damaged vocal chords, apparently. Though how, I'm not sure. Perhaps a fight with someone? It wasn't Bobby Sarno, was it?"

I give Ember a slow shake of my head and a smile that says she's playing a dangerous game. Bobby-Fucking-Sarno. *As if*. I'd never let that motherfucker get his slimy hands around my throat. But she already knows to give me more credit than that.

"No, I didn't think so. I heard someone very sneaky snapped his neck on the roof of his own club. How bold and audacious. I wonder why someone would do that?" Ember says, her voice saccharine. Her eyes are glittering gems of hidden malice. I look at Cole and he returns my gaze with an assessing stare and a tilt of his head. He shifts his eyes to his menu as footsteps approach. A pitcher of deep crimson wine with ice cubes and slices of lemon and orange appears in front of my place setting. I smell the blood and citrus, the tannins of wine.

"What is that pretty concoction, brother?" Ember asks, tilting her wine glass toward my pitcher in a question.

"A quarter of a debt fulfilled," Ashen replies, pouring a glass of fangria for me before helping himself to wine from Ember's bottle. A server arrives and takes the orders of my dining companions. He's human. I can smell his blood rushing to the quicker cadence of his heart. He knows I'm different too and gives me a wary look when I pull my bloody drink closer and shake my head to decline any food. I have questions that I can't ask about how a human would wind up in this place. Does he want to be here? What does he know about immortals? Also... he smells tasty. Is he a douchebag?

As the server leaves with a nervous look in my direction, Ember casts a smirk toward her brother. "A quarter of a debt fulfilled? You're not considering repaying Lu for saving your life with a bit of... what is that... sangria?"

"*Fangria*. For vampire consumption only," Ashen says, leaning back in his chair with his wine glass. "And no, of course not."

Cole's eyebrows climb beneath his mop of blond hair as his gaze bounces from Ashen to me. "You saved his life? How? And... why?"

"She can't answer you, remember?" Ember says as she cuts him a side-eye glare.

"I was struck in a confrontation with Semyon's former pack," Ashen explains. His voice is deep and rich with memory. "The blade was laced with Angelwing poison."

"I thought Angelwing was a myth," Cole says. His eyes sweep across my face as though he's looking at someone new.

Ember's lips curl in a smile, like this is the very best of games and we're the only two playing. "No, it's no myth. It just hasn't been used in a very, very long time. Not many are left who have seen it. Even fewer remain who know the antidote."

"Which is?"

"Sacrifice," Ashen interjects. He takes a sip of his wine and sets the glass on the silver tablecloth, pushing the base against the fabric. He taps his finger along the stem, a quiet metronome for the music. *Tick, tick, tick.*

"No, brother. Not just sacrifice," Ember says. "The Realm of Light demands more than something so simple as sacrifice to remedy a poison wrought of their empire."

Cole spins his ice in his drink, the *clink, clink* adding to the ping of Ashen's finger on the glass. "What do you mean?"

"She spellcast also," Ashen says. He sounds bored of this conversation, though I know he's not. I'm becoming really fucking irritated that it's going too quickly to write my own reply, which Ember seems to enjoy.

"The spell was not the antidote."

"How'd she cast a spell if she can't speak?" Cole asks, his eyes narrowing.

Sign language, you dicks, I sign, even though that is of course a lie. Ember laughs. So someone here does know sign language after all.

"Vampires are adaptable creatures, Cole," she says. *Right, Leucosia?* Ember signs. She holds my gaze as her hands form the words, her smile spreading. A spark of mischief catches fire in her eyes and she turns their gleam toward Cole. "No, the spell helped to hasten the effect of the antidote, but it wasn't just for my brother's benefit."

Ember and I look at one another, unmoving. I know what she's about to say. It's something I've known since the moment I realized I had been successful in saving Ashen. It's how I knew my blood would not be enough. It's *why* I spoke the spell.

"Not just sacrifice. Not just blood or spells. It's risk. Being willing to risk something you cannot get back," she says.

Ashen's eyes cut to me and back to Ember. "Risk what?"

"Little brother. Haven't you asked yourself why Lu shines like a star in our Shadow Realm?"

The ticking of Ashen's finger stops.

All the room seems to go quiet without the cadence of passing time.
Ember's smile spreads like venom in a wound.

"She risked her soul for you. And now it belongs to the Realm of Light."

CHAPTER 19

U hhhhhh... Hard pass...

No one said anything about agreeing to forfeit one's soul to the Realm of Light when I first heard whispers of an antidote for Angelwing. My infallible vampire memory would have remembered that, surely. Then again, that was a long time ago. I remember the bit about sacrifice. There was something about taking a great risk, yeah I got that too. But I definitely would have remembered that little tidbit about my soul. And I sooooo don't want my soul to end up there.

I'm perfectly happy in the Living Realm. There's food. There's bloffee. Sure, there are werewolves and not all the witches are as awesome as Ediye, but I've been making a go of it for a long time. I'm on a bit of a streak, if you think about it. I'm not keen to leave, and everything about the Realm of Light sounds boring as fuck.

No wars? Boring.

No douchebags to hunt? Boring.

No getting away with sketchy shit? So fucking boring.

Also, most of my friends wouldn't make the cut. Ediye is great and I love her more than anyone, but she's not squeaky clean. Cassian, the vampire I made in Rome? Or Sora? That's legit laughable. The only one that would get a guaranteed free pass is Andy, and the thought of playing Scrabble with him for eternity makes me want to gouge my eyes out with a fork. Even being a visitor in the Shadow Realm is more fun than that, as creepy as it is.

Shit, Andy. I haven't given him a second thought since we arrived. Poor Andy and his peace lily. I haven't even considered that we're supposed to go

on a date on Saturday. Fuck, I feel like such a jerk. Especially now, because I really, *really* don't want to go.

I glance at Ashen. His pupils are orbs of flame. He looks at me with both dismay and fury. I feel a rush of heat surge from him and I drain my glass and pour myself another.

"Did you know?" he asks, his voice low and quiet.

I shake my head and then down my full glass. Ashen pulls it from my fingers and gives me a hard and searching look as he fills my glass. I think he's hunting for truth and lies. I shake my head again and mouth the word *no*, and the look of rising panic on my face must be enough to convince him that I truly had no idea. Ashen passes my refilled glass back, his fingers grazing mine in a gesture that feels purposeful. He manages to subdue his expression into a stoic mask but I feel something behind it in the depths of his eyes. Sadness, maybe. Worry. It feels like there's a deep ocean hidden beneath what he shows to the world, and it rages with currents and storms.

"What does that mean, if the Realm of Light has a claim on Lu?" Cole asks, breaking us out of a heavy silence.

"If she dies in the Living Realm, they will offer refuge for her soul, just like a human. Not a situation immortals find themselves in very often," Ashen says.

"Or they could come to collect. Who knows, they've been suspiciously quiet for the last thousand years or so," Ember adds, casting a serene smile in my direction. She's fucking loving the squall she's brewed among us. I run my hand across the dagger at my thigh and think about how great it would feel to plunge it into her heart.

"What, you mean they'd come *here* to collect?"

"No. She is in our realm, so we can do what we want with her here."

"We are not doing shit with her, Ember. Leave her alone," Ashen says. His eyes are pits of malice as he looks over his glass at Ember.

"I did not say we *would*, dear brother. I said we *could*. Don't worry, I have no intention of harming your beloved vampire," she replies with staged affection as she reaches across the table to lay a hand on his.

"I'm sure you don't." Ashen pulls his hand away and Ember purses her lips in a pout that I want to punch off her face.

"What is your interest in Lu anyway, brother? Is it really only to keep her from being used to make another hybrid? Is it because she saved your

life? Or is it something more?"

"My interests and motivations are none of your fucking business."

"You are my little brother. *Everything* you do is my business."

"I haven't been your *little brother* in millennia, Ember."

Ember heaves a sad, wistful sigh and twists the stem of her wine glass, spinning the base against the silver cloth. "Forgive me, Ashen. I just find it odd. After sleeping your way through most of the female population of Reapers you can't seem to find one suitable to fulfill your desires. And now here you are escorting a bright soul on your arm. The brightest soul, in fact. But I suppose it makes sense that you want that which you cannot have, a man of the darkness seeking the light."

Ashen smacks his palm to the surface of the table and the glasses jitter as though startled. Smoke cascades from beneath his hand. "*Enough*, Ember," he says, his voice loud and stern. Cole and I glance at one another with identical expressions of surprise.

"Now now, both of you. I realize that sibling rivalries run deep, but no fighting in my establishment," a smooth voice purrs in warning. A woman materializes from the direction of the bar, her dark skin glowing and vibrant in the dim and flickering light. Dark curls cascade from her head and flow over her bare shoulders. Her neck drips with gold chains that pour into her cleavage. A low cut, black silk dress shimmers across her curves as she saunters toward us. She radiates power and authority.

"Apologies, Imani. We didn't mean to disturb your other guests," Ashen says as the woman stops next to him and lays a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know if you disturbed them or thoroughly entertained them," Imani replies with a benevolent smile. She turns her gaze to me. "Who is this fetching creature you've brought to shine among us this evening?"

"Imani, this is Lu. She is my guest in our Shadow Realm. Lu, may I present Imani, the proprietor of *Bit Akalum*."

Imani extends her hand and gives me a smile like she knows all my secrets. It should be unnerving, but instead it feels welcoming. "Pleasure to meet you, Lu. I'm happy to host you this evening, despite the ill manners of the cantankerous siblings of House Urbigu."

"Apologies again, Imani," Ember says, and she sounds legit contrite. I kind of love it. I have trouble hiding my shit-eating grin and Ember knows it.

"Yes, well, I'm sure you won't let it happen again. Correct?"

Ember gives a nod and flashes a glance at me that straddles the thin line of apology and rage. "Yes, of course."

"Excellent." Imani turns her eyes to Ashen, her pupils consumed with rippling black flame. "Ashen, why don't you take your guest to the dance floor. Tessa is about to sing, and it would be nice to cultivate a more jovial atmosphere. I hear that vampires are graceful dancers and I would very much love to see if that rumour is true. I will ensure your food is ready for your return to the table."

I get the sense this is not a suggestion. I take a long sip of my drink to hide my smirk at the idea of doing something stupid like *The Sprinkler*. I wonder if this 'Tessa' would take a request for *WAP*.

"Of course," Ashen says, pushing his chair away from the table. He holds out his hand for me to take. "Lu, would you please join me for a dance?"

I smile like I'm the sweetest, most innocent little vampire that ever set foot in the Shadow Realm as I place my hand in his. I avoid Ember's eyes, but I glance over at Cole as I rise from my seat. He watches us with an unreadable expression as he swirls the ice in his crystal glass.

"Enjoy your evening," Imani says as we pass by, and again I feel like this is a command to be obeyed. I give her a single nod and follow the pull of Ashen's hand as he leads us past the tables of guests who watch us like ravens waiting to steal a catch of fish from the bow of a boat.

We arrive at the expanse of black polished stone. The strings of lights overhead reflect on its surface like stars beneath our feet. Tessa is already there as the cellist tunes his instrument, a vintage silver microphone waiting for her voice to take flight. I give her a smile and she gives me an honest one in return, one singer to the next.

"The whole place will be watching, so if you start twerking I might kill you myself," Ashen says as I turn to face him. His eyes glimmer with suppressed amusement and I give him a broad smile. I have so many things I wish I could say that the words nearly spark from my eyes like fireworks.

The cello starts, then the piano. Ashen's hand slides across my ribs and lays across my spine. My exposed skin heats beneath his touch. I run my left hand up his arm, my other hand encased in his grip.

It's a song that I recognize. My breath catches in my lungs and I look up at Tessa. She smiles, and it seems laced with sadness. It's *Let It All Go*. How this is supposed to create a more jovial atmosphere, I don't know, but I love

this song and I want to hear Tessa sing it. I want to be right where I am. Tessa closes her eyes and her voice finds the melody of the piano. The music swallows us in its rich tone and sweeps us away across the sparkling floor.

*I've been sleepless at night
'Cause I don't know how I feel
I've been waiting on you
Just to say something real*

"I would like to ask you something. Some *things*. Will you answer me honestly? If only while the music plays?" Ashen asks as we float across the polished stone.

I meet Ashen's eyes and watch for just a moment, trying to find everything he keeps buried beneath the layers of time that are as hard and impenetrable as granite. I nod.

*I don't know why, I don't know why
We need to break so hard*

"Did you know you would have to take a great risk to reverse the poison?" he asks as the pianist's voice adds to the chorus of the duet.

But if we're strong enough to let it in, in, in

I nod. We flow across the floor like we have spent an eternity here, dancing with one another our entire lives. There's no misstep, no moment where I feel unsure. It's as natural as the breath in my lungs.

*If I look back to the start now I know
I see everything true*

"Did you cast the spell to protect yourself from me?"

It wasn't the only reason why, of course. I spoke the spell because it was the great risk that I took. I wish I could explain that, but I can't. All I can do is nod.

I look up at Ashen and his gaze drifts away from mine as we turn. A fleeting darkness settles over his face as he casts his eyes to the floor with a furrowed brow.

Ashen lets go of my back to spin me from his extended hand. When he brings me in again, we're closer than before. My chest touches his and I feel every breath, every heartbeat. His arm folds around me, his hand pressing its warmth between the bones of my shoulders.

We started it wrong and I think you know.

"Do you still fear me?"

I think about this for a moment as we spin. I see other Reapers watching from their tables, some from the bar. I fear *them* and what they could do. What they *would* do, if they knew who I used to be. But Ashen feels different, no matter how hard I try to convince myself otherwise. I shake my head but I angle my face away as I think about how foolish it is to let my fear go.

I don't know why we break so hard

"Do you trust me?" Ashen asks, the heat of his breath warm across my neck. The room disappears from view, as though we're the only two people here. The scent of mint and ink fills my senses. I press my lips to my hand that rests on Ashen's shoulder and I close my eyes.

Let it all go, let it all go, let it all out now.

I shake my head. It's the truth but there's a pain in my heart to admit it. I squeeze Ashen's hand. I want him to know that I wish I could.

Who says truth is beauty after all

And who says love should break us when we fall

The music cascades around us. The lights glitter in the reflection of the polished floor and I almost believe I'm floating on stars. I feel every note Tessa sings. The bow across the strings, the hammer of the piano keys. I feel Ashen's hand drift across my skin, his face close to mine, his lips next to my ear. I press my body closer to his. It feels like I belong here, even though every touch feels stolen.

We're strong enough to let it go.

The music slows, growing quieter with every breath. Ashen grasps my hand tighter within his. His palm steadies my back as he dips me toward the floor. He draws away and looks into my eyes. "Can you try to place your trust in me?"

The music fades away.

All I offer is a smile.

CHAPTER 20

"Time to go, vampire," Ashen says, pulling his wine glass out of my hands.

I mount a silent protest, even though it's probably a good idea that he removes any alcohol from my possession. Because I am *shitfaced*.

When we got back to the table after our dance there was a replenished pitcher of fangria and a full bottle of Rakomelo at my place-setting. A small card was tied around its neck, written in a sharp, precise script. *Everything they said about vampires is true. Enjoy your evening. Best wishes, Imani.*

I haven't had Rakomelo in decades.

And now I remember why.

After four pitchers of fangria, the bottle of Rakomelo, and more than a few stolen sips of Ashen's wine (a full glass of which I downed just now before he could pry it from my hands), I am thoroughly hammered.

I would love to stay longer, particularly as Ember has been keeping her smart mouth shut. Cole has also been a pleasant surprise with some entertaining stories of his life as a human before his induction into the Shadow Realm. The process of induction was murky at best, and he deftly skirted around the topic in favor of anecdotes of his adventures. I was right about the surfer vibe. He has some great tales of travels from beach to beach, chasing waves, which of course I can relate to being a bit of a former beach bum myself.

But Ashen insists the hour is late. Something about *creepy blah blah something Shadow Realm* who cares. He pockets my journal and pen, loops the strap of the *katana* over his shoulder, then bids farewell to Ember and Cole on our behalf. He then extends his hand for me to take. My heart

twists when I place my palm in his. Heat fills my chest as I stand and meet his eyes. Ashen looks at me for a moment that feels too long before he turns in the direction of the door, pulling me with him. I give a drunken salute to our dinner companions and sweep up a half-full bottle of wine with my free hand.

The cooler air of the night meets my skin in a welcome embrace as we pass through the doors of *Bit Akalum*. I don't even notice if there are other Reapers on the patio. I don't think about the fog, or the sounds that lurk in its depths. I just feel the warmth of Ashen's hand around mine.

I heave a heavy sigh and take a sip from the bottle of wine. *What the fuck is wrong with me*. I mean, other than being drunk, obviously. When Ashen doesn't let go of my hand as we turn down the road, I feel like I don't want him to. And I want it to mean more than just keeping me upright, or looking after me in this sketchy realm as I try not to wobble on my heels. I want it to be for me.

"All right, vampire?" he asks as the fog of the road absorbs us. I take another long draft from the bottle and offer it to him, but he declines.

I shrug. I notice for the first time that it's darker than it was before. I guess there are only two shades to the Shadow Realm: twilight, and night. Makes sense, I guess, and I gesture toward the road ahead and give him a thumbs up around my grip on the bottle.

Just as I put my arm back down at my side, something grazes the hem of my dress and darts past me. I catch sight of a shape running low to the ground. There's something a little off about it. It only has three legs... I think?.. I can't really focus on it, I'm too drunk for that, but I'm pretty sure it was a white dog. It hides around the corner of a hedge and I let go of Ashen's hand with a happy clap and dance as I mouth the word *dog!* and trot toward the hedge. I extend my hand toward it but the shape jumps out from the hedge and startles me with a vicious hiss before it scuttles off into the dark in a crab crawl.

"Not a dog, vampire," Ashen says as I back into him and his arm locks around my waist. "It's a crawler. An old and angry soul."

What the fuck, I mouth as I point with my bottle in the direction of the sound of its hiss as the creature continues into the fog. I hear a high-pitched, whistling cry, then another behind us, followed by a third to our left. Ashen takes hold of my hand once more and pulls me along, his other hand gripping his sword as the flame ripples to life across the blade.

"We need to go."

We pick up the pace, which is a mission in these heels. I pull Ashen to a stop so I can take them off and I expect he'll roll his eyes or huff about it, but he doesn't. He just holds my arm for balance and watches with a worried expression, his eyes darting toward a high-pitched call in the fog behind us. When I'm done, we carry on in tense silence, going as quickly as my impaired balance allow. We don't see them, but I know they're there. I feel the presence of souls in the night, even when they're silent.

There's a scuttling sound close behind us as we round the corner and start down the center of the road leading back to House Urbigu. Ashen lets go of my hand and spins away from me. I follow his movement. His sword cuts a low arc in the fog. Before he lands the blow, I see the crawler in the light of his blade, galloping toward him. It has the body of something once like a human with the movement of a beast. Its eyes are fixed to me, but it's heading straight for the Reaper.

Ashen's sword cuts it clean through the middle, the two halves of the soul separating like slices of meat. Thick, putrid blood and the smell of decay flood the road as the creature falls at the Reaper's feet. I press my hand across my nose and mouth and swallow down the bile that rises in my throat. *This is so not a good time to be drunk*, I think, though it's a little too late now.

"Shit," Ashen says, looking down at the creature. A screech from further down the road fills the still night air. "That's not good. *Run, Lu.*"

Ashen turns in my direction. I drop my shoes and throw my bottle of wine, hoping the shattered glass might slow some of the creatures down. And then we run. We run as fast as we can go together, Ashen's hand clasped around mine. My legs burn, my heart surges. More screeching calls pierce the fog. Bare feet and palms smack the surface of the road behind us. I smell their rot and ruin. I feel their hatred and malice.

House Urbigu looms ahead in the fog, and we dart up the pathway framed by gas lamps. I catch movement on my right but it disappears into shadow before I can get a sense of how close it is. Ashen pulls my hand ahead to send me up the stairs and I turn on the landing, watching as he stops behind me.

Hellfire ripples on the silver sword as Ashen sweeps it behind him. It slices through the air above his head. "*Maqlu kalusa isbura,*" he says, and drives the blade down until it cuts the stone beneath his feet.

Fire spills down the stairs. It burns the fog and shadow. It pours down the path and lights the road, illuminating the crawlers that scuttle toward us from all directions. And then it coats them all in flame.

The souls twist in pain and screech their dying calls into the night of the Shadow Realm.

Memory rips through my drunken haze. My heart roars. Bile climbs my throat. I cover my ears and close my eyes. Their suffering is too much like mine. Before I can open my eyes again and force myself to witness their plight, Ashen grabs my wrist and pulls us into House Urbigu, shutting the door behind us as the souls die their final deaths outside.

"I'm sorry, Lu. I'm sorry," Ashen says, his voice despondent as he pulls one of my hands away from my head. He threads his fingers through mine and guides us away from the door and the keening wails on the other side.

Ashen doesn't seem to relax at all as we enter the vestibule of House Urbigu. It feels like being tethered to a ticking bomb as we walk quickly past the cauldrons and through the grand hall. The sounds of the shrieking fade behind us, and by the time we reach the stairs I can't hear them at all. When we finally enter his room, Ashen leans against the door, heaving a heavy sigh as he lets go of my hand and drops his sword. He bends his head and folds his hands across the back of the neck, his gaze locked to the floor.

For a long moment, there's only the silence of the room. There are only the things I can hear that no one else can. Heartbeats. The air in our lungs. The slow blink as Ashen presses his eyes closed. I sense the worry and fear battle the resolve within him. It's the swell of the ocean battering a lighthouse in a storm. The weight of water behind a dam. I move closer and touch his arm. A question lingers in my expression, but he doesn't look at me. He only lowers his hand from his neck, grazing my fingers on the way down to his side.

"I need to rest," Ashen says, his voice quiet and low. He doesn't raise his head or look in my direction. I feel like something has been bruised within me. "Get some sleep, vampire."

Ashen pushes away from the door and walks past me to the bathroom. The light turns on but I hear no sounds. I watch from where I stand for a long time, waiting for a shadow beneath the door. But nothing changes. After a while, I go to the sidebar and take a long sip of whiskey from a bottle, climbing onto the bed and pulling my hair free of my bun. A few

more sips and I set the bottle down on the nightstand, then lay my head on the cool caress of the pillow. I close my eyes and I dream of nothing at all.

It seems like I've only blinked when I feel something peeling from my cheek. I crack open an eye. A finger hovers in front of my face with a fake lash stuck to the tip.

"Good morning, sunshine," Ashen says.

The room is swirling around me. Someone is scraping pins across the inside of my skull and I'm ninety-nine percent sure it's Ashen. If I vomit, I'm past the point of caring.

Holy fuck I feel like death.

I push my face into the pillow as I open and close my hand in a request for my pen. I feel the cool, polished abalone slide across my palm, the journal landing open near my hand.

I uncap the pen and scrawl a note without lifting my head from the pillow. *Fuck you*, it says.

"*Flick* you? Whatever you say, vampire."

A sharp ping snaps at the exposed skin on my back. All praise to Cardi B that I still have hours left on my mutism spell because I swear I would have yelled a string of obscenities. I flail my hand around and manage to whack some part of Ashen and he lets out an *oof*. I try another note.

F.U.C.K. Y.O.U.

"Oh. I see. That makes more sense."

Go. Away.

"I'm afraid that's not possible. We need to go to Cairo and find the apothecary. Night is already falling there."

I feel like crying. I love that city, I really do. I love it so much and it's been years since I've been there. But it's loud. And my brain hurts. It physically pains me to even make thoughts. I don't know how I'm going to survive music and talking and car horns and lights. No. Hard fucking pass.

I am dead. Leave a message. BEEP, I write, and then I pull all the sheets I can grab and smoosh them to my face. He's right, they're fucking luxurious and cold and I regret I ever talked smack about his silky sex sheets.

"Come on, vampire," Ashen says, and I feel the sheets slipping through my weak grasp. I try to roll myself in them like a burrito but it's no use, so I just curl myself into a pathetic ball instead. "There's bloffee."

Sleep only.

"There's a shower."

No hairdryer. Stinky soap. Only sleep.

"What about a Bloody Mary."

What do you think I am, a peasant? Only Bloody Caesars are acceptable.

"Lucky for you that I went and got some Clamato in that case."

I open an eye and shoot Ashen a suspicious glare through my tangled strands of hair. He points to the nightstand and I follow his smug finger. Sure enough, there's a steaming cup of bloffee, a tall Bloody Caesar with extra blood (obvs) and a random plate of bacon. I point to the bacon and look at him with a question in the crease of my brow.

"Everyone loves bacon."

Not vegans.

"Everyone but vegans love bacon."

Fair point.

I push myself up to a sitting position as slowly as possible. The room tilts at a disturbing angle and I reach out for whatever my fingers hit first on the nightstand. Booze it is, then.

"You look like I dragged you through the streets by your face."

What a charmer you are today. This is not one of those romantic comedies where the protagonist wakes up with perfect hair and fresh makeup, if that's what you were expecting. Although you don't have Netflix, so how would you know anything about romcom tropes, I write, taking a slice of bacon and dipping it into the Caesar.

"I have Amazon Prime Video, and Apple TV. And Disney+. On my laptop. In my bag," Ashen says, his nose crinkling as he watches me take a bite of the wet bacon.

What... the... fuck?..

"What?"

You're a Reaper. Why the hell do you have Disney+?

"I like the Mandalorian. He's... relatable. And baby Yoda is all right."

Who even are you? Did I die? I did, didn't I. I'm dead.

"Probably not far off, all things considered," Ashen says.

I finally realize that I'm only wearing one false lash and pull it from my eye. Ashen, on the other hand, looks rested and ready to take on the world. I watch as he pushes a cufflink through the sleeve of his midnight blue shirt

and I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. I'm still in last night's dress, which feels decidedly less cute now that I'm barely able to sit upright.

Did you sleep? I write, whacking Ashen's elbow with my journal to show him my note.

"Yes."

I look around the room, but I see no pillows on the floor. I smirk as I think of him sleeping while standing in the shower. I could totally see that happening.

...Where?

"Here. Next to you."

I meet Ashen's eyes. I thought the way he retreated last night with barely a word meant he'd stay away, maybe even slip back out into the night. He looks at me as though there's something he wants to say. An apology perhaps. An explanation. Maybe something about calming whatever this is between us before it pulls us both out to sea. Anything about the way he feels. But he won't let himself say it.

"We should get going soon," Ashen says as he turns toward the nightstand and picks up my bloffee to hand it to me in exchange for the now empty Caesar glass. I sigh as that moment between us passes and I take a sip of the hot liquid. I feel marginally better with a little blood in my system, but I make no guarantees that I won't still barf in the shower.

Which is exactly what happens.

I feel a bit closer to normal afterward, aside from a raging headache. Brushing my teeth three times also helps. I pull on some jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt, toss my hair into a damp bun, and forgo any makeup because who has the energy for that. Definitely not me.

As soon as I'm ready to go, we head downstairs to the grand hall. There's no one else there. Our footsteps clatter up the walls and fly like bats among the stone pillars. The closer we get to the cauldrons, the slower I go, and when we're near enough I stop altogether. I want to ask Ashen about the fate of the crawlers from last night as he lights a torch, but I don't. He throws the fire into a sleeping cauldron and the embers roar to life. When Ashen joins by my side my heart is already surging with the panic I can't seem to subdue. The hangover all but disappears, the room stops spinning. The only thing I see is flame.

"It will feel the same as last time," Ashen says. His voice is patient and calm. I see movement in my peripheral vision and look to my feet as smoke

swirls up my body. It climbs across my arms and Ashen takes my hand. "No pain. No burning. No different from when you came here, Lu."

I nod and gather my fears, and then we walk forward, the smoke obscuring the cauldron as we draw near. I know it's irrational, but I'm still afraid. My breath still comes quicker than before. My ribs still quake. My hands vibrate and I feel the urge to run. The memories of villagers shouting their insults and incantations ring as bright as bells in my mind. I can still see Bobby Sarno, standing in the back of the crowd. He enjoyed every second of it too, his sweet retribution for my sisters sinking his merchant ship, taking him prisoner. Even though I was the one to set him free, he was happy to sell me out to the Reapers, and even happier to watch me burn. I still feel the malice of his smile as he watched me writhe and wither at the stake.

I step into the cauldron with Ashen, and this time I don't weep. But I do close my eyes. I cover my ears. Ashen's arms fold around me in an embrace. When the flame ripples around us and the pressure builds in my head, I feel his hand lay on the back of my neck where his skin can touch mine.

When the flame falls to our feet and the smoke clears away, I open my eyes. I sense the difference in the air here. It's a heavy heat. I smell Ashen, his scent of unsmoked tobacco, the ink that lives in his skin. But I smell other scents too. Limestone dust. Time and history. Cumin and cardamom cooking in the distance somewhere, drifting in on the night breeze.

I let my hands slide away from my ears as I recover my breath. I look over Ashen's shoulder. We're in a courtyard framed by palms and limestone walls. A blue mosaic fountain trickles nearby. Only the brightest stars glimmer above us, the rest washed away by the light of the city's heart in the distance.

"All right, vampire?" Ashen asks as he lets the strength of his embrace diminish.

I nod, realizing for the first time that it no longer bothers me when he calls me vampire. It feels like an endearment. The warmth of his arms around me pull my soul to the surface. I feel safe, and cared for. I don't feel so lonely anymore.

Ashen draws away just enough so that we're not pressed together and lays a hand on the side of my face. His fingertips sweep across my cheekbone, checking for tears. "Better this time, right?"

I nod again and Ashen pulls away, meeting my eyes for a brief moment before his gaze darkens and he lets go. He looks to the floor and steps out of the cauldron, offering an arm only long enough for me to join by his side. His arm drops from beneath mine and he starts walking toward the house, leaving me behind. That bruise from last night blossoms to a deeper color in my heart.

I am a reckless, silly creature, thinking of embraces and endearments and emotions. I've been afraid of what I feel about him. Now I can't seem to stop it, and I fear that too. And worse still, I'm even more afraid of what he doesn't feel for me. It's a fear that bends and knots around me, holding my feet to the floor.

Ashen looks back to where I stand and tilts his head, eyeing me with an assessing gaze. A crease appears between his brows. I sigh and then follow Ashen into a dark, palatial house. The lights within the foyer flare to life as we enter. The house is sparsely decorated with landscape paintings on the walls and simple furnishings. We don't stay to explore. We head down a corridor and out another door, into a garage. An older model Land Rover rests along the far wall. A row of motorcycles are lined before us, all covered with dusty canvas.

"Can you drive a motorcycle?"

I give Ashen a dead-eyed glare. This guy. *Can I drive a fucking motorcycle.* I put my hand out for my book and pen, and he rolls his eyes as he hands them over from the pocket of his jacket.

Of course I fucking can, you tit. Can you drive a tank?

"Yes. Can you fly a helicopter?"

Yes. Can you drive an excavator?

"Yes. Can you pilot a submarine?"

Fuck. No I cannot. Who would want to do that anyway? Submarine pilots I guess. I glare at Ashen and he smirks in reply.

"Now that we've established that you cannot pilot a submarine, follow me." He tosses me a key and pulls the canvas from a Triumph Scrambler. My headache spikes in anticipation of the sound of the engine roaring to life and I haven't even put the key in the ignition yet.

Ashen pulls the canvas from another Triumph and presses the button for the automatic garage door opener. The folding white panels rattle above us and the heavy night air floods the space with its weight. I shove my notebook and pen into the saddle bag of my bike and pull my helmet on.

"Wakalat al-Makwa," Ashen says, and he gives me a half smile as both of our bikes roar to life. That wound in my heart seems to bleed at the sight of that lopsided grin. "In case we get separated."

I give him a single nod. We straddle our machines and roll out of the garage. We wait beside one another and watch as the door closes behind us.

"Follow me," Ashen says again, and we turn out of the driveway and onto the quiet suburban street.

At the first turn, Ashen heads right, and I wait until his headlights are a few houses down before I speed away in the other direction. I fly around two corners. I take an unlit alley. I lose myself to the darkness until I find the light, until the cacophony of the city streets swallows me whole. I drive until I imagine that no one could find me. Not even him.

CHAPTER 21

Mr. Hassan and I are already on our second cup of mint tea when we hear footsteps pounding up the stairs by twos. Ashen bursts through the door, his eyes aflame, black smoke drifting around him. His silver sword glimmers with hellfire, clutched in his white-knuckled grip. I give Ashen my most innocent smile and he glares at me with fire and fury.

"The Reaper, I assume?" Mr. Hassan says, his tone bemused.

I nod as he refills my glass of tea.

"Have a seat, boy," Mr. Hassan says, and he shuffles into the kitchen to retrieve a plate of *basbousa*.

"What the fuck, Lu," Ashen seethes in a fierce whisper as he looms over me. "You were supposed to follow me."

"You should know by now, boy. Fear is like the wind and ancient creatures are always ready with a sail to catch it. Especially vampires," Mr. Hassan calls from the shadows of the kitchen.

I'm not really sure what the fuck the old man means, but it sounds all wise and shit, so let's go with it. And it definitely confuses the hell out of Ashen, so when the Reaper meets my eyes I just gesture to the elderly apothecary as though he actually makes sense.

"Sit, boy," Mr. Hassan says, his voice clearer than it was before. Ashen narrows his eyes at me but the smoke disperses around him. The fire ripples and dies on his blade as his hand relaxes at his side. He sits in a weathered armchair across from me but glares, the fire in his eyes still bright.

What, it's not like I could go that far without this fucking thing itching my arm right off, I write in my journal, passing it to him then pointing at the

tattoo on my arm. It does give me the wild idea that I could just cut my arm off, but reattaching limbs is a total pain in the ass.

"Not the point, vampire."

Mr. Hassan shuffles back into the room with the plate of *basbousa* and a fragrant cup of warmed blood in a ceramic teapot, spiced with cardamom and cinnamon and sweetened with honey.

"Here you are, *azizati*. You will feel much restored after you drink this," the old man says as he pours the concoction into a mug. I give him a sweet smile and flick my gaze to Ashen as the apothecary pats my hand with affection. "A bright soul in the Shadow Realm, plied with so much alcohol. *Mukhjil*," Mr. Hassan grumbles. He snatches a rolled up newspaper from a side table and smacks Ashen on the arm with surprising speed and strength. I barely manage to repress a snort.

"*Lamaa faealt hadha?*" Ashen asks, his voice incredulous.

Mr. Hassan whacks him again and this time I do chuff a laugh, but the old man doesn't notice. He's too focused on pointing the newspaper into Ashen's face.

"*What was that for?* For nearly getting this poor creature killed in your Realm. How many do you think are left like her, hmm? Really? *Ghabi*." Mr. Hassan throws the newspaper down on a coffee table and grumbles in Arabic as he shuffles over to the settee and lowers himself onto its green velvet cushions.

I look up at Ashen. I see contrition in his eyes but something more, like maybe shame, and loss. He shifts his gaze to the floor.

"Drink your tea, *azizati*. Do not worry," the old man says as he pushes the teapot closer to me. I take a long sip. It definitely helps, at least with the hangover. "And *you*, stop it or I will hit you again."

Ashen looks up to me and then to Mr. Hassan, a confused expression claiming his face. "Stop what?"

"Convincing yourself you can't choose differently now because of the choices you made in the past. Convincing yourself you can never do better today than you did yesterday. Convincing yourself that *better* means letting go, not holding on."

I don't know what the old man is talking about, but Ashen seems to. He looks at Mr. Hassan for a long moment before his gaze lands on me and then falls to the shadows in the middle distance between us.

"Eat some *basbousa* and then ask me what you've come to ask me," Mr Hassan says to the Reaper, pouring him a cup of mint tea as a black and white cat emerges from the kitchen to jump onto my lap. Its purr is the only sound among us. Ashen does as instructed, eating his cake as I sip my drink, and I'm feeling better with every swallow. The Reaper and I glance at one another in the quiet moments, but one of us always looks away.

"We've come to ask you about Angelwing poison," Ashen says when he finishes his cake. He wipes his fingers clean with his napkin and sets the empty plate on the coffee table then gestures to the rows of long cabinets that line the living room walls. Mirrored shelves reflect glass bottles of oils and potions, canisters of herbs and powders. I'd be surprised if the famed Angelwing is among these shelves, but it's as good a place as any to start. "A pack of werewolves were in possession of Angelwing. They used it against me during my attempt to reap the Alpha for the Crime of Abomination."

"*Crime of Abomination*," the apothecary repeats with derision. He clearly thinks that's bullshit, and I don't blame him. I didn't think it was real either before I smelled that hybrid's junk in the morgue. "Who is the Alpha?" the old man asks, taking a sip of his tea.

"Semyon Abdulov."

Mr. Hassan nods. "I have heard of him. He started his ascent in the Ural Mountains. He comes from an ancient lineage, back as far as can be traced in werewolves."

"Yes. Did he obtain the poison from you?" Ashen asks. His gaze darts to mine before latching back onto the old man. I think he's wondering if I've been holding back something I know about Abdulov, but I really haven't. I've always made it a point to keep my distance from the heart of werewolf ancestry, for obvious reasons.

"He did not. I haven't seen Angelwing in a thousand years. An angel must give first give their wing for it to be made, and it's not as though *anunnaki* were keen to do so even in the days when they were abundant in these lands," the old apothecary says, and I can see the dismay in Ashen's eyes. "You said it was used against you? How did you survive?" Mr. Hassan asks. Ashen points to me and Mr Hassan's head swivels in my direction.

"*Ruh shujaei*," he says in a low voice. He smiles with fatherly affection and pats my arm. "The most misunderstood creatures, vampires are." He refills my cup of blood tea and pushes it into my hands.

Mr. Hassan, do you know who could have provided Semyon with the poison? Another apothecary perhaps? I write, and I turn my note toward him.

"No. I don't know of any others that have it. I did hear a years back of a powerful witch looking to pay handsomely to acquire it. Mila Karras was her name."

"The name is unfamiliar to me," Ashen says, glancing at me. I shake my head and he turns his frown toward his glass of tea.

"She kept a low profile. She died in an accident in Jerusalem last year. A spell gone wrong, apparently. Since then, however, I've heard nothing further about it, and there is little I don't know about the movement of the darker concoctions among the apothecaries. She would have needed an apothecary to distil the poison, but I've heard no whispers of such a feat. If there is any Angelwing left, I doubt it would stay in one place for long," Mr. Hassan says as he refills Ashen's glass of mint tea before replenishing his own. He places the teapot on the coffee table and sits back, steeping his fingers as he regards the Reaper. "There are other... activities... that abound, however. Movement in the Realm of Light."

"What do you mean?"

"Hidden portals once dormant, now awakening. Whispers of angels passing through. There is rumor of such a portal at Saqqara. I've heard tales among the immortals here of flashes of light at dawn. Of figures, coming or going."

Ashen and I look at one another. I fold my hand around my bike key. Saqqara isn't far. We can make it with plenty of time to spare before dawn.

"I will find you a thermos. You should take that with you," Mr Hassan says, nodding to the drink in my hand as he rises. I watch him shuffle into the kitchen, my gaze following his hunched frame as he moves through the dark. The cat in my lap pushes her face into my hand and I smile at the affection she gives so freely to a stranger. When I look up at Ashen, he's watching me. It feels like his thoughts are split between me and something far away in time.

What, I say without sound, my smile fading until it's faint, barely a trace on my lips. He looks both worried and angry, and I can't tell which one is worse. He just shakes his head and looks into the mint tea in his hands as though the broken leaves lingering at the base will tell him the future.

Imagine if we see an angel! I haven't seen one in millennia, I write, and tap my journal to draw his attention to my note.

"Yeah, that's probably a good thing. The less we see from that realm, the better," Ashen replies, leaning his arms on his knees.

Maybe I can kill one, I write, tapping my journal again. He raises a weary gaze and reads my note then pinches the bridge of his nose.

"That is a terrible idea."

No, seriously. Think about it. If I kill one, they're DEFINITELY not going to want me in there. Offer rescinded.

"I can imagine it's only a matter of time before they find another reason to keep you out if that's what they really want. No point incurring the wrath of their realm in the meantime."

But hear me out, wouldn't killing an angel make me the most popular person EVER in the Shadow Realm? That doesn't sound so bad.

"You've clearly not seen enough of the Shadow Realm to want to aspire to such heights," Ashen says. He downs the rest of his tea and sets the empty glass on a brass tray, then bends his head and lets go of a heavy lungful of air. I feel the curl of something unpleasant in my chest. Nerves. Concern. A fucking gigantic swirl of anxiety that feels like a whirlpool sucking me to the bottom of the sea.

I look over to the kitchen where Mr. Hassan is still rummaging in darkness. I feel like he's taking his time on purpose. He's trying to give us some space.

I start to write a note. *But if I'm trapped in the Realm of Light,* it says, but I can't finish it. I just can't make myself put the rest into ink. The confession I wish I could make twists like wire around my heart. Because it would have said *I won't be able to see you.* And those aren't feelings I think I should have, even if they're becoming impossible to deny. Even worse, I'm not sure they would be returned.

The apothecary's words ring through my mind like they're on a delay. *Fear is like the wind and ancient creatures are always ready with a sail to catch it. Especially vampires.* I think I get it now. Because I have an urge to take that motorcycle as far as it will carry me into the night.

I flip to a fresh page. *Okay Reaper. Let's see what we see in Saqqara and decide what's next from there.*

I show Ashen my note and I place my pen and journal on the coffee table, rising with the cat in my arms. I hug her close to my chest and place

her on the floor, then pick up my mug and the teapot and carry them into the kitchen. I help Mr Hassan clean up, and he warms my drink and places it into a thermos that was already waiting on the counter.

"Of all the creatures to walk the Earth, vampires are my favorite. But don't tell anyone I said that, I'm meant to be impartial," Mr. Hassan says with a wink, and we give one another a kiss on each cheek to say goodbye as we shake hands.

When I enter the living room, Ashen is standing with my notebook and pen in his hands. I pull them from his fingers and he takes the thermos instead. I give a faint smile of thanks before we head to the door, and then I turn to wave goodbye to the apothecary who watches as we pass over his threshold and into the night.

"I'll follow you this time," Ashen says. There's neither mirth nor anger in his voice and I don't nod or make any movement in reply. We are silent as we descend the stairs of the building that spiral toward the bustling pedestrian streets of Khan el-Khalili market. We pass shops with lanterns of colorful glass, perfumeries whose scents of sandalwood and lotus carry on the currents of air that flow between passersby.

After a few turns, we arrive at a cafe where patrons smoke apple-flavored tobacco in shishas and sip mint tea on the patio. Our bikes are parked a short distance from one another. Ashen follows me to mine. He watches as I slide the key into the ignition and close my hand around the front brake as I throw my leg over the seat. He places my thermos in the saddlebag and rises, but he grasps the handlebar and leans close, waiting until my gaze catches on his. I look at him with a question in my eyes.

"Don't lose me," he says, but he doesn't move away. I look at him for a long moment. My eyes roam from his, toward the tattoos that flow beneath his collar in sweeping black lines. His skin is radiant in the dim patio lanterns and the headlights on the street that flicker in the night.

When I meet his eyes again, they still watch mine. I can see the rich brown tones that seem to warm when he lets his secrets rise through the sediment of time. I nod once, but the stillness remains between us.

Ashen lets go of the bar. His hand lays warm against my cheek. My breath catches in my lungs as his thumb sweeps a slow path across my skin. The world around us seems to disappear with such a simple touch.

"If you're trapped in the Realm of Light, I will still find you," Ashen says. With one more brush of his skin across mine he pulls his hand away.

This time, when we drive through the night, I keep his lights close in the dark.

CHAPTER 22

*T*hat's the fifth one. What the fuck, I write, flicking an intrepid brown scorpion away from my hip. It flies in an arc and pings against the base of the stone wall across from us then scurries away into the sand.

"You're cold. It's a big attraction for desert creatures who are about to face a day of unobstructed sun," Ashen replies.

The Reaper sits to my right, the journal between us. We're stationed on the edge of a limestone wall at the Serapeum where we can face the stepped pyramids, our feet dangling over the edge toward the tawny sand. The majority of the site lies to the Southeast, and the first lighter shades of blue color the sky in anticipation of dawn.

I get that, but still. Hard pass.

Ashen flicks another away as it runs toward my leg. "The scorpion was a symbol of the goddess Serqet. She protected the bodies and viscera of the dead. I think it's kind of fitting that they like you."

Big bag of NOPE.

I drain my white plastic cup of blood tea and Ashen refills it from the thermos as I tap my heels against the stone.

"Feeling better than this morning?" Ashen asks as we cast our gazes across the ancient stone monuments of kings and gods. From here, we can see much of Saqqara, though we don't know where we should be looking when it comes to portals to the Realm of Light.

Much better. I threw up in your shower, by the way. Sorry about that. But don't worry, I totally cleaned off your mansoap.

"Yeah, I know. I heard you. I suppose it was to be expected. And I almost believe you."

I smile and we sit in silence for a moment as my legs swivel along the wall. The stars are slowly receding, only the brightest left to glimmer above us. I think about the last time I was in Cairo, and I wonder how long it's been since angels last passed through this land. I wonder how they'd even recognize it, the city sprawling ever further into the desert.

"I'm sorry," Ashen says. His voice is quiet but it still feels startling. The wire coils tighter across my heart. I look at him with an expression that asks *what for*, even though I'm not sure I want to know. "The old man was right. I knew it last night. I should have been more careful in the Shadow Realm. With you."

I'm not a fucking porcelain doll. I'm fine. Nothing happened. And I can look after myself. I have my sneaky vampire ways, you know, I write, and I give him a wink when he looks up from my note.

"Those crawlers tried to attack you. And that is not even close to the worst of what the Shadow Realm has to offer." Ashen looks away from me, his hands pressed tight across the edge of the stone as he stares at the sand below. "I know you can't see it, but you shine like a lantern in our realm. It's not just the Reapers who have their eyes on you there. I should not have taken a risk like that, taking you out at night. Giving you that much alcohol."

To be fair, you did owe me after I sniffed that dog dick. You were only upholding your end of the agreement to provide copious amounts of booze in compensation.

"Still. You don't belong there, as tempting as it is to believe otherwise."

I hold onto his words. I roll them around in my mind. Is it tempting? Is it something he wishes were true, that I could belong in their realm? I suppose he's right, it's not the best place for me, with all its creepy vibes and tripod dogs-that-aren't-dogs and the lack of tanning opportunities. That and the problematic issue of being a high-prized kill in their midst. I really got away with that one the last time. My luck probably won't last so I'd better not push it. But the Shadow Realm is not *all* bad. And I'm starting to believe it's not really where you are that matters. It's who you're with.

I tap my pen against my notebook, trying to work out what's worth saying and what's worth keeping hidden away. The lid of the box in my mind keeps slipping when Ashen is around. Thoughts I shouldn't have keep

escaping, and they're the kind that can get you killed when you let your guard down.

When I look up he's watching me, waiting for some smartass response I'm sure. I feel the wind in that sail, just like Mr. Hassan promised. But even with it spurring me to flee, even knowing the risks, when I look at Ashen I want to try. I want to keep my eyes on the shore, my anchor down.

Do you? I write, turning my note to Ashen.

"Do I what?"

Belong there?

The journal faces him and he takes longer to read my note than two words can take to understand. He meets my eyes. A thousand thoughts seem to surface in his, like the sediment of time is washed away by an unexpected flood. He opens his mouth to respond, but he doesn't have the chance to utter a word.

There's a bright flash in the distance. A pillar of light erupts from the top of the Pyramid of Userkaf, reaching into the sky. It disappears almost as quickly as it came. But by the time it's gone we're already up and running across the sand, heading to the Alley of the Sphinxes, hoping to catch a glimpse of what has only been a myth for a thousand years.

We run down the ancient causeway, slowing as we draw near to the Pyramid of Userkaf where the entrance lies on the north side, facing us. When it feels like we're close enough to see without being seen ourselves we stop, hunching next to one another behind an eroded slab of limestone.

Do you think we missed it? I write, tapping Ashen's knee with my pen.

"I don't know," he says, glancing down at my note. He meets my eyes and the flame comes alive in his pupils. His sword is drawn, but he keeps the smoke and hellfire at bay. I can tell he doesn't like this. *At all.*

We look back toward the entrance of the pyramid, and just as I'm starting to think we must have imagined the light, a figure emerges.

It's tall. A man. White pants and tunic, both pristine despite the desert dust. His face is obscured by a white veil that tucks beneath the high neckline of his shirt. It clings to the features of his face, almost like a slick second skin. His limbs seem just a little too long, as though they slow his movement as he walks with the immortal grace of another realm, radiating light. As he passes from the shadow of the ancient tomb the sun illuminates his wings. They shimmer, translucent. One moment they catch the light to

scatter it, the next they are invisible. It's a mesmerizing display of iridescence and trickery.

It's really fucking cool.

See also, *FUCKING TERRIFYING*.

That thing vibrates with power. You can feel it from a distance. Like a hum in the air, the buzz of static before a storm.

I draw my dagger and turn to Ashen, making a stabby motion and mouthing *kill, kill, kill* with a menacing smile.

"No fucking way," he whispers.

Come on, I whisper soundlessly. *It'll be fun.*

"I do not agree with your assessment of *fun*."

I give him a pout and my saddest puppy eyes and Ashen smirks in response. His gaze lingers on my lips when my expression collapses into a smile. I can feel the heat of his gaze tingling in my skin. We're so close in the sand that our legs touch as we huddle behind the stone. It would take barely any movement at all to lean forward and press my lips to his. I see him swallow and I wonder if he's thinking the same thing.

There's a flash of light so bright I'm not sure if a star hasn't exploded in front of my eyes. I'm pushed into the sand. I scramble to find my bearings but I can't see. It's gone from bright light to utter blackness. I smell tobacco and ink. The blindness of the flash fades just enough that I can see my fingers in the sand. I'm covered with smoke.

"Stand down, *anunnaki*," I hear Ashen say. He is not fucking around. I can hear the ripple of fire on his sword as the blade scorches the desert air.

"I have no quarrel with you, demon," a deep voice says. "I am merely curious."

"Curiosity fulfilled. Now leave," Ashen says.

I push myself up to stand behind Ashen, my *kaiken* ready in my hand. The angel is perched in his bare feet on the stone we were just hiding behind. Ashen glances over his shoulder at me. A streak of worry flashes in the fire of his eyes and he turns back to the angel, raising his blade.

"So, it is true. Werewolves making hybrids. Vampires saving Reapers. The Living Realm crumbles before my very eyes," the angel says. I can't see his face behind the veil, but I hear the mockery in his voice as he turns his head toward me. This outfit of his is very haute couture with his weird, shroud-like veil. It's like he's cosplaying a mummy in Chanel.

Ashen moves his free hand behind him, trying to push me further back into his shadow. "You know about the poison."

"Of course."

"Who gave it to the wolves?"

"I have some ideas."

"Care to share?"

"No."

The three of us stand, unmoving and uncomfortably silent. I have a super inappropriate urge to start dancing, or maybe make fart noises. The angel tilts his head as he looks at me and I try to subdue the smirk that's creeping across my face.

The angel raises a gloved hand and points.

"They need one like her to make another. She would be safer in our realm," he says.

Hellfire surges across Ashen's blade. "No."

The angel draws his arm down. His wings stretch behind him and he stands to his full height on the stone. "Suit yourself, demon. It will be your own demise," he says. With a flash of light and movement and a crack of sound, his wings draw to the front of his body and slap both our faces. I fall to my knees as the angel takes off into the sky.

"Fucking prickface motherfucker," Ashen says, spitting hot blood into the sand. "I fucking hate it when they do that."

I'm still down on my knees, my palm pressed to the side of my face. It's damp with thick, black blood that colors the grains of dust beneath me. The pain was on delay but it's hitting hard now and I struggle to steady my breath.

"All right, vampire?" Ashen asks, and I feel his hand on my shoulder. I nod, but I'm not convincing either of us.

Within a beat of my heart, Ashen is kneeling in front of me, prying my hand from my face.

"Fucking hell," he whispers. He whips his jacket from his shoulders and presses it to my torn skin. "*You'll be safer in his realm* my ass. He's here for two minutes and rips half your fucking face apart."

I look at him with a question in my eyes.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad."

I open and close my fingers to ask for my pen with a faint smile. Ashen rolls his eyes.

"Really?" he asks, the sarcasm heavy in his expression as I give him my sweetest doe eyes and cast my pen across my journal.

Do you think I could get salmonella?

"No."

E. coli?

"No."

Rabies?

"...maybe."

Nooooo. Not angel rabies. The HORROR.

Ashen tries to smile but pulls the jacket from my wounds. A darkness embeds itself into his eyes and his pupils flash with flame. "It's not healing very fast. Do you have more blood in the thermos?" he asks as he pushes the fabric to my face once more. It smells like him, and it doesn't fix the pain but it's comforting.

A little.

"Is it enough?"

I don't know. How bad is it, really?

"To the bone. Those feathers are like knives. It's a lot of damage."

I sigh and look toward the pyramid. I wonder how their portal works, if it's anything like the cauldrons that the Reapers use. But I have no desire to find out. It would be handy to have one right here. I think I'd like to go back to the Shadow Realm now. I think even the fire in the cauldron would be okay.

"Take my blood," Ashen says, his voice rich and warm, like the first rays of the sun that find us on this ancient ground. I meet his eyes and he stares intently into mine, as though he's reaching right into my heart. It pulls the air from my lungs. I feel a sudden rush of tears sting in my eyes and I shake my head. It's not like I would take enough to harm him, and I know my venom won't harm him like it does the werewolves. It's the act of offering that overwhelms me. On any other day he could be my executioner, and now he's rolling up his sleeve and offering his wrist to me. "It's all right. I know you will only take what you need. Go ahead."

I look at the network of veins beneath his skin, feeling the beat of his pulse as though it lives within me. I hear the four chambers of his heart, the surge of blood through valves and arteries.

"Go on, Lu. It's okay. Just trust me."

I flick my eyes to Ashen's and find only truth in his words. I look back down to his arm and my canines slide to their full length in my mouth. Venom colors my tongue in sweetness. I lay one hand in Ashen's and his fingers curl around mine. With my other hand I grasp his elbow.

Thank you, I whisper without sound. I feel a tear breach the corner of my eye, creeping around the grains of sand stuck to my skin. Ashen's thumb caresses the back of my hand in a reassuring touch. I close my eyes and draw my lips to his wrist. I take a deep breath. I press a kiss of gratitude to his skin before I bite down.

Blood, hot and rich, fills my mouth. It's like nothing I've ever tasted. Sweet but not cloying. Spiced but not burning. Ashen doesn't move as I draw in his blood from the bite, and I relish the sound and the feel of it as it flows from his body to mine. When I sense the wounds across my face begin to knit together, I slow down, until I can finally let go. As I lift my fangs from his flesh, I press my palm across the bite and we wait for a moment, kneeling in front of one another, unmoving aside from our heavy breath.

When the bleeding has slowed on both our wounds, Ashen stands, pulling me up with him. He unfurls his black jacket and pulls it across my shoulders to hide the dark stains that flow down my shirt. "Better?" he asks.

I nod and I touch my cheek, still sore but healing. *Thank you*, I mouth.

Ashen grasps my chin and tilts my face to the sun to see the progress of the wound. He offers a faint smile as he casts his gaze over the healing skin. Even with its subtle tones, I see relief, and I see pride.

Our eyes meet. The warmth of his thumb caresses my chin, grazing the edge of my lip. My heart rages to climb closer to him, pulling my body with it. His blood sings in my veins.

Part of me wants so badly to lean forward and press my lips to Ashen's. I want to feel the heat of his breath on my skin. I want to memorize his features with the touch of my fingertips. But the winds of fear catch my sail.

I swallow a thick knot in my throat. My fingers curl around Ashen's wrist and I lower his hand from my face. I take a step back and look at Ashen for a moment longer before I turn away. My heart rebels against me, hammering furious beats that ring in my ears. It just doesn't know that I'm trying to save it.

We walk in silence back to the Serapeum, grabbing the apothecary's thermos before we head back to our bikes. By the time I pull my helmet on, the wound is nothing more than pink slashes across my skin. We drive off toward the city and I follow Ashen's taillights into the morning rush of cars.

Asallah libakkunu, I think, over and over on the drive back into Cairo, remembering the words of my spell. *I overpower your heart*. But I'm starting to worry that mine has already succumbed.

CHAPTER 23

I sit on a shaded bench in the courtyard and text back and forth with Ediye as I wait for the Reaper to gather some clothes from the depths of the house. We talk in emojis so I don't tell her where I am, but she knows that I'm okay.

I send her a heart.

She sends me a skull and a question mark.

I send her a face palm.

She sends me a devil face.

I send her an eyeroll.

She sends me an eggplant and a cat.

"I found this," Ashen says, startling me. I nearly drop the phone on the limestone and recover it with a fumbling hand. The Reaper holds out a folded black dress and I take it into my arms, holding it away from the grime on my top. He's gotten changed into black jeans and another midnight blue shirt, not as crisp and new as the other one but still well-tailored.

Thank you, I mouth, and look away. I'm feeling kind of weird about what happened in Saqqara. Not just about the presence of an angel who seems too interested and knowledgeable about our little mystery, but about what happened with Ashen.

There's a lot of power in his blood. A lot of history. And it's kind of frightening. It's like a well of secrets that I can taste but not see or hear. The essence of it still surges in my body, and even though it's not much, I can feel him, effervescent in my veins.

Ashen turns away and I get changed right there in the courtyard. The dress is kind of sweet and I can't imagine a Reaper wearing it. Aside from

the dark color, it's not their typical style. The soft cotton hits just at my knee, the bodice is fitted but not tight. Gold beads follow the neckline and flow up the halter straps. I take off my bra. The white lace is stained and not really a good fit with the halter, you see. I leave it on top of my other clothes where it can hopefully make Ashen uncomfortable.

The Reaper doesn't say anything as I tie the matching belt behind my back and walk past him to the fountain, cupping water in my hands to splash my face. Swirls of dark blood drip onto the blue mosaic and wash away.

"Night will be falling when we get back to the Shadow Realm," Ashen says. He tries to look super chill as he tosses my bra and shirt into the cauldron where they melt into the flames, but I see the way he swallows when he glances at me. *Attraction and Annihilation*. My jeans are salvageable, so he hands them to me with my journal and pen.

How wild of you, burning bras, I write.

"I am a progressive Reaper," he replies, and his deadpan tone makes my smile grow even wider.

Yes, I really gathered that when you asked if Andy Cartwright wanted to mate with me.

My smile fades as his expression grows dark and menacing. I see the flash of bright flame in his eyes as Ashen looks away, first to the fountain, then the floor, then the cauldron. Basically anywhere but me.

"We should go," he says. The black smoke swirls from our feet and climbs our legs. He reaches out his hand before it's enveloped by the rising fog, but he doesn't meet my eyes. I lay my palm against his and follow him to the cauldron.

I still feel the rising tide of panic. I still hear the voices of the village. My heart thrums and my breath quickens. I cover my ears and Ashen pulls me into an embrace. It seems tighter than before, and when we arrive at the other side and I recover my breath, it feels like he doesn't want to let go. But he does, and he keeps his eyes away from mine on the long walk to his room.

When we get there, Ashen leaves for a short while to get some food, bringing back a bottle of wine and two glasses. We sit for a long time in silence as we read through the texts from the library. He has wisely given me the werewolf book while he keeps the vampire one to himself.

I read a bit about Semyon's ancestry in Russia, but it's nothing entirely surprising. He's old. He killed his way to power. He's had family come and go, children living and dying. The werewolves may technically be immortals, but they often fight such vicious battles amongst themselves that they don't stick around too long. I guess he's a little unusual in that way; he's more ancient than most. The earliest references date to about my time, before the Romans, before the Greeks, when the Sumerians still held power in the fertile valley of the Tigris and Euphrates.

I reach over for my glass of wine from the side table next to my chair. I'm feeling a little worn out by this day, even though Ashen's blood still hums in my veins. When I look up he's watching me from his chair, his book splayed across his lap in the same pose as the night before.

What? I write, and spin the note on the table between us so he can see it.

"The angel said the wolves need *one like you*. What do you think he meant?"

I don't know. Someone badass and cool?

"No. That's not it."

Someone that has angel rabies?

"Not that either."

I have a feeling joking around isn't going to get me very far. He's been in a dark and humourless mood since I mentioned Andy Cartwright, so I guess I need to take a different approach.

You seem to know, so why don't YOU tell ME.

Ashen sighs and closes his book, setting it down on the side table before he takes a long sip of his wine and then sets that down too.

"You are obviously an ancient soul. You don't know who your maker is."

So what? And thanks for telling me I'm old. Yeesh.

"All vampires know who their maker is."

I'm not all vampires. I spin my note to face him and give him a death stare when he meets my eyes. He leans forward in a challenge.

"Precisely my point."

I burst from my chair like it's on fire, even though I have no place to go. Fuck it, I'll hang out in the bathroom if I have to. I'll hide there until I can figure out a way to flush myself down the toilet to freedom all Shawshank style. He's in hard pursuit of my history now and I knew it, I just knew he'd

start digging at me sooner or later. I've been fooling myself into believing otherwise. I've convinced myself that he cares enough for me to let it go.

I was wrong.

I sweep my pen and journal off the table and start marching toward the bathroom when Ashen grabs my arm.

"Why do you not want to tell me? What is it that frightens you so much about telling me who you are and where you came from?" he asks, letting go when I rip my arm away.

I scratch my pen with fury across a fresh page. The tip nearly pierces the paper by the end. *Are you fucking serious?*

I have such an urge to use my voice. It would explain so much, just a word or two. It would put everything into perspective for Ashen. He would finally understand. And then he would rush right out of his room and find his sister, or the new guy Cole that needs some kills under his belt, or pretty much anyone to do the reaping for him. So I clamp my mouth shut and give him the death stare to end all death stares. But as is sometimes the way with frustration and anger and hurt that you bury deep, I feel the swell of enraged tears burning in my eyes.

Christ, I fucking *HATE IT* when this happens.

I swallow down the knot in my throat and focus on the wavering sheet of paper in my hands.

The less you know about me, the less chance I'll have of one day being chained to your doors, or pulling your carriages, or wandering alone as nothing more than a fucking ghost in the library. The fucking LIBRARY, where you would celebrate my name beneath yours as another great kill for the glory of House Urbigu on your polished marble slab. Then you would just forget whatever it is I did to wind up reaped in the first place. Before long you'd forget who I was or what I could have meant to you. I'd be just another specter that either does your bidding or wails in the fog or stands like a pitiful shell of a soul in the corner somewhere. Well, fuck that shit, Reaper. Fuck. That. SHIT.

I tear the page from the journal and slap it to Ashen's chest, not waiting to watch his reaction when he starts to read. I push past him and skirt around the bed, sitting on the edge and whacking my journal down on those fucking luxurious sheets that I wish I could hate but I can't. They're just so fucking great.

I press my palms to my eyes and try to swallow the lump that just keeps getting bigger with every breath I take. I decide I can't sit on these ridiculous sheets a second longer and I erupt from the bed like lava, smacking my face right into the Reaper's chest. He catches my arms and spins me away from the bed, pressing my back to the wall. I can tell by his grip I could pull away and he would let me, but I don't want to, and I don't want to think about why.

"You are not only a particularly acerbic vampire, but a dramatic one as well," Ashen says as his eyes brighten with flame. The scent of unsmoked tobacco and mint and ink fills my senses. Part of me wants to hiss right in his fucking Reaper face but I see something more than just frustration in his eyes as they land on my lips. "You are hiding in that strange little town. You don't want me to know where you belong among your clan. Do you think I didn't already figure out long ago that you must have done something for which you could be punished? Has it not then occurred to you I have never harmed you? That I've sought to protect you?"

Well *dang*. So much for hiding in plain sight. He probably thinks I told a human I was a vampire, and hence I'm on the run. But there is a big difference between telling some bloodbags that immortals exist and, you know, *killing a fucking Reaper*.

Also, *protecting me* is a bit rich. Besides, it's not like he has much of a choice but to play nice-*ish*.

I tear one of my arms free with unnecessary force and Ashen rolls his eyes. I jab a finger to his chest, hoping that the spot is still sore, then I poke his arm where the tattoo is. I draw my thumb across my throat and then tick my finger back and forth in his face until he pushes it away.

"Yes, your spell prevents me from killing you but we both know I could have called in another Reaper to do the job. Any one of them would relish the opportunity to pull secrets from a bright soul in the Shadow Realm until they found a crime worthy of punishment. My sister most of all."

My glare intensifies as Ashen breaks down my arguments and throws my fears into the light. We stare at one another, my other wrist still warm within Ashen's grasp. My heart feels like a wild bird trapped in a cage, bounding from one set of bars to the next. I try to keep hold of a fierce vampiric stare but I can feel it dissolving. Ashen leans a little closer, his eyes fixed on mine.

"You want to know why I pulled you from the fight in Sanford?"

I swallow a breath. I give the slightest nod.

"Because you surprised me. You intrigued me. You were not what I expected. That you might fall in the fight, in some dirty alley of such a ridiculous little town, it didn't just seem like a waste. It felt... wrong. It felt like something irreplaceable was about to be lost. Like I had just found something worth saving, even though I didn't understand why."

Each beat of my heart detonates in my chest. The air catches in my lungs. We look at one another, unmoving. The fight in my flesh evaporates with every second that passes. I relax my arm in Ashen's grip and his palm slides down my arm until it meets mine. Our fingers interlace as he presses our hands to the wall, his movement slow and careful, his eyes never leaving mine. I hear the rush of blood through the chambers of his heart as he moves even closer. How there's any space between us I just don't know, and every place his body touches mine it feels like fire beneath my skin.

"You are acerbic and dramatic but you are also brave. You fear yet challenge this place. You fear yet challenge me," he says, his breath warm as it spills across my lips. His other hand finds my side, laying heat across my bones. I close my eyes, trying to calm the coil of need that snakes its way through my belly. When I open them his gaze is waiting for me, fiery and fierce, molten with desire. "You are like the wind or the sea, like an elemental force of nature. You feared me and yet I'm the one who is left defenseless as you dismantle my walls, stone by stone."

I take in a ragged breath as Ashen's gaze fuses to my parted lips. I move closer with every shallow inhalation until my skin touches his, until our breath mixes and our lips nearly meet. His hand moves across my ribs as though committing every bone to memory, like he would know each one in the dark. I realize now how much I've been wanting this moment, to hear that he feels something real. To admit that I do too. To feel his lips against mine-

"Elemental," he whispers, turning his face to the side at the last possible instant before our lips touch.

Ele...what?

...What the fuck?

Do I have vampire breath? Was it the fangria? Is it fangria hangover breath?

Oh my God I think I've died five thousand years worth of deaths in a single second of time.

"Elemental," Ashen whispers again, his eyes trapped in some kind of epiphany that is clearly not my kiss. I have a mild sense of relief that his touch still lingers and our faces remain close. But more than that I have irritation, which is a thin veil for an unhealthy amount of angst.

So, I make my point known.

What the fuck? I mouth, tilting my head to cast a line back to his errant gaze.

"That's what we're missing. It's not just werewolves using vampires to make the hybrid. The witches must be involved as well. Perhaps even humans."

What the fuck? I mouth again with a confused shake of my head.

"I need to go to the library," Ashen says, letting go of my hand and turning away, his expression consumed by whatever thoughts are whirling through his head. Thoughts which clearly have fuck-all to do with me. He passes the edge of the bed, heading toward the door.

What the fuck?

I want to say it out loud. My hands hover in the air like I'm carrying my confused mind on a platter. I'm just standing, motionless, with some dumbass, incredulous expression on my face. Ashen stops abruptly and I have a surge of panic that I actually did utter the words out loud.

"Oh, one more thing," Ashen says as he turns around.

Within three strides he's there, right in front of me. His palms are warm on my face. His lips are pressed to mine. In five thousand years, there's never been a kiss like it.

Searing hot. Salty and sweet. Dark and dangerous. Intoxicating.

Heat cascades through my every vein, ignites every nerve like a fuse. His lips sweep across mine until I'm sure that Ashen is the only real thing in this Realm. Our tongues meet, and I taste mint and smoke and the sweet nectar of venom. I know he tastes it too, and he kisses me like I am the elixir for his very soul.

I grasp Ashen's shirt and pull him into me. There is no fucking around. There is no going back. I wrap my arms around his neck as Ashen presses my body to the wall and he makes his intentions clear, that he might be going to some fucking stupid library of ghosts but every thought he has will be consumed by one instinctive need. To be right back here, with his lips on mine.

Ashen gives a bite to my lower lip with just the right mix of pleasure and pain as he pulls away, both of us breathless and not ready to part. I open my eyes and his are fixed on mine like magnets to iron.

"I felt like I owed you after you put that image of a mating hybrid in my head," Ashen says with a dark smile. I huff a breath of a laugh and he kisses me again, this time a drugging, luxurious kiss. A deep and slow kiss, as though all we have is eternal time. When we separate, he presses his palms to my cheeks and catches my gaze, his expression serious.

What? I mouth as I furrow my brow and give him a questioning look.

"You need to stay here. It's too dangerous for a bright soul at this hour, even with me. I won't be long." Ashen looks into my eyes as though pressing every word into my brain. "Do not leave the room. It isn't safe. I will be as quick as I can."

I give a single nod. I'm not sure what would be worse about the Shadow Realm than what I've already experienced, but I don't really want to find out.

"Please, Lu. Promise me."

Jeez, he's adamant about this. I have no intentions whatsoever of going anywhere. The only thing I'm planning on doing is dreaming up creative ways to get back at him for faking me out with that kiss.

I nod again. *I promise.*

Ashen doesn't look completely convinced, and given our time together so far, I can't say that I blame him.

He presses one last kiss on my lips and then stalks to the door, looking back over his shoulder as he closes it behind him. I stand for a long while against the wall, replaying what just happened over and over in my mind, my fingers rolling back and forth over my swollen lips.

After a while, I sit on the edge of the bed. I'm still lost in thought when I hear a knock at the door. A surge of adrenaline hits my heart as I get up and drift silently toward it. There's another knock, and then a voice.

"Lu," it calls, as sweet as summer dew. "*LuLu*," it sings.

I open the door. Ember stands on the other side. A chain is wrapped around her fist. She yanks it with a vicious pull of her arm.

A soul falls to my feet. She looks up at me, her vacant gaze flowing up my body. I see the moment of recognition in her eyes, the woman who I know is trapped within looking back at me.

Molpe.

My sister.

CHAPTER 24

"It's nice to finally have the chance to talk, just us girls," Ember says, jerking the chain that's coiled around Molpe's neck. My sister's body twitches in response, but her mind is caught somewhere in between, somewhere both now and in memory. I hope that she feels less than what I see.

I look from Molpe to Ember, putting on my fiercest expression. It's not hard. Because I'm going to rip her fucking throat out.

"I see that wicked gleam in your eyes, vampire. Before you get any ideas, let me just say that I know where your other sister is. Your *favorite* sister. And I can bring her back, you know. But without me, you'll never find her."

Ember gives me a smug grin and then loosens the tension on the chain. Her smile turns sweet, as though she's the most benevolent creature in all the Shadow Realm.

"You're going to help me."

I shake my head.

"Oh yes, I think you will. If Aglaope isn't motivating enough, how about I throw my brother into the mix. If you don't help me, I will ensure it becomes known what he did."

I give her a vexed look. He hasn't done anything wrong with me, at least not that I know of. Also, the fact that she would place him into this little game of hers makes want to kill her, resurrect her, and then kill her again.

"He's not always been the perfect Reaper of the Shadow Realm, if that's what you're thinking. You're not his first... indiscretion. You should ask him about Rosaria Wyre. Now *that*, my love, is a sordid tale."

I feel like I'm burning up with rage. I unsheathe the *kaiken* on my thigh and grip the handle with all the fury of my body channeled through my palm.

"No, I don't think so," Ember says, yanking the chain and bringing Molpe to her feet. She uses my sister as a shield. I glance at Molpe, her vibrant green eyes clouded by time and despair. They stay locked to mine and I feel her. I feel the plea that she conveys in her half-vacant gaze. "I have ensured that if you harm me, everyone will know it was you. And you already have one Reaper life to atone for."

"What do you want," I say out loud. My voice rings like bells, shimmers like a beacon in this hallway of House Urbigu.

"There it is!" Ember chimes, her face bright with a delighted smile. "I have been so hoping to hear that sound. It is truly beautiful. So much prettier than the voices of your descendants. Don't get me wrong, they sing beautifully, but you... you are special. The last of your kind. But it doesn't have to be that way. I can bring Aglaope back."

"What do you *want*," I say again. My hand is vibrating with the anger that churns in my core like lava. I hold my dagger to my side, trying to keep the tremble in my arm hidden.

"I want you to find how they made the hybrid. Bring that knowledge back to me."

Well that doesn't sound so bad, really, I think as I furrow my brow in confusion.

"Bring me whatever it takes to make another."

Okay that sounds a little bit harder, but I can probably do that.

"And then we will make our own hybrid with the power to take on the Realm of Light."

Umm, that's probably a pipe dream.

"And you will bring it there and unleash it upon the enemy. The angels."

Okay fuck that shit. This bitch is crazy.

"I know what you're thinking, that it's impossible. But it's not, Lu. I realized it as soon as you showed up in our Shadow Realm. I knew right away that you aren't just a bright soul. You're a bright soul with a free pass to the Realm of Light." Ember pulls the wispy strands of hair from Molpe's shoulder and lays her chin on my sister's papery skin. "The angels are mobilizing against us. It's why Angelwing has shown up. It's why they're

working with werewolves to make hybrids, to change the balance of control in the Living Realm. They want to wipe out the Reapers. To take control of the immortals. But you and I, we can steal that power right out from under them. And you can bring our vengeance to the Realm of Light."

"This will never work," I say, standing my ground on the threshold as she pushes Molpe a step toward me.

"It can. All you have to do is say yes. But the way I see it, you don't really have another option."

A slow and poisonous smile creeps across Ember's face. My fangs graze my tongue. We're staring at one another when footsteps approach from the far end of the corridor. Neither of us moves. We both know who it is.

"What are you doing here, Ember?" Ashen asks, his voice calm and measured. I glance toward him and his eyes are fused to mine. I turn my gaze back to Ember and she smiles as though we're the best of friends.

"I'm just visiting, brother. I thought Lu might recognize this vampire soul I found wandering near *Bit Akalum* tonight. I guess not."

Ashen halts at my side and glances at Molpe before training his eyes on his sister. "How lovely. I am sure Lu appreciated the intrusion. Time to go."

Ember's smile grows as she looks from Ashen to me. "You are right, brother. The hour is late. I will see you tomorrow, before you leave."

Ember turns away, pulling the chain with her as Molpe stands before me. My sister's eyes say so much in the instant before she's torn away. She keeps them tied to mine until she's forced to turn away. My throat closes tight, like every second suffocates me. I feel tears gathering in my eyes.

When Molpe turns her back I throw my dagger.

The blade strikes below her shoulder. Molpe drops to her knees. The silver *kaiken* is still laced with Angelwing. Within a breath she falls to the stone, unmoving.

I notice for the first time that Ashen's hand is curled around my free arm. He could have stopped me, but he let me throw the blade.

Ember looks down at the soul who has died a final death at the end of her chain, then bends down and pulls my dagger free. She tosses it in the direction of the door and it clatters across the floor. Ember turns her gaze back up to mine and smiles. "I expected nothing less," she says, then turns away, pulling the chain taut as she drags my sister's body down the corridor.

I clasp a shaking hand to my mouth. Ashen skirts around me to pick up the dagger and then pulls me back into the room and closes the door, locking it behind us.

"What's going on, Lu? What's happened?" Ashen asks, his gaze surveying my face as he tosses the dagger and a thick book onto the armchair.

I shake my head, trying to subdue the tears that are determined to streak down my face no matter how hard I fight them. Ashen stands before me and grasps my upper arms as his eyes bounce between mine.

"Who was that soul? What does Ember want from you?"

I can't even shake my head this time. I can only bite down on the inside of my lip until blood hits my tongue.

Ashen lets go of my arms and stalks to the bed, grabbing the pen and journal. He returns, shoving them into my hands.

"Tell me what the fuck is going on," he says. I hear the thinly veiled frustration in his voice, even though he tries to keep it measured and clear. I hear anger too, and I'm not sure if he's furious at Ember for her manipulations or at me for shutting him out. Maybe both. "*Tell me, Lu.*"

I tear my pen and journal from his hands and throw them across the room.

I can't do this anymore. This place, these Reapers, this life. These demands. This confusion and all the things I feel.

All I've tried to do for the last three hundred years is feel nothing at all. I've spent centuries cocooned in a life that wasn't mine. Always hidden. Always lonely. And now I'm in the Shadow Realm and it feels like I've broken out into the light, but there's no safe place in which to hide.

Ashen turns away, casting his confusion to the pen and journal on the floor. I feel split wide open as I watch him move away to the centre of the room. I know I can't go back to the way things used to be. And I don't want to go back.

So if Ashen is going to kill me, I want it to be for a single word. One that means something to me. One that he'll never forget.

"Ashen."

His spine fuses, rigid as a blade.

There's a moment where time seems to stop. He doesn't move. I don't even blink. The only thing that's real here is the air that moves in and out of our lungs.

The seconds tick by but there is no blade through my heart. There is no fire and smoke. There's nothing between us but space and all the things I've left unsaid that can't stay quiet anymore.

"I'm falling in love with you, Ashen."

He turns his head. His eyes are locked to the floor as though it has swallowed him into another dimension. The tattooed bird on his neck seems to take flight. When he turns, he breaks away from his thoughts and his eyes lock on mine, his expression unreadable.

I stand my ground. I accept whatever happens next. All the moments of my life that have brought me here, I'm thankful for every one. I will not close my eyes.

Ashen strides toward me. Before I can be sure if it will be a sword or a kiss, he sweeps me up from the floor in an embrace. I wrap my legs across his back and my arms over his shoulders and I let go of everything spooled in my chest.

"Did you think I didn't know it was you?" Ashen says, his breath hot along my jaw as one of his hands presses to my neck, the other gripping the bare skin of my legs.

I nod my head, but as I replay a word or a look I start to realize the truth, that he's known for a while. Maybe all along.

"I've been waiting for you to say something, *anything*, Leucosia."

I grip tighter to Ashen's shoulders as he turns us toward the bed. He presses his lips across the column of my neck. His kiss is urgent with desire. He lays me on the bed and I pull him down with me, unwilling to let go. His palms are hot on my cool skin as they travel up my legs.

"Do you want this?" he asks. His hands still as he pulls away and looks into my eyes.

I nod. "Yes. I do."

Tears are still warm on my cheeks. Ashen lifts a palm from my thigh and brushes them from my skin with a gentle hand. There is reverence in his touch and the way his eyes follow the movement of his fingers across my flesh.

"If you want me to stop, I want you to tell me," he says in a voice as rich as golden honey.

I nod again. "I promise."

Ashen meets my eyes, like every word I've spoken is a gift. His lips descend to meet mine and for a moment his gaze is still fused to my eyes

before it's shuttered away. I work the buttons of his shirt free and run my fingers across the tattoos that I remember from when I healed his wound. The face of the jackal. The rolling script and the geometric patterns that follow the planes of muscle and bone. His warmth seeps into my fingers and ignites them, and I want to feel every part of him, to trace every line until I know him from touch alone.

Ashen pulls away to strip the shirt from his shoulders, his eyes burning coals of bottomless need. With a slow and careful hand, he pulls the bow free from the halter tie of my dress. He lets the fabric ties and their tiny gold beads caress my skin as he pulls them down across my chest, his eyes filled with layers of longing. His fingers trace the slope of my neck and the line of my collarbone. He leans down to press hot kisses across my jaw, down my throat, across the pulse of my surging blood. "*Libbu isriq, ekimmu,*" he whispers into my skin. *You have stolen my heart, vampire.*

It feels like being filled with starlight hearing those words. Like all the dark and suffocating loneliness I felt has been lit with something rare and beautiful. One final, treasonous little tear escapes from my eye and for a moment I think he won't know it, but he does, and he kisses the path it streaks until even its warmth is nothing but a memory.

I run my fingers through Ashen's dark hair as he presses his lips across my chest. He pulls the peak of my breast into his mouth and circles it with languid passes of his tongue before kissing his way to the other side. Every press of his lips feels purposeful. Each kiss means something to him. Each kiss means something to me.

Ashen's other hand flows beneath the hem of my dress, climbing up my thigh and sweeping across the soft flesh above a womb forever sleeping. He traces the bones of my hip and my heart shivers in my chest. His fingers tug the laced edge of my panties down, pulling them across my legs, past my knees, until they fall to the floor.

He undoes the button of his jeans with one hand, his other gliding across my thigh. My heart is roiling in my chest as though it's caught in the swell of the sea. I watch as he pulls the last of his clothing off, the length of his erection springing free as he undresses.

"I don't think that's gonna fit," I say, my voice thick with desire as a sly grin spreads across my face.

A wicked smile lifts the corners of Ashen's lips. He leans over me, bracing his weight on his fists next to my waist. "It'll fit."

“Are you sure? It’s very big.”

“I’m sure, vampire,” he purrs. Our smiles dissolve as we watch one another. I catalogue every detail of his face, from the flecks of color in his eyes to the curve and angle of his jaw. I feel heat in my belly, in my cheeks. I want him more with every second that ticks by. My doubt and fear crumble away beneath his watchful, worshipful gaze. I feel like the great monuments of Saqqara, eroded by sand and storms until only the core remains.

Ashen’s eyes ripple with a flame of desire. He brushes errant locks of hair from my face. I feel his length press to the seam of my body and we both go still as he looks at me, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths.

"I want this," I whisper. "I want *you*, Ashen."

The flame brightens in his eyes. They stay fused to mine as he slowly pushes his into me, my flesh stretching around him. When he has filled me with the full length of his erection he lowers his face to mine. Our ragged breath mixes between us, smoke and nectar. He pulls out just as slowly, and then glides into me again. When I moan with desire and close my eyes he kisses my lashes, framing my face with gentle hands.

“Every word,” Ashen whispers close to my ear as his thumb traces my parted lips, “every sound you make... I imagined your voice so many times when I read your written words.”

“And is it what you expected?”

Ashen draws away enough to look in my eyes as I lay my hands on his face. He slides to the tip of his erection and thrusts into me and I moan, my core coiling with tingling heat.

Ashen smiles, his fingers following the curve of my bottom lip as he does it again and I growl with desire.

“No. It’s one thousand times better,” he says.

Ashen’s lips seal to mine and we find a rhythm that’s as natural and graceful as music. My hands follow the curves and ridges on Ashen’s body. His arms. His shoulders. His back. I press my fingertips into the cords of muscle that roil beneath his sweat-slicked skin. I touch every inch of flesh I can, greedy for more.

The pace intensifies. Ashen’s thrusts grow more powerful. An urgency builds, that we are both chasing something to a precipice. His hand grips my thigh and I fold my leg across his back, lifting my hips, taking him

deeper. I feel my climax coming like a breaker crashing onto shore. My back arches and my core pulls taut around him as I say Ashen's name, over and over until I can't speak anymore. My veins spark like fuses and my breath catches in my chest. Ashen buries his face into my neck, moaning in pleasure as he empties into me. Stars explode in every nerve, in every chamber of my heart.

For a long while we lie unmoving, Ashen's weight comforting on my body. I feel the storm of beats and breath in his chest as it presses against mine. When his lungs steady, Ashen layers kisses across my neck until it tickles and I laugh.

"That sound," he says as he pulls away. His gaze shifts between my eyes and then trails across the details of my face, landing on my mouth. "I cannot imagine your song could be better than that sound."

I laugh again and his eyes spark with delight as he sweeps an errant strand of hair from my cheek. "You haven't heard me sing anything by Celine Dion. I crush that shit. I'll make you cry, guaranteed."

Ashen smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling. Up this close, I can see the tiny flecks of gold that warm the tones of brown. His smile slowly fades away until only his attentive gaze remains.

"Sing for me," he says.

I shake my head but smile. The way he looks at me, he knows that I will.

"Come on, vampire," he murmurs as he snakes his arms beneath my back and lifts me until we're sitting chest to chest, still joined at our center. He pulls the bunched-up dress over my head and the elastic free from my hair, running his fingers through the long strands.

"Sing what?" I ask as Ashen drags his lips across my neck up to my ear, biting my earlobe. It sends a shock of gooseflesh down my arms. The hot coil of desire turns in my belly and I close my eyes, my heart already raging as I feel him harden within me.

"The song from Bit Akalum," he says, and I tilt my head to catch his gaze with a question in my eyes. "I wanted to hear it in your voice. I thought if you could place your trust in me that maybe you would sing it for me one day." Ashen trails his fingers across my cheek and locks his eyes to mine. "I already knew who you were. That I wanted you, like this. That I would break any rule, that I would do anything for you."

I watch him for a moment. I must have the most surprised expression on my face, because a faint smile lifts the corner of Ashen's mouth.

"Did you hear me, vampire?"

I nod, trying to unlock the sudden tightness in my throat. I lean forward and press my kiss to his. When a rhythm starts to build between us, I pull away to hold my lips to his ear.

I've been sleepless at night

'Cause I don't know how I feel

I've been waiting on you

Just to say something real

I sing until there is no more room for words in passion, until even a siren song can't withstand the power of a kiss.

CHAPTER 25

I wake to a heavy arm draped down the length of my back. Ashen's fingers trail a slow progression at the base of my spine. I open my eyes and there's a dim light in the room but it's still dark outside beyond the narrow windows, or at least darker, so it must still be night.

This should feel really fucking weird, waking up in a Reaper's bed on his slick, silky sheets in the Shadow Realm. But it doesn't. It feels like pieces have fit together in a puzzle I couldn't solve until now.

I draw in a deep breath and take stock of my body. I'm a little hungry but I don't want to bother with food. I'm tired but rubbery and relaxed. I'm sore but in a way that makes me just want more of what made me feel way in the first place.

When I turn over, Ashen's hand follows the flow of my movement, settling to trace the same slow pattern on my ribs. He's propped up with pillows, a large book resting against his legs.

"No sleep?" I ask, and he shakes his head. "Was I sleep talking?"

"No."

"Snoring?"

"No."

"Singing?"

"No."

"Farting? Not sleep farting."

"...maybe." Ashen smiles so I know he's only joking and we watch one another for a silent moment. His smile fades, the pattern on my ribs slows. "We need to talk."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all," I say, my heart dropping into my stomach as I pull myself up to sit facing him. I don't cover my chest as I figure boobs can only help. His eyes linger on my breasts and I can see him try to subdue the flame of desire in his eyes as they meet mine once more and he clenches his jaw.

Note to self: Reaper likes boobs.

I roll away off the bed to retrieve my journal and pen from the floor. I give him plenty of time to take in the rest of my body before I turn around and write a note about the boobs in my collection.

Addendum: also ass.

I fold the journal closed and throw it and the pen on the edge of the bed, then stalk across the silken sheets like a predator. I hear the whoosh of blood through the caverns and crevices of Ashen's heart and I smile as I draw closer.

"*Fuck,*" he whispers, dragging a hand through his hair as he tries to conquer his urges. I prowl past his legs and close the book, tossing it on the floor with a heavy thud. I climb up the length of tattoos that flow from his abdomen to his neck.

"You had something you wanted to discuss?" I whisper in his ear as my hand starts to trail a slow path down his chest, down the ridges of muscle across his stomach.

Ashen growls with frustration and catches my wrist. "We need to talk about *Ember.*"

I sigh and sit back, resting my body on his leg. I drape my arm across his knees so I can lean my head on my hand. "That is such a buzzkill," I tease.

"Ember usually is. She's had several millennia of practice," Ashen says, and sweeps some hair back from my shoulder. "What did she want?"

"To force me into helping her make a hybrid of her own, then ferry it to the Realm of Light and release vengeance or some shit," I reply, catching Ashen's hand to hold it in my lap.

"And the soul she brought, you knew her?"

"She was my sister, Molpe. Ember said she knew where Aglaope's soul was and that she could bring her back to life. Can she do that?"

Ashen's eyes darken and he looks down at our joined hands. "Yes, potentially. She could petition to bring her back as a Reaper, but she doesn't have the power to do it herself."

I don't want to think about what Aglaope would make of that if she were still alive. Maybe it would be better than being a wandering soul trapped in this place. Or maybe it would be better for me to kill her for good, like I did with Molpe. Ashen squeezes my hand and I meet his eyes with a faint and melancholic smile.

"She said if I didn't help her, that she would bring you into it too. Something about Rosaria Wyre."

Ashen's eyes widen before he heaves a heavy sigh of dismay. He tilts his head back against the headboard. "Fucking hell. I cannot believe she knows about that."

"In the short time I've known her, I get the feeling there's not much that goes on among the Reapers that Ember doesn't know about."

"Astute observation," Ashen says, bending his head as he presses the fingers of his free hand to his forehead. His gaze is trapped in our joined palms as he loses himself in thought.

I roll his hand back and forth across my lap, drawing his attention back to me. "Tell me what happened," I say, waiting as he gathers his thoughts.

"There was discussion among the Council of reaping Rosaria. She had consolidated significant power and had a network of connections deep into werewolf ancestral packs. They felt she was becoming too political, too much of a threat to the balance of the smaller clans."

"You have a Council?" I ask, and Ashen smiles. "I thought you all just, I dunno, made shit up as you went along."

"No, that's the Council's job," Ashen says and I laugh. "They were moving to make a decision. I fabricated evidence against one of the other packs to protect her. As much as she was powerful, she kept a balance that had been hard for werewolves to maintain. She played an important role, and I felt that power did not equate to crime."

I take in a heavy lungful of air and watch Ashen for a moment. I squeeze his hand. "Did you love her?"

Ashen's eyes seem to hold onto my words as he looks to the light that reflects on the fibers of the sheets. "No. We were lovers for a while. I cared for her, but I wasn't *in love* with her. It ran its course. We went our separate ways a few years ago."

I watch as he loses his thoughts to memories I will never know. There's something greater buried under this loss. I can feel it, deep beneath the strata of time. I wonder if he'll ever let me in enough to see it, or if it's

simply a pain he cannot bear. But I know about unbearable pain, unspeakable loss. I know better than to pry into anyone's past.

"I'm sorry that you lost someone you cared about," I say, and Ashen's eyes meet mine. He looks as though I've said something unexpected that he didn't know he needed to hear. He pulls my hand and I follow the motion, laying the weight of my body against his chest.

"Thank you," he whispers. His fingertips trace every ridge of my spine. Down and up. Down and up. "I need to find the brickworks where the last hybrid was kept and figure out what else it is Semyon is looking for. He must be stopped before he regroups and gets to Valentina or Cassian."

"Or me," I say. Ashen's hands press on my shoulders and he lifts me away so he can look into my eyes. That same fierce expression from the first time in the cauldrons is embedded in his gaze, the one that says he will tear the world apart.

"No. I will not let him get close to you," he says.

"You might not have a choice, Ashen. It's not like you can do this without me. It's the spell that I cast."

"I'll leave you here. Imani will look after you."

"You can't. My arm will itch so badly I'll chew it off and throw it into the fire," I say with a smile, hoping to lighten the mood. It doesn't work. The light in Ashen's eyes intensifies from flame to lava. I place my palm to his cheek and lean closer. "Who knows what will happen if we're separated by realms. Besides, I would rather face Semyon with you than be left to the Shadow Realm with your sister and a slew of enemies I can't distinguish from friends. If I'm there in the Living Realm, it will draw him out, sooner or later."

Ashen's eyes watch mine for a long moment. I can feel them locked there, even when my gaze travels the curves of his face. "I don't like it. But you're probably right."

"Get used to it. Vampires usually are."

Ashen smiles and pulls me back down to his chest, wrapping his arms across my back in a worried embrace. The steady drum of his heart pounds its song to me. I trace the face of the jackal above it, imagining how many lifetimes it has been beating in its cage of bone. Every touch still feels stolen. So, I'll be the greatest thief of all time. I will take every last one that I have a chance to steal.

Ashen's embrace fades and I feel his palms glide across my back. I hear his heart hammer a heavier beat. I press my lips to the black lines that flow through his skin and I wonder how they came to be. Who made them, how long ago. Why. Questions I wish I could ask, but I don't think I can, and I'm afraid he wouldn't answer if I did.

I push myself up so I can look in his eyes, their flame sparking to life. He sweeps the hair from my shoulder and a crease appears between his brows.

"What is it?"

I look at him for a long moment as his palm glides across my shoulder and down my arm. His touch is like a falling feather that leaves gooseflesh in its wake.

"I feel so much buried in you. So much that you keep hidden deep," I finally say, my voice little more than a whisper. "I wish I could know it all. I'm afraid of what I can't see. I'm afraid of what could reach out from beneath the layers of you to grab me and crush my heart."

Ashen's eyes are the warm light of sorrow and longing as he reaches up to trace the line of my cheek. His lips part as he watches his fingertips on my skin, but he says nothing.

"I can't stop myself from wanting you, Ashen. Even though it could kill me. I've tried and I can't."

I press my chest to his, my lips to his. I lay my hands on Ashen's face, tracing all his features as though they might live forever in my fingerprints. I feel the hard length of him against my thigh and I reach between us, centering his erection to my core. He moans into my mouth as I slowly sink down onto him, his hands coasting up my back.

"I will not deny you anything that you ask," Ashen whispers as he pulls away to search my face. He presses a warm, lingering kiss to my cheek, another just beneath my lashes. Each kiss is held so I remember it in my skin long after his lips have moved to the next patch of flesh.

I look in his eyes, drilling my gaze into him, hunting for the molten core of the man beneath the Reaper. "I won't ask you your secrets, Ashen. I'm an immortal. I know better than that." I glide to the edge of his erection, my movement fluid and slow. I hover above Ashen's body as I run one of my hands down his neck and across the dense network of ink that traverses his skin.

"But?.."

“But maybe I’m not the only one that needs to learn to trust.” I watch Ashen’s face as I push down on him once more, taking him deeply. His gaze never wavers from mine. I’m not sure what I see there. Maybe a little surprise, a little awe. A spark of hope. He folds his arms across my back and rolls us over to look down at me.

“My elemental vampire, taking out more of my defenses,” he says as I wrap my legs across his back and lock my ankles.

“Defense destruction is my specialty. I do drive a tank, after all.”

“Not a submarine though.”

“Shut up and make love to me, Reaper.”

Ashen smiles and the rhythm between us builds. I try to let go of the heat that warms my chest as his words replay in my mind. *My elemental vampire.*

It’s just an endearment. *My* is such a little word. But it’s funny how much two letters can mean to you. And I kiss him like they mean everything to me. Deep and urgent and full of fire. I want to tell him how they make me feel after being alone for so long. But I can’t tell him. I can only show him.

I grip my legs tighter across Ashen’s body and flip him to his back so that I’m straddling him once more. I push upright and roll my hips, pressing my palms to his chest. My fingers trace the black, geometric lines, the slope of muscle on his shoulders.

Ashen’s hands slide from my hips and he hooks his hands behind my back to pull me in close until his mouth is on the peak of my breast. He swirls his tongue around my nipple and then clasps it in a gentle bite. I hiss, not a sweet, breathy, human hiss but a distinctly vampiric hiss of desire.

“My vicious, elemental vampire,” he says when he releases me, and with a wicked smile he dives for my flesh again, torturing me with delicious little bites. I increase the rhythm of my hips until I feel my climax burning through my core and firing through my limbs like lightning. It’s an orgasm that keeps coming in waves to drown me. Ashen moans into my flesh as he comes, sucked under by the same consuming storm of desire.

When I gain control of my breath, I nestle against Ashen’s chest and listen to the blood that surges through his veins. “Maybe we should just stay. Let the werewolves make their hybrid. Bar the door. Have Bit Akalum deliver booze and blood and food. Watch the Mandalorian. Bask in your sex sheets.”

Ashen breathes a laugh into my hair and tightens the grip of his embrace. "I wish we could. I have my doubts that the immortals of the Living Realm would be too pleased with werewolves taking control. Nor would any humans once they realize so many of their myths are true. We should go now, before Ember is up. I would rather avoid her if possible. I might be too tempted to kill her if not," he says, but even still, we stay for a while just lying wrapped in one another and the thoughts that weigh us down.

When we finally do get up, we dress and pack in silence, not bothering to shower. We straighten things up a little in the room and I wonder if I'll ever be back here. It's a thought that hasn't occurred to me until this exact moment, but now that it has it won't leave. I know I'm not really meant for this place, regardless of what happens or how I feel. This bittersweet thought is turning over in my mind as I make the bed and Ashen finds another bag to carry the heavy books to the Living Realm.

"I'm sorry I ever doubted you," I whisper to the sheets in a dramatic soap opera voice as I smooth out the ripples and wrinkles across the surface of the bed.

"Are you talking to my sheets?"

"Yes. You were right. They're amazing," I say. I kiss my fingertips and press them to the bed. "Goodbye, lovers. Always remember me."

Ashen smiles as I turn my sly grin toward him. "I was wrong, what I said the other day."

"What's that?"

"Your mind is not a terrifying place. It's an *unusual* place. Sometimes a bizarre place."

I chuff a laugh as I pick up my notebook and pen. I take Ashen's offered hand. "Your sweet-talking skills might need some improvement."

"But most of all, it's a wondrous place, vampire." Ashen leans down and lays a sweet kiss on my cheekbone, letting it linger as he takes a deep breath.

We leave Ashen's room without further delay, moving in silence down the corridor and the stairs. As we pass into the grand hall there's a sound in the shadows, a scraping of claws against stone. Ashen pulls me into the darkness behind a pillar as I catch the scent of something musky and feral in the distance of the room.

"Shit," he whispers, leaning forward to peer around the column. I hear a chattering sound, recognizable for its uniqueness. Another calls back in reply from the opposite side of the room.

Hyenas.

I lean around the other side of the column, into the shadow. I see the hulking shape in profile as the creature sniffs the floor close to the cauldrons. It's enormous, about the size of a truck. Bits of fur and flesh hang from its skeletal face. The bone of a leg is visible through a tear in its skin.

Not just hyenas. *Really fucked up* hyenas.

I move toward Ashen behind the safety of the column.

"What the *fuck*?" I whisper. Ashen looks down at me and draws his sword from its sheath with a slow and practiced hand.

"They shouldn't be in here," he replies, his voice barely more than a breath of sound.

"You don't say."

He looks at me for a long moment and I see the concern in his eyes. He bends carefully to set the bags on the floor, then lets the strap of my katana slide from his shoulder. He hands the sword to me. "Do you have Angelwing on this one too?" he asks as he rolls up his sleeves. I nod and unsheathe my blade. "Good. You're going to need it."

"Great, because I'm dressed to kill," I say, glancing down at my dress, the same one he found for me at the house in Cairo. I meet Ashen's eyes and smile, giving him a wink. *This is going to be great.* He smiles in return.

"Ready, vampire?"

I give a single nod. Ashen leans down, folding his free hand across the back of my neck and pressing his lips to mine in a searing kiss. He pulls away and looks into my eyes. I expect he'll say something like *be careful*, or *stay behind me*.

"Have fun. Don't hiss too loud," he says. He gives me a wicked smile as he turns away.

And fuck me if I don't realize that very instant that I've fallen head over heels in love.

CHAPTER 26

Ashen stalks down the hall. The hellfire comes alive across his blade, black smoke billowing behind him to flow across the floor. The hyena next to the cauldrons looks up and lowers its head and shoulders. It braces for a fight. It yips and cackles. Another dissolves from the shadows. I can hear more in the depths of the room, their attention drawn to us.

A third hyena surges from the dark recesses behind the pillars and lunges for Ashen, but his sword is already carving an arc through the air. It sweeps from down low and cuts the darkness. I hear the sound of rippling flame.

A yowl echoes up the columns as Ashen hits the shoulder of the creature. The jaws snap toward him. He ducks. The animal spins in fury but Ashen is already swinging. His sword lodges into its side.

The beast falls from Ashen's blade. Its jaws smack shut as its face hits the stone. It lies unmoving, and I can smell the thick blood that glistens on the floor.

Ashen is already making his way further into the room to attack the next beast. There's grace in the way his back and shoulders carry power through every swing of his sword. He's calculating. He's formidable. He's really fucking hot.

He's also having all the fun.

I unsheathe the *kaiken* from my thigh and kick off my shoes. The stone is cool and slick beneath my soles. I take a deep breath as I lean against the column and look up. All praise to M.I.A. for the hype tune tracking through my mind. *Live fast, die young, bad girls do it well.*

This is gonna be great.

I smile and then turn into the shadow and run in the darkness between the pillars.

I hear the first hyena galloping for me from the left, from Ashen's direction. Just as I start to think he'll get to it before me, the creature leaps into my path and I drop to the floor, sliding on my hip beneath its jaws. I come to a stop below its heart. I thrust my *kaiken* into its chest. The animal stutters to the side and I roll away as it falls.

I'm up and running before I hear it hit the floor. The first one I saw by the cauldrons is skulking toward the open corridor where I can hear Ashen's blade tearing through muscle and bone. By the time it realizes I'm coming, I'm already in the air. I bring the *katana* down against its neck with a hiss. Thick, putrid blood sprays across my face.

As the hyena and I fall together with a thud of fur and bones across the stone, I look toward the corridor of the hall and see Ashen's blade slicing light into shadow. The fire illuminates his face, his dark hair falling across his brow. The flame in his eyes glows bright with deadly focus. A hyena runs toward him and he readies his sword.

Before it can meet Ashen's blade, it meets mine as I burst from the darkness. I catch it in the throat with my *katana* and spill its blood across the floor.

"That was mine," Ashen says as I stop next to him. I look up and smile at the devious grin that alights within his skin.

I turn away and run to the shadows of the other side of the room as Ashen strides onward to meet the next beast. I kill one more before the odds turn against me.

As I'm running for the darkness between two pillars, a force knocks me from the side, hurtling me into the center of the room. My blades fall from my hands when my ribs hit the stone. The air leaves my lungs in a *whoosh* and I can't suck it back in. I roll onto my back and I hear Ashen calling my name.

A black form hovers over me. I smell the musky scent of fur that's been dampened by fog. Two bright eyes bore into mine as a paw lays weight against my shoulder. A long snout sniffs my hair.

Urtur.

The jackal looks up at Ashen in the distance of the room before his attention is caught by movement to the right of us.

Good thing I didn't shower, I guess.

Urtur bounds away and jumps onto a hyena stalking toward us from the darkness. The hyena is bulky but... disintegrating. Urtur tears at the creature's ruined flesh as the two tumble into the shadows.

I heave myself onto my stomach and reclaim my *katana* from the floor.

"All right, vampire?" Ashen calls from the other end of the room. I can hear the worry in his voice, even though he tries to hide it. I look up to see him standing with both hands clasped around the handle of his sword, the tip of the blade pointed toward the floor. The flame brightens in the darkness, illuminating the tattoos that flow up his arms and beneath the sleeves that are rolled to his elbows.

I slide my hand forward and give him a thumbs up. *This is so fucking embarrassing*, I think as I finally gain control of my lungs. I have a feeling he's going to be bringing this up one day.

I push myself to my feet and smooth out my dress with my free hand before grabbing my dagger from the floor and diving back into the ebb and flow of the battle. I join Urtur to kill the creature he fights in the shadows and then we part ways, meeting our own enemies in the dark. I hear the fire of Ashen's blade at the end of the room near the cauldrons. I smell ink and smoke, and I know he's okay.

I really should have brought my GoPro, because I totally parkour myself up some pillars to jump on the back of a hyena and drive my sword between its vertebrae in a kickass move that Ashen won't believe. As I stand on the back of my latest kill, I start to wonder how many more there could be.

Fuck this shit, I think, sheathing my *katana*. *Time to go*.

I turn to the back of the room and run to the pillar where we dropped our bags. I barely slow down as I scoop the straps into my arms. I take off down the center of the room. Ashen is at the other end, near the cauldrons, his back turned to me as he swings his sword against another beast. I'm too afraid to yell, so I do the next best thing.

I throw my dagger.

The *kaiken* lodges into the skull of the hyena and Ashen turns toward me. The realization takes no more time than meeting my eyes.

Ashen pulls my dagger free and turns to light the embers that will take us home. He sets one foot into the cauldron as I run toward him. For the first time in three hundred years, maybe all my life, I embrace the caress of

a flame. I grab Ashen's outstretched hand and we turn with my momentum, just like a dance. The fire surges around us. The pressure swells in my head and I close my eyes.

The curtain of the blaze falls around us. We stumble out of the cauldron and off the dais, looking behind us as though a creature might still be in pursuit. But the only sound that meets us in the Living Realm is our breath and our raging hearts.

We meet each other's eyes and Ashen drops his sword. He grasps my face and kisses me as though the world is about to fall. His touch burns as hot and bright as a last chance. It's as desperate as a final breath.

When he draws back he looks into my eyes, his chest rising and falling with the effort of recovering from the fight. "Let's not do that again," Ashen says, glancing toward the cauldron.

"Why not? I thought it was fun."

Ashen narrows his eyes at me and wipes some gore off my face with a warm palm. "I still do not agree with your assessment of *fun*."

"You're a Reaper, you're not supposed to know about things like fun." I fold my arms across his back and press my face to his chest. It's sweaty and hot and I smile as I imagine my body must seem like a giant cool pack straight out of the fridge. "So what were they doing there? You said they weren't meant to be there," I ask as I let Ashen go and he retrieves his sword from the floor, the blade stained with black blood that reeks of decay.

"They're not. They typically roam near House Mushussu. They have a particular fondness for vampire souls and House Mushussu is where many congregate," he says, glancing at me before he turns away toward one of the brick pillars at the edge of the room.

"By fondness, do you mean as a delicacy? I didn't get major cuddle vibes from any of them."

"Definitely eating and not... *cuddling*," Ashen says, the thread of distaste weaving through his voice.

I feel a smile spreading across my lips. "When was the last time you said the word *cuddling*?"

Ashen stops and points his gaze to the ceiling, scrolling through memories new and old. "Never. It's a terrible word."

My smile grows ferociously bright. "But we cuddled last night."

"That was *NOT* cuddling," Ashen says as he shoots a sharp look over his shoulder then bends to pick up a heavy cast iron lid that's lying in the dust near a pillar.

"There was *some* cuddling."

"*No*. I have not, nor shall I ever, *cuddle*."

I crack open my journal.

Note to self: demon hates the word cuddle. Must use more frequently.

"Well, I've just made you say it three times in the span of thirty seconds, so I think you're lying. I think you love cuddling and you say it all the time when I'm not around," I tease as I watch him ascend the steps of the dais, holding the iron circle like a shield. He rolls his eyes and gives me a fierce glare with a lick of flame in his pupils, which only makes my smile brighten with delight. I watch as he settles the lid over the wide mouth of the cauldron, snuffing out the last of its flame. "What are you up to, scary demon?" I ask.

"Making sure no one follows us from the Shadow Realm," he replies as he takes slow, heavy steps down from the dais, his eyes fixed to mine.

My gaze darts between Ashen and the cauldron. I raise a brow in a skeptical question. "That's... that's all it takes? You just... put a lid on it?"

"Yes. Pretty much."

"That's just so... lame."

Ashen stops in front of me, his eyes still fused to mine. "A little," he says, taking one of the bags from my shoulders. I feel like I have to peel my gaze from his just to look away. But I do. We turn and start toward the hallway that leads to the stairs. "Regardless, I don't want whoever let those creatures into House Urbigu to follow us through the corridor."

"Any ideas who that could be? I don't think it would be Ember, she needs me to execute her plan. What about Cole?"

"I doubt it. As insufferable as he is, he is too straightforward for that kind of duplicity," Ashen says as we start up the stairs. I glance up and his eyes flow across my skin before settling on mine once more. A muscle ticks in his jaw. "There are a hundred different options, Lu. It could have been someone looking for revenge on me. It could be someone looking to have some fun at your expense. It could be someone that knows of Ember's plan and wants to remove her most valuable player from the board. It could be someone who knows more about you than you expect."

We walk in silence through the dimly lit house. It's still dark outside, and I can almost feel the weight of the fog on my skin. My thoughts seem lost in a mist as thick as the one that shelters this house. I tumble these ideas over in my mind about who could have let those creatures in and why. How much did others really know about me? How hidden had I really been all this time? Maybe not as much as I'd thought all along. Or maybe now that I'm breaking into the light, it's casting my shadows into visible shapes across the floor.

We arrive at the corridor where our rooms are, and before any awkward questions can surface, I take Ashen's hand and pull him into my room. It's just the same as the last time we were here, with the floral bedding and the orchids on the sill. But it feels like that was years ago. A different Lu. I realize for the first time that a lifetime can be measured in millennia, or it can be counted in the weight of a few days. Even mere moments can cause a tectonic shift, propelling you from who you were to who you are now. Tearing you down. Building you up into something new.

I set my bag and my sword down close to the window and look at the orchids, taking the white star of a wind orchid between my fingers to run my thumb across its silken petals. I smile as I think of the Reaper placing them here. An executioner tending to blooms, caring for rare flowers.

"All right, vampire?" he asks, and I look over my shoulder to see him watching me from the center of the room.

I let go of the flower and turn, nodding with a worried half-smile.

"Still concerned about what happened this evening?" he says, taking a step toward me, and then another. I feel scorched by the fire in his eyes, and this time I know I can't strip my gaze away. I only nod, watching as Ashen draws near enough to touch.

He takes another step closer. His pupils brighten with flame. His hand slides into my hair, the other across my hip, pulling me closer. I trace my fingertips along the tense muscles of Ashen's arms and close my eyes for a heavy beat of my heart. Desire unfurls like a serpent beneath my bones, licking its hot tongue along the walls of my chest. But there's something else too, something bright and burning in my heart. A little spark, a little whisper. A hunger for something more than sex or blood. Something I might want only from Ashen, but something too dangerous for a bright soul to entertain with a Reaper bound to the Shadow Realm.

Ashen presses a fiery hot kiss to my neck where the blood surges to meet his lips. The urge in my heart only grows stronger, whispers louder, but I keep it locked away. Ashen must feel the turbulence in my blood with this feral instinct flooding my veins. He traces his fingers down my pulse and pulls away to look in my eyes. "Whoever it is, whatever their motivation, they will have to come through me. And I will not let anyone get close to you, Lu. I will not let anyone harm you. I promise you."

I shake my head. "You can't make promises like that," I whisper. "No vows spoken by an immortal can be kept forever, you must know that by now. Promises are for mortals. They are meant to die with the bearer."

Ashen sweeps his hand in a slow path down my neck. His fingertips trace the ridge of my collarbone. They follow the gold chain, the links warm against my cool skin. His open hand presses to my heart that drums its tortured song to him. His eyes never leave mine as they brighten in the dark.

"Not this time, vampire," Ashen says. "This promise is just like you. There is no measure of time, no realm that can stop it. It is elemental."

Ashen's kiss and his touch follow every word into the last threads of the night. But I know the truth. That the only immortal promises in life and death must be paid in blood.

CHAPTER 27

"Do you ever actually sleep? I haven't seen it happen," I say as I slide onto one of the barstools in the kitchen and pull my damp hair into a ponytail. "Every time I wake you're already up."

Ashen pours my coffee, passing pitchers of blood and cream across the island before he returns his attention to his heavily buttered piece of toast and his newspaper. The faint smell of cinnamon drifts through the room, traveling on the gentle breeze of the open window. "It's hard for a demon to sleep soundly next to someone with angel rabies, you know."

"Well, at least it's that and not sleep farting."

"Oh no, it is definitely that too. I am just too much of a gentleman to mention it."

I grin. He smiles. We stare.

This should feel really fucking weird, sitting across from a Reaper and thinking about all the things I love about him. His humor. His wit. His beautiful cognac eyes that seem to capture me, holding me hostage. But it doesn't feel weird. The more I let go of my guard, the more it feels right. The danger seems to dissolve, leaving only desire behind.

Ediye is going to have a fucking field day with me.

Fuck.

Fuck shit fuck.

Ediye.

She's expecting me back soon and I haven't touched base to let her know I'm safe in the Living Realm.

I tear my eyes from Ashen's and reach down to my bag, pulling my phone from within the front pocket. There are six messages from Ediye, all

emojis. There's a lady vampire. There's the planet Earth. There's a shrug. There's a wave or a slap, I'm not sure. There's a knife, which I think means she's going to kill me. Lastly, there's a ghost, which means she's definitely going to kill me.

I send her a devil face and a line of eggplants.

Ediye's response is immediate. It's a line of cry-laugh faces and a skull. I'm not sure if that means she's died laughing, or she's still coming to murder me. Maybe both.

"Hmm," Ashen murmurs. I look up to find him engrossed in the newspaper, a frown embedded on his face. He slides the story across the table to me.

"*Family asks public for support to find missing local man,*" I read aloud. My eyes fix on the picture of a familiar face. "Jessie Fucking Bates."

"The man from the alley, correct? Your meal?"

"Yeah. Major douchebag," I say, my voice thin as my thoughts are consumed by the words on the page. There are the usual details about his height, age, eye color, *yada yada*. How he's such a wonderful person beloved by all. Such bullshit. Fortunately, he'd made it home from Sanford and was last seen at his house in Newbury. When he didn't show up for work, his brother went to check on him but the door of his home was ajar. Nothing was taken, nothing seemed out of place. Even his Audi was in the driveway, the keys still in a dish at the entrance of the house.

"A little too coincidental, I'm afraid," Ashen says as I slide the story back toward him.

"You think this is Semyon's doing?" I ask as Ashen folds the paper and takes a sip of coffee, his eyes pouring over my face.

Ashen sets his mug down and watches me as he turns it across the granite with a thoughtful expression. "Probably."

"Why?"

Ashen shrugs as he glances down to the image of Jessie's punchable, smiling face. Even as a missing person he comes off as a dickhead. "Maybe he thought you might have other... interests... in this particular human. Or maybe he's trying to send you a message. That he's watching, waiting."

I barely manage to stifle a snort. "*Interests*. Gross. That guy was only good for one thing. Eating."

"When you left me in the alley with him, are you sure no other werewolves were left behind as well?" Ashen asks as leans forward and

locks his gaze to mine. Tiny buds of flame blossom in his eyes.

"I know that face," I say with a sly smile as I sit back on my stool and cross my arms. "That's your interrogation face. That face sucks."

Ashen gives an incredulous laugh as his gaze flicks to the ceiling. When his eyes meet mine again they burn with a hotter flame. "My face *does not* suck."

"Don't get me wrong, it's a very handsome face, Reaper. But it sucks. This is where you ask me a bunch of questions and pressure me to give you answers that I don't want to or cannot give you. And this time I have genuinely no fucking idea." We stare at one another, the only sound between us the ticking of Ashen's finger on the handle of his mug. "So are you going to stop asking me questions?"

"That depends on what you tell me about how and why you cast the spell, and what happened afterward."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "I just gave you my blood, said a bunch of stuff that I hoped wasn't gibberish and then you woke up. You said my name, I said some more crackpot shit then I smacked you in the head and took off. I left you with that grabby asshole and you two were the only ones I saw there. End of fucking story," I say as my hand snaps out and I grab my mug, downing the rest of my coffee even though it's still too hot and it burns my tongue. I clunk my mug onto the granite and glare at Ashen. "Satisfied?"

Ashen looks at me for a long moment. The only movement is the surging blood within his heart and the brightening glow of flame in his eyes. "*Grabby?*"

I tilt my head and narrow my eyes. "Out of everything I just said, *that* is the thing you worry about? I could have made you into a two-headed snake and you're worried about a handsy human douchebag?"

"Yes, in fact," Ashen says, his voice menacing. The flame erupts in his eyes and smoke billows across the countertop. "What do you mean, *handsy*? He touched you?"

I smack my flat palm onto the granite and point in his Reaper face, my eyes glowing with red light. "You listen here, Reaper. I can look after myself. Which is exactly what I was going to do when you rudely interrupted me from my well-chosen meal of retribution."

"Maybe so, but I only did it to save you from a pack of werewolves," Ashen says with a smug expression as he leans forward in a challenge. I

give a dramatic roll of my eyes and level him with a glare.

"Well riddle me this, batman. *You* were the last one of the two of us to see Jessie in the alley, so what did *you* see there, huh? Any werewolves when you woke up? Anyone watching the grandmaster smoke demon looming over the douchebag human as he pissed himself behind Cheese Louise? Interrogate *that*," I say, giving him a mic drop motion with my hand that turns into a middle finger as I sit back and cross my arms. I give Ashen my fiercest vampiric glare but I see a smile fighting to break free on his face. "Don't you dare."

"Don't what?" he asks, the smile brightening as he loses the battle to keep it at bay.

"Don't you laugh at me," I say, still trying to look serious even though part of me so wants to hear the sound of his laugh again. "I just dropped a mic on you. You're not allowed."

"Is that the rule? You never told me that rule."

"It's implied. Longstanding vampire tradition. Vampire drops mic, no laughing or arguing allowed. Vampire wins."

That does it. Ashen laughs. The sound bounds through the space around us, musical and warm. I wonder for the first time if he can sing. I imagine it would be a rich baritone, bright like brass in the sun.

"All right, vampire. You win. I did not see anyone else in the alley when I woke. There was no mist either. But that doesn't mean Semyon wasn't watching from nearby." Ashen is still smiling when he leans back and takes a sip of his coffee. He watches me for a moment with amusement still bright in his eyes as he takes a bite of his toast. He looks down at his phone, sliding it toward me. "I think this is worth checking out. Selborne Brickworks," he says, pointing to the map.

I run my hand across my arm, trying to smooth the goosebumps that erupt in my flesh as I look down at the dropped pin. "You think that's the one?"

"I did some digging. It was shut down in 2011 but was purchased two years ago by a company called Klyk Corp, a chemical engineering firm owned by Semyon Abdulov."

"Couldn't get much more likely than that," I say, zooming out of the map. "It's quite a drive though, and it's going to raise questions if I don't show up today in Sanford. Bian will probably hunt you down herself."

"I have no doubts about that. And Ediye would be fast on her heels I'm sure," Ashen says, draining his cup and taking both our mugs and his plate to the sink.

"We also can't really rock up there just the two of us all *'wassup bitches, we're here to check if all your hybrids have giant dicks'*. We need a plan."

Ashen glances at me over his shoulder with a smile as the water cascades over the mugs, washing the last scents of coffee away. "Very true, but there's another stop we can make that's on our way back to Sanford. Before you woke, I found a potential connection in the book of witch lineages between Mila Karras and one of the local covens, and they both might intersect with Semyon's businesses."

I'm about to ask some questions when the smell of cinnamon catches in the back of my throat. I smell cream cheese icing and the sweet scent of irises in morning dew as Ashen takes the last bite of toast before placing the plate beneath the stream.

"Is a half-pound of butter per piece of toast not enough? You have to eat it with a vat of icing and cinnamon sugar now?" I ask as he rinses the mugs and places them on the drying rack.

"What do you mean?" Ashen replies as he sets the plate next to the mugs. I can sense the confusion in his voice. He turns the tap off, and then I hear it. A fluttering sound. Faint. Rapid. Like a hummingbird trapped behind a veil.

"Do you hear that?" I ask.

The world around us slows and speeds up, both in the same instant. I blink and when I open my eyes Ashen's palm is flat on the granite in front of me. I think that I could count every drop of water rolling down his skin.

In the next moment, his weight and momentum are crashing into me as he slides across the island that separates us. He knocks me from the chair. His arm folds around my waist as I fall backward and we strike the floor. Ashen takes the hit of the landing and we roll, enveloped by thickening smoke and the smell of cinders and ink. We come to a halt and within a beat of my heart Ashen's arm and his weight are gone. Sparks hiss as they die on the cold stone.

When I look up he's standing with his back to me. Smoke cascades from Ashen's shoulders in the shape of a wide set of wings. I've never seen him like this before, and I know on instinct it must be bad. Embers and licks of flame fall to the floor as the wings unfurl. I see his silver sword through the

diaphanous black vapor flowing from his back like liquid. The hellfire burns bright across the metal he grips between his hands.

"*Anunnaki*," Ashen seethes, his voice so thick with malice that it doesn't even sound like his. "Get out before I burn your blood with my sword."

A light grows from beyond Ashen until it's so bright it sears my eyes. Smoke thickens above the floor to shield me as I press my face beneath my arm. I feel the warmth of my tattoo across my skin. I swear I can make out every letter. I swear I feel them within me.

Sunu liiktisuma.

May they be bound.

I grip the handle of the *kaiken* at my side and rise through the smoke and flame to stand with Ashen.

"The vampire is right, demon," a man says over the ripple of fire that surges across Ashen's blade. His voice shimmers like wind chimes, melodious and bright. The feathers of his wings scrape the stone as the angel takes a step closer. "You need a plan. And I have come to see it done."

CHAPTER 28

"This is not your territory. Get out," Ashen growls. His wings of smoke billow between us, rippling across the floor. Sparks hiss in their shadows.

"I'm sorry to say, but I come by invitation," the angel replies as the light dims in the room. I hear the edges of his feathers rake the floor like claws. "I was asked to come and check on you when the corridor to your realm was closed."

"By whom," Ashen demands. His voice cuts through the air, sharp as a blade. The angel doesn't answer. I step to Ashen's left and peer around the flow of smoke to look at our guest.

It's not the same angel as the one we saw in Saqqara. I can tell right away. This one is shorter, dressed in the same pristine white but much less *Project Runway*. There's no veil to obscure his beautiful face, its proportions almost too symmetrical to be real. He has olive skin, darker than mine, but light blond hair in tones of honey and gold. He locks his shimmering blue eyes to mine and smiles.

"Hi," he says, giving me a little wave.

"...hi?" I say back as I give a tentative wave in return with the hand that isn't clasped around my dagger.

"I'm Eryx," the angel says. His smile is still bright and untroubled, as though there isn't a seething demon in the room with us.

"...that's... cool..." I say, turning my confused gaze up to Ashen. His eyes glow as hot as lava. He hasn't taken them from the angel, though I know he feels me watching. I look back to Eryx, his smile still plastered to his beautiful face. "I'm Lu-"

"Lu-" Ashen hisses.

"-and this is Ashen," I continue. Ashen lets out a groan and I can almost hear his eyes rolling. "Uh... what are you doing here?"

"I came to provide my aid," Eryx says, his voice cheery. He sounds legit excited about this prospect.

I take a step closer and Ashen's hand darts out, his palm laying hot against my stomach. It takes me right back to the fight where we met. I look up and he meets my eyes. There's worry there, and urgency. I give him a half-smile but it only sweeps away the layers that shield his innermost thoughts from view. There's desperation in his eyes. There's a deeply buried fear that shows itself when he shakes his head and presses me back a half step. I lay my hand on his and look back to the angel who watches us with interest but without judgement.

I clear my throat and try to smile. It feels more like a grimace and the angel tilts his head. "Uh, that's super nice of you to want to help, Eryx, but... why?"

"To keep the balance of the Realms, of course," he says. Eryx folds his wings back in a show of trust. Ashen does not meet him in this display. Smoke continues to fall around us, coating the floor in a thick black haze. I curl my fingers across Ashen's hand and try to loosen the tension trapped there but he doesn't budge.

"Who sent you?" Ashen asks.

"He said I shouldn't tell you," Eryx replies, a hint of discomfort in his voice.

"Was it Cole?" I ask. Eryx's face lightens in what looks like relief.

"Yes! Good guess, Lu. You're very bright."

"Hear that? The angel said I'm *very bright*," I repeat to Ashen with a beaming smile. He glares down at me in reply. I crinkle my nose and turn my attention back to Eryx. "About the balance between the Realms part... care to explain?"

"There are some within the Realm of Light that believe the age of humanity has come to an end," Eryx says, his voice deepening in tone to match the weight of his words. "They believe the Living Realm should be left to the immortals to fight over. But first, they demand the Shadow Realm must be destroyed. They aided the werewolves in the formation of the first hybrids. And now we must work together before they perfect their creation and start a war." Eryx gives a sad smile and walks forward through the

smoke. For every step he takes, Ashen pushes us in the opposite direction. I watch as Eryx bends and grasps the edge of my fallen stool, standing it upright next to the kitchen island.

Ashen and I exchange a glance. I feel the worry in mine. I see fury in his.

"There are some in the Shadow Realm that would see hybrids made to fight the Realm of Light instead. We cannot let that happen either. We have many souls to protect," Eryx says as he drifts around the island and picks up one of the mugs drying on the rack. He turns the water on and fills it before facing us as he takes a long sip. "Water is the best, don't you think?" he asks with a sincere smile. His feathers clink on the stone like falling knives as he sits on Ashen's barstool.

"No," Ashen says.

"Not really," I say.

Eryx shrugs but his smile remains untarnished by our lack of enthusiasm. "We need to ensure the werewolves don't have another chance to make a hybrid. Lu would be safer in the Realm of Light, out of their reach."

"No," Ashen growls. It's such a small word, and yet it feels filled with feral rage.

Eryx purses his lips in a displeased pout. "Why?"

"Firstly, you just said yourself that there are those in your realm that seek to aid the werewolves."

"Not the House of the Virtues," Eryx says, emphatically shaking his head. "Lu would be safer there than in any realm."

"Forgive me if I don't believe a word you say, *anunnaki*. Your kind lie more masterfully than any creature to walk the Earth," Ashen seethes. Eryx has a genuine look of shock and dismay as he sets his mug on the counter. "Secondly, the last angel we saw shredded Lu's face. I presume that one wasn't even trying to do us harm."

The color seems to drain from the angel's skin. He looks from Ashen to me and back again, his smile collapsing into a grimace. Eryx swallows but it looks like it takes effort to do so.

How odd, I think. And I'm not the only one that notices.

"That's right, *anunnaki*. Down to the bone. There was blood everywhere. It was carnage."

Eryx raises his fist to his mouth and clears his throat, his other hand gripping the edge of the countertop.

"That is..." Eryx swallows again. I swear his skin is turning grey. "That is so unfortunate."

"Yes, and it's a very good thing we figured out a solution as your brethren drifted away into the sky without a backward glance. Speaking of which, Lu, you must be famished," Ashen says, looking down at me. I am, actually. I'm fucking *starving*. "Take more of my blood."

I glance at Eryx and he looks like he might vomit across the polished stone. Ashen gives the slightest hint of a sly smile as he removes his palm from my stomach and raises his wrist close to my lips. "Just trust me," he whispers.

The flowery sweetness of venom blossoms from my fangs as they expand in my mouth. I take Ashen's wrist in my hands and run my thumb down the blue line of the radial artery. My eyes drift closed with the scent of blood beneath skin. I press my lips there, an apology for the pain I'm about to cause. Ashen doesn't move when my teeth slide into his flesh. He stays carefully still as I take the first draw of his rich blood and open my glowing eyes.

Eryx grips onto the countertop as though it's a lifeboat on a raging sea. His skin has taken on a greenish hue. I can see a sheen of sweat on his brow. The hummingbird rhythm of his heart takes flight. I swallow another long pull of blood from Ashen's arm and it floods my veins with its effervescent heat. *Fuuuuck it tastes so good*. It warms my chest and sparks the engine of desire in my heart, a longing for more than I should ever want from a demon of the Shadow Realm. I take one more draw from his wrist before I force myself to let go.

"I'm sorry, does this bother you?" I ask Eryx in a voice as thick as syrup. I clamp my hand down on the bite. One look at my bloody smile and Eryx tilts off the stool and hits the floor, his wings crashing like a spilled armory of blades across the stone.

"I think that's a yes. Time to go," Ashen says, pulling away to grab a tea towel for the bite. His wings disappear in a blur of smoke and sparks. The hellfire evaporates from his sword. We gather our bags and weapons and rush from the house, leaving the angel passed out on the floor.

"I feel kinda bad for him," I say as I slide into the passenger seat of Ashen's car and clip my seatbelt closed. "He seemed nice."

"Of course he seemed nice. He's an angel. That's what they do. One moment they're talking about how much they love water, for fucksakes, and the next they're slicing your face up with their feathers," Ashen replies, twisting in his seat as he backs the car up at speed. The tires drift on the gravel as he slams his foot to the brake and shifts to drive. We speed away from the house, the pervasive fog thinning until it disappears at the road.

"We never got to hear his plan."

"I am sure it was a genius strategy that involved him fainting at the first hint of a fight while you and I saved the realms."

I let out a conspiratorial laugh, which quickly dies as a wave of dread closes my throat. "About that... how are we supposed to do that, exactly?.."

Ashen lets go of a heavy sigh, his grip tensing on the wheel as he stares down the road that meets us. "I do not know, but we'd better come up with something fast. Time is not on our side."

"Well that's a shame, because I'm so fucking hungry I can't even think," I lament, looking out the window as we pass by fields of sheep.

I see Ashen's reflection in my window as he glances at me. He reaches to the back seat of his car for one of the bags. "There's a cooler in there," he says. I give him a half smile and open the backpack, rummaging inside for a bag of blood. I empty it into a thermal mug and sip away but it tastes bland and boring, too cold and flavorless to really sate my thirst, especially as Ashen's blood still tingles in my veins.

"Thank you," I say in a quiet voice. "It's not the same but it helps. But I'll need to eat properly before tonight."

"What's tonight?"

"Andy?.. The movies?.."

I feel Ashen's body tense beside me. I hear the quickening beat of his heart. "You're still going? With the detective with the ugly plants?"

I look out the window to hide my smile. "Well, it doesn't really seem fair to just text him. He's been trying for months to ask me out. I thought I'd go and then friendzone him afterwards." I glance at the steering wheel as Ashen's grip tightens across the leather.

"Can you not just... eat him?" he asks, and I burst out laughing.

"Eat him? No, I can't eat him, Reaper."

"Why not?"

"Why not? First of all, he's a detective. It'd be an uproar if one of the two detectives of Sanford went missing." My smile broadens as I see Ashen

scowl at the road from the corner of my eye. "Secondly-"

"Really?"

"-*secondly*, Reaper. I'm on a douchebag-only diet."

"Seriously?"

"Yes *seriously*. It's a sustainable life choice. I only kill douchebags. It's not some fake food intolerance bullshit, it's an ethical decision."

We fall into a strained silence. Ashen glares his simmering fury at the road ahead. I look out the window again, hiding my growing smile behind my hand. The seconds tick by and it's harder and harder not to laugh.

"Ashen," I finally chime, unable to keep the amusement from voice as I wrap my hand over the hard muscle of his forearm. "You're jealous of Andy Cartwright?"

"I am not," he retorts, every word clipped.

"Really? Because it kind of sounds like you are."

Ashen scoffs and shoots me a menacing side-eye glare. "I am not jealous of some small-town human detective who thinks rubber plants are a romantic gift."

"It's a peace lily. And he did at least give me a romantically intentioned gift, so-"

"I gave you a sword! Not just any sword, but Tomoe Gozen's sword. Also a journal and pen. So you're welcome."

"Don't get me wrong, Reaper. Both were very thoughtful. I just don't know as I'd call a sword romantic. And the journal and pen were also because it was annoying for you to lip read. So, really, those were practical gifts. Both of which also benefit you."

I don't really believe ninety percent of what I'm saying; in fact, I thought the sword and pen choice were very touching. That said, I'm having too much fun winding Ashen up. He gives the road a death stare and we sit in deliciously awkward silence as I sip my bland drink.

"Well, I still do not think it's wise to hunt in daylight in Sanford," Ashen grumbles.

I take another sip and make a face. I can feel Ashen watching. "You're probably right, but this won't cut it either, unfortunately."

"Take more of mine," he says, and his voice is softer as the irritation from my teasing dissolves.

I scoff and look out the window. I feel heat creeping into my cheeks. I was hoping to maybe avoid this topic, but obviously it's coming for me and

it's happening *now*. "Thank you, but no."

"Why not?"

"This?" I say shaking the mug as the blood sloshes within. "This is like rice cakes. Your blood is like pop rocks soaked in melted chocolate and... I dunno... truffle oil?"

"An intriguing combination."

"It's... decadent. And it's yours."

"So?"

I give him a dead-eyed glare and he glances from the road to me. I wait for the epiphany to dawn in his mind. It's taking longer than expected. I tap my finger on the center console as the seconds tick on. His eyes narrow, probably as he replays my words and tries to forge the connection. Then they go wide and his expression slackens.

And there it is. The realization takes hold.

"Oh."

I close my arms across my chest and turn my gaze to the window. I can almost hear the gears turning in his mind as he cycles through everything he knows about vampire mating behaviors. He probably wishes we could turn around and retrieve some books from the haunted library to refresh his memory.

"But it's not just about taking blood. There is more to the... process..." Ashen says as he reaches across the center console and lays a reassuring hand on my leg. I take his hand and throw it back toward the steering wheel.

"I don't need you to Reapersplain the mating habits of vampires to me. I'm familiar with how the process works, *thankyouverymuch*."

"I'm merely trying to say that you can still take some of my blood, if you want it. It will be easier than hunting in daylight," Ashen says, sliding his hand down my arm to pull my wrist free from where it's clamped across my body.

And right here, as he gently pries my arm free from its vicelike grip across my chest, I'm sure you're wondering, *what the fuck is the big deal, Lu? He's trying to be sweet and you're kind of being a stubborn cow*. And yeah, while I totally agree, you need to understand that the more blood that I take, the harder it will be to not want to mate with him. Like, *properly*. Not just sex but binding myself to him. And I'm already feeling the tug of it in my heart, the whisper of it from the box in my mind.

"You don't understand," I mutter, keeping my eyes trained on the fields and trees out my window, even when he pulls my hand to his lips and lays a kiss on my fingertips.

"You're right. I apologize, vampire," Ashen says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. There's a long pause of taut silence. "When you say you are familiar with the process-"

"Fuck off, Reaper."

"You are an acerbic creature."

"Screw you."

"And dramatic."

"Fuck my life," I moan as I pull my hand away to cradle my head. "It's not even ten in the morning and I feel like I need a bottle of tequila to survive you."

I feel Ashen's warm palm slide across my neck and I close my eyes.

"And I have just the place in mind for that."

CHAPTER 29

"*N*o. No fucking way," I snarl.

"I get a sense you have a problem with this particular establishment. Care to elaborate on why that might be?"

"Absofuckinglutely not."

"But look at the sign," Ashen says, pointing to the brick building in front of us. His voice is laced with far too much amusement for my current state of hunger to endure. "It says '*Under New Management*'."

"Go fuck yourself."

"There are douchebags here. I guarantee it."

"So do I. You're one of them."

"You will find both tequila and lunch. It's the perfect solution."

"I've lost my appetite."

"There's a connection here. Mila and Bobby shared something in common."

"That's fucking gross imagery I never needed in my head."

"Just a quick little investigation. The link to Semyon is here, I can feel it."

"If you make me go in there, I will never have sex with you again."

Ashen laughs. The sound is richer and more musical than the song still playing in the car. I turn my gaze from the familiar bar across the street as Ashen leans toward me and rests an elbow on the center console of his car. His eyes make a languid pass of my skin and rest on my lips. "You lie."

I put on my fiercest vampire glare, but it feels like a thin mask. "Do I?"

Ashen shifts out of his seat and prowls across the narrow space of the vehicle. He braces one hand against my door and looms over me.

I smell silk. I smell unlit cigars. I smell the decadent blood that pulses in his neck as he draws near. "Yes, you do," he whispers, letting his breath rest on my skin before he presses his lips to my throat. "And you are terrible at it."

"Why don't we go somewhere else, *anywhere else*, and I'll show you what a terrible liar I am," I say as Ashen trails a line of kisses down my neck between another laugh. One of his hands flows beneath my shirt, following the lines of my ribs and tracing the scalloped lace of my bra.

"Indulge me."

"I'm trying to indulge both of us."

I feel the smile in Ashen's lips as he kisses my jaw, drawing closer to my mouth. "Vampire," he purrs, "I need to check the club but I do not want to leave you here alone."

"Then don't. Let's drive away."

That smile again, it drags across my skin. Ashen's breath mingles with mine as he kisses the corner of my lips.

"Come with me, vampire, and I promise to make it up to you later."

My desire is like a planet with a gravitational pull all its own. I let my hands flow up the muscles of Ashen's arms, over his chest, down his waist. I grab hold of Ashen's belt and tug his hips closer. He pulls his lips away to search my face as I release the clasp of the buckle. "Only if you make it up to me now first."

Carnal fire erupts in his eyes. Ashen stares at my mouth as I drag his zipper down with a slow and teasing hand, tooth by tooth. He looks ravenous, like he can barely restrain himself from tearing the car apart. I bite my lip around a merciless grin and go even slower.

"And how do you propose I *make it up to you now*?" he asks through a ragged breath as I work the button free on my jeans and pull them down beneath him. I press the button to recline my seat, keeping my eyes on Ashen. He leans down and devours me with his kiss, a growl rumbling in his chest as I wrap my hand around his length and guide him to my opening.

"Fuck me," I say. My core feels raw and empty with my own words. I'm desperate to have him inside me, to have him fill me, for my flesh to stretch around him. But I wait with the silken tip of his erection paused at my damp entrance, wanting to drive us both mad for a moment longer.

“You know I will not deny you anything, vampire,” Ashen says, and drives into me. I cry out with the intensity of it, the pleasure of it. It’s so much better than what I was aching for. He withdraws to slam into me again, and again and again and again, our kiss urgent, our tongues plundering. He braces himself against the car door and grasps my hip with his other hand, pushing deeper until I’m not sure where he ends and I begin.

A wild thought detonates in my brain, that we could mate right here. It would be a bloodbath. The car would be a write-off. And it wouldn't really be inconspicuous, not that we're being very inconspicuous right now, fucking in the front seat of his car. The lot we're parked in might be empty, but who knows if someone might turn up and catch us. But that's part of the allure.

Right now, though, I don't give a shit about people, or consequences, or the world. It could be burning down around me and I wouldn't care, because the exquisite thrusts keep coming, over and over, deeper and deeper, drowning me in desperation for more. My bones feel like molten metal, liquid and searing hot. Ashen's hand moves from my hip to my stomach, then up further still to pull my bra down and run his calloused palm over the smooth skin of my breasts.

“Come with me, vampire,” Ashen murmurs in my ear before burying his lips and his hot breath into the crook of my neck as he drives into me. He's not talking about the club this time, that much is clear. My hands slide beneath his shirt and press into the thick muscles of his back. I scrape my nails down his skin, drawing blood. He growls into my throat with pleasure and gives a gentle nip to my shoulder.

The scent of blood, the feeling of Ashen's thickness as he thrusts into me, his hands on my skin and the warmth of his breath as he kisses and bites... it all fuels the engine in my heart to claim him as mine in blood and give my own in return.

My fangs descend and coat my tongue in sweet poison. Ashen drills into me as I fumble with the top few buttons on his shirt until I can pull the collar past his shoulders. My lips carve a path of cool kisses from his clavicle to his neck. I open my mouth above his jugular and let my teeth and tongue graze the salty sweetness of his skin. Ashen groans at the caress of my fangs and his thrusts grow stronger, his thickness filling me with every pounding stroke.

“Drink, Lu,” he whispers into my neck. His voice is strained with the effort of holding back as every thrust pushes us closer to oblivion. “Drink and come with me.”

I don't drink, because I know it's something I won't be able to stop if I do. But the idea of it undoes me. An intense orgasm tears through my core and claims my breath from my lungs. Wave after wave, it keeps pulling me under. I drown in a sea of sparks, calling Ashen's name as he spills into me.

It takes a long moment for our breath to recover. Ashen rests his forehead to my shoulder and I run my fingers through his dark hair, every inhalation filled with his scent. I think I could stay here forever beneath the weight of him, feeling his heart as it thunders in his chest, listening to his whispered adorations. “You are a force of nature,” he says to me. “An elemental force of nature.”

Even though I wish we could stay, we don't, of course. Life and the world that claims it enter my thoughts as I recover from the desire I just drowned in.

"Come on, vampire," Ashen says as he slips out of me, laying kisses across my face until I smile. "Let's get this done so we can move onto more fun things."

Once we've cleaned ourselves up as best we can, Ashen reaches behind me and pulls my sword from the back seat, laying a final, lingering kiss on my neck as he rests the *katana* across my lap and climbs into his seat. I look at the *saya* and think about the wars fought with this blade so long ago. I don't know if I was more reckless then, running off into those bloody battles after Tomoe Gozen, or if I'm more reckless now, falling in love with a demon who is meant to destroy me.

"All right, vampire?" he asks after we get out of the car and stand by the hood, looking up toward the bar. The giant silver letters loom across the brick like trapped and angry spirits. *The Maqlu*, it says, molten black flames licking the letters. I clench my jaw and stare at the rendering of fire that burns the words above the door. "Vampire?"

I look at Ashen and feel the bright blaze of red light that consumes my pupils. I give a single nod and tighten my grip on the silk threads wrapped around the handle of the sword. Before I can convince myself to steal the car and drive away, I stalk across the street toward the club, Ashen meeting my strides as he keeps to my left shoulder.

"I heard many theories of who killed Bobby Sarno on the roof of his own club. An ancient clan of shapeshifting witches. A vengeful angel bent on sending a message to the covens. Reality, it seems, is even more surprising. Was it truly you?" Ashen asks as we keep to the right of the building, heading down a narrow alley toward the back entrance. I nod but I don't meet his eyes. "Why?"

"You already know why."

Ashen falls silent. He looks up at the building and I feel his body tense beside me. "*The Maqlu*," Ashen says, more to himself than to me as the translation of the words on the brick takes hold. "*The Burning*."

We stop at the corner of the club to listen, but there are no sounds, no voices. I smell tobacco and brandy, the scent of ink warmed by skin. Ashen grasps my wrist and I turn toward him as smoke envelops our legs and climbs past my waist. Flame coils within Ashen's eyes.

"He was the last one that was there. The last on my list," I say before he can ask a question I don't want to answer. "He got what he deserved."

Ashen keeps his fiery gaze on mine for a long moment before he gives a single nod. His hand stays wrapped across my skin. The smoke dissolves but the heat still burns in his eyes.

"Try not to kill any witches until we have answers," Ashen says, bending his head to keep his unwavering stare locked to mine. It burns an indelible mark right onto my soul. "Once we're done, take them all."

"Why? They weren't there."

"They knew Sarno, and that's close enough."

Hellfire erupts across the sword Ashen grasps in his free hand, and when he's ready he lets go of my wrist, his fingertips following my palm, down the lines of my fingers, down the pads of flesh at their tips. The heat of his touch leaves mine but his eyes linger for a moment longer. His rage stays locked behind within like a beast that roams behind bars, waiting for its chance to be released.

Ashen turns away and I follow him to the heavy iron door that faces an empty loading dock. He tries the handle, but no surprise, it's locked with more than just metal. There are spells at work here, I can feel the hum of their current in the air. The scent of star anise and rosemary and mica infuse the unsettled air.

"How did you get in the last time?" Ashen asks as he unscrews a tiny spring on the end of the handle of his sword.

"The front door," I say, giving a shrug as Ashen looks up with a questioning brow. "Ediye helped with a disguise. Besides, it's not like he was expecting me. He thought I'd been dead for three centuries."

Ashen gives a faint smile and focuses his attention on twisting an ampule free of its compartment in the handle of his sword. He opens it and I smell sulfur and ground bone. There's some other shit in there too that I don't want to think too much about. Hair steeped in the scent of milk. The skin of something long extinct, sweet like powdered sugar and burned in cedar.

Ashen pulls a metal stopper free of the ampule and taps some of the dust within across the door handle before returning the vial to the hidden compartment of his sword. Static crackles and light arcs across the metal. Froth bubbles and drips onto the asphalt below. When it subsides, Ashen gives a swift strike with his sword to sever the neck of the handle. The bulbous metal head rolls to our feet.

We step into the darkness of a narrow, windowless, utilitarian corridor lit by a single fluorescent bulb. There's a door on either side and one at the end. I hold my breath in the silence. I lay my hand to Ashen's chest and he does the same. I close my eyes and concentrate on the sounds I can hear. Two heartbeats. The ripple of sulfurous flame. There's nothing else close. I shake my head and we breathe again, walking to the end of the hall.

The door is unlocked. Ashen pushes it open just enough that I can listen. Again, I hear nothing. We drift into the corridor like a poisonous gas.

I know every hallway and room here. I memorized them with Ediye months before I ever walked inside. Ashen looks down at me and seems to know I wouldn't have left Bobby Sarno up to chance, and he'd be right about that. If I was going to wait three hundred years, I wasn't about to fuck it up with poor planning. I was going to get away with it.

I jerk my head to the left. The offices are in that direction.

We follow the corridor of black painted brick lined with signed posters of artists and bands that have played in The Maqlu over the last several years. Most of the messages start with 'Dear Bobby,' or even worse, 'To Mr Sarno,' and if my stomach wasn't so fucking empty I'd want to vomit all over them. Fucking prick.

When we're about halfway down the hall I spot a framed photo of Bobby with his arm around Cardi B. She looks a little grossed out to be fair.

My fist snaps out like a viper and I smash the glass.

"What the fuck, Lu?" Ashen hisses as he watches me pull the photo down and tear Bobby's smug, bloated face away from Cardi's.

"My bad," I whisper, patting her image back into the frame and dropping the half with Bobby's face next to my boot. I hold onto Ashen's fierce glare as I twist Sarno's ugly head into the shards of glass. "Sorry... so terribly sorry."

Ashen rolls his eyes and turns away, leading us to a corner with a right turn. He leans forward and listens, then motions for me to follow. Doors line either side. At the end is a turn to the left that leads to the public-facing section of the club, which won't be open until dusk descends. We drift past the first set of doors. Ashen is nearly at the second when I reach out and grasp his hand. He lurches to a halt.

I point one finger in the air. I tap my palm to my chest in the rhythm of a heartbeat. I hook my thumb to the left. The flame surges across Ashen's blade.

Ashen grips the handle. It keeps silent beneath his slow and careful hand. He pushes the door open and we step inside the office.

A man sits slumped forward in a chair, his hands bound to its arms, his ankles to its legs. A gag stained with bloody saliva is tied through his mouth. His chest is heavy with sleep. Even with the cloth across his tongue I can smell dehydration on his breath.

Jessie Fucking Bates.

He startles awake as though I called his name. He looks at Ashen, then at me, then back again. I see hope and relief in his eyes. Ashen glances at me and his emotions are buried beneath deep sediment like a creature hiding under the sand, waiting to attack. He stalks toward Jessie and rips the gag free of his mouth.

"Oh my God, *I know you*, I know you from that fucked-up Sanford place. Are you here to rescue me? Thank God. These guys, these fucking Russian guys just came into my house and took me. They fucking *took me*, man. They shoved me in a van and brought me to this factory and took a bunch of blood from me and then brought me here. I have no fucking idea who they are. They never said who they were or what they were doing or why they wanted me. I don't know what the fuck is going on, man. They just took me. *What the fuck*, man. They just took me from my home."

Jessie descends into pleas and swears as he squirms against his bonds. Ashen turns to me. Everything he's just tried to bury is right there at the surface. I can see it in the flame that seems both bright and black in his eyes. "I think we have everything we need to know from him," he says.

An arc of fire twists through the air. A crack splits the silence of the room. A scream fills the office as a severed hand falls free of its bonds and smacks the floor.

Ashen leans toward Jessie as he thrashes in anguish and cries to the stump he holds to his chest, his blood pulsing like a clogged fountain that spills into his lap. "That is for touching what does not belong to you."

A flash of steel, a burst of flame. Another scream. Another surge of blood pumping from a raging heart. The smell fills my nose and the back of my throat. I swallow the venom that floods my mouth as Jessie's other hand drops to his feet.

Ashen kicks Jessie's chair over and looms above the broken man as his body contorts in shock and distress. "And *that* is to ensure you can't touch yourself in fantasies of her. If she lets you survive, that is."

The fire dissolves as Ashen wipes his blade clean on Jessie's thrashing leg. The smell of urine mixes with the blood on the floor. Jessie wails and sobs. He kicks one of his own hands away in his desperate squirming. It flops over like a dead and slippery fish. How Jessie hasn't passed out, I just don't know, but kudos where it's deserved. Dude just had both hands cut off and he's still awake enough to snivel a string of obscenities.

Ashen rises and walks toward me. He looks a little calmer, though the dark flame still roils in his pupils. My throat feels thick with longing. The sound of Jessie's anguish seems to fade away as Ashen stops before me. "What's wrong?" he asks.

I swallow a sudden sting of tears before they can pool in my eyes. A coy grin pulls at my lips. "Ashen of House Urbigu... do you think I belong to you?"

Ashen gives a breath of a laugh. His smile fades. His eyes soften and the flame within dies to embers. He reaches up and lays his hand on the side of my face, letting his fingers trace the line of my cheekbone and the angle of my jaw. His gaze follows every movement of his slow and gentle caress. "No. You belong to you, vampire. But I will cherish any part you're willing to share with me."

I can see past every layer when I look in Ashen's eyes. Past decades of time burned to cinders in his wake. Past the souls stripped from bodies by his blade. I am witness to every moment of loneliness and rage and despair. I see the man within the empty fortress, the soul within the demon. Things that shouldn't be, but they are.

"I'll share every part that you're willing to take, and I'll take any part that you're willing to give," I say, taking a step closer and placing a hand on Ashen's heart, the other across the back of his neck to draw his lips down to mine. His kiss sets fire to my veins, lighting them like fuses. My heart detonates in my chest, an explosion of love and desire.

"Fuck you, assholes!" Jessie yells from the floor. His voice is slurred with the loss of blood. I pull away from Ashen and look over his shoulder. Jessie is struggling to his knees with the chair still strapped to his ankles.

"You might want to take care of that before there's nothing left to eat," Ashen whispers close to my ear before pressing his lips to my cheek. My eyes don't leave Jessie's sticky, writhing form. He slides in the blood that coats the floor, wailing like a lost child.

I slip away from Ashen and dance toward Jessie. I'm very excited about this one, so excited that I do a little clap. He's the meal that got away. Such a rare occurrence, and I do love a rare dish when I have the chance. I'm sure you're not too surprised though. After all, it would be a shame if I lulled you into believing I could be something else, especially after what I told you in the beginning. We vampires adapt to what you want us to be, so we can get what we need from you, remember? But don't worry. In this case, it's what I need from *Jessie*. A long overdue lunch.

I rake my lower lip beneath the needles of my fangs and skip a little turn in Ashen's direction to find him watching me with a hooded gaze that's full of dark desire.

The rotation of my spin ends by Jessie's side. I bend toward the desperate man. My hand slides into his hair and I pull his neck to my lips as he cries out to the indifferent walls that surround us.

"I sang you a lullaby the last time," I whisper into Jessie's ear. His feet squeak and slide through the blood that pools on the polished floor. "This time, I don't care how loud you squeal. Because if there's anyone here to listen, I'll kill them too."

With a smile of satisfaction, I crush my fangs to Jessie's throat and drink until the last beat of his heart.

CHAPTER 30

On the plus side, I'm no longer hungry. Or, more accurately, *hangry*.
On the minus side, I look like I'm cosplaying Carrie after the prom.

Jessie's lifeless body rolls from my lap as I stand and stretch my blood-soaked legs. I try to wipe my face with my sleeve but that's probably only making things worse. Ashen has the good grace to neither laugh nor grimace when I turn toward him. My fangs recede and I give a wary smile as I stop within his reach.

"It's in your hair," Ashen says, wiping a sticky strand away from my cheek.

"It can get a bit messy when I don't sing. Also when they don't have hands, apparently. That was a first."

"Well, at least you will terrify anyone we happen to find along the way." Ashen says as his eyes brighten the darkness between us. He tries to keep his worry hidden beneath the fire but it only stokes the blaze. "We should see who else we can find and get out of here."

I nod and start to move around Ashen to the door, but he grasps my upper arm and holds me in place. I glance down to his hand and back up to his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I just... I want you to be careful. If I ask you to run or to leave me behind, please just do it. Promise me."

"Does running because you told me to sound like something I would do?"

"No. That's why I am asking you to promise me."

"Promises are for mortals."

"Not when they are made between you and me."

Christ. Why do his words hurt? Why does my chest feel like there's a blade in the spot where my heart should be? My breath stalls against my ribs when I search Ashen's eyes. I see now that loss is the foundation of his life, as ancient as a monument of stone. He will fight the loss of me. But he expects it. He believes it. And he thinks it's coming soon. Maybe he's right, I don't know. I've been getting away with this life for a long time and lately it feels like death is catching up with me.

So, I will give him what he wants, if that will ease his pain. Because I don't get the sense that he's let anyone share that side of him for a very long time.

"All right, Reaper," I say as I lay a hand to the side of his face. There's a measure of relief in his eyes before he closes them and leans his warm skin into my palm. "I promise."

When Ashen opens his eyes again, the loss and longing are still there, but so is hope. He bends his head and presses his lips to mine as his hand slides beneath my shirt to drift across my back. He must taste the blood that lingers on my tongue and the residue of honeyed venom on my teeth, just as I taste smoke and mint and the heat of spiced liquor on his. And maybe I was wrong about promises being only paid in blood. This kiss feels like a promise. Every caress of our lips, every sweep of our tongues, every ragged breath. The way Ashen's palm heats my back as he pulls me closer. It feels like a promise that is paid with love.

When the kiss fades away, Ashen rests his head on my shoulder, his lips close to my ear. "Be careful," he whispers.

"You first," I whisper back.

Ashen pulls away and smiles, placing one last kiss to my cheekbone before he lets go. Fire ripples to life across his blade. We leave the room without another word. When we pass the threshold I give a final glance to the bloodless body on the floor and then I close the door behind me.

We continue down the corridor, passing more empty offices and staff rooms. We see no one, hear no one. We stop at a thick steel door at the end of the hallway and listen, but nothing comes from the other side. Ashen looks down at me before pulling the handle.

"The main section of the bar," I whisper, and he gives a nod in reply.

We enter the club at the boundary between the dance floor and the first rows of tables. I have to admit, even though I hated that motherfucker,

Sarno did have good taste. It's just the right mix of industrial and opulence. The brick walls and exposed pipes give space for the ornate crystal lights and the quilted black leather booths to shine. A wide stage spans the length of the dance floor against the rear wall, framed by sleeping lights and lasers.

"Tequila," I whisper with a happy clap as I head toward the gleaming copper bar at the other end of the room. Ashen follows in my wake as I weave between the empty tables. I hop over the counter and pull a bottle of Gran Patron and two glasses from the shelves.

"I am not sure now is really the time," Ashen says as he lays a hand on the bar and scans the room.

"I think now is the perfect time. Besides, you promised."

"No, I didn't."

I let out an incredulous laugh. "Are you fucking kidding me? I'm a vampire. I remember everything. Your exact words were '*Come with me, vampire, and I promise I will make it up to you later*'."

"My promise was specific to the part about making it up to you in bed afterward. I only pointed out that tequila and lunch were both located in the building."

"Ashen of House Urbigu," I say in my most chastising voice, clucking my tongue as I pull the glass stopper from the bottle and pour two shots. "Stop fussing about technicalities and drink up."

I down my liquor. The burn tingles in my lips and blazes a trail down my throat. I refill my glass under Ashen's watchful gaze.

"We should go," he says, but I make no motion to agree.

I finish my second shot and look through the sheen of liquid at the base of the glass to the polished copper bar. I've always loved the color of copper. I fill my glass once more and take just a sip this time, closing my eyes to relish the smoky flavor that coats my tongue. There are so many little things I love about life, like the sparkling flecks in metal or the flavor of a good drink. So many little things like these and I love them all, and together they make something so fantastical that it burns a hole in my chest when I really stop to add them up. How precious moments like this are, sharing a drink in silence with someone you love.

I open my eyes and give Ashen a bittersweet smile. "Don't you find it a bit odd that Jessie was just chilling out here with no one around? I know it's

not really prime club hours and all, but you'd think someone would have been guarding him. There'd at least be someone here."

The flame in Ashen's eyes grows brighter. He doesn't look surprised. He looks as though the weight of this idea and its implications already lays its heavy burden in his thoughts. "They must have known we had figured out that witches were involved. Perhaps someone saw me take the book of witch lineages and they reasoned we would identify a connection among you all."

"Did you find something in the book? You said at your house there was a connection between Mila and Sarno."

"They were cousins. Both came from an ancient line. Bobby was the older of the two, it seems, but nothing was recorded of his existence further back than Greek times. That doesn't mean he was not already around, however. When his father died, Bobby started amassing more power. That would have been shortly before the reaping of Aglaope."

"Well," I say, turning my glass against the surface of the bar before raising it to my lips and taking another sip. "It probably doesn't matter now anyway. Because this is clearly a trap."

Ashen fills his lungs with a heavy sigh and finally lifts his glass from the bar. He takes the shot and I refill it when he's done. "I'm afraid you might be right. But it is not certain. Are there more rooms?"

"A lounge and another two offices upstairs. And the staircase to the rooftop bar. It might be safer than going back the way we came or trying to waltz out the front door. We'll have a good line of sight to the streets below and there are two other rooftops within jumping distance."

Ashen finishes his second drink and sets the glass on the counter with a heavy *thunk*. "Let's go then."

"Nah, I think we should just stay here with all the alcohol and let them find us when they're ready."

"That's... that's a truly terrible idea. And you've had some spectacularly terrible ideas."

"Like what, killing an angel? That was a great idea."

I give Ashen the most lighthearted smile I can manage. And truthfully, it's not as hard as I thought it would be. I've been dodging death for a long time now. There's a certain peace in thinking these moments might be my last and choosing to embrace them in the way I want to.

I'm not so sure Ashen agrees.

His gaze falls away from mine. He drags a palm through his hair and presses his hand to the back of his neck as he lowers his head. I see the growing light of his eyes reflected in the polished surface of the bar.

"I'm sorry, Lu," he whispers, keeping his eyes lowered for a long moment. It seems to take a lot of effort to meet my gaze. When he does, I see desperation there. Despair. Remorse. Sadness that swells like a raging sea crashing against a rocky shore. "I should not have brought you here. I think you're right. I think it is a trap. But we need to go, in case we haven't yet sprung it and we can still get out."

I down my last shot of tequila and lean across the bar, folding my hand across Ashen's wrist to pull his knuckles to my lips. They're still spattered with Jessie's blood. I press a kiss to his skin, letting my lips linger there while I inhale the scent of Ashen's skin beneath the stains.

"All right, Reaper," I say when I let go. I offer a faint smile that does nothing to douse the fire in his eyes. "Follow me."

I lead us between the tables in a path to the left side of the room where a set of black stairs ascend toward the glittering crystal fixtures suspended from the ceiling. They end at a wide landing with leather couches and dramatic flower arrangements, high tables and expensive artwork in ornate gold frames. There's a V.I.P. lounge to the left and I can already tell it's empty. There's no breath, no heartbeat, no scent. On the right is a short corridor with an office on either side. Again, the rooms are empty, silent. Straight ahead is a final set of stairs. The stairs to the roof.

Ashen and I stand at the base of the staircase. I look to the closed door at the top. I think about the first and last time I was here, when the music was pulsing through my chest, confusing the rapid beat of my heart. My palms had been slick with anticipation. I remember the taste of venom on my tongue. I hadn't seen Bobby Sarno in person since that day in the village when he'd sneered at me as I writhed in flame, bound to the stake. I had climbed those stairs with a singular purpose, to claim my revenge on the last man left to see me burn.

I got what I came for. I lured him alone to the roof. When the spell of my disguise melted into the night and I saw the recognition in his eyes, I pressed his temples between my palms. I twisted his head until the bones popped and his body shuddered. He fell to my feet in a lifeless, twitching heap. I watched until he stilled, and then I jumped from the roof to disappear back into my quiet, hidden life.

And now here I am, and it feels like the ghost of Bobby Sarno is right here with me, like he's waiting on the roof. I know it's silly. His soul isn't trapped in the Shadow Realm, and it's not trapped here either. He died between my hands and there is no coming back. And somewhere along the line, it feels like that version of me died too. I would still kill him, don't get me wrong. I'd still relish every second of his life ebbing away between my palms. But I don't want to simply hide anymore. I don't think I'm meant for that life, because it doesn't feel like living.

I take Ashen's hand. His skin radiates warmth. I pull a deep breath to the bottom of my lungs. *This* feels like living.

"All right, vampire?" Ashen asks, looking down with a faint smile.

I nod. I give a smile in return despite a swell of nerves that churn in my belly.

We ascend the narrow staircase with our hands still clasped together. Ashen's blade brightens with flame. When we stop on the landing, Ashen turns the handle. He cracks the door ajar. I listen for sounds from the roof but there's nothing out of place. It's only the sound of birds traversing the sky. Cars down below on the road. I give a single nod and he pushes the door open.

We walk onto the roof. The bar is unlit, chairs turned upside down on the tables. We walk to the right and look down into the alley where nothing seems amiss. We check the other side that faces the front of the building and it's only cars and the empty sidewalk. I glance up at Ashen and smile. He returns my gaze with a wary look, but I see a touch of relief in his eyes. We move away from the edge of the building and start toward the fire escape at the far end. My eyes flick to the exact spot where Bobby Sarno's last breath was spent before I focus on the iron railings that curve toward the street below.

"I have to say, Reaper, I do love getting away with things."

A deafening crash bursts in my ears. A blinding light scorches my eyes. Ashen's arms wrap around me as we fall, a thousand pins of flame piercing my skin.

There is sulphur and smoke. There is pain and the scent of blood.

And then there is nothing at all.

CHAPTER 31

*M*y eyes are sticky. My lids pull apart and I blink the film of blood from my vision. Smoke and dust clog my lungs. I try to cough but the sharp points of broken ribs press into my chest. Thick, dark blood flows from the innumerable cuts and punctures in my skin. I see something shining in my arm, metallic and foreign in my flesh. I shift and pull my other hand from beneath my body. My fingers tremble with shock as I grip the bloodied metal and pull. A nail slides free from a deep hole between my bones.

"That's just swell," I say to myself, but I can't hear the words I make or the sound of the metal as I flick the nail onto the broken bricks.

There's a weight across my body that presses my ribs into my lungs with every breath. I groan and cough as I try to sit up, but the most I can manage is to roll onto my back. The smell of blood is suffocating. My own. Jessie's, dried and coated with dust. The Reaper's.

I look down at my body. The weight across my torso is Ashen.

I grit and growl and fight the pain as I push Ashen's heavy frame to my side. His arm rolls away from me and hits the debris that lies scattered around us. I can't see his face. His head is turned away from me. I drag myself closer, calling his name over and over. I can't hear the desperation in my own voice. But I can feel tears that cleanse the cuts on my cheeks with their salty sting. I lay my hand beneath Ashen's face and turn his head toward me.

His eyes fix their unseeing gaze toward the sky.

"Ashen... Ashen wake up."

I caress his blood-streaked skin with broken fingers.

"Ashen..."

I lean my ear against his chest, hoping to feel the rise and fall of his bones, the evidence of movement in his lungs. He is still. My shaking fingers touch his neck and his lips, searching for any sign of a heartbeat or a breath. There is nothing. I wail in frustration and despair, but the sound that escapes from the very center of my soul is little more than a muffled cry in my own ears.

My fangs slide from their sheathes and I bite into my wrist, holding my dripping blood over Ashen's parted lips. It flows into his mouth just as I see the first grey flake peel from his skin and lift toward the sky. There's another, and then another, and then more, and more, until I can't count them. They lift around me and drift away on the breeze. Then a light, cinders and smoke, sparks that take flight. The features of Ashen's face dissolve beneath my hands. His flesh turns to dust and I close my eyes, tears flowing across my skin as I weep.

I don't hear it coming. A crack of blinding pain hits the base of my skull, and the world and all my sorrow disappear.

I smell antiseptic. Alcohol. The adhesive of bandages. The PVC of intravenous tubes. More faintly: clay. Kiln dust.

The brickworks.

A sharp and unrelenting pain pierces through my brain and muddies my thoughts. It takes a moment to realize I can hear again. The beeping of a heart monitor plays an inconsistent beat to my left. The pace is getting faster.

Memories surface like the broken planks of a sunken ship. The weight of Ashen's body on mine. An image of his lifeless eyes, pointed to the sky. The cinders that collapsed beneath my hand and drifted away in the breeze. Tears streak across my temples before I even open my eyes. I look down at my left arm, bound with silver handcuffs to the rail of a hospital bed. I turn my forearm in the light, but the tattoo is gone.

I close my eyes and my shoulders shake with silent sobs.

"Tears for a Reaper? What kind of *koroleva piyavok* are you?" a man says from my right, his accented voice thick with mockery. I look toward the open door of the room.

The Alpha.

Semyon Abdulov leans against the threshold, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His dark hair is slicked back. He wears a burgundy suit, the

black shirt and silk tie beneath shimmering in the lights that shine too brightly above us. His glowing, snow-blue eyes crinkle at the edges with a smug, triumphant smile.

"Although, that might just be why you have survived so many years while your kin have not. You are unique. You make unpredictable choices. Most of the time." Semyon pushes away from the threshold and walks a few steps into the room, casting his gaze around the space before it lands on me once more. "Except the human. I figured you couldn't resist another chance to kill him. And we needed you to feed in order to survive. Most of your injuries have healed, no?"

Semyon walks closer and prods my ribs with his finger. The bones shift beneath the pressure and I hiss my fury at him.

"Most, not all," he says as his smile broadens. Semyon turns away and walks toward a stainless steel table along the far wall of the room, obstructing my view of the contents spread across its surface. "You know, the first few hybrids were a mess, quite frankly. We tried with several vampires before we found Arne Larsen. He was more ancient than the others we had experimented with. Not that he turned out very well."

"I noticed. I saw him in the Shadow Realm. Huge dick."

Semyon laughs and looks over his shoulder at me. "Interesting observation."

"Why did you put him down, couldn't stop him from humping the couch cushions?"

Semyon laughs again and turns to face the table. Glass jars clink in his hands. I hear the pop of a cap pulling free of a syringe. "No, we didn't put him down, *koroleva piyavok*. He died of his own genetic instability."

"But I smelled Angelwing poison."

Semyon turns to face me, a syringe clasped between his fingers like a cigarette. He gives me an assessing stare, his crystalline eyes roaming across my skin. A slow smile stalks across his face.

"That was his own venom."

The realization pulls me under like a rip tide tearing me away from the shore. I smelled the poison close to the hybrid's mouth, but I had assumed they must have given it to him. It never crossed my mind that his body could have *made* it. The implications... the power... Semyon would have a limitless supply of the deadliest poison to fell immortals and Reapers alike.

The cadence of the beeping from the ECG speeds as adrenaline surges through my heart. Semyon smiles.

"Where is the other ancient one you took? Where is Zara?" I ask.

Semyon raises the needle and looks with pride and determination at the thick silver fluid in the body of the syringe. "Safe. Far from here. She turned out much better. The older the vintage, the better the result, you see. That was the key." He turns his back to me once more to tinker with his vials and syringes. "You will be our best. A vampire from the original source. You will be our ultimate weapon. And when your Reaper comes back to find you, he will deliver you like a trojan horse to the Shadow Realm. And then you will slay the Reapers until none are left to stand against us as we take power over the Living Realm."

"He's dead," I whisper as fresh tears pool in my eyes. "The spell that binds us is gone."

Semyon tisks at me and shakes his head. "Now, now. You know that a Reaper cannot be killed for good so easily. After all, you've done it yourself. I imagine it took great effort, even armed with a Reaper blade and Sarno's spell. We did not use anything that would stop your Reaper from coming back, however. We need him, after all."

I blink in disbelief. Hope ignites the center of my chest. My heart pounds until the sound of it thrums in my ears. Semyon glances over his shoulder at the monitor and gives a chuckle before looking back down at the table.

"I will not help you."

"You won't have a choice. What the Alpha says, the pack obeys. It will be built into your new genetic makeup."

Well, fuuuck. Hard pass, because that sounds super lame. I strain against the handcuffs, but the silver keeps my strength at bay. The harsh metallic sound of the shackles sliding against the railing fills the room.

"Don't bother fighting, *koroleva piyavok*. It will make it easier on you." Semyon turns around with a butterfly needle for drawing blood and another syringe in his hand, this one half-filled with black liquid. "*Andrei*. Bring him in," he calls out in a booming voice.

A moment later I hear footsteps approaching from the corridor. They follow the sound of rubber biting the polished floor. I watch the door as an elderly man with fierce black eyes is rolled into the room in a wheelchair.

He impales me with a sharp glare, not acknowledging the tall Russian who brought him in as the man departs.

"Do you know who I am?" the old man asks. His voice is low and thick, like it's filled with fluid. He growls a rumbling cough. His body is failing, I can smell it in the scent of living decay. Organs that ooze their poison. Skin that rashes and blisters and peels. I smell ointments and witchcraft, time and suffering.

I shake my head. I have no fucking clue who he is.

"I am Adamen."

Oh shit.

"Adamen Sarno. Barbossa's father."

This is super not good.

"I thought you were dead," I say, looking at the lines that etch his face and the whisper of white hair that flows across the flaking skin of his scalp.

"You and I have something more in common than just my son." Adamen grasps the wheels of his chair and rolls himself closer to my bed. His progress is slow and laboured. He coughs and grumbles with the effort. "I faked my death when my enemies closed in around me. I stayed hidden. I helped Bobby acquire power among the covens. And as society evolved around us all, I helped him run his businesses, make his money. Build his connections. Grow his empire. And then you took my son from me."

I scoff. I know Bobby was his son and all, but he was no guiltless angel. And he certainly was at the centre of enough trouble that someone was bound to come for him eventually. "He sold me out to the Reapers. He told them where to find me. And then he watched as I burned. He got what he deserved," I snarl, biting the words out at him.

Semyon steps closer, stopping at Adamen's side. The old man rolls up his sleeve and holds his arm out. Adamen's eyes never leave mine, not as Semyon ties off his arm, not when the needle pierces the thick vein at his elbow, not when the vial fills with blood.

Semyon removes the needle and twists the vial free, then uses the half-filled syringe to draw the fresh blood in with the black fluid. He passes it to the old man to hold as he takes the syringe of silver liquid and taps it free of bubbles.

"I have willingly given my power and my youth and my health for this moment," Adamen says. He coughs, spitting phlegm into a tissue. I can smell the blood. It's as though his body is breaking down before my eyes.

And then something changes in his face. It morphs, from aging man into something cat-like, changing back again before I can be sure of what I saw. He does it again with a wicked smile, and this time I know it was not my imagination.

"A shapeshifter," I whisper.

"That's right. The last of my line. The magic in my blood will bind to the magic in yours and strip you of what you are," he says, his menacing smile deepening the wrinkles in his skin. "And now I will watch as *you* get what *you* deserve."

I erupt with fury, twisting against the shackles, hissing and growling into the man's weathered face.

"Be calm, little leech," Semyon says as he grips my throat and presses my neck down on the bed. He climbs onto the mattress, using the weight of his knee to keep my chest still. "I made something special just for you, as a thank you to Adamen here for giving his blood and his power to our cause so willingly. Anything you'd like to say before we begin?"

"Fuck you," I snarl. I spit in Semyon's face and he laughs.

"Very well then," he says. A needle pierces into my throat and Semyon pushes the plunger down. Liquid fire burns in my neck. He smiles down at me. "Just a little silver. Not enough to kill you, but definitely enough to kill your siren song. I hope you are happy with your last spoken words."

I twist and writhe and burn in Semyon's grip.

But those are not my last words.

My last words are a whisper of hope. My last words are *Ninmen Eslal*.

CHAPTER 32

I don't even try to make another sound. The silver burns so hot that I can't swallow. Adamen chants some kind of spell but I don't really listen to the words. I just squirm in pain as tears cascade across my skin, mixing with the sweat that dampens my hair.

Semyon pulls the needle of silver from my neck. He releases my throat from his grip and reaches over to exchange the empty vial for the syringe of black liquid in Adamen's hand. He plunges it into my jugular. "The witch serum first. Once this takes hold, we give you the wolf serum."

Semyon climbs off my body and I hear his footfalls as he walks to the table. I press my eyes closed in a silent sob. Adamen continues his incantations. I catch the occasional word. *Namtud. Usutuku.*

Rebirth. Warrior.

This witch serum of Semyon's hurts like a fucking bitch. It's cold, so icy cold it burns. I feel it crawling through every vein, snaking its way through my body. But my skin, my skin is on fire. Sweat trickles from my hairline, pools on my sternum. My torn shirt clings to my body, itchy and wet.

The heart monitor beeps a rapid rhythm that sounds nowhere near as fast as it feels in my chest. I swear my heart is going to squeeze itself through my ribs and make a run for it. My stomach twists like a fist and bile climbs my throat.

I turn my head and projectile vomit a spray of blood on Adamen's thin cotton shirt. He looks down with disgust and meets my eyes with a fierce glare.

I cackle a silent, fiery laugh.

"*Khristos*, that's a fucking mess," Semyon says as he looks over his shoulder at us and rolls his eyes. I laugh even harder despite the pain and fear, jostling the handcuffs against the stainless steel of my bedrail in delight.

I look back at Adamen, who pulls a tissue from his chest pocket and wipes a smattering of bloody vomit from his chin.

And that's when I see it.

I don't focus on it. He mustn't catch me watching. I keep my eyes on the old man. But my attention is not on him.

My attention is on the door that slowly closes behind him.

I hear what the others can't. I hear the click of the lock.

I smell the faintest scent of sage, picked from a windowsill under the full moon. Crushed with a granite pestle. Burned with a beeswax candle.

The lights flicker.

Adamen's eyes widen. A venomous smile creeps across my face as my fangs descend.

Adamen takes a breath doesn't have a chance to call Semyon's name.

A deafening crack fills the air and the lights go out. The room is plunged into night. It's like we've been hurtled into outer space. Stars glitter and burst around us as they fall from the ceiling, bouncing and hissing on the floor.

Adamen's wheelchair is knocked over. The old man lets out a feeble cry as he hits the floor with a clattering thud. A whisper fills the air from every direction, encasing us in incantations. Semyon is thrown against the wall in a burst of lightning.

The shackles on my wrists and ankles fall apart.

I erupt from the bed and land on the old man as he sputters and squirms, trying to pull away from his overturned chair. His fingertips squeak on the polished floor as he makes a futile final effort to drag himself to the door. I grab his throat and raise his face to mine and hiss, but no sound comes out.

The old man laughs.

"No songs for you anymore, vampire," he says as a thin channel of blood seeps from the corner of his mouth.

And no life for you anymore, old man, I think, and with a smile of fangs and poison I clamp my teeth to his neck and tear it apart.

Crackling electric light covers me and lights my skin in shimmering blue. I swallow all the blood I can in deep draws as a dome of black glitter

forms around me. I smell the familiar scent of Ediye. She wraps her arms across my waist from behind as I suck a last gulp of blood from the dying warlock in my grip.

I hear claws scrape with furious desperation against the dome and I know without looking that it's Semyon, transformed and trying to get in. There's a ripping sound and a slice of light tears through the fractured surface of the sphere. Not only did he survive the lightning blast in his human form, but he's fucking pissed about it.

"Time to go," Ediye says.

She presses me close to her chest. "*Sabbi lillaam barbi lillaam*," she says, her voice layered like chords in a song.

The dome explodes around us and we fall in a heap together on her living room floor.

"What the fuck," Ediye says when we finally catch some air in our lungs. She turns me over and grimaces. I've never seen her look this worried, not even when she stole my charred body from the stake like a macabre magic trick. "What happened to you?"

I shake my head. It feels like my brain jostles against its walls of bone. I close my eyes and lower my face away in despair. Tears flow across my burning skin as Ediye's palm slides over my forehead. Her touch feels cold when it's usually warm.

"You're burning up. Tell me what the hell happened."

I shake my head again.

"*Talk to me, Lu.*"

I smash my fist against the floorboards in frustration and I feel Ediye back away. I don't open my eyes. I don't raise my head. I make a writing motion with my hand.

Ediye gets up and rushes to her desk, bringing back a notepad and a pen, shoving them into my hands.

No voice, is all I write.

"No voice? There's no one here, it's just me. No one will hear you."

NO VOICE. STOLEN. I write.

"What?.." Ediye whispers. She tilts my head up to look in my eyes. Her gaze flows across my skin and she leans back to examine my throat. I see the swirl of her magic transform her eyes. It feels like looking into the heart of the universe, sparkling stars swirling like galaxies hurtling through the cosmos. "Silver?"

I nod.

Ediye's fingers travel a gentle path on my neck and she closes her eyes. She presses the precise point where the needle entered to deliver the toxin that stripped my siren song from my flesh. Ediye begins an incantation but my throat burns until the pain is unbearable. I clamp my hand around her wrist and beg her to stop with a soundless plea.

"My God," she whispers, her gaze flowing down my arms before they land on my face once more. The stars recede from her eyes as they return to their familiar, warm black. "Some kind of spell also, Lu."

The burn of my throat meets the cold serum in my blood. I feel a flutter of pain like pins needling my eye sockets. My fingertips are numb.

"Where is the Reaper?"

Killed. Back in the Shadow Realm, I write, though I can barely grip the pen. The numbness in my fingers climbs the backs of my hands, passes my wrists. My tongue feels too thick in my mouth.

"What did they put in you?"

Don't know. Blood of Adamen. Something black.

My hand jerks across the page. My arms and legs tremble. I drop to the floor and the last thing I hear is Ediye calling my name. The world goes dark.

When I wake, shivering and confused, Ediye is hovering over me, wiping a cold cloth across my skin. I try to talk but no sound comes out. For a moment I think it's a dream, a terrible dream. When I see the worry and despair in Ediye's eyes, I remember that it's real. I can't make a sound. Not an incredulous laugh at the irony of fates. Not a sweet song to bring Ediye joy or sooth the ball of nerves in my chest. Not a desolate cry of sorrow and loss. Nothing.

"You had a seizure," Ediye says, her voice quiet and soothing. I roll my tongue across my teeth and try to cleanse a fucking awful taste from my mouth.

What ungodly beast took a shit in my mouth? I write.

Ediye looks a little relieved by my note and almost smiles. She passes me a cup of warmed blood and nods to a second mug and a teapot that waft rank steam into the air. "It's a mix of *ferula asafoetida* and some other herbs I had on hand. It seemed to help."

Great. Here's hoping it doesn't happen again. Cheers.

Ediye watches as I take a sip of the blood and hang my pounding head. The fever still rages. Sweat still mists my skin. The numbness has receded from my fingertips but I feel weak, like just casting my hand across the page takes more strength than I have.

Thank you, Ediye. They would have kept going if you hadn't shown up.

"What do you mean?"

Something about 'waiting for the witch serum to take effect.' Then following it with a wolf serum. They wanted to make me into a hybrid weapon and use me against the Shadow Realm. It would somehow transform my venom into Angelwing poison, among other 'upgrades' I guess.

"Angelwing? You would... produce it?.."

I nod. My hand begins to tremble again and I feel the pins prodding at my eyes once more. I snap my fingers and point to the cup that contains the ass-smelling herbs. Ediye passes it over and I take a long drink and grimace, but the stabbing pain subsides, the tremor stops in my hand.

Ediye watches with a thoughtful, pensive frown. "Maybe that's what's going on with your body, Lu. Whatever process they started, it has begun but is incomplete. This witch serum is doing something, obviously. But maybe your body needs whatever is supposed to come next in order to stabilize."

Not fucking happening. You didn't see the hybrid's dick. It was abnormally huge. What if it makes my labia into a parachute?

Ediye smirks and runs her hand across my cheek. "Though I'm glad they didn't steal your fucked-up sense of humour, we really need to figure out what's happening to you and stop it before it gets worse. The apothecary I told you to see in Cairo, did you meet him?"

I nod.

"Good. He's partial to vampires. We'll go to him, he might be able to help," she says, standing over me as I remain seated on the floor. She grabs a cushion from her couch and guides me down until my head rests on the pillow. "Stay here, try not to move. I'll gather what I need to make a portal."

I nod and close my eyes. I listen to the sounds of Ediye fleeting through the kitchen, opening cupboard doors and muttering reminders to herself. I hear the pestle grinding fragrant herbs against the mortar.

"Need pine needles," Ediye says as she walks past me and opens the front door. I hear her footfalls bounce down the porch. I know she'll walk to the right side of the house where a pine tree shades her bedroom from the afternoon sun.

A few moments later I hear footsteps climb the stairs.

But they aren't Ediye's footsteps.

These are slow, the steps firm but not heavy. The point of each heel strikes the floor with finality. Sulphur wafts toward me on the breeze of the open door.

"Leucosia," a voice purrs.

I groan but no sound comes.

"You have seen better days."

I open my eyes as Ember bends down toward me.

"Do not worry, your witch is fine," she says, smiling her sweet and poisonous grin. Her eyes make a slow path from my sweat-drenched hair to my bloodied boots and back again. "You really look terrible."

I give her my middle finger. My attempt to keep it from shaking with rage and sickness is futile. The needling pain pokes my eyes and I reach for my cup of Ediye's concoction. Ember watches with fierce interest as I take a sip and suppress the urge to toss it into her face.

A faint smile lifts the corner of Ember's mouth. "They started with you, didn't they. But they didn't finish." A small and wistful laugh escapes past her lips. "I am impressed. I only asked for you to bring the knowledge of how to make the weapon back to me. Not to *become* the weapon."

Fuck you, I mouth.

"Don't worry, we will figure it out and finish what they started," she says as she curls her hand around my upper arm and hauls me to my feet.

Two unfamiliar Reapers enter the room and Ember turns her head without taking her eyes from mine.

"Bring this potion and the witch, then burn the house to the ground," she says to them. "We're going home to the Shadow Realm."

CHAPTER 33

"*T*his place is *fucked up*," Ediye says to me in a low voice as a black carriage emerges from the fog, pulled by a line of souls. The chains dangling from their necks clank as they slacken and the carriage draws to a halt.

Tell me about it, I think as I look over with a weary half-smile. Her grip across my shoulder tightens.

There's a tug on the glowing chain wrapped around Ediye's throat. It's a warning from the guard that stands behind us, tethered to the other end: *don't try anything stupid*. Not that she could with an enchanted obsidian chain tied around her neck to mute her power. The guards don't even bother to bind me. I'm in no state to threaten anyone.

The carriage door swings open and Ember is the first to enter. Ediye and I are pushed forward by the Reaper guards behind us, Ediye entering next to pull me up with her. The guards follow and shut the door behind us as the carriage lurches forward.

"It's good to be back, don't you think, Lu?" Ember asks as she crosses her legs and regards me with a coy and devious smile. I give her my middle finger. Her smile widens.

I look away, watching the fog outside the window as we pass through the veiled streets of the Shadow Realm. I want to ask Ember a thousand questions about Ashen. I want to ask if he's okay, if he's awake. If he's injured or in pain. If he's safe, as safe as anyone can be here in this place. I want to know if he's tried to come for me, even though the corridor of his estate was still closed when we arrived there with Ember. She must have

come another way. Maybe she was already in the Living Realm. Watching. Waiting.

Ashen's voice in my memory pulls a tight cord across my heart. *If you're trapped in the Realm of Light, I will still find you.* I close my eyes and lay my head on Ediye's shoulder, replaying those words in my mind, imagining the warmth of his touch on my skin. My heart is as sick as the rest of me, I think. I drift to the brink of sleep but it's an island I never reach in a dark and desolate sea.

It feels like every second is a minute, every minute an hour. Our carriage lumbers a winding path through the fog and twilight. Sweat still coats my body in a slick film. The numbness in my fingers comes and goes. Sometimes, the pins return to press on my eyes, but there are no seizures to follow in the confines of the black carriage.

Ediye taps my hand and I force my eyes open. It feels like it takes a lot of strength to do so. The thought crosses my mind for the first time that I might not just be sick. I might be dying. When I look at Ediye I can tell that the same thought is already embedded in her brain like a thorn. Her brow creases. I hear the erratic rhythm of her heart as her anxiety climbs. She tries to give me a reassuring smile but it comes out fake, like it's been painted on.

"Have you seen that before?" she asks, pointing to the window. The fog is less pervasive here. I can see for a distance. We're on a long bridge over a bay of black water that seems too thick and oily. The waves move unnaturally against one another as though creatures stir their currents beneath the surface.

"The Bay of Souls," Ember says, leaning forward and casting her gaze to the horizon. "It's where the detritus of human civilization comes to suffer for eternity. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Not really," Ediye says.

I shake my head.

Ember smiles. The sparks and cinders in her eyes dance with amusement.

We reach the end of the bridge and the fog thickens, but I can still see the black marble blocks of a tall gate in the mist as our carriage passes the threshold. Gargoyles loom over the guards that stand watch, silver spears with points of flame aimed to the dim light of a hidden sun.

The road curves and we stop at a tall building of the same polished black marble as the gate, imposing and unwelcoming. Torches ripple on either side of heavy iron doors, a line of guards in armor standing either side. We exit the carriage and it lumbers away, squeaking as it rolls into the abyss of silver mist.

Our taxi isn't going to wait, I guess, I sign to Ediye. She has her fiercest, most badass face on, and I love her for it. Her only acknowledgement of my uneasy message is a twitch in her lip.

Ember leads our party up the wide stairway to the entrance, not bothering to check if we follow. The Reapers behind us push us along. The guards at the doors pull them open with great effort despite their strength, and we pass into a hall of shadow.

The rhythm of my heart doubles in the dark. I can't see as well as I normally can. Pins pierce my eyes and I stumble in pain. Ediye grips my arm and whispers encouragement close to my ear. *Keep going, Lu. Focus on the sound of my voice. One foot in front of the other.* The guard tugs on the chain in another warning and she snarls her own warning back at him. But she doesn't give in. She doesn't stop. She continues her soothing monotone, even when I trip and she pulls me back up. Even when I stop to vomit blood on the slick black floor. Even when I close my eyes and lean against her as we walk.

So I focus on the things I can cling to as I drift on waves of unrelenting pain. How I can't give up, because Ediye needs me now as much as I need her. I have to get her out of the Shadow Realm. And I think of Ashen, that he's got to be here somewhere. That I need to find him, even if I don't have a spell to guide me. Even if it's only for a last look or a final word, to tell him how I feel. That I'm not just falling into love, I've landed in the very depths of it. It's as consuming as the desperation of not knowing where he is. And I don't think I've got much time left to tell him, because I'm not going to make it very long like this. I might not get another chance.

We walk for what feels like an eternity. Our steps echo up the stone walls that encase us like a tomb. I try to picture the good things I can think of when pain threatens to drown me. I feel Ediye's steps falter beside me and I open my eyes.

The space opens to a wide room, many stories high. Black smoke cascades up the wall like a reverse waterfall. A dais stands before us, lit by

shafts of light from a window behind us that must sit above the cover of fog. We slow to a halt.

There are three Reapers standing on the platform.

The one in the center is a tall man, older but still handsome, with streaks of grey in his dark hair and trimmed beard. His hand is folded around a long metal spear that rests at his side.

To the left, a woman with fair skin and waves of red hair that fall across her shoulders. Her hands are clasped together at her waist, her expression placid but observant.

To the right is Ashen.

I close my eyes and bend my head as relief overwhelms me. It floods my veins like a soothing serum, and for a moment I imagine it cools my burning skin and calms my pain. Tears sting my eyes and when I open them they fall, thick and cool on my fevered skin.

Ashen's expression is unreadable. I can see the rise and fall of his chest. I can almost smell the ink and tobacco that would comfort me if I could just feel his embrace. I meet his eyes and see the spark of flame in his pupils. I don't know what thoughts might live behind them. Everything is buried far beneath layers of armor centuries thick.

"Well done, Ember," the man says as Ember separates from our group, stepping closer to the dais. "When you spoke of a weapon to bring the Realm of Light to its knees, I hardly believed you. But now I see. She shines very bright indeed. I can see the stain of their promise on her soul."

I look from the man to Ashen and back again. My fingertips are numb. I don't feel them as I press my nervous grip into Ediye's arm.

"Not only that, Master Eshkar. She is Leucosia, the last of the original sirens. The one that gave Hakan an everlasting death on the island of Anthemoessa," Ember says, looking back at me with a smile of malice and delight. I hear the sharp intake of breath from the two unfamiliar Reapers on the dais as their shocked gazes shift between me and Ember. I look to Ashen. There is ferocity and determination in his gaze as he flicks it to Ember. He meets my eyes again and I wonder if he might tear this room apart.

"Truly?" the woman asks, and Ember gives a definitive nod. "How is that possible?"

"She faked her death. I'm sure the witch here had something to do with it. Perhaps my brother can confirm the specifics." Ember turns on her heel,

pressing the sharp point on the stone as she locks her eyes to mine. "None of this would have been possible without him, after all."

My heart ricochets on my ribs.

"Gaining Leucosia's trust, luring her here... bringing her to the enemy... using her to uncover their secrets."

My lungs burn in the absence of breath.

"Releasing the pack of hyenas into House Urbigu was a particular stroke of genius on his behalf. Nothing grows trust and affection like fighting danger together, isn't that right, brother?"

I turn my gaze to Ashen. His eyes are fused to Ember. He says nothing. No affirmation. No denial. No acknowledgement that I'm dismantling right before him.

Despair crashes through my chest. I try to grip my heart, as though the shattered pieces will pierce through my skin. Needles of pain radiate through my eyes. My legs and arms tremble. I drop to my knees before Ediye can catch me. I seize but I stay conscious long enough for Ediye to pull a thermos of her potion from the hands of one of the guards, forcing the liquid down my throat. Ediye's arms fold around me until the tremors subside.

"What is wrong with you, vampire?" Eshkar asks when Ediye hauls me to my feet. She knows me better than anyone. She knows I won't want to writhe on the floor. I wipe my tears and swallow my sorrow, raising my eyes to the man in the fiercest glare I can manage. "Speak."

"She can't," Ediye says.

"It's a lie. She can," Ember snaps.

"Not anymore. They burned it from her."

My glare intensifies as tears for another loss mount in my eyes. I turn my feral rage to Ashen. He looks back at me, the flame brightening in his eyes. The hand clasped around the hilt of his sword tenses.

"They started the process of turning her into a hybrid," Ediye says. "They have not finished."

Ember turns toward the dais. "Good. We will finish the job. Bring me Gallus and I will see it done."

The woman with the red hair nods.

"Not only have you brought us a powerful weapon that will win the war against the Realm of Light, but you found a great prize that had slipped away without our knowledge," Eshkar says as he turns toward Ashen.

Ashen pulls his eyes away from mine and for a moment I think I see pain within them, but maybe it's just my own that I imagine there. "Your service to the Shadow Realm has been long and dedicated. You have earned a great reward."

Ashen's eyes narrow in confusion and question.

"Bring the soul."

For a moment, I think the guards behind me will push me to the dais. But there are no hands on my back.

I hear chains clanking from the shadows of the room. A Reaper pulls a thin and tattered soul toward the dais. A witch. I can tell, though I don't know how. I just feel it, the dead magic within her.

I look to Ashen. His breath is quickening in his chest. His lips part. His eyes dart from Eshkar to the soul and back again.

Eshkar looks to the woman next to him and sweeps his hand toward the witch soul. "Imogen, if you will, please begin."

She gives a nod in reply and closes her eyes for a long moment, and then she starts to chant. When Imogen opens her eyes they glow with a brilliant green flame. She continues her chant as she descends the steps of the dais, raising her hands toward the soul. Black tattoos etched to her palms glow with golden light.

The chain clasped to the soul's neck breaks apart and clatters across the stone. The soul wavers on her feet but the guard holds her arms, keeping his grip solid as Imogen draws to a halt before them. She presses her palm to the soul's chest.

Golden light hums on the witch's skin. Static crackles in the air.

"*Sag anir niggiggaa udmi nibzal zale,*" Imogen says.

Light explodes from the body of the soul. She crumples to the floor, naked and shaking. Black tattoos erupt across her skin as though carved from the inside out. A bird. Geometric flowers. Honeycomb. She turns over and gasps for breath, her eyes burning bright with white flame. On her chest, the face of a jackal above her heart.

The last of the black lines carve sweeping lines beneath her collarbones. They burn out like fuses in her skin. When the last of the golden light dies, the witch curls into herself, panting and shivering on the cold stone floor.

The Reaper who dragged her in lays a cloak across her naked body and pulls her to a seated position. She brushes long hair the color of honey and gold away from her face and looks around in confusion and fear.

Ashen takes a heavy step from the dais. He looks at me. For a moment I see every truth behind his eyes. That life is time and loss. It's choices and failures. It's holding on and letting go. And I don't think I fit in any of it. Not anymore.

"Ashen?" the witch asks from the floor. Just one word. It means so much to her. I can feel the time and loss just like I see it in Ashen. But I hear rebirth in it, too. Another chance at something lost long ago.

Ashen takes another step down the stairs. I see the doubt, the question in his eyes.

"Davina?" Ashen asks.

She pushes herself to her feet. She takes an unsteady step in his direction. He takes another down from the dais.

A sound of hope and disbelief pours from her and she rushes to him, crashing into his body, wrapping her arms across his back. Her cry is unlike anything I've ever heard. But it's everything I wish I felt. Ashen wraps one arm across her back, and then the other. He closes his eyes and I lower my gaze to the floor.

Eshkar pounds his spear to the dais. The sound ricochets across the walls around us. Two Reapers creep from the shadows as the guards behind us step closer and grip my arms. I look one last time at Ashen. Davina weeps in his embrace. His eyes are fused to mine over her shoulder, glowing with the brightest flame.

"Take the witch and the weapon to the cage," Eshkar says as his voice booms around us.

"The war against the Realm of Light has begun."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much for reading A Shadow In The Reaping! I absolutely loved writing this book and I hope you enjoyed reading it. Please consider leaving a review; not only will it help me to reach more readers, but it will also bring some sunshine to my day! Writing can be a very solitary, lonely process, and the feedback I receive truly does keep me going. And please reach out, I'd love to hear from you! I really do love to hear from readers and I'm always happy to answer questions. You can find me here:

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ASITR started as an exercise for me to get words out more quickly. I was already deep into writing The Elysian, the second book of The Diviner series, but was struggling with how heavy that project is. It takes a lot more time to write as there are many intricate characters to keep track on top of an evolving, complex magical world. I felt like I couldn't get the words out that were trapped in my head. So, I set a little challenge for myself, to tackle a genre I felt was maybe a little stigmatized, or 'overdone'. Vampires really fit that bill. I wanted to make a book that was fresh, fun, and unique. My only rule was: HAVE FUN.

And that's what I did! I just *had fun*. In the moments where I struggled, or doubted myself and the direction I was taking, that's what I kept going back to. Make it batshit crazy. Make it weird and wonderful. Make it FUN.

I am still a total pantsner, and this book was no exception. I really didn't have much of an idea what I was doing when I started. But Lu and Ashen absolutely swept me away. Sometimes, it felt like I couldn't keep up with them. The world rose up to meet them, and I cannot wait to write the next step in their journey.

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Finally, to my lovely husband, thank you for the wine, the coffee, the food, the rants, and most of all the love. You might just be the only one that gets the homage to Hot Fuzz AND who gets the reference to homage. I love you so much. HAG. And to my son, Hayden, please basically skip this book and just read this dedication. Okay, maybe just this part of the dedication. But just know that your hugs and kisses and face pats kept me going. I love you and I hope I made you proud.

Much love,

Brynne xx

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brynne is a fan of velociraptors, the Alien movies (well, most of them), red wine, and wild adventures. She can relate nearly anything you say to a line from the movie Hot Fuzz. She has been trying unsuccessfully for years to convince her husband that they should acquire a pet mink to add to their menagerie of animals (what could possibly go wrong with that plan?!). Brynne has been everything from an archaeologist to a waitress, a deep-sea core analyst to an advertising account executive. For the last several years, she has been working in the field of neuroscience clinical research. Brynne has been writing since childhood and has published a non-fiction book under her real name, but she won't tell you what it is unless you provide a live, fully-trained velociraptor. When not busy at her day job or writing, Brynne can be found working with her husband and their son on their family farm in Nova Scotia, Canada, or enjoying her other passions which include riding horses, reading, riding her motorcycle, and spending time with family and friends around a raclette and a bottle of wine. *A Shadow In The Reaping* is her second novel and she is thrilled that you took the time to read it.



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