

DEATH

LAURA THALASSA

THE FOUR HORSEMEN: BOOK FOUR

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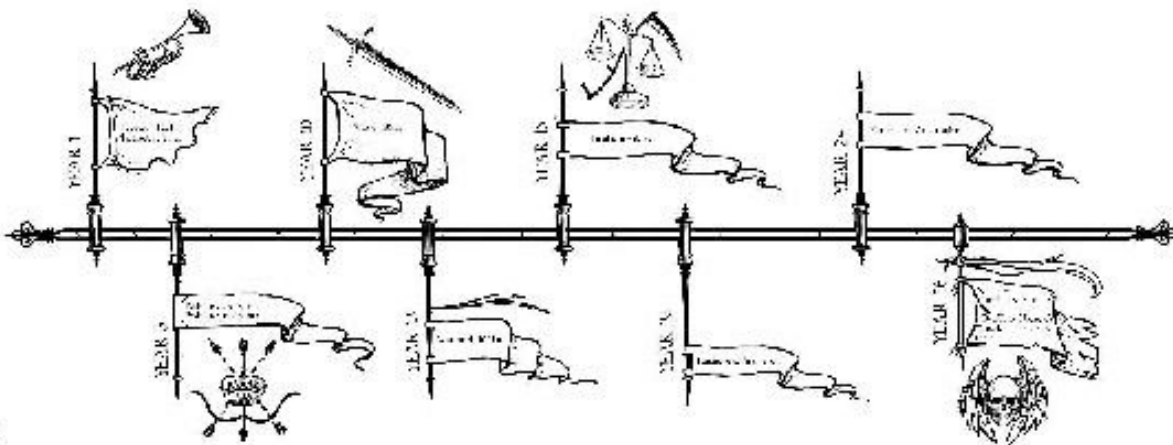
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To Dan

So it was fated.

Horsman Timeline



When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come!” I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and the one who sat on it had the name Death, and Hades was following with him.

—*Revelation 6:7–8 NASB*

But [Death] has a heart of iron, and his spirit within him is pitiless as bronze:
whomever of men he has once seized he holds fast: and he is hateful even to
the deathless gods.

—*Hesiod, Theogony*

PART I

Chapter 1

Temple, Georgia

July, Year 26 of the Horsemen

The first time I meet Death, I am ... not ready.

A trickle of sweat drips down between my shoulder blades as I look over the list of items I need to pick up for my niece's birthday barbeque later today. There's a dull drone of noise around me as people shop at our outdoor market.

Tomatoes—got it.

Leafy greens—got it.

Cantaloupe—got it.

I scan over the rest of the items. I think all that's left are apples.

Stashing my list in my back pocket, I glance up at the open-air farmers' market, scanning the tables for the one I'm looking for. As soon as I spot Tim's stall, I start winding my way towards it. He's a cantankerous old man, but he's the only seller I know who regularly stocks produce that's out of season.

I'm convinced witchcraft is involved.

I've just made it to Tim's stall when the animals freak out. And they *all* freak out. The horses tied to nearby posts jerk against their restraints, dozens of birds take flight all at once, and the dogs in the area let out frightened, baying cries.

Old Bailey's mule races down the highway next to the market, his horse cart still attached. And the sheriff's steed throws his owner off his back before galloping away, saddle and all.

Still more creatures dash through the outdoor market, knocking over tables and baskets, scattering people and produce as they go. I can see the terrified

whites of their eyes. They and their fear move like a storm cloud through the market.

Eventually, the stampede tapers off, leaving behind a hollow silence that raises the hair on my arms.

What ... was that?

I glance around. Everyone else looks confounded as well.

“What in the hell?” someone says.

“In all my life, I’ve never seen animals act that way,” someone else says. But then the thought is punctuated by a laugh, and someone else joins in, and suddenly, it’s like the tension leaks out of the space.

People help right knocked over crates and chairs, the produce gets rearranged, and conversations resume. A group of men and women split off to retrieve the lost animals, and an elderly man helps the sheriff to his feet.

Everyone seems to be shrugging off the strange behavior like a bad dream.

I turn back to Tim, the stall owner, and then my eyes drop to the apples. I try to focus, though I haven’t shaken that unnerving silence that seems to ring in my ears. My attention drops to the apples.

I read the price, then I read it again.

“A dollar fifty *per* apple?” I say, astounded. That *must* be an error.

“You don’t like the price, then don’t buy them,” Tim says.

So it’s not an error.

“I didn’t even say the price was too high,” I respond, *though it is*. “The fact that you assumed it means you *know* it’s unreasonable.”

“Deal with it.”

He might as well steal my purse while he’s at it. Way to rob the customer blind.

“But it’s an apple,” I say slowly. This has to be a joke.

“You don’t like it, buy from someone else.”

Damn this man. He knows no one else has apples at this time of year. And my niece Briana was *very* specific that she wanted an apple pie for her birthday.

“A dollar,” I say. It’s still a ridiculously unreasonable price, but it’s better than *a dollar fifty per apple*. My God.

“No,” he states flatly. His gaze moves away from me, to another woman who is looking at a nearby crate of corn.

“A dollar twenty-five,” I try again, even as I’m trying to figure out if any other sellers would have apples in stock. Martha might ...

Tim gives me an annoyed look. “I’m done talking about this.”

“This is ridiculous—you seriously want *a dollar fifty* for an apple? It’s an apple!” I say.

“They’re out of season,” he responds gruffly.

I guffaw. “I’ll pay”—this is so unbelievably stupid—“eleven dollars for eight of them.” These better be the best damn apples I’ve ever tasted; they better make me see God.

Tim folds his arms over his chest, casting me a withering glance, even though I’m only asking him to take off one measly dollar. “You can pay the full price, or you can take your business else—”

Right in the middle of his sentence, his eyes roll back.

“Tim?” I say. Even as I speak, he begins to fall. “Tim!” I lunge for him, but I’m not fast enough.

The soft sound of his body hitting the grass is lost in the collective noise of *many* large objects hitting the ground all at once.

I jolt at the commotion, the hairs at the back of my neck standing on end. And that’s when I notice that disquieting silence is still there—the one that began when the animals first fled. Only now, it’s more pronounced than ever.

I look around, confused. In every direction, people lie motionless. Most of them are sprawled on the grass, but there are others who lay slumped over tables.

No one moves.

One second goes by, then two, then three.

I’m aware of my own ragged breathing and the pounding of my startled heart, and my head is trying to wrap its mind around what I’m seeing.

The thing is, I *know* what this is. It looks impossible, and my heart doesn’t *want* to believe it, but something like this has happened before. It’s happened to *me* before.

Still, I kneel down next to the woman who had been looking at Tim’s corn. Now her sightless eyes are staring up at the clouds.

I place a hand to her neck, waiting for her pulse.

Nothing.

A sick sort of feeling twists my gut. I stand, my gaze sweeping over the market stalls once more, taking in the dozens of still bodies.

No one moves. I can hear the gentle sound of wind stirring canvas canopies, the trees rustling in the breeze, and even the distant glug of some container dripping out its contents. But there’s no idle chatter, no laughter, no

shouts or screams, no noisy insects and no bird calls.

It's completely silent.

On a whim, I check Tim's pulse. Nothing. Then I check another and another, my breath seizing up in my throat.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Everyone is dead—everyone but me.

A small noise slips from my lips, and I can feel my body trembling, but my mind is oddly blank.

Is this what shock feels like?

I stumble out of the farmer's market, towards Highway 78. I can't stifle my rising horror as I pick my way through the dead.

How far does the devastation extend?

I'm passing the last line of stalls, and the highway is right in front of me, when the clop of hooves interrupts my thoughts. I think I'm imagining it, but then it gets louder.

I turn towards the sound. At first I don't see anything, the canopy of the stall to my right blocking my view. I take a few more steps towards the road, and suddenly, I see him.

Backlit by the morning sun, looking like some dark god, is a rider clad in silver armor, a set of black wings at his back.

Those wicked wings are all I can look at for a moment. They are just as impossible to comprehend as the sea of corpses behind me.

There are four known creatures alive who have the power to kill off life in an instant. And only one of them has wings.

God's last angel.

Death.

Chapter 2

Temple, Georgia

July, Year 26 of the Horsemen

My knees nearly buckle at the realization.

My God, I'm staring down *Death* himself, one of the four horseman of the apocalypse.

I've never seen anyone—*anything*—like him.

He is dressed to do battle—though who could possibly stand against him is a mystery. That armor gleams as though it's freshly polished, and those massive black wings lay folded at his back, so large that the tips of them nearly touch the ground. As the horseman rides, his eyes are pinned to something in the distance.

His face is solemn and captivating. I swear that I've seen the arch of that brow and the slope of that nose before in my dreams. And I've imagined the curve of those lips, the press of those cheekbones, and the cut of that jaw in every tragic poem read by candlelight.

He is more beautiful than I can make sense of and more terrifying than I could've imagined.

I must make some noise from where I stand because the horseman's gaze lowers from the skyline, his black hair shifting a little where it skims his shoulders. For one perfect second, our eyes meet.

He has *ancient* eyes. Even as far away as he is, I can still see his age in them. This being has seen more of humanity than I could ever hope to. I feel the weight of all that history the longer he looks at me. His jaw clenches as he takes me in, and my skin tingles from his appraisal.

Maybe it's because I'm still in shock, or maybe it's because it's simply too late to hide, but whatever the reason, I walk onto the highway towards the

horseman.

Death's brows furrow, and he pulls his horse to a stop. I stop then, too, the two of us still staring each other down.

After a moment, he swings off his horse and strides forward, closing the distance between us. His boots make an ominous, echoing sound on the broken asphalt, and my heart is pounding and I should run. Why am I not running?

Death comes to stop in front of me.

He takes me in—all of me, his eyes moving from my face to my vintage T-shirt and cutoff jeans to my legs and second-hand sneakers, then all the way back up to my face again. The appraisal isn't lewd; I get the impression that he's not taking in my body at all, his gaze is a little unfocused.

"I don't recognize you." His wings rustle and resettle at that. He frowns, his brows creasing. "Who *are* you?"

Chapter 3

Temple, Georgia

July, Year 26 of the Horsemen

Death

Everything in me demands I take her.

Everything.

Perhaps it's because I *cannot* do so—not in any real sense. Her soul has cleaved itself to her flesh, and neither my hand nor my power can pry it loose.

And still, the urge to whisk her away rides me. It's so foreign, so *alarming*, that my wings fan out, partially in shock, and partially in preparation to take flight.

I felt it the moment I saw her, and the sensation still hasn't abated.

I stare at the woman as her lips part.

"I ..." Her voice trails off, her chest rising and falling faster than it should be. "I don't know how to answer that," she says, looking lost and perhaps a little dazed.

I'm struck by the lilt of her voice. Even *it* is compelling.

Your brothers had their women. This one is yours. Take her.

I fight against the driving need.

Did this happen to my brothers? Were their struggles this ... visceral?

It's fucking awful.

I steel my spine.

Humans are the impulsive ones. Not horsemen.

Certainly not me, Death.

Nor will I become like them.

I whistle over my shoulder, calling for my horse, though I can't bring myself to look away from the woman. I don't know why I want to gaze at her. I have been awake for a year now. Never has a human caught my attention like this. That alone is unnerving.

My steed comes to my side. Reluctantly, I tear my gaze away from the mortal and force myself onto my steed, battling my own baser instincts to reach down and snag the woman's shirt so I can draw her up here with me.

My mind needs to be set fire to.

Leave, I command myself. Put as much distance as you can between her and yourself. You have a duty you must not waver from.

Still, almost of their own accord, my eyes drop down to her, like they can't

help but take her in. At my back, my wings open and resettle with my agitation, and I ignore these strange sensations rolling through me.

“You shouldn’t be alive,” I bite out, my voice hostile.

Before the woman can say anything else, I kick my horse into action, and I flee.

Lazarus

I **stare after** the horseman as he rides away, unsettled by the strange, brief encounter.

Death.

I get chills just thinking about that awful horseman.

Once I lose sight of him, I blink several times. Death's departure seems to break the spell I've been under.

My gaze sweeps around me once more, at all the people who were alive only minutes ago.

Then the wheels in my mind begin to turn. Death has come to Temple, Georgia. He's already killed off the entire population gathered at the open-air market (sans me, of course), and now he's heading into the town proper.

My town, where my family and friends live. Where today, in particular, they've all gathered in honor of my niece's birthday.

Oh, *fuck*.

That thought has no sooner clicked into place then I'm dashing down the highway, leaping over the dead, my heart pounding a mile a minute.

OhGodohGodohGodohGod.

Pleasenotmymom. Pleasenotmymom. At first, all I can fixate on is her. She's been my entire world since she found me two decades ago, alone in another city full of corpses.

But then there are other people I love—my siblings Nicolette and River and Ethan, Owen and Robin and Juniper. Then there are their spouses and—

I choke at the thought of all my tiny nieces and nephews, my stomach roiling at the thought. Already I've seen children amongst the bodies lying in the streets.

What sort of monster doesn't spare children?

I try to push away the thoughts of my family, but then I'm thinking of Hailey and Gianna, my closest friends and then there's Jaxson, who I'd only started seeing.

All of them live in this town.

My fear and horror are choking me up.

Please God, don't be that cruel.

The trip back to my house is quick, but my panicked thoughts make it feel

like an eternity. The scattered remains of so many dead don't help. Dread is already mixing with my fear.

My lungs burn and my legs are threatening to give out when I catch sight of the pea green house that I've always called home. It's always been a bit snug for the seven of us siblings that grew up in it. Add to that all of the friends and neighbors we had coming and going through that front door over the years, and it was always a noisy, boisterous place where you could kick your feet up and hang—if you didn't mind the fact that we all basically lived on top of each other.

I dash up the front walkway and barrel through the door. The first thing I notice is the smell of something burning, but the thought is quickly eclipsed by the sight in front of me.

A scream slips out. My brother River sits on the couch, his body slumped over his guitar, his pick on the ground next to him.

"No," I moan, running over to him. There are more bodies—Nicolette and her husband Stephen are in the kitchen, their younger daughter in the highchair my mom keeps around for her grandkids.

At the sight of my tiny niece, I have to press a hand to my mouth to keep my rising sickness at bay. A horrified tear slips out.

I can't bring myself to touch the bodies. I know they're gone, but feeling their cool flesh will make it real, and I ... I can't do that just yet.

My brother Ethan lies on the ground in front of the stove, and there is the source of the smoke—the breakfast he was cooking sits charred in the pan.

I don't know why I go to the trouble of removing that pan from the stovetop. Everyone here is already dead.

I stagger down the hallway, into my bedroom. Robin is inside, splayed out on the bed she used to sleep in before she moved out. Briana, my niece, is slumped against her, the picture book they must've been reading pinned beneath her small body. Their eyes stare sightlessly out and I choke on my horror.

We were supposed to be celebrating Briana's birthday today, not ... not *this*.

Owen and Juniper and their families haven't arrived yet, so the only person still unaccounted for is—

"Mom!" I shout.

No answer.

Nononopleaseno.

She can't be dead.

"Mom!" My heart feels like it's trying to leap out of my chest.

I run from room to room like a madwoman, searching for her. She was here when I left this morning, already prepping for the birthday party, but now I don't see her.

Gone is better than *dead*, I try to tell myself.

But then I glance out the living room window into the backyard. First I catch sight of the long wooden table already prepped with plates and utensils and some birthday decorations. Beyond that I notice the big oak tree that I used to climb as a kid. For a moment I'm able to trick myself into thinking that she was an exception, just like me, before my eyes land on the raised garden beds.

No.

My legs fold.

"Mom." My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's too hoarse, too agonized.

She lays next to the raised beds, some gathered herbs strewn next to her.

I force myself to my feet and stumble towards the back door. I don't know how I get it open, I can't see clearly, my tears are obscuring everything.

I don't want to believe *this* death. This woman saved me and took me in. She showed me what grace and bravery and compassion and love look like. To quote my second grade writing prompt, my mother *is* my hero.

And somehow, her incredible life is just *gone*.

I don't know how I manage to get the rest of the way to her. Nothing feels right. I fall at my mom's side. This close to her, I can see that her eyes, too, are open, sightlessly staring up at the sky as though it holds the answers.

A choked cry slips from me as I drag her body into my arms. Her skin feels wrong—warm where the sun has been beaming down, but cooler where it's rested against the grass.

I still press my fingers to her neck; I can't bear not to.

Nothing. No flutter of a pulse—nothing to challenge what I can so obviously see.

I close my eyes, bowing my head over her. Tears now freely slip down my face.

My entire family can't be gone. They *can't*.

I'm weeping and broken and I can't process any of it.

This is what it must've felt like, all those years ago, when Jill Gaumond,

my mother, rode into Atlanta against everyone's pleas, looking for her husband. It must've felt unbelievable, seeing a city's worth of dead and her loved one amongst them, taken by Pestilence's plague. But at least then, the rest of her family had been in Temple, Georgia, safe from the Messianic Fever.

Now, that's not the case. There's no one left here besides me.

The longer I hold my mom, the colder her skin grows. And I'm still crying, and I know.

I know.

I know.

I know.

They really are all gone. Mom and River, Robin and Ethan, Nicolette and Stephen and birthday girl Briana, and little Angelina. All gone the same instant everyone else was taken. And they're not coming back and no amount of wishing will change that.

"I love you," I say to my mom, brushing back her hair. It feels inadequate. And my mind is still reeling, and grief hasn't fully set in because none of this makes sense, and I'm so confused how everyone could just be ... *gone*.

And why, even after facing down Death himself, I'm still alive.

Chapter 4

Temple, Georgia

July, Year 26 of the Horsemen

Death and I are old enemies.

Well, at least I *assumed* we were enemies. Apparently, he doesn't actually know who I am.

The thing is, I've never been able to die—or rather, I *can* die. It just never seems to stick.

Not when I fell from the tree and broke my neck. Not when I was robbed and my throat was slit.

And perhaps most notably, not even when Pestilence rode through Atlanta long ago, killing a city's worth of people, my biological parents included.

I shouldn't have lived then—not from the plague itself, and not from the days that followed when little infant me went without food and water.

The way my mother tells it—*told* it—she was riding back home after finding her husband dead at the hospital he worked at when she heard my cries.

I went inside the house, and there you were, scared, hungry, and howling like you didn't survive at least two days on your own. You saw me and ran into my arms and that was that. I lost a husband, but gained a daughter.

I can hear my mom's voice in my head even now, and it causes my throat to tighten. My strange origins were what led to my name, Lazarus.

One who cannot die.

There's a sick twist of envy in my gut. Envy for the *dead*. Who even envies the dead? And yet here I am, wishing that death had taken me along with my family instead of forcing me to endure this crushing grief all alone.

Of all the futures I envisioned, this was never one of them. It should've

been. This is the world we live in, one where nothing works anymore and people cling to religion like some sort of talisman that will keep the monsters at bay when it so obviously won't.

I let my mother's body go and back away from her. It hits me then: I am surrounded by the dead. Not just in this house, but in this entire city. I swear I can feel it in the air—death pressing in on all sides.

The ground beneath my feet begins to tremble. I glance down at the earth, my brow furrowed. In the distance I hear the deep groan of ... something large. Several splintering sounds follow it, then—

Boom!

The ground shakes a bit more violently as something hits it *hard*.

I'm still trying to get my bearings when those same sounds start up again—only now, they're coming from the walls of *my* house.

My gaze moves to the building before me, dread pooling low in my stomach. I begin to back up, even as the ground continues to shake.

Move, Lazarus.

I make it just beyond the oak tree near the back of the yard when my childhood home lets out a long, shrill screech. I turn around just as it starts to fall. The left side goes first, but as it begins to collapse, the right side follows.

BOOM!

I'm thrown to the ground by the sudden, close impact. A plume of dust and debris blows out over me, and I close my eyes, even as I breathe in the acrid air. A few final bits of building material clatter, then it grows quiet once more.

I stand, waving away the lingering dust in the air as I turn towards my house.

Only, my house is no longer standing. It, and all the dead who resided in it, are now nothing more than a pile of rubble.

The entire town of Temple lays in ruins. I see bodies and debris. Nothing more. The landmarks—the coffee shop I went to, the grocery store I shopped at, my old high school—are all gone.

Gone, gone, gone.

At the sight of all the destruction—and all the people I recognize lying out in the streets—I begin to cry. I cry until my voice is hoarse from sobs. Then I simply stare at the sea of bodies.

Can't stay here, I realize. There's no shelter left—no *people* left.

I look desolately around me.
Where am I supposed to go?

Chapter 5

Eastaboga, Alabama

July, Year 26 of the Horsemen

Three nights later, sitting off to the side of Highway 78, I roll my mother's old wedding ring round and round my finger as crickets chirp around me. It's the only thing I managed to salvage from the wreckage of my house, though that's because my mother was wearing it, and she was one of the only things not buried beneath the rubble.

I took it off her finger. Bile rises to my throat at the thought. I took it like some shameless grave robber. What I should've done was bury her with it. It meant a lot to her. But I didn't, and honestly, my guilt is eclipsed by the relief I feel that I have at least something of hers.

Besides it, the only things that are truly mine are my purse and my bike, which I happened to leave at the farmer's market way back when this all started. So now they've officially become my few prized possessions.

I return my attention to the simple gold band, trying my hardest to un-see all the images that my mind wants to manically replay over and over. It's not just my town that has been destroyed. Bremen, Waco, Tallapoosa, Carrollton—all the towns I have passed through seeking refuge—they have been decimated, their inhabitants dead, their buildings leveled.

I'm still rolling that ring around when it comes to me.

He needs to be stopped.

And if I'm the only one who can survive Death ... then I must be the one who stops him.

Chapter 6

Lebanon, Tennessee

October, Year 26 of the Horsemen

The second time I meet Death, it's by design, not chance.

I sit against an oak tree off to the side of the road, a bow and quiver at my side.

It took three months, lots of running around in circles, and many, many devastated towns, but finally I think I've gotten ahead of Death.

The autumn sun hides behind clouds, and the trees down the road are changing colors. This is about the time that football season is in full swing, when there's a sharp chill to the wind. With that comes the promise of holidays and sweaters and warm drinks and *family*.

My throat tightens. Living alone has been its own kind of hell. I'm used to noise. My house was always filled with singing, cursing, laughing, *talking*. There was comfort in all those sounds. You couldn't walk five feet without tripping on someone else's toes. Even once my siblings had all moved out, they were always over, and when it wasn't them, it was neighbors and friends.

Now the only company I keep are the corpses I pass and the carrion eaters that feed on them.

That, and the lonely howl of the wind.

I think the loneliness might drive me mad.

The afternoon wears on, and I begin to fidget. Hanging out on well-traveled roads is just asking to get robbed at knife-point. That's how it happened to me. I'd been on my way home from a patient's house after being up for over twenty hours, assisting with a particularly long and troubled labor. The doula I was apprenticing under had sent me home to get some rest.

I was falling asleep on my feet when I decided to stop a little ways off to the side of the road and lay down for a minute. I woke to my neck getting slit. The highwaymen stole all of my things as I bled out. When I came to again, I was bloody and alone.

Lightning flashes, rousing me from my thoughts.

Not a minute later, a swarm of animals rush down the quiet highway. I stare at them in disbelief.

He's coming.

Dear God, he's actually *coming*.

I've gotten the horseman's location wrong so many times in the last few months that I almost believed I wouldn't cross paths with him again. But finally it paid off.

Briefly my hand reaches for a bow I picked up a month ago. I'm not a good shot, and it was meant more for scaring off dogs and hunting game. (I've yet to succeed at *that*.) But perhaps I could use it to stop Death.

I grimace. I've never deliberately hurt anyone before, and while I might have reason to now, I'm ... I'm not sure I'm ready to do so.

I mean, I'm the girl that deliberately stitches daisies onto my clothing, I like to save baby animals in my spare time, and for the last few years I've been studying to be a doula, of all things. Also, it's been proven that, when drunk, I'm a hugger.

A lone figure comes into focus. He looks like a dark smudge against the stormy horizon. I can just make out those terrible wings.

Overhead, rain begins to fall. First one drop, then two, then several, until it feels like the sky has cracked itself wide open. The wind kicks up and I shiver against the chill.

The closer the horseman gets, the more I quake.

Did you really hope to stop him, Lazarus? He's not just going to listen to reason. You know he's not.

He doesn't notice me, not until I get up from where I'm sitting and step out into the middle of the road.

The horseman pulls his horse up short, and though it's a different city and a different day with different weather, it feels like I'm reliving our first encounter all over again.

"You," he breathes, his voice filling the entire world around us.

He remembers me.

I shouldn't be surprised, there probably aren't many humans he *can't* kill,

but still. He remembers me.

The rain comes down faster by the second, and the wind whips my hair as I stare resentfully up at the horseman.

Death hops off his steed, his gaze fixed on me. In the shadowy light, his face looks especially tragic. Tragic and lovely—as though he’s haunted by the things he’s done.

That, of course, would be giving him far too much credit. I don’t think he cares at all about the deaths he’s responsible for.

Lightning spears through the sky. For an instant the harsh light changes the horseman’s features. Where a second ago there was a face, now I see a skull overlaying the horseman’s features, and where there was once armor and wings, now I see a skeleton.

Just as quickly as the lightning comes, it’s gone again, and Death is simply a man once more.

Oh God, he really is death. If I needed any more proof, I was just given it.

My knees go weak and fuck, I’m about to lose my nerve.

Death steps up to me, and my breath catches. He’s a being that was never meant to be beheld this closely. He’s wretchedly beautiful.

The horseman takes in my wet hair and rain-soaked body. “Every single creature runs from me—except you.” He doesn’t sound surprised or alarmed. The horseman is a complete mystery.

I lift my chin. “Am I supposed to be frightened of you?” Because I am. I am utterly terrified. I’m also too reckless to care.

He smiles a little, and I must be brave because I don’t piss myself at the sight of that grin, like any sane person might’ve.

“You took *everyone* from me.” My voice breaks as the words slip out. I hadn’t planned on opening with this, but once I start speaking, I can’t seem to stop. “My mother, my brothers, my sisters, my nieces and nephews, my neighbors, my friends. They’re *all* gone.”

The aching loneliness I’ve carried with me sweeps in. Grief is awful enough on its own, but now I also have to deal with this solitude I never asked for.

Death stares at me as rain pelts the two of us. “That is what I do, kismet,” he says, his voice gentling. “I kill.”

My grief claws at me, trying to get out. My entire life died that day Death came to my town, and he doesn’t give a shit.

Of course he doesn’t, Lazarus, a small voice inside me says. *He wouldn’t*

be destroying the world if he did.

The horseman gives me another cursory look. Something ancient and alien stares out from the back of his eyes.

“What is your name?” he asks.

I hesitate. I shouldn’t give my name to a man I don’t trust. But what’s the worst that can happen? We both know he can’t kill me.

“Lazarus,” I finally admit.

“*Lazarus*,” he repeats, tasting the name on his tongue. He smiles, though again, it only manages to make him look like he’s about to eat me. “An appropriate namesake.”

Death begins to circle me, the tips of his wings dragging against the ground. The outer edge of one of those wings brushes against my arm, and the contact draws out goosebumps.

“Who *are* you?” he says.

“You’ve already asked me that question before,” I say, watching him warily as he comes to a stop again in front of me.

Lightning strikes off in the distance, and again I see a skeleton superimpose itself over him.

I shudder at the macabre sight.

“My will alone should kill you,” he says, ignoring my reaction. “It does not. My touch should rip your soul from your bones. It cannot. There is only one option left.” His ancient eyes seem ... sad.

The horseman moves blindingly fast. He grabs me by either side of the head and with one swift jerk—

Snap.

I blink groggily, confused for an instant. Above me the sky is dark.

Where am I?

Out of the corner of my eye, a shadow moves, and I startle into action, rolling to my knees, only to come face to face with Death.

I suck in a breath at the sight of him kneeling at my side, his long wings draped over the ground behind him.

“You truly cannot die,” he says, the words spoken with a hushed sort of reverence.

I jolt at the sound of them, remembering my last few lucid moments.

“What did you do to me?” I demand, sitting up, even though I already know the answer.

I touch my neck, remembering the flash of pain.

Death looms over me. “There is only one thing I am made *to* do, human.”
Kill.

The horseman continues to stare at me, and something about his gaze pricks my skin. Or perhaps it’s that bone-deep silence that seems to follow him. Or, you know, the fact that he killed me earlier this evening—maybe *that’s* what’s setting me on edge.

I suck in a breath, and this is where I lose it. I can feel my anger and my grief and every other ugly emotion that’s crossed my mind over the last few months sucking me under.

Remember your purpose. Remember—your—purpose.

I draw in a ragged breath and push down my rising hysteria. Despite what Death just did to me, this was a hard-fought meeting. I don’t want to squander it. I *can’t*.

“Stop the killing,” I whisper.

There’s a long beat of silence.

“I cannot,” he finally answers.

“Please,” I say. “Don’t make anyone else go through what I have gone through.” It cuts so deep, pleading with this man who killed my family and friends—and who just attempted to kill me as well.

I can feel the horseman’s dark gaze on me. Eventually, he stands, then backs away. “Leave it be, Lazarus.”—I jolt at the sound of my name—“I am what I am, and no sweet pleas will change that.”

He swivels around, baring those wings to me as he retreats to his horse.

I glare after him. “Is mighty Death running from me?” I call out, openly taunting him.

His footfalls pause.

“Go ahead then, *leave*. I’ll simply hunt you down again,” I vow. “And when I find you, I *will* stop you.”

He laughs, turning around once more. “I am one of the few things that *cannot* be stopped, Lazarus. Nevertheless, I look forward to seeing you try.”

I think that’s the end of the conversation, but instead he approaches me once more.

He pauses, then kneels back down at my side.

My brows furrow together, and I rear back a little. “What are you doing?”

His eyes gleam in the darkness. “Getting a head start.”

And then for the second time that day, the fucker reaches out and snaps my

neck.

Death

After Lazarus goes limp in my arms, I gently lay her out on the ground.

I have made her hate me.

I try to relish that—it is for the best, foiling this cosmic challenge that has very literally been placed in my path. If she hates me, everything becomes easier.

But as I kneel next to her, I feel no satisfaction. Only a sickening sort of sadness, as though perhaps I made the wrong move. My baser nature still calls to me, demanding I place Lazarus upon my steed and take her with me. I've come to expect the impulse whenever I see her, and it makes it easier to ignore.

I stare down at her still body. Encased within all that blood and bone, there's her essence. Even now I can sense her soul fluttering within that lifeless form of hers, trapped inside it like a caged bird. It should be effortless to reach out and pry her soul loose.

It isn't.

In fact, it's the one thing I haven't been able to do. Stranger still, though I can sense her essence right now, it doesn't feel as though it's *mine*. Every other human is intimately connected to me. With this woman, the moment she leaves my sight, it's as though she's fallen off the earth. I'm coming to realize that this is going to drive me mad.

I bow my head and exhale.

I've got many, many souls I still need to deliver. She is distracting me.

Perhaps after tonight, she will leave me alone.

I frown, displeased at the thought.

I know she's my challenge. All my brothers received one. And all of them failed. Even Famine, though somehow he managed to fail his task *without* finding humanity redeemable.

Dropping my hand, I stare at Lazarus once more, feeling my usually steady pulse pick up. The moon is just bright enough for me to make out her features. My eyes linger on her eyelashes, which kiss the top of her cheeks now that her eyes are closed. My gaze moves to her lips. I have the most peculiar urge to draw her back from death, all so that she might let me lean in and press my own mouth to hers, just to see how the two line up.

I shudder at the thought.

I've seen billions of people with every manner of physical variation. *None* of them have moved me.

But *she* moves me. This woman whose soul I can't take and whose life I can't know. This woman whose face should blur together with every other face I've ever seen. Instead it lingers on in my mind's eye, haunting me like some sort of specter.

Lazarus.

How many times that cursed name has crossed my mind in the hours since she first spoke it.

This human doesn't come with an Angelic word, but she doesn't need one—she was given a human one that is just as fitting.

She can withstand death, which means ...

She's creation. *Life*.

Lazarus

I wake with a groan, my hand going for my neck. Above me the dark night is peeling away, the stars fading into the periwinkle sky.

This time the confusion lasts only for a split second before I remember—
Death. Confrontation. Broken neck.

That *bastard*.

He killed me twice in the last day, and left me lying here, off to the side of the highway. And now he's gone—all but for a single black feather that tumbles off my chest as soon as I sit up.

My anger rouses deep from its depths. It's too late to hurt the horseman, but no matter.

This latest confrontation has awoken something inside of me.

True purpose.

This was a task I already began months ago, but it feels different now that I'm formally committing myself to it: Stop the horseman. Save humankind.

No matter the cost.

Chapter 7

Lexington, Kentucky

October, Year 26 of the Horsemen

I have two goals in mind: One, warn cities about the horseman's looming arrival. Two, stop the horseman by any means necessary.

Just finding a town untouched by Death takes the better part of two weeks. I assumed I'd have trouble picking up the horseman's trail, considering my past luck, but now it's as though I cannot escape him. Everywhere I go, he's already been. He doesn't just leave corpses in his wake; the cities themselves are destroyed, the buildings leveled, the streets obscured by debris. It's as though it's not good enough to simply kill us, he must wipe out all evidence of our existence.

By the end of two weeks, I've seen dozens of cities of dead, and the map I picked up back in Tennessee is full of X's—each one representing a city Death has taken. One of them is Nashville—beautiful, doomed Nashville. I openly wept when I entered the metropolis. The bodies had already begun to rot and the smell ... it and the carrion eaters drove me out of the city just as quickly as I entered it.

But amidst it all, I've been learning. For instance, Death doesn't move in straight lines. Instead he zig-zags across sections of the country. I can see it plainly on the map, though by the time I recognize the pattern, the dead I come across are older and more decomposed, which means Death is pulling farther ahead of me.

Another thing I've learned—through assumption alone—is that the horseman never sleeps and never stops, making it that much harder to stay one step ahead of him.

So when I eventually do come across a city lying in Death's path—one full

of living, breathing people—it's like a cruel dream, and I have to check my map again.

The city of Lexington bustles about as though nothing is amiss. And not only is it thriving, it is a massive city—one Death would not leave standing.

Did I get something wrong? Has the horseman changed his pattern?

I have this panicky urge inside me to stand in the middle of the road and scream the truth from the top of my lungs.

Death is coming for you all!

Instead, I head for the police station—though it takes me a few tries and some asking to find my way.

I lean my well-traveled bike against the side of the police station and I worry my lower lip as I eye the building.

Should I have gone to a fire station instead? City Hall? I don't actually know where the best place would be to share news of Death's movements.

Taking a deep breath, I reluctantly remove my weapons, leaving them with my bike. I sincerely hope no one is ballsy enough to steal these right outside a police station. Then, I stride inside.

There are a few people waiting in nearby seats, and the officer manning the front desk gives me a bored look, like he'd rather be doing other things in other places.

I head up to him, cracking my knuckles finger by finger as though that might dispel my nerves.

“What can I do for you today, miss?” the man drawls.

I draw in a deep breath. There is no sugar-coating this.

“One of the Four Horsemen is closing in on this city.”

I assumed I wouldn't be believed. I assumed the officer I approached would laugh me off.

That wasn't the case.

Two hours later, I find myself sitting across the table from Lexington's mayor, its chief of police, its fire chief, and another official whose title escapes me, all of us gathered inside one of their City Hall's conference rooms.

Unlike the officer I initially met with, not everyone here is eager to believe my story.

“Tell me again who you are,” the mayor says.

“Lazarus Gaumond—”

“‘Lazarus’?” the unnamed official interrupts. He guffaws. “Her name is *Lazarus* and you didn’t question her account at all?” he accuses the others. “This is just one of those loonies from the Church of the Second Coming.”

The chief of police glares back at him. “Don’t call my department’s judgment into question, George.”

“So you actually believe that a *horseman* is coming to our city?” George says skeptically, raising his eyebrows. He glances at me, then huffs out another disbelieving laugh.

The chief of police casts George a withering look, his jaw tightening, but he doesn’t say anything else.

“There have been eyewitness reports of mass deaths in the last few weeks,” the fire chief says idly. “It’s not unthinkable, especially considering the fact that we know the horsemen are here on earth.” The fire chief turns his attention to me, his hands clasped loosely on the table. “Why don’t you tell us what you know,” he says gently. The man has kind eyes, and he’s not looking at me like I’m a kook.

My gaze moves over the other three men in the room. I’ve never done this before—never tried to warn an entire town of Death’s arrival. I’m more than a little uneasy that these people won’t believe me.

“Death is heading in this direction,” I say haltingly. “Whether he’ll ride through this city remains to be seen—but he probably will. I—I think he’s drawn to big cities.” It’s another one of those assumptions I’ve made, but it seems right.

“What proof do you have that he’s coming here?” the fire chief asks.

Proof. The word has my heart sinking. I have precious little proof besides what I’ve seen and experienced firsthand.

I reach for my weatherworn bag, setting it on the conference table. I open it, and a sheathed dagger slides out. Pushing it aside, I grab my maps. I have one of Tennessee, one of Kentucky, and then a bigger one of the entire United States. All of them are meticulously marked.

I ignore the way my hands tremble as I open them one by one, laying them out on the table.

You thought you could just walk into this city and warn them, Lazarus? These people will never believe you, they’ll die not believing you.

All of my worries rise up, and there’s a sick sort of irony to it because there’s nothing for me personally to be worried about. *I* won’t be killed, after all; it’s the people around me who will.

I push the maps towards my audience. “The *X*’s are where Death has been already. Those cities are gone. If you look at the map of the entire country, you’ll see that these extend all the way to Georgia—that’s where I’m from.” I’m babbling, but I can’t seem to stop. “There were a couple months where I lost track of the horseman. I don’t know where he was during that—”

“*This* is your evidence?” George says, cutting me off. “A few marks on a map?” He makes a disgusted sound, then pushes out of his chair. “You all are damn *fools* if you’re going to waste your time listening to this.” Flashing me one last unpleasant look, he shakes his head and leaves the conference room. He slams the door behind him, the noise echoing.

There’s a few tense moments of silence.

“He’s right,” the mayor chimes in, running a hand over his silvery hair. “Why should we believe you? Seems to me like a great way to scare people out of their homes long enough for you to rob them.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You think I’m going to—” I cut myself off, even as my annoyance rises.

I meet each man’s eyes. “I have ridden through the towns Death has visited. I have *seen* the bodies and smelled the rot. Go to any one of those marked cities and see it for yourself, but for the love of whoever gives a shit, *please* warn your town.”

The room is quiet.

“There will be more sightings of the dead, especially as Death gets closer,” I say, softer, “but your time is running out. This is the first living town I’ve come across in *two weeks*.”

The mood of the room has grown grim. I see them looking me over again, reassessing whatever initial assumptions they made of me. I’m wearing a simple white shirt, jeans, and a scuffed up pair of leather boots, the items a little travel-worn. They’re also not mine. I’m sure I came in looking young and naive. I hope they see the haunted look in my eyes, and I hope they hear the truth in my words.

If they do, this might just work.

“No horseman has ridden through this country in two decades,” the mayor finally says. “Why would one show up now?”

I try to find my patience. I was never meant to be a diplomat.

“I don’t know why,” I say. “I don’t actually have any of the answers. All I do know is that I met a man with black wings who called himself Death, and he’s been riding through town after town, killing everyone in his wake.

Again, an ominous silence falls over the room.

“As far as I can tell, this horseman doesn’t sleep, and neither does his steed,” I say. “There is one thing and one thing only that drives him: the need to annihilate us. The only thing I can try to do is warn cities like yours. If you evacuate your city, you might survive Death’s wrath.”

The chief of police clears his throat. “There’s one problem with your story,” he says. “If Death is killing everyone he crosses, then how are *you* still alive?”

This is the question I’ve been dreading. Of course they’d want to know this. I haven’t come up with a convincing enough lie, so I go for the truth.

“I cannot die.”

The room grows quiet again; only now, I feel the collective skepticism and distrust.

Finally, the mayor laughs humorlessly. “George was right. This is a goddamned waste of our—”

“*I can prove it.*” I don’t want to, but I can. “I just need a knife and a little more of your time.”

Chapter 8

Lexington, Kentucky

October, Year 26 of the Horsemen

“**This is ridiculous,**” the mayor protests a minute later. “No one is going to let you cut yourself—or whatever the hell you plan on doing.”

“You want proof I cannot die; I have the proof. Do you really think any of this is bloodless?” I demand vehemently. “My hometown isn’t the only city I’ve seen fall. Look at those *X*’s. They represent *every* massacre I’ve seen with my own eyes. And there are countless more that I haven’t seen. I’m trying to prevent Lexington from being another *X* on my map, so if you need proof, I’m willing to give it.”

It’s quiet for a long moment, and I can tell the men are uncomfortable with everything I’m telling them.

“Fuck it,” the chief of police says, threading his hands behind his head, his chair groaning as he shifts his weight. “If the lady wants to cut herself to prove a point, I say she does it.”

I don’t want to do *anything*.

The fire chief stares at me for a long moment, then nods his head.

“Really?” The mayor blows out a breath. “Fine, whatever.”

I begin rolling up one of my sleeves as the mayor mutters something under his breath.

“Just what *exactly* are you planning on doing?” the fire chief asks, his eyes narrowing.

I glance over at him. “I’m not going to kill myself, if that’s what you’re worried about. I heal unnaturally fast—I was planning on demonstrating that.”

“How exactly is one little cut supposed to prove that you can’t die?” the

mayor says, somewhat hostile.

I blow out a breath. “Should I just go?” I ask. I feel defeated. “I want to help, but if you think I have malicious intent, I can go.” Bile rises at the thought. I don’t want to leave, but I also need to know when to fold.

I think I know what road the horseman will take into Lexington. If I leave now, perhaps I can cut him off ...

“If you have malicious intent,” the mayor says, “you won’t be going *anywhere*.”

The chief of police holds up his hand. “Nobody is asking you to leave,” he says, giving the mayor a sharp look. “Do what you need to, to prove your claims.”

I exhale. Okay, I can do this. I haven’t scared off these officials yet.

I point to my bag. “Can I grab my knife?”

The men in the room tense as though I haven’t been saying for the last several minutes that I need a knife.

The fire chief eventually nods. “That’s fine.”

Slowly, I pull the blade out from my bag.

“One wrong move with that knife, miss, and I won’t hesitate to take you down,” the chief of police warns.

“I understand,” I say softly, unsheathing my blade.

This isn’t the worst situation I imagined. I assumed this gathering might fall apart at the seams and we’d never get this far. But we live in the time of nightmarish miracles. Defying death isn’t quite as insane as it might’ve been thirty years ago.

Baring my left forearm, I bring my knife to the exposed skin. I hesitate, drawing in a deep breath. I’ve never actually done this before, and my stomach turns at the prospect.

Before I can second-guess myself, I drag the blade down against my forearm. My flesh parts disturbingly easy. The pain comes a split second later, and even after all I’ve endured, it’s still a shock to feel that sharp sting.

I suck in a breath as my blood drips from the wound, and I drop my knife on the table.

Across from me, the fire chief stands, pulling out a handkerchief from his pocket.

“To staunch the blood,” he explains. “It’s clean.”

Giving him a grateful look, I take it from him, wiping the blood away. A moment later, I round the table, heading over to the men, my arm extended.

“I figured you’d want to see the wound up close,” I say. “Just so that you all know it’s not a trick.”

I wipe the blood away, even as more wells up in its place. Around me, the three men do take a good look, the fire chief even going so far as to grasp my forearm and move it this way and that.

“How long will it take to heal?” he asks, releasing my arm.

I shake my head. “An hour, maybe two.”

“Two hours?” The mayor raises a hand as if to say, *what was even the point of this?*

And I agree—two hours is too long to wait.

“If that’s a problem,” I say, “then put me in a cell, lock me away for two hours, and begin making evacuation plans. If I’m lying, you can keep me there,” I say. “But I’m not,” I add, steel in my voice, “so you best start prepping.”

I’m not taken to a cell, but I am led to an interrogation room where I am kept for the next two hours, the door locked from the outside.

The time passes glacially slow, but eventually the doorknob turns, and an officer opens the door. Behind him the chief of police and the mayor file into the tiny interrogation room.

“Hank’s busy at the moment,” the chief of police says as the door closes behind them, “so he couldn’t be here.”

I assume Hank is the fire chief, and I have to hope that he’s busy evacuating people.

The mayor nods to my injury, which is now wrapped in gauze. “How’s it doing?” he asks, his eyes guarded. I think he’s still sure this is some prank.

Looking at both men, I begin unwrapping the bandages until the last of the linen falls away. Beneath it, there’s still a smear of dried blood where the wound once was. Taking the cup of water I was left in here with, I pour a little over the blood staining my skin, then use my bandages to wipe it away.

Beneath it, the flesh has stitched itself back together. There’s not even a faint scar left to indicate that there was ever a wound to begin with.

“I’ll be damned.” The chief of police’s words are hushed, almost reverent.

His eyes flick to me. “Who are you?”

Those were the very same words Death asked me, and at the reminder, a chill runs down my spine.

“Do you believe me now?” I say.

The interrogation room is quiet.

“Because if you do,” I say softly, taking their silence for a yes. “Then there’s a lot we should do to prepare, and not much time left to do it.”

Chapter 9

Lexington, Kentucky

October, Year 26 of the Horseman

I crouch inside the attic of a trading post that sits on the edge of Lexington, the smell of tobacco and beeswax wafting from the crates around me. My bow and arrow are poised over the open window, the late afternoon sun hanging low in the sky. I have a view of the I-64, the highway I'm betting the horseman will use to enter this city.

I adjust my grip on my bow. I'm a decent shot, but not great. I glance across the street, where a handful of other archers lie in wait behind and on the roof of a horse stable. One of them is Jeb Holton, the chief of police. He was adamant about being posted here, on the road that I felt most certain Death would be traveling.

The rest of the streets in and out of the city are being guarded as well. The horrible truth is that no one has any idea if or when or from which direction the horseman will ride through.

I roll my shoulders and crack my neck. My muscles are stiff from sitting still for so long.

I worry my lower lip. It's been over twenty-four hours since I first met with Lexington officials, and I've sat up here for almost half that amount of time, taking shifts sleeping alongside Kelly Ormond, the officer posted up here with me.

Outside, the road is fairly busy as people flee their homes. Evacuation orders have been given, and over the last day many have packed up and left.

Many have also stayed.

At the window next to mine, Officer Ormond waits, her own bow poised.

Distant animal calls break the silence. My body tenses as I notice the thick,

moving darkness on the horizon and the distant, shocked cries of travelers on the highway below us. As I watch, that dark mass moves like a wave towards us.

I hear bleating and howling and cawing and a hundred other animal cries over the shouts of frightened evacuees. Creatures flood the highway, overturning bikes and carts and barreling through the people on the road.

Once the animals are gone, an eerie silence follows in their wake, raising the hair on my arms.

I strain my eyes, searching, searching ...

“Think the horseman’s coming our way?” she asks.

“Yes.” I’m certain that in a matter of minutes I’m going to see Death face-to-face once more. At that, unease pools low in my belly. Even after everything he’s done to me and my family, I’m not sure I’m ready for what I’m about to do—what I have already set in motion.

I can hear the beat of my own heart. I steady my breath.

I can do this. I *will* do this.

Below, the spooked travelers help up their comrades who were knocked down and right their overturned belongings. It’s that day at the farmer’s market all over again, only now, an officer poised behind the building across from us is calling out to the people on the road and directing them back the way they came.

Those farther down the highway aren’t so lucky. I see one man standing in the middle of the road, dusting himself off like his life is not being threatened at this very moment.

“Move,” Officer Ormond murmurs under her breath, noticing the same man.

I press my lips together, grimacing. I don’t know how much time the rest of these people have.

I hear horse hooves echo against the asphalt.

My skin pricks, and then—

There he is.

Great, winged Death.

For a moment, I can’t breathe.

Hate is such a gentle word for what I feel for the horseman. And yet the sight of him makes me ache inside. He’s beautiful and terrible and more than just a little mythical as he rides down the highway. Around him, people fall down dead. A few scream—some are even able to turn around and run back

towards us and those ones *don't* fall down dead. Not yet at least.

For a moment, I'm gobsmacked at the sight. Back in Georgia Death killed everyone far before he came upon them. And though I'm thankful that these fleeing travelers and the posted officers haven't died, I'm still shocked that the reach of the horseman's power has changed.

Next to me, Kelly's oiled bow creaks as she pulls the string taut, and it's that subtle sound that snaps me out of my own musings.

I aim my arrow and force myself to clear my mind as I wait for the signal.

The seconds pass like minutes. Then, in the distance someone whistles, and that's all the cue I need.

Please don't miss.

I release my arrow alongside Officer Ormond's and half a dozen others. The projectiles slice through the wind.

The horseman only has time to shield himself with an arm, his wings flaring wide, before the arrows slice into him. Many glance off his armor, but several more puncture his wings and at least one slices through his throat. I can hear the choked sound he makes as his horse rears back.

Under the onslaught, Death's wings seem to crumple and the horseman's body slides off his horse, hitting the ground with a dull thud.

Even as he falls, I nock another arrow into my bow and release it—as do the other officers. Again and again we release them.

Shoot until he falls, I'd told the room of uniformed men and women last night. *And then continue to shoot him. Shoot until you're out of arrows.*

That's what we do. We empty our quivers and pelt the horseman with arrows until his horse is driven away and Death himself looks more like a porcupine than anything else.

Meanwhile, the final few living travelers flee for their lives, their screams growing distant as they move farther and farther from us.

Eventually, our volley of arrows tapers off, the quiet hiss of them sliding into silence.

"Shit," Kelly breathes next to me. She then slumps back against the wall, dropping her bow. "We did it."

"We did," I say softly, still staring at Death's still form. All sorts of conflicted emotions churn within me.

We took down an angel.

I'm the first to get to the body. Partially because everyone seems reasonably

spooked, and partially because once I snapped out of my stupor, I *ran* for him.

I kneel at the horseman's side, and I swallow my own choked cry when I see the damage we've inflicted on him, damage *I* insisted on. I have to fight back the urge to retch.

I've never done anything like this before, and the sight fills me with deep remorse.

He killed you twice, and he likely wouldn't hesitate to do so a third time if you got in his way.

The thought lessens the sickness I feel, but only slightly.

I place a hand on the horseman's silver armor, my eyes lingering for a moment on a procession of mourners hammered into the metal plating.

Leaning towards his ravaged head, I whisper, "Death?"

Nothing. He doesn't stir at all.

I have this crazy urge to remove the arrows one by one and clean his body, but I don't get the chance.

Behind me I hear the footfalls of others coming to inspect the horseman. A strange surge of protectiveness wells within me. My hand falls away from his silver armor.

"No one touches him," I say hoarsely, standing, then swiveling around to face the incoming crowd. I feel like a lioness defending her kill.

"Who says?" calls out a familiar voice.

My eyes hone in on the man who speaks.

I'll be damned. It's the same official who walked out of the meeting yesterday, the one who thought I was crazy. What was his name ... ?

George.

I hadn't realized that same man had been posted here. My eyes dip to the sheriff's badge pinned above his chest. I also didn't realize he was involved in law enforcement.

"*I* say." I meet his frigid gaze with my own. "So far, I am the only person Death hasn't been able to kill." Something most of the people here are aware of; they were all debriefed on me last night.

"This is ridiculous," George says, approaching me anyway. And then he's pushing past me, and there's nothing I can do to stop him. "We don't even *know* that he's dead."

The rest of the officers and a growing crowd of onlookers form a semicircle around us, peering curiously at the winged being, his body strewn

with arrows.

“Do you really have any doubts?” I say, fighting the urge to drag insufferable George away. It would be useless; the man is much larger than me.

Ignoring my words, George reaches for the horseman, presumably to check his pulse.

The moment his fingers brush the horseman’s flesh, his body stiffens, then collapses in a heap, half on, half off of Death.

My breath catches.

“George?” another officer calls—and I realize after a moment that it isn’t just some officer—it’s Jeb, the chief of police. “*George*,” Chief Holton says again, sterner now.

He shrugs off his bow and quiver and steps forward.

“*Wait*,” I say, giving him a meaningful look. “Let me do it.”

Jeb pauses. His jaw works, but after a moment, he gives me a nod.

I kneel at George’s side and place my fingers against his inner wrist. There’s no pulse.

Slowly my eyes lift, meeting Jeb’s. I shake my head, then set George’s arm gently on the ground, even as I hear a choked cry from the crowd. Apparently, the horseman can kill even when he’s dead himself.

I glance back at Death.

“This is the part we agreed on, Jeb,” I say quietly to the chief of police.

I’d only requested a few things yesterday, when I began coordinating this strike with Lexington’s officials, but the one I’d been most adamant about was taking Death’s body.

Chief Holton runs a hand down his mouth, then turns to the rest of the crowd. After a moment, he clears his throat.

“Congratulations,” he says to them. “Together we have stopped Death himself. We’re all alive today *because* we brought him down. But there’s much we still don’t know about this rider. So, in terms of survival, I need you all to return to your stations. If you’re part of the evacuation teams, please check in with your supervisor for further instructions. If not, I suggest you go home, grab what few items you can, and evacuate town.”

“What?” an officer says, surprised by the news.

Several others protest as well.

“What about Deputy Ferguson?” Someone else complains, and I think he’s referring to George, who’s still slumped over Death.

“I’ll take care of George. Now get going.”

The officers don’t leave immediately. Whatever they were expecting to happen, this isn’t it.

Jeb glares at them. “Do you want me to put you all in cuffs?” he threatens. “Move it.”

That seems to get the crowd going. The officers and onlookers disperse.

It takes another minute, but eventually, Chief Holton and I are alone.

Lexington’s chief of police eyes Death, then shakes his head. “I don’t know that I fully believed you until now.” He blows out a breath. “Do you need any help?” he asks.

“Even if I did,” I say, “I don’t think you could give it. Not without ending up like George.”

Chief Holton’s eyes move to the man in question and he suddenly looks a decade older, and so, so weary.

“It could’ve been worse,” I say.

The police chief nods. “Think he’ll stay away?” he asks.

I shake my head. *Not if he’s anything like me.*

“Unless he can be stopped for good,” I say. “I have a feeling he’ll be back. But hopefully I’ll be able to get him far enough from Lexington by then to give you and the rest of the city time to fully evacuate.”

The chief of police nods his head, still looking weary. He looks over to the buildings we so recently occupied.

“You should go,” I insist. “I’ve got this.”

I don’t, in fact, *got this*, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“And you won’t die?” he asks, scrutinizing the horseman.

By way of answer, I kneel down next to Death and place my hand against what I can of his cheek. “He cannot kill me,” I insist. At least, not while he himself is dead.

Chief Holton blows out a breath, shaking his head. “Sunday School never prepared me for this shit.” After a moment, he jerks his chin towards George. “Someone’s going to have to collect my friend there,” he says. He turns towards the way we came, squinting at the people in the distance. “And there will be more people using this road to evacuate. I can give you an hour to get gone, but not much more.”

Hopefully an hour is all I need.

Jeb turns to go, then pauses. “Thank you for coming here,” he says. “It was an astonishingly decent thing to do.”

I give him a small smile and watch as he turns and leaves, this time for good.

And I'm left alone with Death.

For a moment, all I do is stare at the horseman. He's badly mutilated, and I'm shocked to find that it bothers me—the injuries, his pain, all of it. He's not a man to pity. And yet I can't stop replaying the way he fell from his horse as we continued to shoot at him.

I stand, then back away from the horseman, worried that if I tear my gaze away for even a single moment, he might simply vanish.

In the end, I do have to turn away so that I can retrieve my things. Among them is my bicycle and a borrowed cart Jeb let me hitch to it.

I can't be gone more than five minutes, but I'm terrified that when I return to the horseman I'll find another dead body slumped against him—or worse, that he'll be gone altogether.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I catch sight of Death—he's exactly how I left him.

I ride my bike and hitched cart up to his side. Hopping off the bike, I move to the back of the cart, where I've already stashed my bag and my weapons. I lower the ramp then turn to Death.

Now for the impossible: lifting him.

In theory it shouldn't be hard, but the man weighs about as much as a goddamned whale, and the moment I get my arms under his shoulders, I'm sure his wings are deliberately trying to smother me, and I keep getting feathers in my mouth, and a half a dozen bloody arrow points are now digging into my skin.

“Why do you have to be such—a—giant—jerk?” I ask as I drag him inch by painful inch up the cart's shallow ramp.

I've barely gotten him fully in when my legs give out and I collapse, his body falling on mine. I lay there for a moment, cursing God that I can't die. At least then I would've never found myself in this motherfucking *embarrassing* situation.

Eventually, I extricate myself, my hand brushing against Death's bloody neck and a lock of that dark, wavy hair in the process.

My heart pounds as I stare at the fallen man, and I try to tell myself it's just fear and not ... not—well, it's *not* anything else, so there's no use trying to put a name to it.

I shove Death's booted feet into the cramped cart and close the back of it.

Once that's done, I retrieve my belt and sheathed knife from my bag and slip them on.

Just in case things go sideways.

Hopping onto the bike, I put my feet on the pedals and ride out of Lexington with one dead horseman at my back.

Chapter 10

Interstate 64, Kentucky

October, Year 26 of the Horsemen

I don't know how many miles I've gone when I hear the pound of hoof beats behind me. I glance over my shoulder, and there's Death's dapple gray stallion, closing the distance between us. It gallops all the way up to the cart before leaning over and nudging the horseman's body with its muzzle.

My heart is beating loudly because a supernatural horse is shadowing me and it seems like this is where I learn that supernatural horses like to eat humans or something else equally atrocious.

But after checking on its owner, the horse seems content to merely follow us.

I ride the rest of the day and into the night, retracing Death's movements as best I can. He'll eventually wake, and he'll eventually resume his terrible mission, but hopefully I can stop him for a time.

Every so often I hear something clatter in the cart. The first few times this happened, I stopped my bike to try to figure out the cause of the noise. That's when I first noticed the bloody arrows lying next to the horseman. Initially, I assumed these had been jostled loose by the swaying cart. But as the hours pass and one by one, the bloody arrows that were once *definitely* inside the horseman are now obviously *outside* of him, I realize that somehow his body is purging the weapons.

That's ... more than a little unsettling.

I pedal long into the night. My legs have been shaking and cramping for hours, and it's colder than hell and I probably should've stopped miles ago to rest. I'm beyond exhausted.

Still, I push on until I'm literally too exhausted to continue pedaling. Only

then, do I angle my bike to the shoulder of the road and let it roll to a stop. Behind me, Death's horse trails along.

I swing my leg over my seat and slip off, kicking out the bike stand.

All I want to do is collapse on the ground and sleep my exhaustion away.

Have to set up camp. The thought nearly does me in. I'm not entirely sure I have it in me to make a proper bed, let alone set up *camp*. Still, I stumble over to the cart to at least get a blanket from my bag.

Once I get to the cart, however, I hesitate. I'm pretty sure almost all the arrows have been purged from Death's body, which means he's healing—and really, really rapidly.

I stare and stare at horseman's winged form. One of my hands moves to the knife at my side, and I wait for him to leap up and surprise me. When a minute passes and nothing happens, I force myself to take several long, steadying breaths.

Assuming he *can't* die, then ... what if he wakes while I sleep?

He broke my neck when he found me a nuisance. What will he do now that I've truly hurt him?

I have to be ready for him.

I glance around. Thick trees line the highway—I could sleep hidden somewhere in there ... Maybe he wouldn't go looking for me—or if he did, maybe I'd wake in time.

... And maybe in the light of day, this tree line won't actually hide me at all. The thought of the horseman spotting me and coming after me terrifies me beyond belief.

I could simply flee. My legs nearly give out at the thought. I have nothing left in me. I spent it all getting this far away.

I don't know what options that leaves me with.

My gaze returns to the horseman. The few times that I've woken up from death, it's taken me a moment to get my bearings. Perhaps it's the same for the horseman.

If I were able to wake up just as the horseman started rousing, I might still have the upper hand. But that would mean ... that would mean getting *in* there with him.

No. Absolutely not.

So, fleeing it is.

Before I can think twice, I'm dragging myself into the cart to get my things. I'll simply grab my bag and my bow and quiver and leave.

The cart rocks a little as I step onto it, and I have to bite back a whimper. My limbs are still trembling with exhaustion, and it makes groping around the cart in the darkness that much harder.

Where are my things? Where are they? Where are they? My hands keep closing around arrows and nothing more.

I lift one of Death's wings, then immediately drop it.

It's warm!

I stare in horror at the horseman.

"Death?" I whisper.

No response.

"I don't believe you're dead," I breathe.

Nothing.

Maybe he still is. Maybe this is what an undead body feels like before it wakes.

There's only one way to know.

Need to check his pulse. Hopefully he won't snap my neck the moment I do so.

I kneel down next to him, fighting off fatigue as I grope around his armor until I find his hand. I move my fingers to his wrist, but there's no pulse. Still, if he's not alive yet, he probably will be soon. Bitter relief courses through me, though the last thing I should be is relieved. The fact that Death cannot be killed makes stopping him that much more complicated.

Setting his hand down, I continue searching for my bag, blinking several times as I feel my eyes droop with sleep. My fingers brush against more dislodged arrows. Eventually my hand closes over my satchel.

Success!

I tug on it, only to discover that it's pinned beneath Death's shoulders and his wings.

Well shit, the thing is as good as gone.

I lean back against the cart wall, my lower legs brushing against the horseman. I'm beyond exhausted, all I want to do is sleep, and my grand plan of fleeing just got shot to hell.

My eyes begin to droop.

Oh God, not here. Need to get out of the cart ...

My body is having none of it.

At the very least, I need to slit the horseman's throat or do something else drastic to keep him dead for a while longer. I nearly retch at the prospect.

One killing is enough for a day.

I rub my eyes. At the very least I should bind his hands.

Alright, I can do that. Even though it *seems* impossible, and my head hurts just trying to figure out what I'll need to use as restraints, I can do it.

I just need a moment to rest ... I haven't been able to rest, and I'm really, really tired ... but then I'll do it ... I just need a little ...

I jolt awake to the sensation of my body tipping forward.

I catch myself, but then decide to lay down in the cart. *I'll find the bindings in just a minute. I'm just going to close my eyes for one moment, then I'll do it ...*

Somewhere at the back of my mind, I'm aware that this is an epically bad idea, but it's warm here, next to the horseman, and I'm too tired to panic—too tired to care much at all.

Just going to rest here for a minute ... then I'll get up ...

This time when I shut my eyes, it's for good.

Chapter 11

Bardstown, Kentucky

October, Year 26 of the Horsemen

I wake to the smoky smell of frankincense and myrrh. Above me, pale morning light stretches across the sky, bathing the clouds in a rosy glow. The air has a chill bite to it, but I'm warm here, with my blanket ...

Blanket?

My eyes move to the massive black wing that's draped over me like my own personal blanket. Worse, at some point in the night the horseman shifted position. He now lays on his side, his face inches from mine.

Oh no.

My heart starts hammering in my chest.

Lazarus, what have you done, you enormous twat?

As gently as I can, I grab Death's wing, biting down on my lower lip to smother the panicked sounds I want to make.

I expect the warm feel of them. What I don't expect is how soft they are. I hadn't noticed that last night.

Move.

I push the wing off of me, only to hear a soft sigh come from the horseman.

I freeze as he stirs.

This is where I stab him. This is where I force him to stay unconscious so I can give the people of Lexington even more time to evacuate.

I reach for my sheathed knife ... but I hesitate.

Just do it. He's done it to you before.

But I don't have the heart to. Not right now when he's so helpless. It feels ... wrong.

I move my hand away from my knife—for now.

It's only then that I notice the smoke wafting lazily around us. How I missed it before now is a mystery; I've been choking on the fragrant fumes since I woke.

Sitting up, I search for the smoke's source. After a moment, I spot the strange torch that it's coming from. It rests in the corner of the cart, and from its decorative silver casing, I know exactly who it belongs to.

Get your things and go!

Quietly, I grab my bow and quiver from where they rest at my feet. No wonder I couldn't find them last night. I'd been looking in the wrong area the entire time. Never taking my eyes off of the horseman, I quietly grab them and lower them to the dirt outside the cart. Then I scan the wagon for that damned bag of mine. I finally catch sight of it, wedged between the horseman's shoulder and wing.

Oh, come on.

I swallow, my gaze fixed to the satchel.

Just leave it.

But damnit, it contains the last few items I owned from before my life was destroyed, and I really, really don't want to part with them.

My gaze returns to the horseman. Who's alive and who could wake at any moment.

I can do this. I'm ballsy, and I'm not going to let this asshole cost me the last of my personal possessions. He's taken enough as it is.

With that pep talk, I unsheathe my blade and slowly move myself until I'm kneeling on either side of the horseman, his legs trapped between mine. Bringing the knife up to his neck, I reach for my bag.

It takes one forceful yank, but I finally get the thing dislodged.

Beneath me, the horseman stirs, his black brows pulling together before smoothing out.

I think I've truly run out of time.

I could bolt now, but then, there's another option, one that's far too tempting for my vengeful side.

So, after tossing my bag into the grass next to the cart, I stay there, knife pressed to his neck, and wait for him to wake.

I can't keep myself from staring at him. His face is unmarred—as though it weren't run through by several arrows only a day ago. Stranger still, there isn't a speck of blood on him.

That's different.

Every time I've died—no matter how briefly—it's always left *some* trace behind. Ripped clothing, bloody skin—*something*. But staring down at the horseman, it's as though yesterday simply didn't happen at all.

I frown as I study him. I've never seen anyone so ... so *grotesquely* handsome—handsome and lethal. There should be a name for that kind of beauty, the kind that literally kills.

As I keep vigil, he stirs again. Only this time, his eyes flutter, then snap open.

The first thing he sees is me.

“Hello again, Death,” I say. “Did you miss me?”

Chapter 12

Bardstown, Kentucky

October, Year 26 of the Horsemen

He begins to sit up.

“Ah ah,” I say, pressing the knife a little firmer against him. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

He glances down at the blade. When he looks back at me, his eyes are glittering with malice. “You intend to hurt me?”

I lean in close. “I already *have*.”

It takes him a moment to remember, but eventually Death’s eyes narrow on me. “The arrows,” he murmurs. “That was *you*.”

It wasn’t *really* me. I’m pretty sure my own shots went wide. But I’ll still take credit for the attack.

“I vowed I’d stop you.”

I don’t see the horseman’s hand move until it’s wrapped around my neck. I forgot how damn fast he is.

He doesn’t squeeze and I don’t bother trying to pry his fingers off of me. This is the cursed retribution I feared, yet I’m surprised by how unafraid I am in the face of it.

“Let me go, or I’ll slit your throat,” I say softly.

He gives a low laugh, one that’s full of menace. He does, however, remove his hand from my neck. I realize a second too late, he does that only so that he can wrap an arm around my waist and flip us, forcing me to the floor of the cart.

My knife slashes down his throat with the movement.

Death curses, snatching the blade from my hand and tossing it away. Then once more he pins me down by the neck.

Now he's the one looming over me, the blood from his wound dripping onto my lips and chin. The moment I taste the iron tang of it, I begin struggling again.

"Foolish woman," he hisses. "You should've slit my throat before I woke."
I know.

He waits for me to stop struggling, staring down at me with eyes that seem to glitter.

"Killing me won't stop *anything*. You cannot save your people," he says, his weight bearing down on me.

"Not forever," I agree, "but I'm going to make you work for each one of those deaths."

He practically growls out his displeasure, his feathers ruffling at his back. "Leave it *be*," he says. "I am not interested in battling you."

I lift my chin. "Then stop the killing."

His nostrils flare, and maybe it's my imagination, but the horseman actually looks vexed.

"Do you think I *want* to be here? That I *like* riding through cities and doing this?"

"If you don't like doing it, then that's all the more reason to stop."

He scowls, looking fierce. "People go when it's their time, kismet, and it's not my place to make exceptions."

I've had about enough of this.

I strike out at him. "It's—not—our—time." Each word is punctuated by a swing of my fist or a thrust of my boot.

My attack is messy, and the horseman dodges each blow, but that doesn't stop me from continuing to swipe at him. I swear to his sanctimonious god I'm going to claw out those stupid eyes of his.

He leans away, managing to keep just out of reach. "You think to hurt me again, mortal? You forget who I am."

Death doesn't bother squeezing my neck and yet—and yet ...

My back arches and my eyes widen as pain lashes through me.

What are you doing? I try to say, but the sensation robs me of breath.

Feels like ... like I'm withering away. Like my life is being sucked from my flesh.

I stare up into Death's eyes as he takes my life. That must be what he's doing. I feel the years peeling away from my bones and I'm being devoured from the inside out. I try to scream, but it comes out as a strangled cry.

The longer the horseman stares down at me, the more his expression changes, his brows pinching together in confusion. That somber façade of his gives away and his chest rises and falls faster and faster. Now I reach for the hand wrapped around my neck and try to pry it loose.

I'm impossibly weak—far too weak to remove Death's grip on me. I choke on my own breath. Next time I catch this monster I'm *definitely* stabbing him before he wakes.

All at once Death gives a frustrated shout. He releases me then, casting himself as far away as he can get.

"Why did you do this?" he demands, looking heavenward. "I don't want to feel like this."

I lay there, trying to draw in air.

He swings himself out of the cart then, moving around it to get to his horse, preparing to flee from me once more.

As he passes me, he pauses, his eyes moving to mine. He takes me in, looking disturbed by what he sees.

"I'm sorry," he says, the words clipped.

"Don't be," I wheeze out. "Next time we meet, I fully plan on gutting you alive."

And this time I won't let my damned conscience get in the way.

Chapter 13

Cincinnati, Ohio

November, Year 26 of the Horsemen

Grave-robbing is a deplorable act. Unfortunately for me, I've been forced to resort to it.

I press a handkerchief to my nose as I reach into the pocket of a bloated corpse,

“So ... fucking ... *disgusting.*”

I knew the dead smelled, but I had never realized just how putrid every single thing about decomposition could be. Not until I started encountering cities of dead.

This body in particular is grotesquely swollen.

“I'm so sorry,” I say to the man, “but I need you to give—up—your—wallet.” I jerk on the object in question, which doesn't want to come out of the swollen corpse's pocket.

“*Lazarus.*”

I nearly fall face-first into the corpse at the sound of my name echoing in the air.

I know that voice.

It's been only a little over a week since I last heard it, but it feels like I confronted him only yesterday.

Dropping my handkerchief, I grab my bow and draw an arrow, swiveling around.

There, less than a block away, standing among the rubble of the razed town is the horseman.

My breath catches at the sight of him. Clad in his silver armor and shrouded by his black hair and wings, he looks every bit the dark deity he is.

I aim my weapon at his chest. How long has he been standing there watching me?

Death's gaze drops to my bow. "Your weapon won't protect you, kismet."

"What are you doing here?" I demand. I'm breathing faster than I should, surprise making me jittery.

"You've been following me," he states.

My heart is pounding like mad. I could shoot him now. I'd probably miss, but you never know.

The horseman prowls forward, the tips of his wings dragging along the ground.

"Keep your distance," I warn.

"Do you really think your bow scares me?" he asks.

"I *will* shoot."

"Ah, so it's you who is scared." He tilts his head. "Did you not like my touch?"

I think he's deliberately trying to frighten me, and damn him, but it's working. Even now I'm remembering how, beneath his hand, it felt as though my life was leaking out through my pores.

"Why were you waiting for me?" I demand.

"Why are you chasing me?" he fires back.

I frown at that. "You already know why. You must be stopped."

"Must I?" he responds, coming ever closer. "Perhaps it is *you* who needs to be stopped."

I need to shoot him. I don't know why I haven't released my arrow yet.

"Is that why you're here?" I ask, my gaze flicking to our surroundings before returning to him. "Because you wanted to stop me?"

"I wanted to *talk* to you," he says.

A chill courses through me when I realize *I am the only person he can really talk to*. I don't know the nuances of his power, but wherever he goes he kills. Perhaps I am the only person he *has* ever spoken to.

"You cannot change my mind about coming after you," I say.

"Who said anything about changing minds?" His gaze sweeps down my body and back up to my face, assessing me. Only, his eyes linger for a beat too long on my mouth, and when they finally do rise to meet my gaze, there are so many emotions in those eyes. I feel like if I stare too long, I'll fall into them and drown.

"You and I are fated to endure one another," the horseman says softly as

he moves towards me; he's now no more than ten feet away.

"Don't come any closer," I say. "I mean it."

Reluctantly, Death does stop.

I look him over the same way he did me. I hate that I find everything about him beautiful—from that ancient, tragic face to those strange wings, to his massive frame and his intricate silver armor. It *all* calls to me.

The corner of his mouth lifts as he watches me scrutinize him.

"What's your name?" I ask, keeping my arrow aimed at his chest. "Or do you only go by Death?"

"Oh, I have *many* names." His gaze returns to my lips, and a muscle in his jaw flexes.

"And what are they?"

"Anubis. Yama. Xoltol. Vanth. Charon. Mors. Mara. Azrael—and many, many others." His eyes flick to mine. "But for you, *Thanatos*."

Chapter 14

Cincinnati, Ohio

November, Year 26 of the Horsemen

“**Thanatos,**” I echo, letting my guard down for a moment.

He must sense it because he smiles and his eyes burn. The horseman—Thanatos—takes another step forward, and I tense all over again.

“I will shoot you.”

“Then shoot me already,” he challenges.

He doesn’t believe me?

I release the arrow. The projectile glances off his armor and clatters to the ground mere feet away.

And ... the horseman now looks pissed.

I’m reaching over my shoulder for another arrow when Death storms forward, erasing the last of the distance between us. Before I can fully nock the projectile, he jerks my bow and arrow out of my hand and casts them aside.

“Hey—!” I cry out.

Even as I protest, Thanatos reaches for my quiver strap. The horseman pulls it off my shoulder and tosses it away from me. I wince when I hear it hit the corpse I was trying to rob.

And now I’m empty-handed against the angel of death.

I tilt my head back and look up, up into the horseman’s terrible eyes. He scowls down at me, that muscle in his jaw still ticking.

“Do you really think you are making any difference?” he says, crowding me until his chest brushes mine. “Following me, shooting me?”

He’s clearly angry, which means I’m at least doing *something* right.

“People are escaping you—surviving you,” I say, “—so yes, I do think I’m

making a difference.”

His expression changes, he looks almost amused. “That was a *single* city—a city I wiped out only hours after I left your side that day. And I’ve eradicated over a dozen other towns since. Your efforts are sincere,” he acknowledges, “but wasted.”

Before I can respond, Thanatos shocks me by cupping my jaw, his eyes scouring my face. “All of creation falls to me, kismet. Kings and beggars, babies and warriors. Whales and flies, redwoods and dandelions. It all ends. And when it does, *I* am there to claim it.

“You will not stop me today, or tomorrow—you will not stop me *ever*. But—despite all sense, I think I do enjoy watching you try.”

He releases my jaw then.

I stumble back as he moves away from me.

“The next time we meet, Lazarus, I won’t be so kind to you,” he warns, his wings spreading wide. “But come for me all the same. I will relish our reunion.”

He leaps into the sky, his massive wingbeats further scattering my arrows across the street.

With one final, parting look, he flies away from me.

Chapter 15

Ames, Iowa

December, Year 26 of the Horsemen

I can't say how long I've been crouching on this partially collapsed overpass, waiting for the horseman to trot down the interstate highway beneath me. Nor am I absolutely certain that the horseman *will* travel this way, or that my half-baked plan will actually work.

All I know is that I'm freezing my ass off and waiting here was most certainly a bad idea.

I breathe on my gloved hands and rub them together. My nose hurts, my ears ache, and my toes feel like they're frozen. I'm pretty sure I've gotten frostbite on three separate occasions over the last month, and depending on how long I stick to this miserable task, today might mark four.

But watery sunlight has broken through the clouds, and maybe this day will be a little warmer than the ones that preceded it.

I grab my thermos and take another sip of coffee. I am pretty sure the horseman is coming this way. I know he made it to Minneapolis, and I think the next big city he's set his sights on is Des Moines.

Just as I set my thermos aside, the wildlife sweeps through. Cats, dogs, chickens, deer, birds, cows, elk—I even see a few bison.

The animals rush down the highway and the fields that border it on either side. As quickly as they come, they're gone, and that deathly silence sweeps over me, a silence I've come to associate with Death.

It takes several minutes, but eventually I catch sight of the horseman, casually riding down the I-35, the highway that runs beneath this overpass.

Before he has a chance to see me, I cut across to the other side of the overpass, nearly tripping over broken bits of asphalt as I do so.

I've gotten better at shooting my bow, but my fingers are far too numb to successfully shoot the horseman off his steed.

So today, I'm doing something a little different.

I pull myself onto the low wall of the overpass and, placing a hand on the cold concrete, I crouch there, my gaze locked on the highway below. A portion of the overpass to my left has collapsed, creating a bottleneck of sorts right beneath me, one that the horseman will have to pass through. I'm planning on capitalizing on it.

My breath mists as I wait for the horseman.

It takes a couple minutes, but eventually I hear the steady cllop of his steed's hooves as he gets closer and closer. Quietly, I withdraw my knife as I stare down at the highway beneath me.

Now those hoof beats echo, and I tense as he crosses beneath the overpass. The seconds seem to stretch as I wait.

Finally, I see his horse's dappled head twenty feet beneath me, then I see the black waves of Death's hair and his silver armor as he stares ahead, unaware of my presence.

I leap.

For a moment, while I'm airborne, I realize how absolutely stupid and prone to failure this idea is. But by then it's too late.

Rather than landing in the saddle, as I'd so elegantly pictured, I clobber into the horseman.

He grunts as I knock him off his horse, the two of us tumbling to the road below.

The whole thing is painful and more than a little embarrassing, but before Death can react, I stab him through the neck.

"*Lazarus,*" he rasps, reaching for his throat. Blood slips between his fingers, and a small sound slips from my lips.

I've fought this man before. I've hurt and killed him before. But this is ... intimate in a grotesque way. Shooting someone from a distance is far more impersonal than this.

Withdrawing the dagger, I release it as though it burned me, my nausea rising.

Regardless, it's too late for regret. There's blood everywhere and the wound I've inflicted is too deep. Thanatos's eyelids droop, and then seconds later his body goes limp.

It's painfully quiet.

There's nothing to ease the aftermath of this violent moment.

My shoulder and chest hurt from my fall, and I'm still nauseous from my own violence, but I force myself to get up.

Moving like a creaky old man, I head back up to the overpass to grab my things. When I return to the horseman's side, I finally notice the smell.

Frankincense and myrrh. I glance up and see Death's horse standing twenty feet away, the horseman's torch jutting out of one of the saddlebags. Hazy, perfumed smoke wafts through the air, and a chill passes through me.

I know enough about the horseman to know death won't stop him for long. The only real way to hold the horseman up is to stick around and kill him again before he wakes.

I've been confronted with this issue before. I still can't stomach the thought, particularly not after what I just did.

You could hold him captive.

The thought causes my breath to still.

I could hold him captive.

It would be like trying to rein in a hurricane. You can't stop a force of nature.

That doesn't quell my rising excitement. I mean, who knows? Maybe I can rein him in.

There's really only one way to find out.

Death wakes on the floor of an abandoned barn. The place smells like mildew and wet animals. Oh, and scented smoke—Death's horse decided to join us in here. And to be fair to the incense, it does cover up the other two odors fairly well.

I sit cross-legged in front of Thanatos, my body still aching from all the effort it took to get this overly large, winged man in here.

As I watch, his eyelids flutter, then he blinks. It's a strange magic, watching Thanatos come back from the dead. Stranger still to watch his blood vanish from my clothing and his armor—which I discarded near the overpass—reappear on his body.

Immediately, his gaze hones in on me.

“Lazarus.” For a moment, he smiles, like he can't help himself. The sight is so shocking that my heart flutters at the sight. “To what do I owe this uncommon pleasure?”

The horseman tries to move his arms from where he lays on his side, but I

bound him with a length of cord I normally use as a clothing line. It's not the thickest stuff, but I made up for it by tying it *tight*.

He glances down at his bound hands and ankles, his smile slipping away. "You knocked me down," he recalls.

I try not to wince at the memory of my graceless leap.

His gaze rises to mine. "And then you stabbed me." Accusation laces his words. "And now ..." His attention returns to his bindings.

"You're my captive," I tell him as he awkwardly pushes himself up to sitting position. His wings lift at his back as he does so.

Death's eyebrows lift. "I'm your ... ?" He smirks then. "*Captive*." He says the word with relish and perhaps a pinch of humor, and maybe I should stab him again. Just, you know, to remind him of the power dynamics here.

He jerks his head back to toss a lock of hair behind an ear, and I jolt a little at the sudden action, my adrenaline rising.

Thanatos notices, and it causes him to grin again.

He clicks his tongue. "That will never do, kismet. How are you supposed to control me if my every movement startles you?"

I narrow my eyes at him.

"This is how it's going to be," I say slowly. "We're going to stay here, together, and if you make any move to escape," I touch the bow resting next to me, "I will shoot you."

"I guess I'm trapped," he says. He doesn't sound worried. Or defeated. He doesn't sound like someone who's gotten themselves into an unfortunate situation at all.

If anything, he seems amused.

Bastard.

"What will you do with me?" he asks, his gaze flicking over my form. Something about the way he assesses me has blood rushing to my cheeks and core.

"I'm going to keep you here, where you cannot destroy any more towns."

Death's eyes gleam, but he says nothing to that.

I've caught a creature higher up on the food chain than myself. I truly am a fool for even attempting this.

"So then we are to live here?" he asks, glancing around at our surroundings. "Together?"

He makes it sound like the two of us are shacking up like some couple.

My plan is unraveling.

I frown at him. “That’s *not* how this situation works.”
“Then how does it work?”
“If you move, I attack.”
He flashes me a sly glance, then leans to the left.
“I’m moving,” he taunts.
“Don’t be childish,” I say.
“I wouldn’t know how to be childish,” he counters, “I’ve never *been* a child.”
I narrow my eyes at him again.
He leans right. “Still moving.”
Oh, for fuck’s sake.
Quick as lightning, I pull out my bow, nock an arrow, and shoot.
He hisses when I hit a wing, the arrow getting caught in his feathers.
“This isn’t a joke to me,” I say. “I will keep shooting you if you don’t listen.”
“Will you?” Death presses, a muscle in his jaw flexing with the pain.
“Because I have a feeling your violence only goes so far.”
I have nothing to say to that. It’s so painfully close to the truth, and I have no idea how I’ve become that transparent.
When all I do is sit there and stare at him, he finally says, “Are you going to remove the arrow? Or are you afraid I’ll move?”
I glare at him. “Maybe I want to see you in pain.”
“You don’t enjoy it,” he states, his face growing serious. “Just as I don’t.”
“*You* don’t enjoy all the violence?” I say, raising my eyebrows. I find *that* hard to believe.
“I see why you have been put in my path,” Death says softly, ignoring my words. “We are alike in one fundamental way.”
Now he thinks we’re *alike*? This conversation is growing wilder by the second.
“Duty is duty,” Death says. He settles back a little. “But—to answer your previous question—no, I don’t enjoy it.”

Hours pass and the light fades. It’s hard to make out anything in the darkness, and it’s made me more than a little jumpy. I’m pretty sure I’d know if Death got free—but then, there’s no way of knowing with absolute certainty, not without getting close to him, and that poses its own sort of risks.

“I like this,” Thanatos admits across from me, breaking the silence.

His voice is like velvet, and it should be soothing. Instead, a childlike fear of this *thing* that lurks in the darkness consumes me, sending my pulse racing.

“You *like* this?” I say in disbelief, trying to control my voice.

“Sitting with you. *Talking* with you. Not fighting for once,” Thanatos says. After a moment, he adds, “The fighting is ... I find it exhilarating to be pitted against you, but well, now you know how I feel about hurting you. Talking with you, however—this is intriguing.”

At his words, my fear transforms, and I’m reminded of those stray thoughts and dreams I’ve had over the last months. Ones where Death isn’t my enemy at all, and he looks at me and touches me entirely differently ...

I am not right in the head.

I clear my throat. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Why not?” Death asks, curious.

I rub my eyes. “*Because.*”

Because it makes me want to like you, and that is an absolutely terrifying concept.

The barn is oppressively quiet, and a part of me wishes I could see the horseman’s face.

He *is* right. There is something intriguing about sitting here and actually talking to this menace.

“We are alike in another fundamental way,” he says after a moment.

And what is that? The question burns in my throat, but I won’t let myself ask it.

And Death never elaborates.

By the middle of the night it becomes clear I’m in over my head.

I’m hungry and thirsty and chilled, and I need to go to the bathroom. But most of all, I’m *tired*. I’ve lived in a perpetual state of exhaustion chasing this man around the country.

I yawn for the fifth time? Sixth time?

“Better not fall asleep, *kismet.*” Death’s voice comes from out of the darkness. “That’s when I’ll strike.”

“Better not move, horseman. That’s when I’ll shoot.”

I hear his low, almost sexual laugh. My stomach clenches at the sound.

After a moment, I ask, “What does that word mean? *Kismet?*”

He's called me that several times before.

There's a long pause.

"I assumed you would know," he finally says. "It is a human word after all." He adds, "It means *fate*."

Fate?

"Why would you call me that?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"You do not know." Death says it like a statement, and yet I swear there's a note of surprise in his voice.

"Know what?"

But he doesn't answer, and I don't have the energy to press him for more.

For a while, his warning to stay awake is enough to keep me alert. But the hours tick by and there's nothing to do but stare into the darkness.

I don't mean to slip off to sleep. To be honest, I would've sworn I *hadn't* fallen asleep, but suddenly I'm roused by cool fingers brushing my hair back from my ear. For a moment, I've forgotten the situation, and that touch is so gentle that I lean into it.

A moment later, lips replace those fingers.

"I was so intrigued at the thought of being your captive, Laz, I almost stayed put," Death whispers against my ear. "But I have work to do."

I stiffen at the sound of his voice, panic flooding my veins. *He's broken free.*

"Maybe next time," he adds, "*you can be my captive.*"

"Thanat—" Just as I'm turning to face him, my hand reaching for my weapon, Death's hands find either side of my face. He twists my neck violently and—

Snap.

Death

I have taken countless lives over the ages. The young, the old, the strong and weak. I thought I had seen it all.

I had not.

I have never encountered a creature willing to die over and over again for her own kind. Not even my brothers were capable of this. We horsemen have all died more than once, but never for anything more tangible than our task.

Watching Lazarus pit herself against such insurmountable odds is unsettling.

Unsettling and beguiling.

I am eager to see her again.

Chapter 16

Kansas City, Missouri

December, Year 26 of the Horsemen

Lazarus

Things have changed between us. That much has become obvious.

The two of us face off on the streets of Kansas City, bodies and broken buildings scattered in all directions.

“I have been thinking,” Thanatos says, his boots crunching over shattered glass. “We could stop fighting.”

“We could,” I agree, gripping my knife tighter. My other blade is now in Death’s hand. “You only have to end the killing.”

His eyes flash. “I cannot. You know I cannot.”

The horseman begins to circle me.

“So what you’re really asking is for me to stop defending humanity,” I say, turning my body with him so that my back is never exposed.

Out of nowhere, the horseman lunges forward, and I have to leap out of the way. Despite the chill air, sweat drips down my chest.

“It is as useless a task as it is thankless,” Death says, retreating back a step.

I rush forward as he moves away, swinging my knife.

Clang. The short blades meet.

Death leans his weight against our locked weapons, forcing me down to a knee.

“It’s not thankless,” I pant. I drop my free hand to the ground. There are pebbles and shards of glass and other debris dusting the road. My hand closes around a fistful of it. “Sometimes I best you, and that is very, very gratifying.”

I fling the rubble at his face, causing him to stumble back, his blade sliding from mine with a *zing*.

Dropping my own knife, I dive towards him, catching the horseman by one of his ankles.

He trips, then falls.

Before he has a chance to get up, I crawl over to the horseman, and then, hesitating only a moment, I pull myself onto him, swinging a leg over his torso.

I’m breathing heavily, my chest rising and falling with my exertion.

For a moment, Thanatos looks bewildered. He expects my attacks; what he doesn’t expect is to find me sitting astride him, weaponless.

Well, *nearly* weaponless.

“What are you doing?” Death demands.

I lean forward, grabbing one of his wrists.

Death’s gaze unwittingly moves to my cleavage, which is more on display than usual, thanks to a well-placed slice of his knife.

Thanatos stares ... and stares, and it would be fucking rude except this horseman clearly has never come face-to-face with boobs.

“What are you doing?” he echoes, but his voice has roughened.

Breasts are, apparently, his undoing.

I grab his other hand, bringing the two of them over his head. I lean forward as I do so until The Girls are up close and personal with Thanatos.

Did I plan on distracting Death with my tits today?

No.

Will I take it?

Yes.

“I’m subduing you.” As I speak, I unhook the rope I have at my waist. I didn’t plan on this, but ... like I said, things have changed between us.

“You’re subduing me?” Death murmurs distractedly. *He’s still staring at my cleavage.*

While he’s busy discovering hormones, I begin binding his wrists together above his head. After our last encounter, I’ve discovered that ties won’t hold him forever, but it’s better than nothing. Plus, this rope is much thicker than the clothing line I used last time.

Thanatos’s eyes finally move away from my cleavage, flicking up to my face.

Death’s gaze sharpens. “*I want you.*” The words rip free from him.

Absolute silence follows in their wake.

I don’t know who’s more shocked, him or me. The admission is so unexpected and so grotesquely inappropriate, given that the two of us are mortal enemies—or immortal ones, but whatever.

I wait for Death to take the words back, or at least qualify them. He doesn’t.

I turn back to my work, ready to pretend the last twenty seconds away, but my hands have begun to tremble, and I can’t seem to secure the knot around his wrists as tight as I’d like.

“Look at me,” Thanatos demands softly.

I shake my head.

“Lazarus, look at me.”

“I don’t take orders from a horseman,” I say, dragging in a deep breath.

He lets out a low laugh, one that raises the hairs on my arms. “You won’t look at me because you feel it too, and you know I’d see it in your eyes.”

“You are delusional,” I say.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him grin, and my stomach does a weird flip at the sight.

Finish what you started, I command myself, refocusing on the knot. My hands, however, are still shaking.

“We keep fighting this pull between us,” Death says.

“There is no pull between us,” I say adamantly. “You are my enemy.”

“Oh, there is a pull between us.”

I glare down at him. “There *isn’t*.”

Thanatos stares deeply into my eyes. After a moment, a slow grin spreads across his face. “There it is. You want me too.”

“How would you even know what want looks like?” I accuse.

“There are many souls who crave me, in the end,” he says.

People who crave *death*, he means.

I frown. “Well, I’m not one of them.”

His grin only grows, making my stomach flutter in the most infuriating way.

“I’m *not*,” I say defensively. “You’re beautiful. That’s all.”

Dear God, did I actually just say that out loud?

The horseman’s expression grows more intense, his eyes seeming to burn. “You think I’m beautiful.”

Death no longer needs to kill me, I think my own embarrassment will do the job just fine.

Why did I say that?

His gaze is still heated, his expression still challenging me.

“Aren’t you tired of all this?” He nods towards the ruins of Kansas City. “Aren’t you tired of the fighting, the struggle, the pain?”

God, but I am. For every town I save, there are at least five others I can’t.

“Of course I’m tired.”

Tired to my bones.

It doesn’t change anything.

Death’s gaze gentles and he says softly, “Then come with me.”

For a moment, the offer sounds unbearably good, like falling into bed after

a long day.

I stare into Thanatos's eyes, which are full of so many secrets. So, so many secrets.

"Come with me," he says again.

I could. No more fighting. No more exhaustion. I'd just ... give in. Perhaps I cannot die and my body can never know true and final peace, but this seems like a close second.

"We would just keep fighting," I argue with myself out loud.

"What if we decided to stop hurting one another?" he counters, and he's the devil in my ear. "I despise seeing you suffer, and I know it's no different for you."

My heart is beating fast. He's saying all the right things, and I am being lured in by those sweet promises.

Which is why I get off of him and force myself to back up.

"You're not taking me anywhere," I say. Assuming, of course, that I bind up his feet—and his wings too. I have more rope in my bag, but my bag is across the street, and getting to it means giving this horseman my back.

He lays there on the ground, then laughs, the sound building on itself. "Do you truly think you are in control?" he says. "That despite your previous failed efforts, you can just tie me up and walk away?"

All at once he lifts his bound wrists, then rips them apart, the rope tearing like tissue.

I stumble back, my eyes wide.

That wasn't supposed to happen.

With catlike grace, the horseman pushes himself to his feet. He straightens, his black wings folding at his back.

He paces towards me. "I think we've already discovered that I make a poor captive," he says carefully. "I slip my restraints a little too easily."

Thanatos stops several feet from me. He extends his hand. "Let there be no more pain between us. No more strife. Come with me, Lazarus."

I'm still shaken by his show of strength, and that I sat on his chest for *minutes*, and in all that time, he could've ripped the rope apart and grabbed me.

But he didn't.

And now ... his offer and his earnest expression wriggle their way under my skin.

No more pain. No more gnawing loneliness. No more scheming and

breaking myself trying to stop this man.

It's overwhelmingly alluring.

I take a step towards him.

Death's eyes alight with some intense emotion.

I reach for his outstretched hand, giving into this moment of weakness. My hand hovers over his open palm.

Only then do I hesitate.

My gaze flicks up to Thanatos. Thanatos, who might stop fighting me, but who will never, ever stop the rampage. Thanatos who wants me to give up everything while he concedes nothing.

"No." Even as I say it, I drop my hand and back away from him.

My heart is still racing. The tides are changing between us. I no longer feel like the hunter and him the hunted, and I have the craziest fear that if Death gets close enough to me again, he will try to snatch me.

"Don't go, Lazarus," he pleads.

I hesitate again. I don't know why I do. I just ... I wasn't expecting this monster to have such a peculiar offer for me, nor was I expecting to be so seduced by it.

And I have no idea what to say to him now. So I settle for shaking my head as I put distance between us.

Death's gaze narrows. "Mark my words, kismet: this is the last time I'll give you the choice." And then, as casual as can be, he calls his steed forth, mounts the beast, and rides off.

Chapter 17

Austin, Texas

December, Year 26 of the Horsemen

I've lain in wait for the horseman now two dozen times? Three dozen? Four? It all blurs together. And with each city I pass, my sharp grief and seething anger fades a little more.

Aren't you tired of the fighting?

What if we decided to stop hurting one another?

“Place your best sharpshooters at all the main roads entering and exiting the city,” I say to Austin’s chief of police, Wyatt Davenport. “You only get one chance to kill the horseman. If an arrow goes wide or fails to instantly kill him, everyone dies.”

I’ve increasingly tried to confront the horseman before he can reach a city, but many times I can’t avoid it. Hence, how I’ve found myself in the room with Austin’s chief of police.

Chief Davenport pulls himself up a little straighter from where he sits in his chair. “We’ve received Oklahoma City’s warnings, and we’ve heard the stories from others who’ve stumbled across the bodies,” he says, somewhat defensively. “We are already aware of the horseman’s existence, and we have plans already in place.”

“He kills in an instant,” I say. “I’ve seen it firsthand.” So many, many times. “You need to evacuate everyone if you can. He’s coming from the North—” I stand and point to the highway I took into Austin. “Most likely he’ll use this road. It would be best to have civilians avoid it and to place most—”

“I will decide what is best for our city,” Chief Davenport says, cutting me off. He scrutinizes me again. “Who referred you again?”

I can feel my bones wearying. “The fire chief.”

I *am* tired. So, so tired.

Tired of explaining this to people who don’t want to believe it. Tired of waiting, bow poised, for Death to ride down that road. Tired of the long days and the short nights. Tired of the ever-present fear that I carry with me.

Tired of hurting Death. Fighting him.

Maybe I should just give in. It *is* all inevitable.

I push the seductive thought away.

“The fire chief,” he echoes, looking at me as though I’m a liar. I don’t know if it’s my gender, my authority, or what, but something about me rubs this man all wrong. “And where is he? Samuel would’ve made a point to be here himself if he felt it was important.”

“I don’t know why the fire chief isn’t here,” I say, exasperated.

The chief of police settles back into his seat, his gaze flicking over my shoulder to the door, as though he’s trying to figure out the fastest way to end this meeting.

“How do you even know the horseman is coming *this* way?” Davenport asks, scrutinizing me again, his expression shrewd. “Am I really supposed to believe some girl who just happened to roll on into my city spouting stories where everyone dies—except for her, of course—really holds the answers that no one else does?” He gives me a hard look. “*Sharpshooters*,” he mutters, shaking his head.

This is where he assumes I have some sort of elaborate plan to get everyone out of their homes so that I can rob them blind.

I’m so tired.

I haven’t told the chief of police the part about me being un-killable. I don’t think I have it in me today to tell *that* truth. So instead, I point to the map in front of him.

“That’s my evidence. Look at the cities he’s hit. There’s a pattern to it. And if you follow that pattern, you’ll see that it leads right through Austin. You said yourself that Oklahoma City reached out. You *know* there are—”

“Do not *presume* to tell me what *I* know,” the police chief says, his voice like steel.

I tighten my jaw, forcing myself to remain silent about the presumptions this man has made about *me*.

“Death likes the big cities,” I say instead. “He’ll be here soon.”

“Based on a bunch of scribbles you made on some map.” Chief Davenport

pushes the paper back to me. “Enough of this hogwash. Get out of my—”

“There is one other reason,” I rush to say.

He grimaces with his impatience, but waits.

“Death is coming this way because *I* am here,” I say grimly. “He’s after me.”

At my words, the chief of police sits back in his chair. He stares at me, and I can practically see the wheels in his mind turning. The moment stretches on, growing uncomfortable.

“Hey, Jones,” he finally calls out, looking at the doorway.

I glance over my shoulder just as Officer Jones, the man stationed outside, pokes his head into the room. The chief of police beckons him in.

Officer Jones steps into the room, looking between the two of us.

Chief Davenport turns his attention back to me. “So, Death is following you?”

I can’t tell whether he finally believes me. His expression is unreadable.

I glance from him to Officer Jones before responding. “Yes,” I say slowly.

“Well, then,” Davenport says, leaning back in his seat. “If it’s you he’s after, then it’s you he’ll get.” His gaze cuts to the other man. “Officer Jones.”

He’s no more than spoken his name when the policeman grabs me.

“What are you—?” I tussle with the officer as he grabs my wrists. I slam my boot down onto his instep.

“*Fuck*,” he swears as his hold loosens.

Can’t believe this is happening. Any of it.

I manage to slip out of the room. God, am I really running from the authorities now?

Two more officers chat at the end of the hall. The moment they see me breathlessly exit the room, they stiffen, their attention turning to me.

I dart in the opposite direction.

I have lots of experience killing deities, but I have very little experience when it comes to this.

The door behind me bangs open and Officer Jones barrels out. I haven’t made it ten feet when he gains on me. The policeman gives me a hard shove from behind. I stumble, then fall to the linoleum floor. He’s on me in an instant, dragging my wrists together and cuffing me while the two other officers close in.

“This is ridiculous!” I huff. “What are you doing?” I begin to thrash

against them.

I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe this is happening.

I hear Chief Davenport's heavy footfalls. He comes over to where I'm being cuffed. "Men, this one is not to be booked in the county jail."

The officers hesitate. Whatever protocol they have in place for criminals, it's clear that the chief of police wants them to deviate from it.

"This little miss seems to think that a horseman is coming our way." Davenport's mouth twists, like he's suppressing a smirk. "Lucky for us, the man is apparently looking for *her*."

The officers' eyes move over me, though I can't guess what is going through their heads.

"Please," I beg the chief of police. "However you think this is going to unfold, you're wrong."

"I listened to your story," Davenport snaps, "now it's time for you to shut up and listen to me, young lady: Maybe you're lying and want to fuck with my city, maybe you're telling the truth and the horseman really is on his way here.

"It doesn't really matter because at the end of the day, we're going to truss you up like a hog, and let the horseman—if he really is coming—get to you first."

That's his plan?

Who had the poor sense to put this man in a leadership role?

"Let—me—go." I jerk against my restraints. These idiots. "He *will* kill you all."

"Seems to me like he might not—not if it's you he wants. Seems to me like he might find himself distracted.

"And if he's not coming," Davenport continues, "then we can escort you to the county jail for a night, so you can think over your life choices."

I blow out a breath. "It doesn't work like that! Death might not be here today, or even tomorrow, he might not come at *all*. But if he does, everyone will die."

The police chief narrows his eyes on me. Crouching in front of me, he says softly. "I think you're full of shit, little lady, and I will enjoy seeing you rot in jail for having the audacity to prey upon our citizens."

Turning to Officer Jones, he claps the man on the shoulder. "Load her into the back of one of the jail carts and take her to the edge of Interstate Thirty-Five," he says, casting me a glance. That was the highway I'd warned him to

watch closely. “When you get there, restrain her and leave her in the middle of the road.”

I stare at the police chief with rising horror. “You are mad.”

Chief Davenport’s eyes harden. “You might gag her too,” he adds. “She’s causing enough panic as it is.”

The officers do as they’re ordered. I’m left in the middle of the highway on the edge of Austin, my wrists and ankles cuffed. A length of rope runs from my neck to a defunct streetlamp fifteen feet away. I’m chained like a dog.

The officers in charge have moved away from me, probably because now that their boss is out of sight, they’re realizing this is highly, highly unethical, even for the Wild West.

Or maybe, trussed up as I am, they simply don’t need to be any closer.

I struggle against my bonds until my wrists are rubbed raw and a few frustrated tears have slipped out.

This is such a *stupid* situation brought on by a few idiots who think that simple problems must have simple solutions, and now, not only are they fucked, *I’m* fucked too.

I work my jaw. The cloth they’ve gagged me with is hurting the edges of my mouth.

I glance over my shoulder at where the three officers loiter near their police carriage. They look bored and somewhat annoyed at being out in the cold, but they’re chatting away. I catch bits and pieces of work gossip.

Nothing much happens for a long time. Some people enter the city, some people leave it—a few of them even stop to question the situation I’m in before Officer Jones or one of the other two men scares them off.

Eventually, Chief Davenport joins them.

“Your horseman hasn’t shown up yet?” the chief of police calls out to me.

My hands are bound, but I still manage to lift them high enough to flip him the bird.

“Hey!” one of the officers barks sharply.

“Forget about it,” Davenport says. Quieter, I hear him add, “If nothing happens by nightfall, we’ll have you guys switch out with Joe and Tompkins and Elijah.”

“*What’s going on?*” one of the men asks, his voice low. I hear the chief of police fill them all in.

“*Think it’s true?*” One of them asks.

“Well, we’ll see, won’t we?” Davenport says a little louder, and I can practically feel his gaze boring into my back. “If not, I can tell you all one thing for damn sure: that woman will regret coming to Austin.”

An hour more goes by before I hear the piercing cries of countless animals off in the distance.

It’s beginning.

My heart ratchets up as I hobble to my feet, then shuffle as best I can over to the leaning streetlamp I’m tied to. That dark line of creatures grows closer and closer, obscuring the sunset. The police cart rattles, then takes off as the horses harnessed to it gallop away.

“Fucking hell!” One of the men exclaims.

I press my back against the metal pole just as the animals rush past, braying and howling and screeching.

“Holy shit!” another officer exclaims.

The rest of their words are lost to the noise of the stampede. The group of them dash towards a defunct fast food restaurant, the paint worn away with time, and the logo nothing more than an outline. They have to slog through the horde of animals to get there, but eventually, they manage to hide behind the derelict building.

I should get some grim satisfaction at their situation, but instead my stomach churns because I know what’s coming.

Death.

As the stampede tapers off, I feel that lethal silence.

Oh God.

I fight my restraints anew, though it’s useless.

I remember the horseman’s promise that he would come for me, and I shiver.

I close my eyes, trying to figure out just how I’m going to get myself out of this mess. I could stay right here, slouched against this pole with my back to the road. I bet if Death didn’t see my face, he’d walk right by and miss me altogether.

But then Austin would perish, and if everyone’s gone, I’ll be stuck forever bound to this post. That nightmarish possibility churns my stomach.

If I cannot hide from the horseman ... then I’m going to have to get back on that road and offer myself up to Death like some sort of sick sacrifice.

Just like Chief Davenport intended.

I grimace, even as I shuffle back over to the middle of the road, my chains

clanking. I've just gotten there when, from the silence, I hear the officers' voices.

My spine stiffens. They're *returning*? How were they not convinced by the stampede of wild animals that the horseman is coming?

I look over my shoulder at them. "*Run!*" I try to scream. The gag muffles my warning.

"What's gotten into her?" one of the officers says.

Is it not blatantly obvious?

I scream again in frustration. "*Run! Run! Run!*"

The group of them stands there, looking confused and a little spooked. Chief Davenport is scrutinizing me, a frown on his face, like perhaps, for the first time, he's considering that this was not the best idea.

Finally, one of the officers says, "Maybe—maybe we should go."

Clop—clop—clop.

Too late. Too late too late too late.

I face forward, dread pooling in my stomach. In the distance, I see the horseman, his wings folded behind his back.

"By God," one of the officers says.

Death is already looking at my form, but the moment I face him, he pulls his horse up short, his eyes scouring over my gag and the rope at my neck, and the cuffs at my wrists and ankles.

His eyes move to my face. There, they linger and linger, his expression seeming to grow more intense, more determined with every passing second.

He clicks his tongue and his horse begins to trot, his attention fixed to me.

Clip-clop, clip-clop.

I can't seem to push down my anxiety as Thanatos quickly closes the last of the distance between us. I can feel my body shaking, and it's not just from the cold. I don't know what to expect from this encounter.

Death stops his horse in front of me. For several seconds, the two of us do nothing but gaze at each other.

"I'll be damned," Davenport says in the distance, his voice hushed, "she was telling the truth."

He's barely spoken the words when I hear several dull thuds. I've heard that sound so many times. *Bodies hitting the ground.* The chief of police and those officers were bastards for doing this to me, but I still ache that they—and likely the rest of the city—are now gone.

"*At last,*" Thanatos says, relishing this situation.

Even knowing I need the horseman to unbind me, I still shuffle away from him as he comes forward, the shackles at my ankles clanging together.

“Where are you hoping to go, kismet?” he says, striding after me. “There appears to be only so much rope.”

That doesn’t stop me from continuing to move away from him.

“Did your dear human friends turn on you?” he asks. He catches the rope tied to my neck and reels himself to me. Once I’m within arm’s reach, Death reaches for my gag. With his bare hands, he rips the cloth apart. “Or was this meant to be an ambush?” he asks, sparing a glance around us.

I draw in a ragged breath. “If you try to take me,” I say. “I will make you regret it.”

The corner of his mouth curves up. “Will you now?”

As he speaks, he reaches down. Taking one iron cuff into his hands, he pries it apart, freeing one of my wrists. Then he takes the other cuff and rips it, too, apart before tossing the broken manacles aside. The sight of his staggering strength has me sucking in a panicked breath.

I keep forgetting the two of us are not equals, not when it comes to raw power.

Once Thanatos has removed my handcuffs, he reaches for the shackles at my feet.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He glances up at me, and Death kneeling before me should not look nearly so appealing.

“I’m freeing you.” As though to make his point, he rips one of the cuffs apart.

“Why?”

“Would you prefer that I just leave you here?” he asks, grabbing the last remaining cuff. He pulls on it, and with a groaning snap the metal is torn apart.

The horseman rises then, towering over me once more.

“So, you’re going to let me go?” I ask carefully.

He gives me a sensuous look that I feel deep in my core. “Surely you haven’t forgotten my parting vow.”

So Thanatos *does* plan on taking me. I don’t exactly know what that entails, but I imagine it means I’ll no longer be able to warn cities of his approach. And though I may be tired of all of this, I’m not ready to call it quits.

“I’m sorry they turned on you,” he says earnestly.

I draw in a deep breath. “They might’ve turned on me, but they didn’t hurt me.” *Unlike you.*

I don’t want either of us to forget who the true villain in this situation is.

The horseman’s gaze meets mine, and he gets it. I can tell he gets it. But he offers no apologies or excuses.

Death’s hand moves to the rope at my neck. His knuckles brush the underside of my jaw as he grips it, and I think he’s realizing *this is the moment*. The moment he takes me. I can see the triumph already in his eyes.

He rips apart the rope, and I am free.

Quick as lightning I shove the heel of my palm into his nose, just like a female officer a dozen towns ago showed me how to do.

Death’s head snaps back, and I use the momentary distraction to turn tail and *run*. I sprint towards the freshly dead officers who lie forty yards away, just to the side of the highway. Surely one of them has a weapon I can defend myself with.

Thwump—thwump—thwump.

Thanatos’s wings echo behind me as he takes to the air.

Don’t look back. I want to badly, but I know the horseman’s closing in on me, and any misstep might mean the difference between capture and escape.

Up ahead I recognize Officer Jones sprawled out on the dead grass. He has a couple blades strapped to his waist, if only I can get to him.

I push my legs as hard as I can, even as Death’s wingbeats get louder as he draws near. Only twenty feet remain. Fifteen. Ten.

Thanatos is so close that each flap of his wings blows my hair about.

Five feet.

I feel the brush of his fingertips as he reaches for me. I slide the last several feet like I’m hitting home plate. Officer Jones is right next to me, his holstered weapons within arm’s reach. I manage to pull out two wicked-looking daggers when Thanatos’s arms close around me. He pulls me back against his chest.

“How I have awaited this moment,” Death whispers in my ear.

An instant later, he leaps from the ground with me locked in his arms.

Christ above.

I kick out at nothing but air as we rise from the highway.

“Thanatos, put me down,” I demand, panic lacing my voice.

“It’s too late for that, kismet.”

It's not too late for anything.

I swivel around best I can in Death's arms, swinging my newly acquired blades.

Immediately he catches the knife in my right hand and jerks it out of my hold, tossing it aside.

Distantly I hear it clatter below us, but I have no time to look because the horseman is already reaching for my second blade. It's in my less dominant hand, which makes striking him hard. But it's also just out of Death's reach. He tries to switch the arm holding me.

"Let—me—go." I kick out at him as we rise higher and higher. I know without looking below me that I will see bodies. Many, many bodies.

Even as we tussle, I can hear the shriek and groan of buildings collapsing. One after another after another. The entire gleaming city of Austin is falling to ruin.

"I won't," Thanatos swears. "You might as well stop struggling."

"You cannot just kidnap me!"

"Says the woman who first took me captive."

We must now be over a hundred feet from the ground and we're still rising.

Thanatos is still grappling for my knife. "Enough, Lazarus," he says. "This is too high for battle."

I don't intend to fight the horseman this high up, but I don't intend to give him my weapon either. If I lose it, I will be totally at his mercy.

That is a fate I don't wish to dwell on.

I swing my arm backwards to evade his. It's only after the dagger has sunk into soft flesh and I hear Death's pained grunt that I realize my mistake. In my panic, I actually struck him.

I don't realize just how bad, however, until the horseman's grip loosens. As quick as sucking in a breath I begin to fall.

"No," he gasps out, trying to recapture me. But his hands fumble over my arms, and I slip through them.

And then I'm really falling.

The wind shoves my shocked cry back down my throat. Why couldn't I have just dropped the blade? I had to fight to the bitter end, didn't I? And now I screwed myself over doing so.

Above me the horseman bellows, and as my body twists in the air, I finally see him.

Death's diving for me, a determined look in his eyes. He extends an arm, though he's several feet above me.

"Lazarus!" It's hard to hear him over the wind. *"Take my hand!"*

For once, I reach for him in earnest.

He's catching up to me, and I'm straining to grasp his hand. The distance closes between us, and my fingers brush his bloody ones.

So close.

Death's eyes move to something below me, and I see them widen.

Dear God.

I don't want to die. Not like this. I was a fool about the dagger. I wasn't thinking. I don't want it to end like this.

"Lazarus!"

I strain for his hand. *"Thanatos."*

I don't want to die. I don't want—

My head cracks against something and everything goes dark.

Chapter 18

Austin, Texas

December, Year 26 of the Horsemen

I wake slowly, my eyelids peeling themselves apart. I stare up at the sky from inside a partially collapsed building. Half of the ceiling has caved in, and judging by the ache at my back, I'm lying on what remains of it.

I begin to move, then choke as blinding pain stabs through me.

I glance down at my torso. Just above my bellybutton, a thick metal bar juts upwards. I choke again, this time more from horror than anything else.

I've been impaled.

I move my arms—those seem to have mostly healed, though they're covered in bruises—and try to push myself up—

I scream as pain lacerates through me and flop back down.

I pant as I stare at the blue sky far above me.

Jesus.

I can't die, and I'm stuck.

If there's a hell, then this is it.

I cry out, I moan, but nobody hears me. The hours go by, day gives way to night, then night gives way to day. On and on it goes.

My stomach cramps from hunger, my lips crack from thirst, yet still I stay pinned to the ground. I sob on and off for some time, mostly because I realize I am so fucked.

So, so fucked.

I don't know where Thanatos is, or what state he's in. Maybe he hurt himself as well. Or maybe he didn't; maybe he simply saw my skewered body and thought leaving me was better than capturing me.

I don't know why that particular possibility hurts my heart as much as it does.

The next day ticks by. I can smell the dead on the wind, I can hear the baying of wild dogs and the screeches of circling birds. None of the scavengers have found me—yet.

Over and over again I try to drag myself up and off the pole, but blinding pain aside, it's an impossible angle for me to overcome, one that no amount of survival instincts can change.

I don't want to be in my own body right now.

The scavengers have found me.

It's ...

Unspeakable.

An eternity I've laid here, pinned in.

I've been in and out of consciousness so many times that I don't know whether hours or days have passed since the carrion eaters found me—I think it's been at least a day, though pain twists my memories. Perhaps I simply dreamed of the dark sky.

The scavengers do eventually move away. Once they do, I sob, my ruin of a chest heaving and my numerous injuries flaring up with the action.

The creatures will be back. It's only a matter of time.

I search around for an adequate weapon, but the rubble that was small enough to grasp I've already picked up and chucked in my failed attempt to scare the animals away.

The best I can hope for at this point is that the next time the scavengers come, they'll somehow manage to free me. The thought leaves me dry heaving.

I sob a few more times, but my head pounds and my body can't summon up enough moisture for tears.

Fucking Death.

I curse him over and over.

So when I hear him calling my name, I think I must've conjured him with my anger alone.

Lazarus ... Lazarus ...

Lazarus ...

It's not really him, I tell myself. Dehydration, hunger, and pain have all

made me delirious.

“*Lazarus!*” A man bellows.

My breath catches. *Thanatos?* Could it be?

The hope that fills my chest is painful, and I’m almost scared to give into it. But then, as I stare, bleary-eyed, up at the hole in the roof, I catch a glimpse of black wings and gleaming armor overhead.

It’s definitely him. No bird could look like that.

He’s looking for me, I realize.

Help. I try to form the word, but my voice is hoarse and weak. I clear my throat.

“*Death,*” I call out. It’s hardly more than a whisper.

I gather together all my energy and suck in a deep breath.

“*Death!*” I yell. My voice is still painfully weak and he’s already passed by, the walls of this partially caved-in building hiding him from sight.

Desperation and hope has me gathering together my strength.

I suck in a breath. “*Death! Death! Help! Please! Thanatos!*” I’m shouting as loud as I can, my pleas interrupted only by my cries as the effort jostles my wound.

I can’t see him, but I hear the thump of those thunderous wings, and I think ... I think he’s coming closer.

“*Lazarus!*” he calls from somewhere overhead.

“*Death!*” I shout again.

And then I see him once more above me. His wings are stretched wide behind him as he perches on an exposed beam. He peers down into the collapsed building, his dark hair waving like flag in the wind.

“*Lazarus?*” he says, his eyes scanning the darkness.

“*Thanatos.*” It comes out somewhere between a sob and a sigh.

I know the instant he catches sight of me. His body goes rigid.

All at once, his wings snap closed behind him. He steps off his perch and drops down from the roof, falling like a stone. Just before he lands, his wings spread wide, slowing his fall, so that he seems to float the last several feet of his descent.

Pebbles skitter as he lands on a pile of rubble, and once more his wings fold closed behind him.

He strides forward over the debris, his silver breastplate shimmering in the shadowy light. His footsteps pause, and I see his eyes fall to me. He takes in my face, then my shredded clothing and the few places where my flesh is still

healing. Eventually, his eyes land on the pole jutting through my abdomen.

“*Lazarus.*” Death rushes the rest of the way to me. He kneels at my side, taking in my injuries again. “*Fuck.*”

“I didn’t know angels cursed,” I say, my lips splitting as I speak.

His eyes are still roving over me, like he’s trying to process what happened. “How long have you been here?” he asks.

But he knows. He *must* know. The pole jutting up through me is evidence enough.

“Since you dropped me.” Now that I no longer have to shout, my voice comes out as a whisper.

“Since I ... ?” His eyes search mine, and I see the horror creep into his expression. He curses again. “You’ve been here the whole time?” he asks.

I close my eyes and nod.

He makes an agonized sound.

I open my eyes.

His hand cups the side of my face, his thumb sliding over my cheekbone.

“I assumed you’d be more pleased by that,” I whisper.

Thanatos’s gaze is tortured as it meets mine. “I don’t pride myself on being cruel.” His eyes wander to where the rusted pole sticks out of me. “I have been searching for you. I ...” He pauses, his gaze moving back to my own. “I was consumed with worry. The sight of you slipping from my arms has not left me all these days.”

“Stop it,” I say.

I don’t want to hear this. I thought I did—I thought nothing hurt more than the possibility of Death leaving me here to rot for all eternity—but I was wrong. We have an unspoken agreement between us—one where we despise each other. I’m not ready for that to change.

His gaze returns to the thick steel bar protruding up from me. There’s a good three feet of it jutting into the sky.

Death gets up and prowls around me, studying the pole. Eventually he kneels back at my side and grabs the thing with both hands.

“Brace yourself, Lazarus,” he says.

And then he twists. The metal groans as it bends beneath his might, and the movement causes the metal to jostle my injury.

I grit my teeth, biting back a pained cry.

With a final screech, the metal bar snaps off. Death tosses the length of it aside. The pole clangs as it lands in the distance, the sound echoing around

us.

For an instant, I marvel at the horseman's unnatural strength. To think I've been fighting that over and over again.

Death frowns down at me.

"What is it?" I say hoarsely.

"I'm going to have to lift you, Laz," he says, shortening my name like we're friends.

My insides seem to liquefy with fear. I thought I was brave when it came to pain, but after the last several days, I'm not.

But I need to get free.

Pressing my eyelids tightly together, I nod.

"Do it," I say, opening my eyes.

Death moves in close, his arms sliding under my back. Even that slight movement causes a cry to slip out.

God this is going to hurt.

Thanatos pauses. "Are you alright?" he says, checking in.

I breathe heavily through my nose. "Just give me a moment."

The horseman does. His arms are still under me, but he doesn't move.

I turn my gaze towards the images hammered into his breastplate, trying to calm my nerves. There are snakes and headstones, eggs and fanged creatures, spirals and funerary processions—each image spilling into the next. I stare hard at the span of metal covering Thanatos's heart. On it, a woman is wrapped intimately in a skeleton's embrace. Just as I'm about to reach out and touch it, Death lifts me.

I scream, the sound driven entirely by the agonizing rip of my wound.

And then the pole is gone and I am free.

Death sits down heavily on the ground, clutching me tightly against him.

I twist my head to the side as I dry heave over and over again, the agony nauseating. And then I cry—I sob—the action doing nothing to alleviate the unbearable pain. I might be free, but my body feels ruined.

Everything hurts so goddamned *bad*.

"I've got you, Lazarus, my Lazarus," Thanatos murmurs.

In this moment, his words are oddly comforting. I turn my head towards his chest and cry against his armor.

He holds me through the tears.

"It hurts," I sob. It's almost ridiculous to admit this to my foe, the one who has hurt me over and over again. Even more ridiculous that he's the one

holding me at the moment.

But he doesn't seem to mind, and maybe that's the strangest thing of all.

Death's hand comes up to my cheek, his palm warm against me. That seems to drive away this pitiful mood of mine.

I try to pull away.

"Be still," he commands, and for whatever reason, I listen.

His face is solemn as he takes me in. He draws in a deep breath, still staring at me.

Before I can fidget under the scrutiny, my skin begins to tingle. The sensation makes my body feel antsy, restless, like I need to get up and move about. The gaping wound in my abdomen feels warm—and ... itchy.

"What are you doing?" I gasp out.

"Healing you."

Healing me?

"You can do that?" I say, still half distracted by the slew of sensations coursing through me.

I thought he only knew how to kill.

Though his face is as solemn as ever, his eyes seem to smile when he looks at me. "I can do *many* things, Lazarus."

Why would Death be given the power to heal? And on that subject—

"Why are you healing me?"

He doesn't answer, just tightens his jaw and concentrates on my stomach.

My gaze returns to that strange couple on his armor. Now I do reach out and trace a finger over what I can see of the skeleton.

Thanatos's gaze drops to my finger.

"Death and life, caught in an eternal embrace," he explains.

"They look like lovers," I whisper.

"They *are* lovers." His eyes find mine, and I swear they can see straight to my soul.

I swallow delicately, dropping my hand. His own hand still clasps my cheek, and now I really can feel my flesh stitching itself back together.

"What are you going to do with me?" I ask. "Once you heal me?"

His jaw tightens just the slightest. "I have respected you, Lazarus," he says, staring intently down at me. "Since that first time you came for me, I've respected you. I understand placing duty before all else."

His expression shifts, heat blazing in his eyes. "But things have changed."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, even as the warm, tingling sensation

presses against the underside of my skin, continuing to heal my many wounds.

His fingers trail down from my cheek, one of them tracing my lips. “I think you know.”

I want to lose myself in you, his eyes seem to say.

I suck in a breath.

“I’m not going with you,” I say.

“Oh, but you are.”

I stare up at him for a moment longer, and then, all at once, I’m dragging myself out of his arms and away from his healing touch. And despite his words, the horseman *does* let me go.

I have to bite back a curse at how much everything still aches.

I stagger to my feet.

Across from me, Death’s eyes burn. “You’re still hurt,” he says softly. “Wounded and weak and *aching* for my touch.”

“No,” I breathe, the words barely audible.

Slowly, Thanatos stands, his gaze fixed on me. He’s never looked at me with such intensity. Not when he hurt me, not when he killed me, and not when I did the same to him.

No, this ferocity seems to be driven by a different—*deeper*—emotion than anger.

“Return to me, kismet. Let me heal those wounds and soothe that ache.”

The guttural way he says *ache* ... I’m no longer thinking about my wounds.

I shake my head and back up.

Death’s wings spread wide. He takes one ominous step towards me, that look still in his eyes.

That’s all it takes for me to turn on my heel and flee. I’ve run from the horseman before. Today is no different.

Only it is.

I’m tripping over debris, huffing from the pain, but I eventually stumble out of the partially collapsed building.

Holding my stomach, I turn to face the multistory structure just as Thanatos steps onto a gaping window high above me, the few remaining glass shards in the pane crunching beneath his boots. A moment later, he steps off, his wings billowing behind him.

He lands on the ground softly, his gaze locked on mine.

I stagger backwards as he strides forward. My heart is racing because *that look in his eyes is still there*.

“Thanatos, what are you doing?” I ask. Not five minutes ago, he was being painfully kind. Now he looks possessed.

“Enough of these games, Lazarus,” he says, closing in on me, his expression unnerving.

Games? *Nothing* about this is a game to me. I’ve died numerous times in the last week alone.

I back up, trying to keep some distance between us.

“Stay away from me,” I say.

“Stay away?” Death’s mouth curves up. “But I thought you wanted me? All those months you spent tracking me.” He opens his arms wide. “Here I am.”

I stare at him for a long moment, feeling completely unbalanced.

This is not how the script between us goes.

Thanatos’s eyes narrow, and his arms lower back to his sides. “You made a mistake, Lazarus,” he says, taking another step forward. “You assumed this whole time you were the one hunting me down. Have you ever considered the possibility that *I* might’ve set my sights on *you*? That this whole time I might’ve been luring *you* in, discovering and learning your mind?”

I continue to move away from him, my heart pounding like mad.

“Why do you think I travel the way I do?” he says. “Criss-crossing your land is not easier than riding straight through it.”

My heart beats madly. I’d always wondered about this, but now that he’s giving me an answer, I find I don’t like it.

“But you’ve always traveled that way—even from the beginning,” I protest.

“I have ... warring urges, kismet,” he says. Another step forward.

I’m shaking my head. What he’s suggesting is ridiculous. “The first time we met, you ran from me,” I insist. I know he did.

“I ran from the one persistent desire I have for you,” he says. Another step forward. He looks like a man possessed. “Go ahead,” he urges, “ask what that desire is.”

I keep my mouth shut, my heart jackhammering against my chest. He’s upended all my assumptions of him.

When I don’t answer, Death continues, “I have wanted to take you from the moment I laid eyes on you,” he says. “It was the first human urge that

ever rivaled my need to kill.”

I’m backing up just as he’s slowly prowling towards me.

“I have enjoyed our encounters far too much for my own good,” he adds, “but I’m just about done playing.”

Need to get out of here now.

I turn on my feet and begin jogging away, a hand pressed to my stomach against the tugging pain I feel there.

“You think to flee from me, Lazarus?” he calls out. “You, a mortal woman, and me, death incarnate?”

“Yes!” I shout.

I mean, he asked.

Behind me, Thanatos laughs. The sound sends a chill down my spine.

“Everyone tries to outpace me,” he calls out. “Everyone. But no one can outmaneuver me. Not even you.”

I’m no longer jogging, I’m now running, my pace quickening with every step.

“So run, my kismet—I’ll even give you a head start. But make no mistake: I *will* catch you. Your time is running out.”

Chapter 19

San Antonio, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I can't say how many times I've glanced over my shoulder over the last three days, sure I'm going to see the horseman right behind me. And the few times I've encountered hoof beats, I've panicked, sure it was Death astride his horse.

But the road and sky remain empty of the horseman. Perhaps Death's threat wasn't so urgent. After all, he's made similar promises in the past, and yet here I am, alive and alone.

The people seated around me in the bustling restaurant eye me with distrust and more than a little distaste.

My hair is unbrushed, my body unwashed, my recently-lifted clothes are ragged and ill-fitting, and the belt that holds my new dagger is far too big. In my haste to get away from Death, I didn't have time to do much more than take these few items from the dead I passed on my way out of Austin. All I have left to my name are a few stray bills in my pocket—also swiped from the dead—and my mother's ring.

I'm usually better prepared than this. I'm also usually less spooked.

Just as I take a bite of my scone, I catch the eye of a young woman sitting with her friend. She looks repulsed by me.

I lift my cup of coffee and salute her. She looks away quickly.

I prop my legs on the chair across from me and lean back, taking a minute to just clear my mind and listen to the hum of conversation.

For a moment, it's relaxing. But then I'm remembering the way Thanatos held me close to him, and the way his fingers stroked my skin. And his eyes, his stormy, depthless eyes ... the way he looked at me felt like another touch.

Everything about him seemed to promise—

The panicked baying of dogs and the screech of messenger birds from the post office across the street cuts into my thoughts.

I lower my coffee just as the horses out on the street go wild, tearing off down the road, some with carts still attached to them. That's when the true wave of animals sweeps through the town. Outside, people cry out at the stampede of creatures sprinting down the city streets.

“Fuck.”

I swing my feet off the chair. That's all I have time to do.

It happens just like it did the first time Death rode through.

In an instant, everyone slumps over. Faces hit plates, waiters fall where they stand, the dishes they carry shattering against the ground. I hear the clatter of dropped silverware, and the delayed crash of some final glasses. Then—

Silence.

Heavy, preternatural silence.

I set down my mug, ignoring the fact that my hand has started to tremble.

I stand, the scrape of my chair deafening amidst all that silence.

How? How did he figure out where I was so quickly? How did he *get* here so quickly? I myself only arrived half an hour ago.

You assumed this whole time you were the one hunting me down. Have you ever considered the possibility that I might've set my sights on you?

I'm moving before I can even fully figure out what I'm supposed to be doing. I push through the back doors of the restaurant, entering the kitchen area. A small fire has already broken out, the smell of smoke filling the room. I try not to look at the body that's slumped over the stove, their clothes already going up in flame.

Instead I grab the knives I see, collecting as many as I can hold.

I re-enter the restaurant's dining room.

“*Lazarus!*” Death's voice echoes in the distance, carrying on the wind.

The hairs along my arms stand on end.

He really is hunting me.

I grab a brown leather satchel I see hanging off a nearby chair. Dumping out the bag's contents, I drop the knives inside, then sling it over my shoulder.

“*Come out, kismet!*” Thanatos calls. “*I know you're in this city!*”

Quickly, I leave the restaurant. My eyes scan the street, looking for the

horseman.

“*Lazarus!*” Death’s voice seems to carry on the wind. I have no idea which direction it’s coming from.

I’m still looking for him when movement in the distance catches my eye. Far away, I catch sight of a skyscraper—something no one’s had a use for in quite some time. Only as I watch, floor after floor crumple like an accordion, the building falling into itself.

I can’t do anything but stare.

It hits the ground with an echoing groan. In its wake, a plume of ash and debris rise up.

“*Come out, kismet. I don’t wish to bury you alive.*”

My stomach flips.

This devil.

“Here I am, Thanatos!” I shout, refusing to hide like a mouse.

My voice reverberates around me, but I have no idea whether Death can hear it. It’s impossible to tell where exactly he is.

Out of the corner of my eye, I swear I see movement, but when I spin, there’s nothing there besides a few bodies and a stretch of open road. Off in the distance, another building begins to topple, drawing my attention back to San Antonio’s skyline.

“*Lazarus.*” Death’s voice echoes, slipping over my skin like the brush of fingertips.

I don’t have to wait long before I hear the thunderous thump of Death’s wings. He lands in front of me, his silver armor gleaming and his wings spread wide.

Behind him, another building collapses.

“Kismet.” He says the endearment like he’s savoring chocolate on his tongue. “Your time is up. Lay down your weapons,” he says.

“No,” I say.

“I don’t want to be your enemy.”

“So long as you’re killing everyone, we *will* be enemies,” I say.

Death strides up to me, and for once, I don’t immediately reach for my weapons.

I hadn’t wanted to hurt this man before our last encounter. Now that he saved me and healed me ... I am especially reluctant about using the knives in my bag. I know that’s ridiculous, but there it is.

The horseman stops in front of me. “Grab your blades then, kismet,” he

dares. He must see how at odds I am with myself.

When I don't, he steps in close. Taking my hand, he guides it to the sheathed dagger at my side. Closing my fingers over it, he pulls the weapon out. The entire time there's a daring, defiant gleam in his eyes. "If we are to be enemies, then hurt me."

It's only when he brings the blade up to the side of his throat that I begin to resist.

"Do it," he commands. "My artery is right there beneath the skin. All it would take is a knick. I would bleed out in minutes and it would buy you a day."

"Stop it," I whisper.

Death releases his hold on my hand, and my dagger slips through my fingers, clattering to the ground.

"I don't know what to do," I admit, the words spilling out of me. "I don't want to hurt you, but I cannot seem to stop you any other way."

Death's hand rises to my cheek. His fingers stroke it, and fool that I am, I let him touch me. It feels so much better than I remember.

"Before I healed you," he says softly, "I assumed using my power to heal was wrong. I can see now that it was me who was wrong." His gaze dips to my mouth. "I find myself longing for another reason to hold you close." This last confession just seems to slip out with the rest.

My breath hitches as his eyes move back to mine. All those forbidden thoughts of him I've had over the months—thoughts that would creep in during my long lonely nights on the road—they resurface. Until recently, I assumed they were one-sided. Now knowing that they're not, that Death wants this more than I even do ...

A completely inappropriate ache pounds deep within me.

Thanatos's attention moves to my stolen bag. He opens it up, staring at all the knives.

"I'm guessing these are meant for me." He says it so conversationally, so unafraid. It should dissipate the strange sexual tension between us.

It doesn't.

"I'm not going to let you take me," I say vehemently.

"I'm not going to give you a choice," Thanatos says, gaze rising to mine.

And yet, he hasn't grabbed me. He keeps *not* grabbing me, as if he's waiting for me to fall into his arms. If that's the case, then he can wait until Kingdom Come.

Death cups my jaw then, and his nostrils flare. “Tell me you don’t feel this ... this consuming *need*.”

My stomach somersaults at the intensity in his eyes.

“I don’t feel it,” I say, only my voice comes out all breathy and wrong.

Thanatos narrows his gaze. Slowly, he smiles.

“I will count to a thousand,” he says. “That’s as generous as I’m going to be. You can do whatever you’d like in those thousand seconds. I won’t fight back, I won’t come after you, but once time’s up, we’ll no longer be playing your game. We’ll be playing *mine*.”

We were never playing *any* sort of game. *Ever*.

My stomach drops. “I’m not going to—”

“One ... two ... three ...” he begins, a savage look on his face.

I look breathlessly at him, then around us before jumping into action.

I slide my satchel off my shoulder, letting it drop to the ground. Kneeling down next to it, I pull out a knife and begin sawing away at the strap of the bag. Once I cut the strap free, I glance at the horseman.

He raises his eyebrows. “Sixty-seven ... sixty-eight ...”

“Turn around,” I command, half-expecting him to ignore my demands. Much to my shock, however, he turns, exposing his massive wings to me.

My breath hitches at the sight of all those coal-black feathers. I step up to his back, my skin pebbling as those very feathers brush against my skin. I swear I hear Thanatos’s sharp inhale, and maybe I’m not the only one affected by the contact.

I grab one of his forearms, pulling it behind his back, then the other, pressing his wrists together. I bind his hands together with the satchel’s leather strap, making sure to tie the knots extra tight. His body sways.

“I like this, *kismet*,” he says, “This makes me think very strange, very ... *human* thoughts about you.”

My core clenches at his words.

It’s only as I finish my work that I remember his absurd strength. He’ll get through the bindings in seconds.

Damnit.

I release his bound wrists. “Why don’t you focus on counting—wouldn’t want to give me any extra time,” I say, stepping away.

Death laughs darkly, the sound making the hair at the nape of my neck stand on end. “You’re not going anywhere,” he vows.

My stomach dips at the certainty in his voice.

“Turn around,” I command.

Again, I don’t expect him to follow my words, but he does. The horseman faces me once more, his eyes full of dark anticipation.

He smirks. “What about my wings?” he asks. “Shall you bind them too? I’m rather enjoying being tied up for you.”

I pull out one of the blades from my bag and use it to cut off the bottom of my shirt. This, too, he’ll be able to rip away in seconds, but if he’s willing to play my game for the next ten odd minutes, it’ll subdue him for at least a little while.

Gripping the fabric, I step up to him.

“Kneel.”

Thanatos stares down at me for a long time, that same *look* in his eyes. Never glancing away, he moves down on one knee, then both.

I bring the cloth up to his eyes, blindfolding him with it.

“Killing me would be easier,” he says.

It would be. I have to hide my swallow. The awful truth is that I’ve come to care about this horseman’s pain. Enough to stay my hand.

So instead I tie the knot extra tight behind his head, ignoring Death’s beautiful features and the silky soft texture of his hair. I can’t help, however, the strange sensations his scent conjures.

Him holding me fast to his chest, his fingers caressing my face ...

“Come with me,” Death says softly, as though he, too, is thinking similar thoughts. His voice is gentle, a plea; it’s so unlike him. “Untie these bindings and come to me of your own free will.”

“You said you wouldn’t ask me that again,” I remind him.

“I was wrong,” he says. “Come with me, Lazarus. Let me know what it is like to hold you instead of fighting you.”

To hold me? What exactly *does* he have in mind once he captures me?

Doesn’t matter, Lazarus, that fate is not for you.

I lean in close to his ear. “No.”

A slow, malevolent smile spreads across Death’s face, and even blindfolded, I find him chilling.

“Then you better *run*, kismet.”

I do run.

I run as fast as my legs will carry me, clutching two knives in my fists, two more blades crammed into the sheath at my side.

I don't know what use they'll be. I have lost the will to hurt the horseman.
You could simply go with him. The thought nearly stops me in my tracks.

I've been so used to opposing him, I've never actually thought through *this* option. If I was with Thanatos—well, there are *many* ways I could prevent him from moving from city to city.

Now I do come to a halt, my chest heaving, my breath leaving me in ragged gasps.

I could go with him.

But then I couldn't forewarn towns. I'd have to figure out a new strategy. All the while, Death's dark, penetrating eyes would keep flashing that *fight-me-then-fuck-me* look. How long would I be able to resist him? A week? Two? I'm probably being generous here. Already his beauty is distracting, but to be alone with him at length? When he's made it clear he wants to at the very least hold me? I would give in. It probably wouldn't even take that long. Not when I know he's *already* given in to this terrible pull between us.

I begin to move again.

No, fleeing him is still my best option.

I barely make it a block more when the earth begins to tremble. I stop once more, looking up at the buildings towering around me. There's a parking lot that's been converted into horse stalls next to a high rise apartment building with broken windows and clothing lines crisscrossing the street. Across the way is another multi-storied structure that's decorated with brightly colored street art.

It's all somehow both bleak and strangely lively.

And I'm pretty sure it's all about to literally come crashing down on me. My fear ratchets up at the thought of being buried alive.

I needn't have worried.

The buildings don't come down. It's much, much worse.

For all around me the dead *rise*.

Chapter 20

San Antonio, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

The corpses that lay strewn on the street are picking themselves up as though they were never dead to begin with. There are four, five, six of them. I spin and count several more. More still are exiting the buildings around me.

Thanatos can raise the dead.

I'm trying not to panic, but *Thanatos can raise the dead*.

One by one the revenants turn their unseeing eyes on me, and unease pools low in my stomach.

I grip my knives tighter. What are they doing?

Suddenly, all of them begin to walk towards me, the group of them moving almost as a single unit.

My own fear closes up my throat.

Fuck, what *is* this?

More importantly, how am I supposed to get myself out of this situation?

Overhead, I hear Death's massive wings. At first, the sound is quiet, but as he gets closer, his wingbeats grow louder and louder.

TWUMP—THWUMP—THWUMP.

I catch a glimpse of him in the air above me, and I watch him circle, then descend down to the street. Thanatos lands no more than twenty feet from me. His wings close at his back, looking like a massive cape.

The corpses halt where they stand, their dead eyes still fixed on me, their faces slack. I shiver at the unnatural sight.

Death walks towards me, his wings swaying behind him. The few revenants between us part for him to pass by.

"How are you doing this?" I ask.

“I have *always* been able to do this, kismet,” he says. “Up until now I simply chose not to.”

He could’ve been doing this the entire time? My mind races over all those instances I fought him. How many cities had the two of us encountered one another, all while being surrounded by corpses?

Many.

So, so many.

Never once had he raised the dead.

Death *has* been toying with me this entire time. The realization steals my breath away. For the first time in a long time, I truly fear him.

“Why?” I demand, backing up. “Why do this now?”

“Because you were designed to be mine. And it’s time I claimed you.”

Chapter 21

San Antonio, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I turn from Thanatos. There are dozens of revenants around me, revenants who have gone still while Death approached me.

“Fighting is useless,” he says, coming closer.

Ignoring his warning, I turn on my heel and begin jogging away from him.

All at once, the zombies come alive, only they don’t walk towards me, they *charge*. They descend on me painfully fast.

My mind won’t let me believe that they’ll actually touch me. They’re corpses, after all, their whole point is to lie still and rot.

So when the first revenant gets to me—a young woman who can’t be more than a few years older than me—I lose a second simply accepting that this is actually happening.

The woman’s cold hand grabs my forearm, and my stomach tumbles at how frigid her fingers feel even through the fabric of the shirt I’m wearing.

I slash out at her—and the other corpses that follow—grimacing as their blood gugs out from the wounds. A dead man grabs the blade of one of my knives, ripping it from me with a jerk. Another rips my two knives from my sheath while I fight off a third revenant.

A dead child steps up to me and wraps a clammy hand around mine. I yelp at the touch and his sightless eyes. He pries my last weapon free.

“*Enough.*” Death’s voice echoes in the air.

The revenants fall to the ground, my weapons clattering from a few of their hands. They are all lifeless once more.

I turn just as Thanatos steps over the scattered corpses. He comes to me, and I don’t even have time to protest before he pulls me into his arms.

At first I think he means to fly off with me, and maybe he does, but he hesitates. After a moment, Thanatos whistles, all while holding me in his unyielding grip.

I hear the echo of hooves against asphalt, and then the horseman's steed charges down the city streets, expertly maneuvering around the strewn bodies. He's already saddled and ready.

Death gazes down at me with those obsidian eyes, his expression filled with wicked intent. His dapple gray horse slows to a stop next to us, and in one fluid motion, the horseman lifts me onto his mount.

A split second later, Thanatos is hoisting himself up behind me. And then his powerful thighs are hugging mine and his armor-clad chest is digging into my back, the metal unforgiving.

Death wraps a muscled arm around me, pinning me in. He clicks his tongue, and his steed takes off once more, galloping down the road.

We tear through the streets of San Antonio, the buildings and the dead blurring by us.

"You are finally mine," he says, his words exalted.

They send a strange mixture of dread and excitement through me. How I long to stop this monster. How I have to keep fighting my ridiculous attraction to him.

"I have imagined this moment countless times," he admits.

He squeezes me close, and oh, I'm definitely getting some hate-fuck energy from Death.

I try not to dwell on Thanatos's words, but how can I not? He's clearly been fantasizing about capturing me, and now I'm at his mercy. And I have no idea what he really intends to do with me now, though it probably has something to do with hate-fucking. Pretty sure that one's on the menu.

After a long, drawn-out silence, I force myself to ask the question that has been plaguing me lately. "What do you feel for me?"

His lips fall to my ear. "Many, many things, Lazarus."

Definitely wants to hate-fuck me.

My breath hitches at the thought of lying beneath Death, his body driving into mine.

Apparently I'm not completely against the idea either.

Jesus.

We leave San Antonio to the muted sounds of buildings crashing behind us. Then even those sounds drift into silence, and I'm forced to truly face my

predicament.

I glance down at the hand holding me fast. On one of his fingers he wears a silver ring, an ancient coin bearing the face of Medusa fixed to it. I just manage to stop myself from touching the strange piece of jewelry.

I'm going to be staring at that hand and that ring in this saddle for a long time if Death has it his way. No more tracking. No more fighting. Just lots and lots of personal time with the horseman.

The thought is enough for me to give escape one last, valiant attempt.

I throw myself violently to the side. Death's hold on me slips, and for a second, I'm sliding off his steed.

I have no plan and no weapons, but by God, I'm going to be the least cooperative captive there ever was.

Thanatos's wing sweeps out, battering against me, slowing my fall long enough for the horseman to snatch me by the shirt and drag me back onto his steed, his heavy arm wrapping itself around my waist once more.

He laughs low, the sound drawing out my gooseflesh. "A good, but futile attempt, kismet," he says. His brings his lips to my ear, his tone turning menacing. "Fight me again, and I will abandon my steed for the skies, and then you will have no choice *but* to cooperate."

Memories of the last time Thanatos carried me into the air flash before my eyes. He had held me and then dropped me. I mean, I *did* stab him, so it's not like he did it intentionally, but still ... I shudder, remembering my fall and the collision, and then the agonizing days that followed.

I will escape you, I silently vow.

But for now ... better for Death to think I've given up.

I force myself to relax against him. In response, the arm around me grips me more fiercely. From his touch alone the horseman seems to *ooze* victory.

The bastard.

Even once San Antonio is a distant memory, his horse doesn't slow, and the chilly air cuts through my clothes. A shiver courses through me, then another and another. Death's cold armor isn't helping.

"If this trembling is another plan of yours to seek escape, then trust me, kismet, when I say that I am ready to take to the skies."

"It's not a plan," I say testily. "This is just what happens when humans get cold."

Behind me, Death is silent for a moment.

Suddenly, he stops his steed, his arm slipping from my waist. I glance over

my shoulder to see him unfastening the straps to his armor. He removes a shoulder guard, tossing it to the ground, then a vambrace.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he casts off another piece of his silver armor.

“You’re cold,” he says, undoing the straps of his breastplate. He hauls the thing off, the metal hitting the road with a clang. “I intend to keep you warm.”

I frown, even as an uncomfortable emotion stirs in my belly.

Death removes every last bit of armor, then pulls me back against his chest.

Glorious heat. It’s coming off the man in waves.

“Better?” he whispers against my ear.

So much better.

“You know about body heat but not about shivering?” I say in lieu of thanking him. I can’t find it in me to be grateful to my supernatural kidnapper.

“I may not know the nuances of the human body, but I do know that living flesh is warm and metal can be cold.”

Without a further word, he clicks his tongue and his horse begins moving again. The chill wind whistles through my clothing once more, but pressed against Death, I’m warm.

“So you can raise the dead,” I say, as we pass by several orchards, irrigation canals dug out around the rows of trees. “Why were you given that power?”

“I have all of my brothers’ powers and then some,” he says.

His words chill me to my core.

“You mean to tell me that another horseman can *also* raise the dead?” I ask, terrified of the prospect.

“*Could*,” Death corrects me.

“Could?” I echo, trying to piece together what he isn’t saying. “So this other horseman is dead?”

“On the contrary, Lazarus, War is *very* much alive.” Thanatos says this with no little disdain.

War. War could raise the dead. I ... cannot even fathom what that must’ve looked like.

But he doesn’t have these powers anymore? I’m burning with curiosity; there’s clearly so much more to Thanatos and the other riders. And for once,

I'm in a position to learn it all, now that I'm stuck in the saddle with the horseman.

"What else can you do?" I ask.

"You will see in time," Death promises, and wrapped in that promise is another that lingers unspoken between us—

You will be with me, always.

Chapter 22

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

We've ridden for several hours when Death turns off the highway and onto an ancient road, the asphalt cracked and pitted.

“Why are we getting off the highway?” I ask. Up until now I'd been able to relax. Now, however, my misgivings are back.

Death doesn't answer, and my anxiety spikes. What is going on? There doesn't appear to be any city center anywhere in sight, so I don't think he's taken me to wipe out another city.

So, what is he doing?

Eventually, Thanatos turns onto a dirt road that looks as though it was once graveled over; now, however, weeds have sprouted up all over the place, making it difficult to see the narrow pathway.

In the distance I notice a copse of trees. Peeking out from behind them is a derelict ranch house. It looks like a thousand other long abandoned homes I've passed before, yet for whatever reason, this is the one Death's decided to stop at.

With the structure in sight, the horseman slows his steed, and aside from the clop of hooves, the world around us is quiet. This is a silence I've gotten used to in the wake of Death. The kind that gets under your skin and soaks into your bones. It can be either incredibly peaceful or frightening beyond belief—which I guess is what you can say about death itself.

We pass by the trees, and then I can clearly see the house. It looks as though it was once a pale blue, but sun and rot have now discolored it brown under the eaves and at its base, and white mostly everywhere else. The roof sags, the windows have been cut out and taken—probably to be installed in

some newer home—there are rusted cars and old appliances in the driveway, and a low-lying, rotted wood fence encircles the home. Whatever once existed of the yard has given way to natural flora.

The place is a mess.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“This is a human dwelling, is it not?” Thanatos responds. “We are here to *dwell.*”

That ... that gives me pause.

He can't possibly be serious.

I glance over my shoulder him. Death's face is as handsomely stoic as ever.

Shit, I think he *is* serious.

We ride all the way up the driveway, weaving around a rusted out dishwasher. Thanatos swings off of his steed. A second later, he pulls me down.

We're really doing this. Dwelling in an abandoned house. *Together.* At least until I figure out how to escape him.

Thanatos's hands are still on my waist. He's either afraid of letting me go and chasing me down ... or he's getting comfortable with the idea of touching me.

His mouth curves into a pitiless smile. “I can see your clever thoughts in your eyes, Lazarus, but you're not getting away. That, I'll make sure of.”

No sooner has he spoken than the earth around us seems to groan. It splits open and plants begin to rise around the perimeter of the property.

I suck in a gasp, watching them grow, shoots turning into stalks which turn into branches. Hundreds of leaves unfurl by the second.

“How are you doing this?” I ask, my gaze taking it all in.

This brambly foliage grows and grows until a makeshift hedge of sorts encircles us and the house, barricading us in.

“Killing is not the only thing I'm good at,” he says.

Eventually the plants' growth slows, then stops altogether. All is quiet and still once more.

I step away from Death, his hands slipping off of my waist, and walk up to the thicket. My eyes scour the thing. I should feel afraid—this is just one more power the horseman has at his fingertips, one that he's now willing to use against me. But I don't feel afraid. Instead, I'm overcome by a sense of wonder.

I reach out and touch one of the thorny branches. “Is this ... Famine’s power?” I ask. That’s the only rider I can think of who might deal with plants.

“It’s *my* power,” Death corrects from behind me, “but yes, I share it with him.”

“Isn’t Famine’s job to make food scarce?” I ask, my fingers tracing a leaf.

“His job is to kill crops.”

I turn from the thicket. “But these plants—you made them grow.”

“Famine can make things both grow and perish—as can I.”

Why would these horsemen be given anything *but* destructive powers? It ... makes no sense. They are only here *to* destroy our world.

I glance back at the living wall Death’s created. It’s impenetrable, that much is clear.

“Try to run, Laz,” he goads me. “I *dare* you.”

My skin pricks at the familiar way he shortens my name.

I look over my shoulder at Death and hold his gaze. *I’ll wait to run until you least expect it.*

“Thanks, but I’m not a betting woman,” I say instead, heading back over to him.

“On the contrary, that seems to be *entirely* what you are,” Thanatos counters. “You bet that you’ll find me in the towns you travel to, you bet that you’ll kill me and save your precious countrymen—”

“I *only* ever did what I did because the other option was guaranteed annihilation,” I say, stopping near the horseman’s mount. I give the creature a pet on the neck.

“Kismet, all life is, is guaranteed annihilation.”

I raise my chin. “If it’s all guaranteed annihilation, then explain *me*.”

Death’s features seem to sharpen, and that heat is back in his eyes. He doesn’t answer, though I’m getting good at reading his expression.

You are mine, it seems to say.

I press my thighs together at the naked desire on his face. Desire that I’m not sure Thanatos is even aware of.

My gaze flicks to the structure behind him. “Are you going to show me this house or not?” I ask, growing more and more uncomfortable by the second.

After a moment, Thanatos steps aside, gesturing to the dilapidated structure. “Why don’t you show yourself in? The house is yours, after all.”

“It’s *not* mine,” I say.

“Fine, *ours*,” Death corrects.

That’s even worse.

I press my lips together and head to the front door. The knob is rusted over, and it dangles partway off the door. I grab it anyway. The hinges screech as I open the door, and the musty smell of wet animals and mildew waft out.

The laminate floorboards inside have bubbled and curled at their edges, the top layer flaking off in many places. Dingy lace curtains hang from some of the windows. There’s an ancient, stained recliner that came from the world before; its seams have burst in a few spots, exposing dirt-speckled stuffing.

The floor groans and creaks as I walk into the kitchen and flip through the cupboards. Nothing but dust and cobwebs and an old cookbook, its binding swollen and its pages curled.

Death follows me like a shadow, and I can feel his dark gaze on me, drinking in my every reaction. I don’t know what he wants from me.

I leave the kitchen, poking my head into a bathroom that has been updated since the end of the world, the toilet replaced with something that’s more akin to a fancy bucket with a toilet seat on top, and the sink replaced with a removable basin.

Now I notice the water stains along the walls, where once upon a time this house must’ve flooded. Maybe that’s why it was abandoned.

I move to the bedrooms next, expecting to see more furniture. Other than a warped particleboard dresser that’s mostly fallen apart, the three bedrooms are empty.

“Why did you choose this place?” I ask after I’ve finished taking in the master bedroom. A house that has no food, no beds—no amenities whatsoever—is hardly a destination worth stopping for. We might as well have set up camp off to the side of the road. We’re *barely* better off here—and even that is questionable.

“Does it matter?” Thanatos replies. “It is a home, it will meet your needs.”
Meet my needs?

I swivel around to face the horseman. He stands in the doorway, his attention fixed on me.

I give him a quizzical look. “Have you ever lived *anywhere*?” I ask.

“I have lived everywhere life is, kismet,” he responds smoothly.

“I mean,” I say slowly, “have you ever stayed in a house? Cooked yourself

a meal? Slept in a bed?”

He stares back at me, his expression unreadable. Still, I read that motherfucker’s face all the same.

“You haven’t.”

Of course he hasn’t. I don’t know why it’s only dawning on me now. That very fact is what has made pursuing him so damn difficult. Death never stopped, never slept. He rode and rode and killed and rode and on and on forever, his travels only ever interrupted by me.

I glance around us again. “So now that you’ve captured your human, you want to keep me in a nice ... *home*?” I might as well have said *cage* or *sty*. An enclosure meant for an animal. Not an equal. “Is that it?” I press.

“Would you prefer I slit your throat? Break your neck? Fight you until the memory of all things have faded away and only pain remains?” With each question, Thanatos takes a step forward, his wingtips making a soft noise as they drag across the rotted flooring. “Because I can do that. I don’t want to—but I can, if that is what you yearn for.”

I frown at him. “What I yearn for is for you to leave Earth and never return.”

Death laughs, his eyes flashing. “Kismet, that will *never* happen. Even once humans are banished from the earth, I will still remain. So long as there is life, I will *always* remain.

“But for now,” he continues, reaching out and lightly touching my cheek, his thumb brushing my lower lip. “I want to discover what more there is to you besides violence and strategy.”

A part of me is mesmerized by this entity whose eye I’ve caught. I get the strangest sense that there is so much more that he wants than death and destruction—he just has no idea what that might be or how to attain it—aside from, you know, capturing unwilling women.

I clear my throat, not liking the personal turn this moment has taken.

“So,” I raise my eyebrows, glancing around, “you have never lived in a house before, yet you not only expect to start doing so now, but you also intend to keep me captive while you’re at it?”

“I don’t plan on keeping you a captive.”

My eyes widen. *That’s* news to me. “So you’re planning on turning me loose at some point?”

“Never,” he vows.

“So what then?” I ask. “You think I’ll come to enjoy captivity?”

“Humans can get used to all manner of things,” Death says smoothly. “I’m sure you’ll get used to this.”

The *gall*.

I spin around. “Where are the beds?” I ask, looking at the empty room. “Where’s the food?” I gesture around me. “Where is the table, the chairs, the cups and dinnerware? Where are the books to read and the chopped firewood to warm *our house* on cold winter nights? Where are the fresh linens? The soft mattress and clean sheets?”

Thanatos keeps his face carefully controlled.

“You are a *fool* if you think I’ll just *grow content* in some empty, rotting house.”

He steps forward, his massive form looming over me, his beautiful face menacing in the shadowed light. “You’ll enjoy it or you won’t, but *this is your fate, kismet*.”

I ignore his words, because right now, I’m a hunter who’s caught the scent of my prey.

I’ve hit a nerve. I know I have.

I flash him a mocking smile. “Were you hoping to impress me?” I laugh at him the same way my sister Robin would laugh at me when she wanted me to feel small. I learned long ago how to wrap an insult into a sound. “This isn’t *impressive*. You’ve hurt me, you’ve killed me, and now you’ve kidnapped me and locked me away in a prison bare of any comforts. It’s pathetic.”

Across from me, Thanatos’s jaw clenches and unclenches.

There. I’ve found my mark.

All at once, his wings snap out, wrapping around us and forcing me to stumble closer to him. “I don’t care what the *fuck* you think,” he says, his eyes flashing. “Insult me all you want. It changes *nothing*.”

I stare up at his turbulent eyes. Ever-steady Death isn’t so steady after all. Not when it comes to me.

A malicious smile spreads across my lips. “We’ll see about that.”

I sit out on the sagging back porch of the house, watching the sun set. So far, the only perk of this place seems to be its bathroom, which I’ve discreetly used. Otherwise, this house blows. Not even the well I found on the property worked. So I’m fated to go without food *and* water for as long as we’re here.

For the last hour, the horseman has given me some space. His horse, however, hasn’t. Every so often the dapple gray beast will plod up to me and

snuffle my shoulder then nudge my hand, as if looking for treats. It's actually pretty endearing.

I pet the creature's neck. "If I ever do change my mind about this situation," I say softly, "you'll be the reason for it."

I hear the back door squeak open, then the crunch of boots against the earth.

"That hedge is not going to part," Thanatos says from behind me.

"I'm not trying to escape," I say.

"It would be pointless."

I only just manage to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

"I'm watching the sun set," I say, not bothering to turn towards him.

He steps right up to my side, the wood creaking and bending beneath his weight. As though sensing the tension, Death's horse plods away from us.

I glance up at Thanatos, craning my neck way back to see his face.

He's looking down at me quizzically. "Why are you watching it? It's a phenomena that happens every day."

"So? Don't you ever savor anything?"

He stares down at me, not responding.

After a moment, I sigh and pat the ground beside me. "Go ahead," I say. "Join me."

Death keeps staring at me and my God, have I grown a third eye?

Just when I think he's going to turn away, he lowers himself.

I'd never realized it until now, but his wings are really awkward. He has to splay them out behind himself and lean forward a little to accommodate them. I feel the brush of his feathers against my side and part of me is so tempted to reach out and touch them. I run my hand over my hair instead.

"I don't want to talk," I say.

"Noted," he says, his eyes on the sky above us.

So we sit like that as the sun slips below the horizon and the shadows lengthen and the cold bite to the air becomes more than just a little uncomfortable. The entire time, he makes good on his word and doesn't talk. It's actually ... oddly peaceful.

Once the last of the light gives way to darkness, I stand, dusting the dirt from the back of my pants. I'm hungry and thirsty and my future feels like it's holding its breath.

I glance down at Thanatos.

"You have no clue what to do with me, do you?" I say.

I think I know what Death wants, and clearly on some level he knows too, but he hasn't acted on his baser impulses, and I'm not foolish enough to give into them either. I wouldn't want to go losing my heart or my head to this man because it won't stop him. I know it won't.

He glances up at me. "I'm willing to figure it out as I go."

I frown at him, though I doubt he can see it in the dark. Briefly, I glance at the house behind us. Letting out a sigh, I turn from it and head down the rickety stairs that lead to the backyard.

"What are you doing, Lazarus?" Death asks from behind me. For the first time since we arrived, his voice sounds relaxed—assured. He knows I'm not going anywhere.

I toe the ground. "Looking for a place to sleep."

"Last I heard, humans slept *inside* houses."

"That structure," I say, swiveling to point to the house, "is not fit for occupation." The walls are probably filled with vermin. It *smells* as though they are.

I see him stand. "It's too cold to stay out here."

"The house won't be any warmer," I say. Not with the windows knocked out. "That I promise you."

I look for an open patch of ground to lay on. There's a lot of junk back here and more overgrowth, and a part of me *is* wondering if perhaps the house is the better option. But no, the abandoned building feels more like a cage than a home.

I do find a clear patch of earth, and I sit down, wishing I had a blanket or a jacket. I shiver again.

Tonight is going to be miserable.

Behind me, the rotted wood planking creaks as Thanatos rises, then descends down the stairs, step by ominous step. I hear the swish of plants as the horseman moves through the backyard, heading towards me.

He stops at my back.

"What?" I say, not turning around. I can't see him, but I can feel his deep curiosity. I get the impression he'd like to open me like a box and peer in at what's inside.

After a moment, Thanatos lowers himself to the ground next to me. One of his wings brushes against me, nearly bowling me over.

Now I look at him. "What are you doing?" I say, affronted. It was one thing to sit with me and watch the sunset, it's another thing entirely to watch

me fall asleep.

“I’m staying out here with you.” He says it like it’s obvious.

Before I can respond to that—and I have things to say—my stomach growls. Loudly.

Even in the darkness, I swear I see the horseman’s brows rise.

“What was that?” he asks.

“My stomach—don’t think you can just change the subject—”

“Why in all the heavens would your stomach make that God-fearing sound?”

Right. I almost forgot that he doesn’t know anything about humans.

“That’s what stomachs *do* when you’re hungry,” I say. “They make noises.”

Death falls silent, and I know he’s remembering all over again how ill-equipped he is to have a human captive.

Is it too much to hope that he’ll just give up and decide to let me go?

It probably is. I sigh. Oh well.

I lay down on my side. “You can’t sleep next to me,” I say.

“I wasn’t planning on *sleeping*.”

My breath hitches for a moment, and I think about the way Death’s been looking at me lately, and my body comes to life, my pulse throbbing between my legs. But then I remember that the horseman doesn’t sleep. And anyway, he’s my kidnapper and my enemy, and sexual relations with him are *off limits*.

“Well,” I clear my throat, “you can’t not-sleep next to me either,” I say.

“If you’re hoping to make some grand escape, Laz—”

“Don’t shorten my name,” I say, making a face. He keeps on doing that.

“—then you are *delusional*. I will not let you out of my sight. Not tonight, not *ever*.”

Chapter 23

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

The horseman doesn't leave my side, damn him.

As the hours tick by and the night grows colder and colder, I've curled myself into a tinier and tinier ball. My whole body shakes, and I can't seem to get warm enough to fall into a deep sleep. So instead, I'm vividly fantasizing about being tucked under a heap of woolen blankets, a fire roaring at my side.

It *almost* helps.

Thanatos has respected my wishes—he hasn't laid down near me. He has, however, decided to pace nearby. I can hear the crunch of plants being crushed beneath his boots and the sway of weeds brushing against his wings. Back and forth he walks. Back and forth, back and forth, back and—

“W-will you p-please stop p-pacing?” It's hard enough to sleep out here as it is.

The horseman's footfalls come to a halt.

“This is the first time I have willingly kept myself in one place for so long,” he says out of the darkness. “It is ... agitating.”

“G-go be a-agitated s-somewhere else,” I say.

There's a pause, then—

“Why does your voice sound like that? And what is that clicking noise that keeps coming from you?”

“B-because I'm c-cold,” I say. “N-normally I s-sleep inside—”

“Inside was an option,” he cuts in.

“—i-in a bed w-with blankets to k-keep me warm.”

Thanatos is silent.

Surely he's aware of this.

I hear him stalk towards me. When I think he's within arm's reach, he kneels down next to me.

"Wh-what are you—?"

Before I can finish the thought, the horseman is laying his body out alongside mine. He pulls me against him. His armor hasn't reappeared yet, and I nearly moan at the heat emanating off of him.

"You're shaking again," he says, alarmed.

"B-because I'm c-cold," I remind him.

I can't see his frown in the darkness, but I feel it all the same.

One of his wings comes around me, blanketing me in. And now fantasies about woolen blankets have been sidelined in favor of *this*.

"Better?" he asks softly, his voice like a caress. This is far more intimate than I bargained for.

And I like it. I like it so much. I can feel Thanatos's delicious heat against my back and the warmth from his wing insulating me everywhere else. If I were a cat, I'd be purring. I melt into the horseman's embrace, all my earlier declarations about him keeping his distance long forgotten.

"Mmm," I murmur.

For some stretch of time, the two of us simply lay there like that, the horseman holding me closer than necessary and me secretly enjoying the crap out of it. Eventually, my body stops shaking and my teeth stop chattering.

He pulls me in tighter, and I might just be reading into this, but I think he's pleased that I'm no longer shivering and stuttering from the cold.

"You don't need to do this," I say softly.

Several seconds pass before he answers.

"I could tell you about the number of people who I've claimed on nights like these," he says. "I could tell you that you would only slow me down if you were dead or weak. But the truth is, this is instinct, kismet. I don't understand why, but I want to be close to you, I want to hold you when you say you are cold."

My heart beats loudly.

He is your enemy.

He is your enemy.

He's solemn and indifferent and he's hurt you and now he's kidnapped you.

Do not give in to the pretty words.

“You’re really planning on laying here, out in the cold, with your wing pulled over me *the entire night* just to keep me warm?” I say.

“I’m not opposed to going inside where it’s probably warmer, but yes, I ... think I am.”

My heart beats madly in my chest. I thought this was intimate before, when it was purely physical. I realize now that I was using the word wrong. Because *this* is intimate.

“I don’t know what to make of you,” I say quietly.

“Go to sleep, Lazarus. You can analyze it in the morning.”

And I do. Somehow, I fall asleep in Death’s arms like it’s the easiest thing in the world.

I wake burrowed against a broad chest.

I snuggle deeper into the heat and solid muscle before it registers.

I’m in Death’s arms.

Literal Death.

I blink my eyes open only to find that *he’s staring at me*.

All at once I’m pushing away from him, trying to get out of his arms.

For an instant, his hold tightens, but then he does release me, and I roll away, brushing past the dark wing that’s still covering me.

I scramble to my feet, nearly tripping over a discarded computer monitor laying nearby.

Thanatos props himself up on an elbow. He doesn’t look like he’s in any hurry to get up, even though the plants around us have lacy frost on their edges and his breath is misting in the morning air and his muscles must be stiff from staying in the same position for so long.

Assuming, of course, that the horseman gets stiff muscles.

He probably doesn’t.

I don’t know what to think about the fact that Death himself held me through the night, so after taking a deep breath and staring at him for a long moment, I settle for turning my back on the horseman and heading back into the derelict ranch house.

Not a minute later the door creaks open behind me.

“Can’t you give me one iota of space?” I say without turning around. “Is that too much to ask?”

Thanatos’s heavy footfalls are slow, the wood creaking beneath him with each step he takes.

“Do you really want space?” he asks softly. He comes right up to my back.

“Yes,” I say, swiveling around to face him.

“So be it.”

Death grabs one of my wrists.

“Hey!” Before I can jerk away from his hold, he spins me around and grabs the other. He pulls them both behind me.

“What are you doing?” I yank against him as I speak.

Thanatos whistles over his shoulder, and I hear the distant plod of horse’s hooves.

Still holding my wrists, Thanatos steers me towards the front door, opening it wide. Outside, his horse trots up to the front of the house, tossing its dark mane. Without any prompting, the beast enters the building, coming right up to Death’s side.

I jerk against Thanatos’s hold again, but it’s useless. His grip is unyielding.

“So, are we back to being enemies?” I say.

He pulls me close. “You’re the one who keeps insisting we have never stopped being ones.”

I growl as I try to tug my wrists free. It’s useless. “Well, friends definitely *don’t* restrain each other.”

Death reaches into one of his horse’s saddlebags and pulls out—

“Rope? You’re going to tie me up now?” I ask, outraged. As I speak, his horse plods back out of the house.

Death jerks me by my wrists so that I’m forced to lean back against his sculpted chest. “You have tied me up several times yourself,” he says, his lips brushing against my ear. Goosebumps break out across my skin. “It’s only fitting I return the favor.”

“How in the *fuck* does this solve the problem of you being too close?”

“It’s simple, kismet,” he says. “You’re going to stay here, tied up, where you can enjoy some space from me while I leave.”

I yank against him again. I don’t like this plan. Not one bit.

“And when I return,” he continues smoothly, “maybe you’ll be ready for my company once more.”

I swear I catch a note of hurt in Death’s voice, but that’s ridiculous, right? Right.

The horseman binds my wrists behind my back, then hauls me over to the nasty, stained recliner, where he ties the other end of the rope to the chair’s

rusted metal base.

This. Is. Such. Bullshit.

“My,” he says, looking me over while I glare at him, “this feeling is so reminiscent of all those times you held me hostage. Unfortunately for you, Laz, you don’t have the strength to free yourself.”

“Don’t call me that,” I grind out.

“Would you prefer *kismet*?” Death’s eyes drop to my lips. They’ve been doing that a lot since he took me. Despite the fact that I’m spitting mad and he might feel hurt, I still think the horseman wants a kiss. “You seem to have taken no issue with that name.”

I glare at him. “The moment I get out of these bindings, you’re going to regret it.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” He touches my cheek, then stands. “Either way, I’ll be back soon. I am ... eager to return to your side.”

Death turns and walks towards the door, his heavy boots clinking as he moves away from me.

I jerk against my bindings. “Thanatos, you can’t be serious.”

He ignores me.

“Where are you even going?” I demand.

He turns, and morning sunlight streams through the windows behind him, illuminating him in a corona of light. It’s annoying how beautiful—how *celestial*—he looks. The look he gives me, however, chills my blood.

“I have work to do, Lazarus. I trust you’re aware of that?”

I go still as his plan falls into place: he intends to travel with me, then keep me caged while he’s off destroying the world.

I feel my face pale. “*Death*,” I breathe. “Please,” I say. “Don’t do this.” This is what I’ve been whittled down to—begging. Pointless, powerless *begging*. “You do enough damage between cities as it is.”

“I’ll see you soon, *kismet*,” he says. With that, he’s gone, the door creaking shut behind him.

Shit, shit, shit.

I need to get the hell out of here, *now*.

Chapter 24

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Fuck that motherfucker.

For the hundredth time I pull against my bindings. It's useless. My wrists are wrapped too tightly at my back for me to undo the knot at the base of the recliner. Not that I haven't tried. I've also attempted to drag the piece of furniture out the door. That only resulted in the thing tipping over and crushing me, and then me panicking, memories of being trapped flittering through my mind.

So now, despite the fact that I've managed to get myself out from under the recliner, I've decided to stop struggling. At least until Death gets back. Then, I'll happily set myself loose on him.

I'm painfully hungry, and I'm pretty sure that I'd give up orgasms forever—okay, maybe for a month—for a nice, cold glass of water.

At least I don't need to go to the bathroom. That's a perk of not eating or drinking for extended periods of time.

I bang the back of my head against the musty recliner, bored and frustrated.

In the distance, I hear galloping.

I tense, even as my heart begins to race.

He's already back.

Shit, that was fast. It took him what—an hour? Two? And in that time a city was annihilated. My righteous anger burns like poison in my veins.

The moment I'm out of these restraints, I'm going to throttle the horseman with my bare hands, the bastard.

I strain my ears, listening to Death's approach.

The hoof beats come to a stop a ways away, and then I hear the thicket Thanatos grew around the property now rustle. The hoof beats start up once more, galloping all the way to the front stoop.

Outside, I can hear Death dismount, his armor clanking together.

I am eager to return to your side.

My stomach clenches.

“Knock, knock motherfucker,” a deep voice calls stepping up to the door.

A voice that most *definitely* does not belong to Thanatos.

My breath catches in my throat.

Well, shit.

BOOM!

I flinch as the hinges screech and wood splinters, the door caving inward. The man kicks it again, and the last remnants of it smash apart. It hits the ground with a dull thud.

Then there, standing in the doorway is the thing of nightmares.

Another horseman.

Chapter 25

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I stare at the armored being, a scythe gripped in his hand.

The horseman takes in the shadowy room for a split second before his eyes fall to me.

“Who the fuck are you?” he demands.

Someone who would really, really like to be any place other than here.

I am literally *quaking* at the sight of this man. And his scythe. It doesn't matter that I can't truly die, *I am afraid for my life*.

Pull yourself together, Lazarus. You've faced down horsemen before.

I take a shallow breath to calm my nerves.

“That depends,” I say, forcing my voice to stay even. “Who the hell are you?”

Not that he needs a nametag. It's pretty obvious.

The horseman narrows his eyes. He takes a few steps forward, and a sheathed sword at his side sways with the motion.

I tense up. I have no idea what sort of relationship this horseman has with Death. There are so many reasons he might want to hurt me, and everything about him—even the way he moves—screams violence.

Good God. I'm having a hard time processing that there are actually *four* of these bastards around.

“Are you Death's woman?” he asks.

My eyebrows rise. *Death's woman?*

Hardly.

“I'm his *prisoner*.” I glance meaningfully over my shoulder where I'm tied up.

He smirks, like the term is cute.

The longer he looks at me, the bigger that smirk grows and the brighter his eyes become.

This is where I get stabbed and left for dead.

“You *are* his woman, aren’t you?” he says, sounding gleeful.

I give him an incredulous look. “If you mean his *kidnap victim*, then *yes*. Otherwise, *no*.”

Why are we discussing my relationship status with Death?

“Have you tried to kill him yet?” the horseman asks.

I stare at him. “What do you want with me?” I ask.

Damn Thanatos for leaving me vulnerable like this.

“Just answer the question.”

“Fine,” I snap. “Yes, I have.”

The horseman watches me carefully, the hazy light making his copper armor and caramel-colored hair glow. “Have you *actually* killed him?”

“He *can’t* be killed,” I retort.

“Not permanently,” he agrees. “But have you ended my brother’s life for a time?”

He stares too intently at me, and I find myself looking away.

“Yes,” I bite out.

I can feel the horseman staring at me with that unnerving gaze for several long moments. I still don’t know what he wants, though my fear of him is waning the longer we chat.

He takes a couple slow steps towards me, scrutinizing my situation. “And you’re now tied up here, helpless and at my brother’s whim?” he says. “You are most *definitely* his woman.”

I grind my teeth together.

“I’m *not*.”

“You *are*,” he insists, and now I know that obnoxiousness clearly runs in the family.

“Hmm.” The horseman considers me. “Your presence changes things.” There’s a calculating gleam in his eyes.

I lift my chin and glare at him. “If you’re planning on killing me, you’re going to be disappointed.” I’m not so easy to get rid of.

“Kill you?” he says, incredulously, clearly taken aback. “Woman, we want to *unleash* you.”

“We?” I echo faintly.

I should be focused on the part where I don't die, but this horseman's words ... they have me nervous in a whole new way.

The horseman closes the last of the distance between us. He crouches down, setting his scythe aside. “You didn't think I came here all by my lonesome, did you?”

My eyes widen and my stomach bottoms out. “The other horsemen are here with you too?” I shift my gaze over his shoulder.

Out the open doorway, I can see the weather has turned ominous. Dark, angry clouds gather overhead.

“Well, not *all* of us,” the horseman admits as the first few raindrops begin to patter on the roof. “We're still missing our dearest Death. But I'm sure if *you're* here, he'll be back soon. There's no way he tied you up like a treat only to abandon you.”

I frown, taking in the horseman's piercing green eyes and cutting features. “Which rider are you?” I ask.

“The least pleasant one—excepting Death, of course.”

I continue to stare at him, waiting for an actual answer.

He sighs. “*Humans*,” he mutters under his breath. “Famine. I'm Famine—I also answer to ‘the Reaper’.”

“Can't any of you horseman have nice, normal names?” Like Frank or Louis? I don't think I'd be scared of a Louis.

Famine smirks again. “I can already tell you and Pestilence are going to get along *real* well.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, you'll see.”

I stare at him for a beat or two longer, while Famine sizes me up.

“Well?” I finally say.

“Well what?”

“If you're planning on *unleashing* me, you could start by removing my restraints,” I say, jerking on my rope.

Famine scowls at me, but reaches for the sword strapped at his side. The sound of rainfall grows stronger by the second.

Even over the sound of the incoming storm I still manage to hear the distant thud of hoof beats.

Reflexively, I tense.

“You can relax,” Famine says, “that's not your boyfriend.”

“Death is not my boyfriend,” I snap as rain begins to drip through the many holes in the roof.

The Reaper flashes me that damn smirk. “Sure, tootsie.”

I thin my eyes at him. Right about now I wouldn’t half mind Thanatos smiting this brother of his.

“How *do* you know that’s not Death riding up to this house right now?” I ask curiously as Famine begins cutting away at my bindings.

“I can sense him,” he says.

My bindings fall away, and I sigh as my arms are freed.

I rub my wrists. “So that’s why you barged in here, sure that Death was inside. Because you *sensed him*,” I say, unimpressed. “The horseman who’s not here.”

“I can sense him *when he’s grounded*,” the Reaper corrects, a bit too defensively. “He was here all last night and early this morning—” He cuts himself off. “I’m not going to explain this to *you*, some degenerate human.”

I glare at him. All my fear has been replaced by annoyance. Deep, deep annoyance.

The heavy pound of hooves grows louder, distracting me for a moment.

“Those would be my other two brothers,” Famine says.

“Did you sense them too?” I say, giving him a look like he’s an imbecile.

He glowers at me. “Just when I was starting to like humans, I have to go and meet you.”

“The feeling is fucking mutual.”

Outside, the hoof beats come to a halt. I can hear a deep male voice murmuring something, and another man guffaws loudly.

I stand just as two enormous men lumber through the doors, water dripping off of them. More horsemen.

My pulse picks up again, my instincts telling me to run.

They’re not here to hurt me, they’re not here to hurt me, I chant silently to myself.

At least, I don’t think they are. Famine hasn’t yet revealed why exactly they *are* here.

One of the new horsemen carries a bow and quiver slung over his shoulder, and the other has a massive sword strapped to his back. Their eyes briefly pause on me and Famine before they scan the room, clearly looking for Death.

Eventually, their attention returns to us.

“Is this a joke, Famine?” demands the older of the two men, his blond hair shot through with streaks of pale silver. Unlike the Reaper, he’s not wearing any armor—nor is the man next to him.

“Great job locating Thanatos,” the dark-haired one says, and I almost laugh. Clearly I’m not the only person who’s comfortable ribbing the Reaper.

Famine steps in front of me. “I found something better than our brother—I found his mate.”

Chapter 26

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Mate?

What in the God-fearing *fuck*?

Pestilence and War's eyes sharpen on me.

I glare at Famine. "I'm not *anyone's* mate." That sounds horribly bestial. "For the last time, Death is my enemy."

"What makes you think she's his, brother?" the dark-haired one says, ignoring my outburst.

I grind my teeth at his phrasing. Do all these Neanderthals think alike?

The blond horseman comes over to me, eyeing me speculatively. He's slightly less intimidating than the others, but that's entirely because he has laugh lines around his eyes, and it's hard to be scared of someone who has laugh lines.

"I found her tied up in this room," Famine says. He nods outside. "And Death's horse was down the road when I arrived."

He was?

"You tracked Death's horse instead of Death himself?" The dark-haired man looks like he wants to hit Famine upside the head.

Not entirely opposed to seeing that.

The Reaper gives his brother a withering look. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you, but *I cannot accurately locate Thanatos when he's in the sky*. So I improvised with the horse."

The older, blond-haired man moves over to me, ignoring his brothers' bickering.

"Thanatos bound you up?" he asks, his gaze moving to my wrists, which

are still red and raw. I can't tell if he's concerned or simply curious.

I lift a shoulder. "We've done worse to each other."

The wheels in his mind seem to be turning, but rather than responding to that, he says, "I'm Victor, though you can call me Pestilence."

Pestilence.

I almost don't breathe. But of course one of them would be Pestilence. My eyes look over him anew as so many turbulent emotions course through me.

This is the horseman who killed my birth parents. The horseman who should've ended my life as well. And now he's standing in front of me.

He's not at all what I was expecting. My throat closes up. "You're—"

"Old?" he finishes for me, his eyes gleaming good-naturedly. "I was made mortal long ago. And now—I age."

I have to breathe through my nose to control everything it is that I'm feeling. Never did I think I would ever face down this ... this *monster*, and definitely not under these strange circumstances.

My hand itches to reach for a dagger that isn't there, and I am so close to crying right now, which is the last thing I want to do, but Pestilence is so damn civilized and he has kind eyes and laugh lines *but he killed my parents.*

He is my enemy too.

Before I can respond, War ambles over, his eyes scrutinizing me. "So you're Death's wife."

Screw. This.

I walk out of the house there and then.

I stride past the idle horses, down the overgrown driveway with its rusted junk. The rain quickly drenches me, but I don't care. I'm no longer bound up, I don't need to stay inside that decaying house with those terrible men, and—

My eyes catch on an opening in the hedge circling the property.

I can escape.

I've been so distracted by my present situation that I lost sight of my single most important goal—getting away.

I pick up my pace, afraid the unnatural overgrowth is going to close up at any moment.

"Wait!" I hear heavy footfalls behind me.

My steps falter.

If I leave now, I will slip through Death's clutches. If I linger, then I might learn why these horsemen are following Death.

I stare at the thicket surrounding the house. Rain drips from all those

hundreds of leaves, making the plants glisten everywhere but that one break in the foliage. That opening is mocking me.

“I know we’re a bit much,” Pestilence calls out after me. “My brothers and I are not trying to heckle you. We’re here to stop Death, once and for all.”

I don’t think I breathe.

I spin, facing down Pestilence.

For a moment, I forget about all of the bad blood I have with this horseman.

“You’re here to stop Death?” I say, disbelieving. I mean, they’re the *Four Horsemen*. *All* of them are here to destroy our world.

I search his gaze. “Why would you—*any* of you—” I gesture vaguely to the house where the other two men are, “want that?”

Pestilence sighs. “It’s a long story. One that Famine, War and I are willing to tell you, if you’ll listen.”

I search his face as rain drips from my hair and my lashes. He sounds truthful, and if he is, then ... perhaps Thanatos could be stopped, permanently.

I ignore the way dread coils inside me at that thought. Death *needs* to be stopped. This is bigger than me and my feelings.

Then I remember who exactly it is I’m talking to. This is the horseman who wiped out my first hometown.

“Why do you think I would want to help you?” I say. “*You* killed my parents.” My voice breaks over that old wound. I have witnessed more recent, more painful deaths at the hands of Thanatos, but oh how I have made him pay for them.

This horseman, on the other hand, he robbed me of the life I might’ve had, and now he wants my help? Because of him, I’ll never know the parents who brought me into the world, I’ll never get to hug them or memorize their faces or learn about who they were and where I came from. And though that life would mean erasing the one I did grow up with—a life full of love and laughter—it’s still a future that was stolen from me all the same.

Pestilence looks taken aback. His eyes search my face anew.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and there is genuine remorse there. I wish I couldn’t sense it.

I work my jaw and look away, suddenly overwhelmed by this confrontation.

“I was a different ... man then,” he continues. “Probably not so different

from how Death is now.

“We horseman can change our ways. All of us *have* changed our ways—except for Death. And unfortunately for you and the rest of humanity, he’s the one horseman who gets the final say on whether you all live or die.

“That’s why the three of us, including that odious beast you know as Famine—”

“*I heard that, asshole!*” the Reaper calls from just inside the house.

“—are here, looking for Death,” Pestilence continues smoothly. “We want to stop him—we are *going* to stop him. But we could really, really use your help. And I am truly sorry. I cannot bring your parents back, but perhaps together, we can spare many other families the same fate.”

I need to sit. My legs don’t feel like they want to support my bodyweight any longer.

“You’re really trying to stop Thanatos?” I say softly.

I can’t believe it.

“We really are,” he says.

His words—and his apology—hang heavy in the air between us. I don’t want to forgive him—and I don’t want to work with him—but this last year has forced me to deal with all sorts of impossible, horrible circumstances. Hell, I just spent the night in the arms of Death himself, the man responsible not just for my family’s death, but for *everyone*’s demise.

Pestilence gives me a long look. “Please, come back inside—” He pauses, leaving an opening for me to say my name.

I size the horseman up, not entirely sure that getting my hands dirty in whatever mess they’re up to is a great idea.

Better than staying Death’s unwilling captive.

“Lazarus,” I finally say. “My name’s Lazarus.”

Pestilence smiles.

“Lazarus,” he repeats. “It’s nice to officially meet you.” He nods back to the house. “As soon as you’re ready to get out of the rain, my brothers and I have a lot to tell you, and I don’t think we have much time.”

Chapter 27

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

They do share their story. It all comes tumbling out like some horrible nightmare. How these horsemen came to earth and broke our technology. How they went back into the ground, only to arise again like cicadas. Each one of them has traveled the world, determined to eradicate us all. But each of them changed their minds somewhere along the way.

And, *in every single case*, a woman was responsible for that.

I realize now why they care so much about my relationship with Death.

“So you see,” War eventually says, sitting back on his haunches as rain plinks on the roof above us, “we cannot let him succeed, and not just because we love our wives and our children.”

Famine stands next to him, arms folded, glowering.

Pestilence adds, “We gave up our immortality and the vast extent of our powers because we believe that despite our task, humans are worthy of living.”

Famine huffs, glancing away.

“Ignore him,” War says. “He’s still bitter that Death didn’t find his motives pure enough to strip him of his immortality.”

“Humans *are* retched,” Famine says. “I don’t know why I must change my mind about that first.”

I sit on the edge of the worn recliner, reeling from it all.

“Where are these families of yours?” I ask. “The ones you’re fighting for?” It’s obvious enough that they aren’t here.

“Far, far away,” War says, his eyes sharp. One of his hands fists, and I notice with fascination that on each knuckle there are red, *glowing* markings.

“And it will remain that way until Death is dealt with.”

His words draw my attention back to his face.

Dealt with sounds so ominous and final.

“What are you planning on doing to Thanatos?” I ask. It comes out as a whisper.

“Whatever we must,” War says grimly.

Famine breaks away from the group, striding over to the open doorway.

“And you want my help?” I say slowly.

Pestilence nods.

I can barely form the next words. “What would you have me—?”

“War, Pestilence—” Famine interrupts.

“*Victor*,” Pestilence corrects.

“I don’t care about your fuckwit name. Death’s coming.”

“Oh, so *now* you know where he is?” I say.

Famine gives me a dark look over his shoulder. He turns to his brothers.

“You two need to leave.”

Pestilence—*Victor*—and War are quiet, but neither of them makes a move to leave.

Famine exhales loudly. “Must I be the sentimental one? You two need to go, *now*. You’re mortal,” the Reaper reminds them. “This is a fight you’ll lose, and today is no longer the day we make our move.”

My eyes leap from man to man, even as a shiver runs down my spine. I don’t know who I’m more concerned for—Death, or these three.

Reluctantly, War and Pestilence head out front, where their horses wait. The rain is beginning to come down harder, and for once, I’m legitimately grateful to be in this rotting house.

“I’ll come for you,” Famine calls out to them, “after I have a little chat with our brother.”

I get chills at the threat in the Reaper’s words.

“So you’re going to face him alone?” I ask.

The Reaper turns back to me reluctantly. “Would you care to join me?” he asks, raising his eyebrows skeptically.

“I have fought that man more times than I can count. I’m happy to sit this one out.” After a moment, I add, “Can you kill Thanatos—for good?”

A mean little smile spreads across Famine’s face. “Does that frighten you, tootsie?”

“I swear if you call me that again, I will take off my boot and clobber you

with it.”

The Reaper folds his arms and leans back against a nearby wall. “Try it,” he says, lifting his chin. “I *dare* you.” His eyes promise vengeance.

Famine is different from his brother, Death. Thanatos might be violent, but there’s no anger to it. He seems grimly resigned to his duty, which makes him and his task all the more frustrating, but at least he doesn’t relish it. Unlike this deviant. I bet Famine loves killing. He looks as though he does.

Before either of us can say anything else, I hear the familiar, dreaded thump of wings.

Excitement sparks in Famine’s eyes. “Is that your boyfriend I hear?” he says, tilting his head.

I part my lips to spit out a scathing retort when the Reaper suddenly crosses the room in three long strides and grabs my arm—

“Hey!” I yank against his hold.

With his other hand, he picks up his scythe. Then, giving me a swift jerk, he drags me up against his chest.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

Outside the rain is coming down in torrents, battering the house and pelting the floor through the open windows and doorway.

“This is called payback, tootsie.” Famine says softly into my ear. “You wouldn’t understand.”

I open my mouth to respond when the Reaper’s lethal scythe comes up to my neck.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you,” he says softly. “I don’t plan on hurting you, but if you do something foolish—as you humans so love to do—well, at least it will be a fast death.”

“You bastard, I thought you wanted my help,” I say. Famine doesn’t know that I can’t be killed, which makes this situation all the more twisted.

“Oh, I’m fully convinced those self-preservation instincts of yours will kick in and you’ll be an obedient little woman.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss.

“Hard pass on the offer, but consider me flattered.”

I growl out a response, but the press of that blade keeps me from struggling.

The rain has turned into hail, and off in the distance I see a flash of lightning. Death’s wingbeats grow louder, and then through the doorway I see his malevolent form lower to the ground. His wings fold up and his gaze

lands on the open door.

For an instant I swear I see—surprise? Panic? Whatever it is, it's gone as soon as it comes. He drops something in his hand and storms forward, up the entryway. Thanatos pauses when he gets to the doorway.

THA-BOOM! Thunder cracks and lightning lights up the sky. For an instant, Death's features flash, a winged skeleton flickering over his face and body, then the illusion disappears.

Immediately, Death's eyes find mine. They only linger for a second before dropping to the bloody scythe at my neck and, finally, the man wielding it.

"*Famine.*" There's a terrifying note to Thanatos's voice, one that even in our worst moments, I have never heard him use before. And the look Death gives him is downright lethal.

Behind me, I can sense the Reaper practically bursting with giddiness.

He really is a deviant.

Famine's grip on my upper arm tightens. "Isn't *this* a familiar situation?" he says to Death. "Only last time our roles were reversed."

Ah, fuck.

Whatever's going on, this isn't just end-of-the-world stuff, this is *revenge* stuff. And I'm caught in the middle of it.

Thanatos prowls forward. "I didn't know you had a death wish, brother."

In a more menacing tone Famine says, "Come any closer and I will slit her throat."

Much to my shock, Death stills.

Why is he not coming any closer? He knows I cannot truly die.

The Reaper leans his mouth against my ear. "Look at that, tootsie," he says. "My brother seems to have a heart, after all."

To Death, he says, "Painful, isn't it? Finally you, all-ending Death, know what it's like to be vulnerable." His voice is openly gloating.

Thanatos doesn't look vulnerable. Just full of wrath.

"You don't think I'm aware that our brothers are a mere mile from here?" Thanatos says, his voice chillingly calm. "That the three of you have been trotting about the globe? Do you think I'm *unaware* of your plans? Let Lazarus go, and I'll spare you all—*for now.*"

Famine sighs, and for one second I think he's making a show of this just so he can drag the blade across my neck and make the whole thing overly dramatic. But then he removes the blade altogether and shoves me forward.

I stumble just as Thanatos strides forward and catches me. The horseman

brushes the hair back from my face.

“Are you okay?” he says softly, ignoring his brother altogether. I look up at his depthless eyes, eyes that are peering at me with concern, as though he hasn’t deliberately and violently ended my life several times.

I nod, more rattled than I thought I was. Now that I’m not about to immediately die, I relax in his arms. Death, too, seems to relax, and I have so many conflicting feelings about *that*.

His gaze moves to Famine, and I can see dark promise in his expression.

“You are going to regret this,” Thanatos says, his voice feather light but filled with menace.

“Am I now?” the Reaper says, raising his eyebrows. He still appears to be enjoying himself.

Thanatos releases me, moving forward to confront his brother.

“Last I saw of you, coward, you were fleeing from me,” Death says, beginning to circle the Reaper. “Tell me, how *is* Ana?”

Ana?

My eyes widen when I connect the dots. This Ana must be the woman Famine loves—the one he wants to give up humanity for.

The Reaper begins to move as well, the two men circling one another.

“When was the last time you talked to her?” Thanatos presses.

Now Famine isn’t gloating. He isn’t smiling either.

His upper lip curls. “If you dare—”

“If *I* dare?” Death says imperiously, his eyes blazing. “*You* are the one who has dared much. You were supposed to *help* me. Instead you dragged our brothers out of their dull, mortal lives and forced their aging bodies to go up against *me*.”

“Aw,” Famine pretends to pout, “you still think the world is fair?”

Death smiles. The sight of it gives me chills. “No, I finally see it for what it is. It’s *you* who seem to still cling to this idea of fairness, or have you forgotten my reach, brother? Your dear Ana is *never* safe.”

At those words, the Reaper lunges, swinging his scythe faster than my eyes can follow.

Who decided fighting inside this cramped space was a good idea?

Oh, right, that psycho Famine, who apparently makes many, *many* awful decisions.

Death steps back, dodging the blade with an ease he should not be feeling.

Quick as lightning, Thanatos lunges forward, grabbing the hilt of the

Reaper's sheathed sword. He withdraws the blade, and then the two of them are swinging their weapons.

The scythe and the sword lock, the metal grinding together.

I watch them carefully as I edge my way around them and towards the door.

"Tying your girl up was a nice touch, Thanatos," Famine says, leaning his weight into his scythe. "But I hope you don't think you're special. That's the one kink we've *all* done." Famine smiles slyly at his brother as I skirt around them, moving slow enough to not draw attention to myself. "And I must say, hypocrisy looks *great* on you."

With a zing, their blades slide apart.

"I didn't realize you wanted to get hurt again," Thanatos says.

Famine spins his scythe and he looks like he has the upper hand when, out of nowhere, Thanatos lunges forward. I don't even see him swing his sword, it happens that fast. In one fell stroke Death cleaves off Famine's arm.

I bite back my scream as the horseman's severed appendage flops onto the ground.

Jesus.

Famine bellows, and then he's on his brother in an instant.

Swords clash and blood sprays.

The earth beneath us bucks violently, throwing me to the ground. Outside, I see the sky flash as rain continues to pelt down from the heavens.

The floorboards beneath me groan ominously. Seconds later, they begin to splinter apart, and mutant plants rise from the ground, growing by the second. Just as quickly, they die, but more are coming and the earth is shaking, and I swear I hear the distant boom of thunder.

My eyes return to Death. His cheekbones seem as sharp as blades, his wings tense behind him. He looks unearthly and he moves with supernatural speed. I have fought this man many times, and never did it look like this. Only now am I seeing the truth.

He went easy on me.

"You hit like a pussy, brother," the Reaper says. His face, however, is pinched with pain.

"Still can't control your emotions or the weather, can you, Famine?"

They goad each other as they chop one another up.

I think they've forgotten almost entirely about me.

Now's your chance, Lazarus.

For a second, I hesitate.

The three horsemen wanted my help, and Lord knows it would feel good to make Thanatos pay for abducting me. But Famine was *this close* to killing me. All so that he could act on some personal vendetta.

Fucker can fight this battle on his own.

I crawl across the room as the house continues to groan and crack, and I'm sure that at any moment Death is going to notice me.

But the fighting doesn't stop. I creep across the open doorway and ever so silently rise to my feet.

Outside, the wind howls as it whips my hair and rain pounds against my skin. In the short time these two horsemen have been fighting, vines have grown up and around much of the house. The building is splintering apart as even more plants force their way out of the ground and up through the frame of the house.

I hurry down the front yard, skirting around the rusted junk as lightning slices through the sky. A memory of Death's skeletal features flash behind my eyes.

Got to get away.

I nearly trip over a scattered pile of supplies. Fruit, bread, jugs of water, blankets and more, all of it getting sodden out here in the storm. It wasn't here when I exited the house an hour earlier.

Death hadn't left me to kill some town. He'd left to bring me supplies. I mean, he probably *did* kill the town he got them from, but that's kind of a given with him.

My heart hammers in my chest as I stare at it all.

Behind me, I hear Famine bellow and the house shriek as beams break in earnest. Death's velvety voice drifts out, and whatever he's saying, it isn't English. The sound of it raises the hair on my arms.

My gaze moves up to the opening in the thicket.

Run girl run.

And that's exactly what I do. I flee for my life.

Chapter 28

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I run for miles and miles, my wet clothing sticking to my skin. Every square inch of me is wet, from the top of my head to the bottom of my icy feet. With every pounding footfall, water squishes between my toes.

My breath is ragged, and the cold air is burning my lungs with every breath I take. The rain seems to follow me the entire time.

Get away. Get away. Get away.

That's the only thought that echoes in my mind. Away from all the horsemen and their violence.

My legs have nearly given out when I stumble into Pleasanton's city center. It's a hiccup of a place. Blink and you'd miss it. But the dead lay scattered like freshly fallen snow, and my skin pricks like it can feel Death's power even now.

I slow to a walk, pressing the back of my hand against my mouth as I pick my way through the streets, ignoring the rain still battering against me.

Now that I've burned through my adrenaline, exhaustion is setting in. I don't know how I made it this far. I'm beyond hungry and thirsty and everything hurts. I glance around me, noticing the houses that line the street.

I need to grab some supplies and find a place to eat and rest in. For whatever reason, the buildings here have been left standing, but I fear that if Death comes looking for me, he'll start obliterating them one by one. I don't want to be inside when he does that.

The idea, however, of camping out in some wet field makes me want to weep.

.... aaaah ... aaahwahwahwahaaaa ...

I freeze at the distant sound. What is that? It's impossible to make out over the wind and rain—hell, maybe it *is* the wind and rain.

I begin to walk again, trying to decide which house to break into.

... *waaaah ... ahahah ... waaaaah ...*

I pause again.

That's not the weather.

Is it an animal? Perhaps some creature got trapped and is now crying out for help. But there's something about that sound, something that sets my teeth on edge. A sick feeling pools in my belly.

I find myself moving towards the noise, drawn in despite my own pressing needs.

... *wahwahwah ... WHAAAAAA!*

Oh dear God.

I forget about the horseman and about food and water and the rain battering down on me.

That's a baby.

Someone else has survived Death.

Chapter 29

Pleasanton, Texas

January, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I run towards the noise. It's impossible. No one besides me survives Death.

The crying gets louder the closer I get to an olive green house. I run up the driveway, onto the porch, and grab the handle—

Locked.

Shit.

WAHWAHWAAAAAA!

Dear God dear God dear God. I grab one of the wrought iron café chairs sitting on the porch and drag it to a window.

Hefting it up, I slam it into the glass. It takes two tries, but I shatter the window. Kicking the remaining glass shards away, I step into the house.

AAAAAAHWAHWAHWAH!

I sprint across the living room I entered and down the hall, barely noticing the corpse I vault over. I make it to a room—a *nursery*—and there, sitting in a crib, is a crying baby.

My legs nearly give out at the sight.

I rush over to the crib, lifting the baby out. There's vomit on the child and they're trembling badly in my arms.

"Ssh, ssh," I say, holding the baby close.

The infant is still wailing, its voice hoarse from crying for so long. Its tiny hands fist into my clothes.

My God, this child survived a horseman.

Just like me.

I'm shell-shocked at the thought, and for a moment, all I can do is shush the baby and stare. But the child's still shaking and how long have they been

trapped in that crib? The thought is too horrifying to ponder.

I storm the house, looking for milk. I have to swallow back a sob as I pass the body I leapt over just a minute ago. The woman's long auburn hair is fanned out around her like a halo; that must be the child's mother.

I've passed countless bodies over the past six months and gotten used to the sight of them. But now my own history overlays this moment, and I have to breathe in through my nose to stop a few careless sobs from slipping out.

When I enter the kitchen, I make a beeline for the icebox. Inside are several pre-filled bottles of milk. Thank God. Grabbing one of them, I bring it to the child's lips.

The baby drinks greedily, gulping down the milk. And now, I begin to cry. This child will never grow up in this house and will never know the woman lying in it.

But they will live. That I swear.

Thanatos will be coming for me.

If he finds me, the child will die. That's just how Death is.

Maybe this baby is impervious to death. That thought fills me with such strange, conflicting emotions. I stare at the baby for the hundredth time, trying to untangle the mess of my mind. Unending life is a gift and a curse wrapped up in one.

Despite all signs indicating this baby can survive Death, I shouldn't assume they're beyond his reach.

I move through the home, one hand holding the baby while the other gathers all the necessities the two of us might need. The child refuses to let me go.

I feel vaguely sick. Too much adrenaline and exhaustion and too little sustenance and rest.

Please don't pass out. Please don't pass out.

I have to force myself to stop and drink the water I find in a nearby pitcher, and I shove some leftover food from the icebox into my mouth as quickly as I can.

I find a backpack and begin adding in diapers and baby clothes, empty bottles and some jars of mashed food. I even manage to tie a teddy bear I found in the crib to the outside of the bag.

Every single second that passes feels like a knife to the chest. At any moment the house could fall or the dead could rise. I am working on

borrowed time.

I do one last pass through. I stop in the nursery, my gaze sweeping over the room to make sure I didn't miss anything. I've been so consumed by this child's survival that it's only now that I notice the three wooden letters hanging on the wall.

B-E-N.

I bite back another sob.

I look down at the baby, who's staring at me, his eyes still puffy.

"Hello, Ben," I say, my voice wavering only a little. "I'm Lazarus."

I can't pass along much to this child that his parents once gave him, but at least he will get to keep his name and know it was the one his parents chose for him.

Ben continues to gaze at me, his lower lip jutting out.

"We should get going," I tell him. "There's a bad man after me, and I don't want him to find either of us."

I leave the nursery and head back through the living room. My eyes catch sight of a framed sketch hanging on the living room wall. In it, a man and a woman sit next to each other, an infant on the woman's lap.

On a whim, I break the frame and remove the sketch of Ben and his parents, folding it up and sliding it into the backpack.

Move it, Lazarus. Time was up five minutes ago.

The one final thing I need is a horse or a bike. If this family ever owned a horse—and it's seriously unlikely, considering how small the lot is—it's long gone. But a bike ... they might still have a bike.

I head down the hallway and open the door to their garage. Boxes are piled along one wall, but leaning against the other is a bike with a basket in front and a baby seat mounted behind it.

I exhale, my relief relaxing my shoulders. I drop the backpack into the front basket. As soon as I buckle Ben in, he begins to cry again.

Shit. Babies are the least subtle creatures in the world. Reaching into the backpack, I grab one of the bottles and unscrew one of the rubber nipples and put it in Ben's mouth.

Probably should've hunted down a few pacifiers.

"I know you've had a rough few hours, little guy," I say, "but I need you to be brave for a few more."

We aren't out of the woods yet.

We escape.

I never even see Death, though the thought of him looms so large in my mind that at times I can hardly breathe around my fear. Maybe if I weren't so hell-bent on fleeing him, I'd worry about his own well-being. But let's face it: he was trouncing Famine last I saw the two of them.

The only thing that eclipses my fear of Death is this new worry: keeping a baby alive. Most humans are fragile enough as it is—babies even more so. And no amount of prior auntie experience has prepared me for the reality of this. Feeding and sleeping and changing diapers and just—all of it.

I take back roads, slip into the few empty structures that are still standing, and collect what money and supplies I can, all while trying to slow my pace for the tiny human who is now ... shit, I think he's mine. Of all the twists I imagined my life taking, this was never one of them.

On day three, I swear the air changes. I try to tell myself that it's just the weather—the sun decided to come out in its full glory, and the winter air feels a touch warm. It would be an idyllic day for traveling, if not for the figure I see in the distance.

I stop my bike, squinting at the person. I've moved through such lonely swaths of countryside that I haven't seen another soul—alive or dead—in over a day.

The figure draws closer and closer, and it's only when they're about a hundred yards away that I notice that the person's skin is mottled and their hair is matted against one side of their face.

And they're moving towards me very, very quickly.

That is no living person.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

I spin my bike around, the movement jostling Ben awake, and I begin to race away, hurriedly shifting gears to maximize my speed.

Behind me I can hear the pounding footfalls following in my wake.

Dear God, Death raised his dead.

And they're looking for me.

I know they are.

I pedal as fast as I can, my legs burning. The footfalls behind me grow more and more distant, but I don't dare look back.

Did the creature get a good look at me? Will more come along? Will Death himself be here soon? Each possibility is more terrifying than the last, and raw terror has me pedaling as hard as I can for hours, until my clothes are

soaked through with sweat and my breathing is ragged and Ben has been crying for longer than I should've let him.

From that point on, I exist in a state of panic. Every figure in the distance is a potential revenant scouting for Death. Every standing structure is potentially housing more of them. I take to traveling at night, which is more terrifying than I have words for. No ghost stories adequately prepared me for the reality of encountering the living dead on dark, lonely roads.

And I do encounter a few of them. They are eerily silent as they prowl the roads. Only once does one come tearing out of a nearby field, the sound of the wild grass my only warning. Luckily, my bike is faster than even the quickest corpse, and the night cloaks my identity.

Each time I get away, I'm plagued by uncertainties: Does Death know where I am? Have I truly escaped him?

It doesn't feel likely.

The only bright side of the dead now walking is that they've left the homes they died in. I never stay long, nor do I ever sleep long. And my riding buddy is a surprisingly good sport about the whole ordeal.

More than once, I find myself staring at him curiously.

How did you survive? Are you really like me?

It would be really, really helpful if he was. Then I wouldn't have to run from the horseman. But there's no way of truly knowing. Not unless something catastrophic happens. And personally, the world has endured enough catastrophes as it is. I'm not interested in manifesting another just to test some theory.

So I fear and panic and travel, travel, travel.

At some point, the cities full of dead give way to cities full of living. Even then I ride on, looking for a place that's far enough away from Death that I don't hear whispers of the horseman. I still can't shake the tendrils of unease that I feel, like somehow, the nightmare isn't over. But I push that thought from my mind; the days are hard enough as it is without worrying about the future.

It takes a small eternity full of crying babies and minor meltdowns (mine, not Ben's) but eventually, we get to Alexandria, Louisiana, a city that just feels *safe*.

So there we linger. I've lifted enough money along the way to rent out a small house and get ourselves settled. Only then am I able to breathe a sigh of relief.

I glance down at the boy on my hip.

“We did it, Ben,” I say softly. “We escaped Death.”

Chapter 30

Alexandria, Louisiana

April, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Days turn into weeks and weeks turn into months and I fall into a routine. Somewhere in there, Ben goes from being someone else's son to my own.

A part of me hates how easily I set aside my purpose, how willing I was to abandon my cause the moment I stumbled across a tiny human who needed help. But then, I look at Ben and I can't find it within me to regret my actions. The world will just have to take care of itself for now.

I find a doula to apprentice for, one who doesn't mind having a baby join us for our house calls, and life begins to feel normal.

Until, of course, it doesn't.

I wake in the dead of night, my eyes snapping open. At first I think it's Ben that's woken me, but then I notice that dreaded stillness. The one I've become all too familiar with over the last year.

He found us.

I suck in a breath.

Ben.

I trip over to his crib. I can barely see in the darkness, but he's too still and I'm so afraid—

I reach in and grab him and I have to swallow my sob when I hear his deep inhalation and feel his body move.

He's alive. The relief that floods my system nearly brings me to my knees. But even it is short-lived.

Run, Lazarus!

If Death isn't here yet, then he will be soon. Maybe Ben is impervious to him, but maybe I just got lucky and sensed the horseman before he's struck

this town.

I grab the baby harness I bought last month and force my shaking hands to strap it onto me before securing a fussy Ben into it. All of it happens in a panic-fueled daze.

Grab the bug out bag. I've kept one for this very occasion. I snag it from the hook it hangs on and, slinging it over my back, I rush out into the chilly evening air.

I grab my bicycle, then hop on.

Please have time. Please all be in my head. I alternate chants, hoping for the best but fearing the worst.

I don't know which way to go; however, down the road I hear a dog yipping. I head towards the noise, panic seizing up my lungs. Five houses down, I hear the dog banging against a rotted wood gate, still baying. Riding all the way up to the gate, I grab the latch, then pause, readying myself.

I glance down at Ben, who has grown quiet as he peers around us.

"We got this, Ben," I say to him, more for my own sake than his. "Neither of us is meeting Death tonight."

I unlatch the gate and set the dog free. The creature immediately bolts down the street, and I ride after it. It tears through yards, cuts corners and plows through bushes and several times I'm sure I'm going to lose sight of the thing. But somehow, I manage to stay on the dog's trail. The whole thing is a blur of adrenaline and instinct. But by the time the sun rises, Alexandria is far behind us and Ben is still alive.

Only then do I allow myself to process what just happened.

He's hunting you. Perhaps Death never stopped.

And now he's closing in.

Ben and I find a new city, a new place to stay, and I secure a new job. None of it is quite as comfortable as Alexandria, but I don't blame that on the new place. My sense of security has been shattered.

With good reason, too. Not a month later, the devil nearly finds me again.

And again.

And again.

I move through Louisiana, then circle back into Texas. I'm afraid to live near the cities of the dead—I still have nightmares about Death's revenants chasing Ben and me—but traveling east is a dead end, so to speak. Thanatos has wiped out too many swaths of the country over there. So instead, I force myself to head southwest.

If I can make it to the coast, perhaps Ben and I can get passage on a boat heading out to distant shores. And if we can't, we'll cut through Texas and head out West, where the land hasn't yet been touched by Death.

A year ago, a plan like this—one full of uncertainty and struggle—would've been petrifying to a country girl like me who spent the first two decades of her life living a comfortable, predictable life. But the bitter truth is that I'm no longer that girl, the one who used to sew daisies onto her jeans and haggle over the cost of produce. Death has altered me in so many fundamental ways.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of it all is that I wouldn't want to go back to being that girl I was. Not for the whole world. I'm more resilient, more adventurous and battle-hardened. Death, ironically, has made me come alive.

Chapter 31

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Ben and I settle into the town of Orange, Texas. The nearest port is tantalizingly close, and I'm already looking into various cruise liners that offer trips to Mexico, the Caribbean and other far off destinations.

A thrill goes through me every time I think of finding a place where Ben will be safe from Death, though I force myself to ignore the odd ache in my chest at the thought of not seeing the horseman again—maybe ever.

All of my imaginings—both good and bad—come to an abrupt halt two weeks later.

It starts out as a simple enough fever, one that makes Ben cry and cry. It lasts for two days, and when it goes, I'm relieved.

But then, it returns—and it comes back with a vengeance.

I pace the small one-bedroom apartment like a caged animal, sometimes with Ben in my arms, and other times empty-handed while my son sleeps feverishly in my bed. I get him medicine to help break the fever, but if it works, it does so only briefly.

The morning after the fever returns, I can tell that something's truly wrong.

Ben's inconsolable.

"Sshh, sshh, Ben, sshh, it's going to be alright," I say, rocking him in my arms.

He screams, his cries growing louder and louder. He won't eat, he won't drink, and even my touch seems to upset him.

The only thing that appears to help are the songs I sing to him. Then his cries die down—just a little—and he watches me, unsmiling and whimpering

a little but at least distracted. Once the song ends, his cries begin again.

I can feel my own hot tears slipping from my eyes. I'm so scared my arms are shaking.

I need to find a doctor. Maybe they will have something to give my son.

But that's assuming they know what's causing Ben's fever. And that they have medication for it. And that Ben manages to keep it down.

I'm nearly hyperventilating at the odds.

Still need to try.

I hustle about the house, grabbing what I can while Ben thrashes in my arms. I don't know what to do. He doesn't want to be in my arms, but when I put him down, he's plainly unhappy.

Just as I'm getting ready to buckle Ben into my bike, a heavy fist pounds on my door.

Grabbing the last of my things, I toss them into the bike's basket and head over to the door, Ben wailing the entire time.

I open it, then blanch at the visitor standing on my doorstep. *Pestilence.*

For a moment, I can't find any words.

"How—what are you doing here?" I finally manage. I have to raise my voice to be heard over Ben's screaming.

Pestilence's gaze drops to the baby in my arms. "Ah. So *this* is why you've been running."

He places a hand on my shoulder and steers me back inside, following in after me. And I just *let* him manhandle me. The truth of the matter is that seeing a familiar face has my knees weakening. Right when I felt so hopelessly lost, Pestilence found me.

I pinch my lips together to hold everything in, though I can still feel my lower lip trembling.

The horseman steers me towards my banged up table and chairs, but I'm too antsy to take a seat.

Need to get going ...

"How did you know I've been running?" I ask, as my gaze sweeps over him again. I feel like my eyes must be deceiving me.

Pestilence releases my shoulder, peering down at me. I feel as though he can see all the stress I carry on my face. How it has worn me down over these last several months.

"War, Famine, and I have continued hunting Death—who, we've noticed, is traveling alone, despite the fact that we're all aware of your existence.

Combine that knowledge with Thanatos's circuitous movements and the awakened revenants and well, he's obviously looking for you."

My pulse is in my ears. I've known Thanatos has been searching for me, but having Pestilence confirm it makes it all uncomfortably real.

"How did *you* find me?" I ask as Ben keeps wailing in my arms.

Pestilence grips the back of one of my kitchen chairs. "There are not many people named *Lazarus*, and unlike Death, my brothers and I are willing to interact with the living. It's amazing how far a few questions will go."

It's still more than a little astounding, considering how new I am to Orange.

"How far away is Death?" I ask. I need to know how much time I have.

"Twenty miles, give or take a few," Pestilence says.

I close my eyes for a moment. That's far too close, which means I need to head to Port Arthur today and buy us tickets out of here. But Ben can't travel. Not like this. He needs a doctor. And medicine. And rest. But if we don't move, it might all be over anyway.

Pestilence continues, "Last time we checked, Death was heading off in a different direction, so you probably have a day—maybe two—before he comes here."

It's not long enough. I hold Ben close, even though his cries ratchet up at the action.

"Why are you here, warning me about this?" I say.

Pestilence's gaze is heavy, and I swear I see some fatherly concern in them as he takes me in.

"Famine, War, and I never finished our discussion with you," he says. "We would like to."

The horseman's gaze drops to Ben, who is still wailing. "But perhaps now is not a good time." The horseman's eyes linger a moment longer on my son. "Infection is ravaging his body—and it's spreading by the hour. He needs antibiotics, Lazarus."

It's all too much. My shoulders curl in and I begin to weep, bowing my head over Ben's.

"Hey, hey," Pestilence says.

This bear of a man pulls me and Ben in for a tight hug. It's a firm, quick squeeze that's over before it's even begun. But his hand stays on my shoulder and he rubs it reassuringly. "It's alright. It's going to be alright," he says with such certainty. "Dry those eyes."

It's willpower alone that has me pulling myself back together.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask, my voice broken.

"Take care of your boy—find a doctor, get him some antibiotics. He'll be alright. When you're ready, come find me and my brothers. We're staying in an abandoned farmhouse just off of Road 3247. It's slate blue and it has a red door with a big iron star on it."

I nod distractedly.

Pestilence hesitates, then glances around my apartment. Noticing the pencil and notebook I keep on my kitchen counter, the horseman grabs the two items and begins to jot down the address. He rips the sheet of paper off and hands it to me.

"You have about a day—give or take. Lazarus, I know you've been running. And I understand why. But we want you to stop."

Chapter 32

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I go directly to the hospital, pushing Pestilence’s absurd final words out of my head. I won’t stop running. I *can’t*. Not if it might mean Ben dying at Thanatos’s hands.

The wait to be admitted is blessedly short. The nurse calls me in, clipboard in hand, and checks Ben’s vitals. Her lips press together in a grim line, and my heart plummets.

“When did the symptoms start? Has he had anything to eat or drink today? When was the last time he did feed? When was his last wet diaper?”

I answer her questions, all while she keeps her face carefully blank, pausing only to scribble notes on her clipboard.

Once I’m finished talking, she says, “Well, your son is definitely sick.” She tucks the clipboard under her arm and stands. “I’m going to get him started on an IV so that we can get some fluids in him. The doctor will be in here shortly.”

The doctor does arrive alarmingly fast, and while I’m grateful they’re taking my son’s condition seriously, I’m terrified of what that might mean.

“I’m Dr. Conway,” he says, nodding to me. His attention turns to Ben, who’s resting in my arms. “And this must be Ben.” The doctor briefly glances over Ben’s chart, then draws a chair to us and examines my son.

Once he’s done, he leans back in his seat. “It looks like it’s meningitis,” he says. “It’s serious, but we can treat it. We’ll start your son on some penicillin and administer fluids. From there, we’ll wait and see, but he should be alright.”

I exhale, my head bowed over Ben.

He should be alright. I hold onto that.

After Dr. Conway leaves, a nurse leads me and Ben to a room with a crib. She sets up the IV and administers the antibiotic. The whole time I cry alongside my son. I've never felt smaller than I do now, helpless to do anything to save my son. Ben's hoarse wails lance at me. They're haunting reminders of the day I first found him, when he'd cried for so long he'd worn out his voice.

He's going to be alright, I tell myself. *He's going to be alright.*

I try not to think about the fact that Death is closing in on this city, or that the other horsemen want me to stop running. Every time I do, I can't seem to catch my breath.

Instead I brush the short wisps of Ben's hair back, and I sing him lullabies that waver on my lips, my sadness throwing my voice off-key.

An hour goes by, and nothing appears to change. My son is still crying off and on, and while his eyes don't look so sunken and his lips appear less chapped, he still seems like he's in pain.

Another hour passes and a nurse comes by. She checks my son's IV, then his vitals, then leaves.

Another two hours pass, and still nothing much has changed, except that Ben's breathing has gotten more rapid and his cries have tapered off with his exhaustion.

I stare out the window at the setting sun, dreading the coming night. Time feels like it's slipping through my fingers, and I can't do anything about it. I can't do anything about *any* of this.

The nurse returns, checking on my son once more. I want to ask her how long it will take for the antibiotics to start making a noticeable change. Or if there's any way I can administer the rest of the medicine at home—or rather, on the road.

Before I can, however, she rushes off.

Only minutes later the woman returns, an unfamiliar doctor on her heels.

"Hi there, Ms. Gaumont," the doctor says, reaching out to shake my hand. "I'm Dr. Patel." Her eyes move to the crib. "And this is—" She glances down at his chart, "Ben."

Dr. Patel crosses over to the crib Ben lays in. She pulls out a stethoscope and listens to my son's heart, then checks his head and neck. The action causes Ben to start crying anew.

Exhaling a heavy breath, she turns from the crib to face me.

“What is it?” I say before she can get a word in. I swear she must be able to hear my heart pounding.

“We should be seeing some improvement by now. Unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

My heart seems to stop at those words.

“We’re going to continue to administer the penicillin to Ben,” Dr. Patel continues, “but so far I’m not seeing any evidence that it’s working.”

It’s not working.

“Is there anything else you can do?” I ask.

“Some cases of meningitis are bacterial, and others are viral,” she says. “Antibiotics won’t have any effect on viral meningitis. That could be what your son has. There is a chance, however, that this is bacterial meningitis, and if it is, then at this point we would give Ben more specialized antibiotics—if we had them.” The doctor sighs, rubbing her eyebrows wearily. “However, those are no longer readily available. We will send out a request to see if any of the neighboring hospitals and pharmacies have any on hand, but by then ...” She trails off, her meaning clear.

By then Ben will have either beaten this thing, or he won’t have.

I feel like someone has stolen the breath from my lungs.

“The other doctor said he’d be okay,” I whisper.

Dr. Patel nods. “He very well could be. Children fight off infections as serious as this one all the time. He’s receiving the best care we can give him. All we need to do now is let his body do the rest.”

The doctor turns to the door, and I want to grab her hand, I want to beg her not to go, I want to force her to stay here until she heals my son.

“Is there nothing else we can do?” I ask, lost.

“Pray,” she says. “There’s always hope in prayer.”

“Pray?” I echo.

To whom? *God?* I nearly let out a bitter laugh. God is not going to help us. God is rooting for the other side. The one that’s hunting me and everyone in this town.

Dr. Patel moves to the door, unaware of my tumultuous thoughts. “We will continue checking on Ben and making sure that his body is as healthy as it can be to fight this.”

With that, she leaves, and I’m left alone with Ben and my despair.

The night churns by, and Ben seems to only be getting worse and worse.

Deep in the witching hour, he wakes up, his eyes glassy. The sight of those unfocused eyes has me picking him up and cradling him in my arms, careful not to disturb his IV line.

I stare down at him. “You’ll be alright,” I whisper to him. “You’re just like me. You can’t die.”

That’s never been proven, a small voice in my head whispers.

But I’ve gotten sick before. Hell, I’ve *died* before. Perhaps Ben *is* like me ... perhaps—perhaps things will be okay.

I cling to that possibility as I gaze down at my son. He’s gone eerily quiet. All I wanted throughout the day was for him to stop crying, but not like this, when sickness and exhaustion are what have stolen his cries away.

I didn’t realize you could love something so thoroughly so quickly. I didn’t give birth to this boy and I’ve known him for less than a year, and yet if—if something happens to him, it will crush me worse than all of the deaths I’ve already endured.

I do pray—damn that doctor—I pray to the god the people in my hometown both loved and feared, even though that god killed my parents and then all the rest of my family and friends. Even though that god has let me die so many times only to force me to live. Even though that god is primed to take my son.

I’m so consumed by my own fear and grief that I don’t hear the animals off in the distance, nor do I notice the unnatural silence that falls over the hospital like a shroud. I don’t hear the ominous footfalls drawing closer and closer nor the slick sound of wingtips brushing against the floor.

I only glance up when the door opens, assuming it’s a nurse.

Instead, my eyes land on Death.

Chapter 33

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I suck in a gasp at the sight of him.

“No,” I whisper low, the word like a prayer, clutching Ben tighter to me. I had prayed for God to spare my son, not to hand-deliver Death to me.

Thanatos stares at me in equal astonishment. “I didn’t believe it,” he says, his voice hushed. “Not until now.”

I force my gaze away from Death. The trick with him is to not look too long or too hard. Otherwise, I might see something beyond my opponent, something real and human.

He steps into the dim, lamp-lit hospital room. “*Months* I have searched for you,” he says.

Despite myself, my gaze is drawn back to him.

Death’s dark eyes are fevered. “You stopped coming for me,” he accuses.

I don’t have an answer for him. He wants to talk about something that feels like a lifetime ago. But all I can focus on is the terrible situation that’s consumed me for the past day.

As though he can read my thoughts, Death’s eyes dip to the baby in my arms.

“You’re a mother?” Thanatos says, and the surprise is back in his expression.

My heart pounds in my chest. It’s about now that it’s actually sinking in: *Death is inside Ben’s hospital room—Death who kills everyone.*

I glance down at Ben, so afraid of what I’ll see. He’s frighteningly still, but I hear his faint inhalations.

Thanatos hasn’t killed my son. Has the horseman ever gotten this close to

another living soul besides me *without* taking its life?

“Why are you here?” I demand.

His gaze is fixed to Ben. “I sense every living creature,” he says. “They open their souls to me when it’s their time to go.”

Death’s gaze rises to mine. His ancient eyes are sad—so, so sad.

“No,” I say again, my voice broken, my hold on Ben tightening. My son doesn’t let out so much as a whimper.

“The boy in your arms is very, very sick, Lazarus,” Thanatos says gently, taking a step forward.

I shake my head, trying to banish his words. “He’ll be *fine*,” I say, trying to reassure both of us.

“No,” Death says softly, taking another step towards me, “he won’t be.”

My face crumples. I hear the truth in his words, even if I don’t want to believe it.

“Please,” I say, tears slipping from my eyes. “He’s just a *baby*.”

Don’t take him.

Thanatos is quiet, his expression agonized. *For me*, I realize. *He’s agonized for me*. I’m not sure any of his pity is for the child.

I begin to shake.

“His soul beckoned,” Thanatos reminds me softly. “It’s his time. I know it, and so does he.”

No. No, no, no, *no*.

But I cannot escape the truth of Death’s words. If Thanatos can sense Ben, then my son must be mortal after all. If I wasn’t already sitting, the thought would’ve sent me to my knees.

“Spare him,” I beg. “I know you can.” If Thanatos can take lives at will, then I’m sure he can overlook one.

Death shakes his head.

“I will do anything—*anything*,” I vow. I hate how hollow my voice sounds, how hopeless I already am. But no one else has given me anything to believe in, and there’s no reason why this horseman should be any different.

Death gives me a long, curious look. Something flickers in his eyes, and I remember that the last time I saw him, he was determined to keep me captive.

Now, there’s a spark of hope. I take it as an opening.

“I will live with you—I’ll do it—” I say, “just spare Ben. Please, heal him like you’ve healed me.”

Thanatos has never seen me like this, boiled down to my weakest, most

vulnerable essence.

His gaze is heavy on mine. “I only healed you, Lazarus, because you cannot die and I cannot bear your suffering.”

“But I’m suffering now,” I say, tears slipping from my eyes.

Thanatos actually looks torn.

“*Please,*” I beg, “I know we’re enemies, but ... please,” I rasp out, “spare me this.”

Death is quiet for a long moment. I feel those heavy, ancient eyes on me, and I wonder absently if, despite all the death he’s witnessed, he doesn’t know what to make of grief.

Finally, he says, “I will give you what I have given many mothers before you,” he says. “Time. You have a day.”

Chapter 34

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

A day?

My body seems to give out then, and I do crumple out of that hospital chair and onto my knees, holding Ben's sickly body close to me. Sobs shudder out of me, and nearby, I'm aware of Death's foreboding presence. He hasn't left, though I don't know why he still lingers.

"I hate you," I whisper. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you."

Death sinks down next to me, and he does something I'm not prepared for: he wraps his arms around me and Ben and holds us against him.

For a moment, his embrace feels unsure, but then I'm leaning into him, like he's the sun and I'm a flower drinking in his light. And I'm breaking apart. I start to cry in earnest, everything within me coming undone all at once. I've been strong for too long, on my own for too long, and I'm now in an impossible situation.

"I thought he was like me," I admit. "I found him alive in one of the towns you destroyed. I thought he could survive death."

Thanatos's solemn eyes meet mine, his face close enough to kiss. "No one is like you, Lazarus," he says softly.

And I begin to cry all over again because I'm alone, I'm always alone, and everyone I love leaves me, and I shouldn't be jealous of that.

"Tell me he's going to be alright," I say, my spirit broken.

"Lazarus, he *will* be alright. More than alright. No more pain, no more suffering. He will be surrounded by love."

I'm shaking my head against Thanatos because I don't believe in that sort of goodness. Not when all I've seen of the supernatural is pain and death.

“And when it is your time,” the horseman continues, “he will be there, waiting for you.”

I sob harder because that shouldn't be the way of things—children shouldn't die before parents. And I don't care that I'm technically not his birth mother, or that the people who gave him life *have* already passed. He's not even two years old. He has an entire future ahead of him.

“How do I know you're not lying to me?” I whisper, my voice choked with emotion. Tears are falling from my eyes like rain.

“Why would I?” Death says. “I have never shielded you from pain.” But he says it so gently, I almost think he regrets that fact.

His hold on me tightens, and the three of us stay like that.

Tomorrow, we will be enemies, but tonight, he's my solace.

Chapter 35

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

It is the worst day of my life.

I've had so many bad ones, I didn't realize they could be eclipsed by this one.

Ben doesn't eat, doesn't drink, and any time he cries, it's a weak, thready sound; I can hear the grave in his voice. And maybe it's my imagination, but I swear he's calling out to that bastard horseman, begging him to take his life away from me.

When I woke this morning to a nurse doing the rounds, the horseman was gone and Ben was back in his crib.

Now I glance down at Ben, who's once again in my arms.

I stroke his small cheek. "I love you," I whisper. I've shed all my tears. My heart is still breaking, but it's left me hollow. "Always, always, always," I promise. "I'm sorry I couldn't do better. You deserved so much more."

I keep stroking his cheek, feeling lost, my lonely future unspooling before me. I've always wondered how long I'd get to live if nothing could kill me. Now the thought of it is punishing. There's no one else out there like me, no one besides the horsemen.

My fingers pause as a thought comes to me, a desperate, hopeful thought.

The *horsemen*.

Death isn't the only one with power. The others once had it—maybe they still do.

Famine must. Maybe they can help my son.

I choke on that toxic, hopeful feeling in my chest, and a part of me wants to push it away. But the idea I have ... it has claws, and it sinks them into me.

Before I can think better of it, I place my son in the crib and call for a nurse.

Need to get this IV out.

Unfortunately, it doesn't happen right away. The nurses don't want to remove it yet even though it's painfully clear my son is beyond the help of antibiotics and fluids.

It's while I'm arguing with the nurse that I realize an astounding detail I missed until now: everyone is alive. The hospital staff, the patients, the people meandering about outside the hospital's windows. Death gave more than just my son an extra day.

The thought steals my breath. Along with it comes the memory of Death's arms around me, holding me as I cried. A lump forms in my throat at his strange bits of kindness.

I refocus on the nurse. "My son is dying," I say, and I resent the hell out of her for making me say those words. "I want to take him home and let him leave this world surrounded by the things he loves."

I have no intention of letting him leave this world.

The nurse presses her lips together, but reluctantly, she nods. "I'll have to okay it with the doctor first," she warns.

She brings a doctor back. They sign off on some forms. Remove Ben's IV line. Murmur a few stilted platitudes.

I clench my jaw against it all.

After what feels like an eternity, I exit the front doors of the hospital, blinking against the glare of the morning sun. My bike is where I left it yesterday, and it's a shock to see it there. It feels like I left it eons ago.

I buckle Ben into his seat, cringing at how limp his body is and how little light is left in his eyes.

I stroke his cheek. "I'm going to save you, Ben," I swear to him with a conviction I shouldn't feel.

Hopping onto the bike, I peddle for home, stopping only long enough to grab a map I bought a week ago and the note Pestilence left for me. I spend a moment locating the road the horseman spoke of, then I trace the route needed to get there.

I fold the papers up, tuck them in my pocket, and Ben and I are out the door once more. I peddle like a mad woman, desperate to get to the address. The jostling causes Ben to stir a little, and I even hear him let out a weak cry.

Something dangerous like optimism surges through my veins. *I'm going to*

save him. I am.

As soon as I turn onto Road 3247, I begin looking for the house Pestilence had mentioned—I can't remember if he said it was blue or gray, only that it had a red door with a star on it.

I panic several times, sure I missed it, but eventually, I find the home. It's blue, not gray, the paint peeling from the wood siding, the windows boarded up. The red front door is faded and the lone star fitted to it has rusted over.

I ride right up to it, then fumble getting Ben out of his seat, my nerves nearly getting the better of me. Facing the door, I pound my fist against the weathered wood.

I can hear murmuring inside, but when no one immediately answers, I pound against the wood again.

Just as I'm about to grab the handle, the door opens. Pestilence's eyes meet mine for a split second, then they drop to Ben.

"I need your help," I rush out.

Before he can respond, I push my way into the dilapidated house. War is in the kitchen, fists on the laminate countertop, leaning over what looks like a map.

"Is this about your son?" Pestilence asks behind me.

War glances up. "Lazarus!" he calls. "I didn't realize you were pregnant the last we met." When his eyes fall to my listless son, his jovial mood seeps away.

"I wasn't pregnant," I say, "but he's my son all the same." I turn my attention to Pestilence. "The antibiotics didn't help. He's ... he's dying." My voice wavers, and I have to stop and draw in a stabilizing breath, even as a tear slips out. "Death intends to take him tonight unless—"

"Unless he can be healed," Pestilence finishes for me, understanding flooding his eyes. He frowns, his gaze remorseful. "*I can't help you,*" he says. "Nor can War. It's true that we've kept some of our former powers, but," He shakes his head, "I no longer have the power to *reverse* such sickness."

"But you once did?" I press, holding my breath.

Pestilence stares at me for a moment, then nods his head. "We all have the ability to harm and heal ..."

He hasn't even finished speaking when I swivel around, searching the house for the one horseman who isn't mortal. The one who can, perhaps, help.

My gaze lands on him lounging back against the wall, a brow arched as he coaxes a sapling in front of him to rise from the splintered floorboards, the tree unfurling before my eyes.

"Famine," I breathe.

"No."

I'm too desperate to be so easily discouraged. I stride up to the horseman, Ben in my arms, and gaze down at the pitiless Reaper.

"Death's going to take my son from me," I say. My body trembles as I speak.

"And?" Famine says, unbothered.

"Help me," I plead. "Save his life."

The horseman leans his head back against the wall. "Like I said—*no*."

War mutters behind us, "And to think you tried to give up your purpose for humanity."

The Reaper's attention shifts over my shoulder, and I know he's getting ready to say something scathing.

I kneel in front of Famine so that we're at eye-level. There's only one thought filling my head.

Save my son.

I stare deeply into the horseman's green eyes until they slide back from War and focus on me again. This is not a man who has much empathy—not for me or my son anyway. But that doesn't mean I can't persuade him. I just need to figure out what he wants.

"I will do anything," I vow. *"Anything."*

God help me, but there is nothing I *won't* do.

The Reaper's gaze narrows. After a moment, his eyes—reluctantly—dip to my son, who has fallen back asleep.

He shakes his head. "He is too far gone."

No.

Horror fills me.

No.

No. I refuse to believe it.

I won't.

"You have torn down cities, crushed thousands in an instant," I say, my voice strong. "Your power is nearly limitless. Do not tell me you are suddenly too weak to help one tiny baby."

Famine's jaw tightens. "Taunting me will get you nowhere, mortal."

“Please,” I say slowly. “Death—that insufferable brother of yours—cannot be the only horseman with the ability to heal.”

The Reaper stares at me with those reptilian eyes of his, and I cannot tell what is going on behind that face of his.

“I will do anything you want,” I swear again.

I’m not scared anymore. Just resolute.

“Anything?” War says from behind me.

I turn to face him just as he walks over.

“Anything.”

War stares down at me, his own dark eyes full of machinations. “Seduce Death.”

My gaze widens, my heart tripping over itself.

“War,” Pestilence cautions, entering the room behind us.

War’s gaze remains locked on mine. “She said *anything*.”

My mind flashes to the naked desire I’ve seen in Thanatos’s eyes.

Come with me, Lazarus. Let me know what it is like to hold you instead of fighting you.

I clench my jaw, caught between dread and a twisted sort of desire I’ve harbored for the horseman for far too long.

I don’t have time to argue.

“Done,” I say, feeling only a little ill at ease.

I’ll worry about the implications of this later.

The corner of War’s mouth curls just slightly.

“I didn’t agree to this,” Famine protests.

War’s gaze goes to the Reaper. “Do it, brother.”

Famine grimaces. “This is ridiculous,” he mutters.

His eyes cut to me, and I can see how much the Reaper dislikes me—or maybe it’s simply what I represent. But when his attention drops to Ben, his gaze softens.

Without asking, Famine reaches out and takes my son from me. He cradles Ben in his arms, and something sad and vulnerable peeks out from the back of the horseman’s eyes as he stares down at my son.

The Reaper places a hand on the side of Ben’s face. Taking a deep breath, his eyelids close.

No one in the room moves. I can sense Pestilence and War nearby, but they might as well be on another continent. All I have eyes for are Famine and Ben.

Nothing happens.

The seconds slip by, then it's a minute. Then that minute bleeds into two, then four ... longer and longer it goes, and no one speaks, no one moves. And yet the air is thick with—I would call it *magic*, except that makes it sound like whatever is happening is some sort of cheap trick. This is life and death. This is being born from clay and returning to the earth and the world turning and shifting. It feels like I am surrounded by the essence of everything.

The longer I wait, the more unsure I suddenly become. Shouldn't it be faster? Death snaps his fingers and cities fall. Why is one act of creation—if you can even call it that—so much more drawn out?

But then—

Ben's breathing seems stronger and his pallor looks healthier. He moves a little, and it doesn't look weak or painful.

I've seen atrocities, I've seen despair and unimaginable horror.

I've never seen something as miraculous as *this*.

I'm choking on my own breath, on all my terror and despair and everything else that has beaten me down. And then it's exiting my body.

Famine opens his eyes, and for a moment, as he gazes down at Ben, the horseman gives him a brief smile.

A sob slips from my lips.

The Reaper's eyes reluctantly move to mine. "He's healed."

Chapter 36

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Healed.

Tears are slipping from my eyes as I take Ben from Famine. My son starts to cry again, and I shudder out a breath. He was too weak before *to* cry. As soon as he's settled in my arms, his cries die down a bit.

I kiss and hug him until Ben is officially annoyed. He's *alive*. Alive and healthy when he'd been marked for death. I can hardly fathom it.

War comes over with a canteen and offers it to me. "For your son," he says, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "He looks thirsty."

Grateful, I take the canteen from War and bring it to Ben's lips. He drinks the water down as fast as he possibly can, choking—then crying a little—before drinking some more.

Pestilence quietly hands me a slice of bread and some raspberries, which are also presumably to give to Ben.

My emotions are a mess. These men who came to Earth to destroy humans saved my son, and now they're nurturing him.

"Thank you," I say softly, meeting each rider's gaze as Ben takes the bread with shaky hands and begins devouring it. My eyes fall on Famine, who glances away, his jaw clenching.

"Thank you," I say to him in particular. I reach out and touch his hand, only for him to withdraw it.

"I didn't do it for *you*," he says hotly, his eyes flashing.

"I don't care, I'm still grateful."

He gets up and, muttering something under his breath about insufferable humans, stalks away.

“Don’t mind him,” War says. “He’s starting to care for humanity despite himself, and he’s pissy about it.”

I nod absently, still holding onto Ben as the little guy devours the food Pestilence gave him. It’s quiet in the room around me, and though a million things should be crowding my mind, it’s oddly empty.

“Your son will have to come with us,” Pestilence finally says, shattering the silence.

My blood runs cold.

“What?” I must’ve misheard him.

Pestilence steps in close. “The only person besides us that Death won’t outright kill is *you*. Your son is not included on that list.”

“I can keep my son safe,” I protest.

“Only if you continue running. But you’re not going to be running anymore,” Pestilence says slowly, his gaze heavy with meaning.

My own gaze moves to War.

Seduce Death.

I can’t seem to catch my breath around the thought.

“This wasn’t part of the exchange,” I accuse.

“Death is a man of honor and duty,” War says, “and his duty *is* death. If he sees your son, he will release him from his body, because he must.”

I begin to tremble with every word War speaks because I can hear the truth in them.

“If you truly care for this boy of yours,” the horseman continues, “you won’t risk it—”

“*Don’t*,” I warn, and there’s violence in my voice. “Don’t you *dare* leverage my love.”

War folds his massive arms. “I am a father—as is Pestilence. We know how to take care of our young. We will take care of yours as if it were our own. That I vow to you.”

I have to keep swallowing down the emotion that rises within me. Or maybe it’s bile. I feel as though I’m going to hurl.

“But I just got him back,” I whisper while Ben blissfully eats the food, unaware that we’re discussing his future.

“We all have families,” Pestilence says, stepping in. “Families who we’ve had to separate ourselves from. Believe me when I say we understand your pain and your hesitation.”

War cuts in. “Our wives and children are staying together at Pestilence and

Sara's home on Vancouver Island. It's far enough from Thanatos that he cannot so easily reach them."

"We will take your son to our families," Pestilence says smoothly, "and I vow on my life and honor, your boy—"

"*Ben*," I say. "His name is Ben." It's a dagger to the chest, giving up my son's name, because I know it means I'm already accepting this on some level.

Pestilence smiles, the laugh lines around his eyes crinkling. "—*Ben* will be cared for and loved until you can return to him. And you *will* return to him, Lazarus—this isn't forever."

I breathe in and out through my nose. All I want for Ben is to survive—it was the entire reason behind us heading to the coast in the first place—to board a boat and get as far away from Thanatos as possible. And now these horsemen are offering up a similar escape—it just happens to be one that doesn't include me.

The Reaper re-enters the room then, passing by as he heads over to the kitchen.

"I vow the same thing," War adds, drawing my attention back to the horsemen in front of me. "Your son will be protected and cherished by me and my family as well. My daughters will relish having another child to play with—just don't be surprised if, when you return, your boy knows Hebrew and Arabic."

"And Portuguese," Famine calls out from the kitchen, as though he's been a part of this conversation the entire time. His voice sounds somewhat bitter, like he hates that he wants to be included in this conversation.

I glance down at Ben, who is fiddling with War's canteen. A frown pulls the edges of my lips down. "So you three will take my son, and then what? Head off to Canada with him?"

Pestilence inclines his head.

All while I will be ... with Death. I try not to focus on the mixed emotions that churns up.

"When will I be able to return to Ben?" I say.

"Once you have fulfilled your side of the deal," War says, his voice deep and solemn.

My gaze bounces between him and Pestilence. "How will—" I don't even want to say the word. "How will *seducing* Death help anything?"

War smirks at me, a humorous gleam in his eyes. "What do you think has

stopped each one of us from destroying your world?”

My gaze moves to Famine, who’s pouring himself a cup of coffee that someone brewed, glaring at the cup the entire time. Hard to believe anyone would give *that* asshole the time of day for anything, let alone *love*. Immediately, I feel guilty for having the thought, considering he just saved my son—albeit, *reluctantly*.

My attention returns to War. “You can’t be serious.” This is actually their plan? They’re placing the fate of their families and the world at large in my hands—or rather, certain other parts of my anatomy?

“Come now, tootsie,” Famine calls out, “don’t tell me you doubt your ability to fuck a man into seeing reason.”

“*Famine*,” Pestilence snaps, scowling.

I glare at the Reaper, but that only seems to amuse him, the corner of his mouth curving into a smirk.

“Well,” Famine says to Pestilence, sauntering over, his coffee in hand, “the other option is that the three of us brothers band together and destroy Death, but seeing how decrepit you and War have become, I have my doubts about *that* plan.”

As do I. After all, I saw firsthand just how easily Death dealt with Famine, and he’s the only one of these three who’s immortal.

Famine brings the cup of coffee to his lips. “Besides,” he continues, lowering his mug, “I want to see that righteous asshole fall for the exact same thing that the rest of us have.”

“So it’s agreed then?” Pestilence says, staring intently at me.

I swallow, glancing down at Ben once more. I hate this. I hate this so much. Now that Ben is alive and well, I want to go back on my word.

Ben won’t ever truly be safe until Death is stopped. And that won’t happen unless *I* stop him. That’s always been my deepest truth.

My purpose settles over my shoulders like a cloak. I’m used to the idea of stopping Thanatos. Only now, I’ll have to use different, more carnal weapons.

Desire curls through me, and I’m unnerved by it. I’ve never dared to give into the guilty, forbidden feelings I’ve had for Death—not even when he captured me.

But now I’m being asked to, and I’m terrified that once I do, there will be no coming back from it.

“Fine,” I say hoarsely. “I agree to it.” Like I ever really had the choice.

Still, I see Pestilence relax a little.

“*But,*” I add, turning my attention to Famine, “I need *you* to vow that you’ll keep him safe.” He’s the horseman that I trust the least.

Famine’s flinty eyes stare back at me. After a moment, they dip to my son. Once more, they seem to begrudgingly soften at the sight of the boy. The Reaper’s jaw tightens.

His attention returns to me, his gaze fierce, “*I vow it.*” And for whatever reason, Famine’s oath to protect my son sounds the most genuine of all.

I take a deep breath, and looking from man to man, I finally nod. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

I take Ben back home and I feed and change him and gather together his things as quickly as I can. I pack food and bottles, and all the money I have saved up. I pack his bear and the sketch of him and his parents. After a moment’s hesitation, I remove my mother’s ring from my finger. It’s the only item I still have from my life before Death, and it’s my most cherished possession, so it’s fitting I send it with my son as a reminder of how much I love him.

I take a bit of twine and slide the ring on it, then tie it tightly to the neck of his teddy bear. Hopefully by the time I return to Ben, he’ll still be too young to notice or care about the ring’s existence. I can’t bear the alternative. Of years passing. The weight of that possibility sits like an anvil on my chest.

It won’t be that long. That’s my vow.

Just as I tuck the bear into the bag, I feel a prickling sensation between my shoulder blades.

I turn to the window, and my eyes scour the street and the apartments across the way. Other than a few kids throwing a football back and forth, I see no one. But dogs are baying in the distance, and I swear that unnerving silence lingers beneath that and the children’s laughter.

Death may have left my side, but I’m under no illusion that the horseman has gone far, not when he has so successfully cornered me.

Drawing in a shuddering breath, I pack the last of Ben’s things. After I finish, I pause, staring at my son, who’s placing a spare cloth diaper on his head, then turning to me and laughing, as though it’s some shared joke between the two of us. It’s as though he was never sick at all.

Now, all I want to do is linger here as long as possible and bask in my son’s presence. But every moment that passes brings me closer to my reunion

with Death. And that's a meeting Ben *must* miss.

"Ben," I call.

He turns towards me again and gives me that same cheesy smile.

I go over to him and pick him up. Immediately he wants back down, but I hold him fast. I don't know the next time I'll get this.

"I love you," I say.

Still holding him, I grab the backpack I just packed and, slinging it over my shoulder, I head over to my bike. I drop my bag into the front basket and strap my son into his seat. Then wheeling him and the bike outside, I settle myself into my own seat and ride back over to the weathered farmhouse and the horsemen waiting for me.

When I return to the ranch house, the three brothers are already out in the front yard with their steeds. War and Pestilence are securing items in their horses' saddlebags while Famine lounges amongst the overgrown grass, indolently watching as a rose bush forms in front of him. Soft, dusky purple flowers bloom before my eyes.

Pestilence steps away from his horse when he sees me. He heads over as I unbuckle Ben, and no sooner have I pulled my son into my arms than the horseman sweeps us both into a welcoming hug. I wasn't expecting a hug, but I needed one. I cling to his warm embrace.

For all my long-standing bitterness towards Pestilence, he's the horseman who's been the most compassionate towards me.

"It'll be okay," he promises. "I have three children, War has four, and Famine is overly protective of defenseless things," he says. "Between the three of us, Ben *will* be safe, cared for, and—" He pulls away to look me in the eyes, "we really will love him as our own. You are family now, Lazarus."

I choke up at that. My whole life revolved around my family, and how I've missed that sense of belonging. Pestilence is offering me something that I thought I'd lost forever. I don't have words for how that makes me feel.

"I took your parents from you, Lazarus," Pestilence continues, holding my gaze. "I can't give their lives back to you, but I can give you this. You understand?"

Tears prick my eyes. I nod, my throat working.

"Thank you—Victor," I say, my voice hoarse.

The horseman's eyebrows rise for a moment, and then he gives me a genuine smile, one that crinkles the corners of his eyes and lights up his

entire face.

I hold Ben close. My son clings to me, eyeing the three very scary-looking men with open suspicion.

Oh God, I don't want to do this.

"I love you, Ben," I whisper, rubbing his small back. I hold him for a long minute.

I'm going to see you again soon, I tell myself. This won't all be for nothing.

War comes over to us, crouching a little so that he can be eye-to-eye with Ben. My son glares at the horseman, his hands digging tighter into my clothes.

This is going really well.

"Ah, *look* at that ferocity. Pestilence and Famine don't have half as much." He points at Ben. "You have the trappings of a future general about you," he says, and the way he says it makes me think this is supposed to be a compliment.

I grab the backpack filled with Ben's things, and I hand it over to the horsemen. Pestilence steps forward to take it.

War reaches out for the boy, but Ben rears back a little.

"Move away brother," Famine says, strolling over, carrying one of those pale purple flowers, "the kid has actual taste."

The Reaper stops in front of us and stares down at the flower in his hand. After a moment, he holds it out to Ben.

Ben eyes Famine skeptically, then looks at the rose as though this is some sort of trick. Reluctantly, my son reaches for the flower.

Before he can grab it, Famine pulls it back just a little. "This is not actually yours," the horseman clarifies, because he's a natural-born dick, "but the woman it *does* belong to would want you to have it."

He extends the flower out once more, and this time, there's no hesitation on Ben's part. He reaches out and grabs the thing, which, I notice, has been carefully de-thorned.

Once the flower is in Ben's grasp, he makes quick work of ripping the petals apart.

Famine grimaces. "Humans are such heathens—even the miniature ones."

"You're just bitter Ana doesn't want to be saddled with yours," War says, thumping him on the back as he turns to his horse.

The Reaper glares after him but says nothing. After a moment, his

attention returns to Ben, who has plucked most of the petals off the rose.

Famine handily takes Ben from my arms like it's the most natural thing in the world. "Say bye to Lazarus," the horseman says, but Ben couldn't care less at the moment. His attention is still fixed on the sad remains of the rose.

My arms feel empty, and everything in me is screaming at the thought of separation.

"I love you, Ben," I say, again, my voice breaking.

This is the biggest trust-fall into the universe.

As Famine walks off with Ben, I hear him say, "I can make you more flowers, but if you shit on me, deal's off."

"*Famine*," Pestilence snaps after him.

"Relax, Grandpa," Famine calls out over his shoulder, "Ben's going to wait until he's on your horse before he does anything funny."

Pestilence rubs his temples. "He'll be alright," the horseman insists to me, dropping his hand.

I nod, biting the insides of my cheeks to keep my composure.

"Before you go," Pestilence says. "I have something for you." He reaches into one of his pockets and pulls out a piece of paper and holds it out to me. "This is the address our families are staying at. Our plan is to take Ben there, where my wife Sara and the others will take care of him."

I take the paper from him and I stare down at the address. My heart hammers at how hopelessly far away it is. *That's a good thing*, I remind myself, even though right now, all I notice is that it feels half a world away from me.

Then the rest of what he said catches up to me. "*They* will take care of him?" I ask. "What about you and the other horsemen?"

Pestilence's face is grim. "We're going to come back for you and Death." His face darkens. "Hopefully by then, Thanatos will have changed his mind about his task, but if not ..."

If not, then Pestilence and his brothers will have to stop him themselves. I don't think that option will end well for any of them.

Pestilence looks off at the horizon behind me. "You need to go. We have to start riding to put as much distance between us and Death as possible."

I nod, backing up. My eyes keep moving to Famine. He's pulled himself onto his saddle, Ben in front of him. My tiny son is going to be riding on a horse.

Icy panic claws its way up my throat, and it takes an obscene amount of

effort to force it back down.

Ben is still distracted from the fact that he's no longer in my arms, and that's thanks to the Reaper, who has grown a vine up his *very* patient horse's leg.

A white flower unfurls right in front of Ben, and though the sight of it is unbelievable to my eyes, my son is unfazed, plucking the bloom immediately, then inspecting it with a serious expression before beginning to pick off its petals one by one.

Panic stirs inside me, and without thinking, I cross over to my son. Reaching up, I smooth a hand down his face. "I'll see you again soon, Ben," I promise. "Stay safe, my heart."

My son looks at me and smiles; he holds out his mutilated flower and shows it off.

I press my lips together to keep from losing it, then back up several steps.

Famine turns to me, his eyes stony.

"Lazarus," he says softly. "Don't forget your end of the deal." His words are laced with menace. "Suck him, fuck him, do whatever shit gets that brother of mine off, but remember that everything is resting on you now. *Everything.*"

Chapter 37

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

My apartment feels like a tomb. It hurts to look at the leftover diapers and clothing sitting in a pile on the floor—one of them the very diaper Ben was so recently playing with.

Perhaps what's worse than seeing that pile is recognizing how pitifully small it is. Traveling often means traveling lightly, and most of my son's things left with him.

Bending down to that pile, I grab a pair of socks that Ben has already outgrown. I tuck those into one of my pockets, pressing my lips together to stop myself from getting too emotional.

He's alive, I remind myself. That's more than Death or the doctors could give me.

I move into my bedroom and grab my blades, strapping them to my thighs. Do I intend to use them on the horseman? No. Would I regret sinking one into his belly if the opportunity arose? Also no.

All those months of trying to raise a baby while looking over my shoulder, of having to drop everything and flee, they've more than stoked my anger. Add to that the fact that Death intends to collect my son's soul tonight, and yes, I'd relish an opportunity to fight this horseman.

Of course, anger is not the only emotion I feel towards Thanatos. I wish it were. That would make everything so much easier. Instead, I have to deal with this insidious desire that smolders within me. And then there's the fact that Thanatos didn't wipe out this town last night.

I head to my front door and step outside of my apartment.

"Thanatos!" I call, my gaze moving over the neighborhood.

I wait for some response—a prickling against my skin, a feeling of being watched, that damnable silence—but there’s nothing. If the horseman has been watching me, it seems he’s taken a break.

I reenter my apartment determined to not just sit here and wait for him. I’d much rather draw him out like venom from a wound. And if I orchestrate this right, I’ll even be able to give his three brothers a head start on their travels.

Striding back over to the kitchen I grab the pencil and notebook and scribble a message onto the piece of paper, my agitation making my writing severe.

If you want me, you’re going to have to catch me first.

—Lazarus

P.S. I’d suggest you start looking on the I-10 East.

Grabbing a kitchen knife, I head outside and impale that note against my front door.

Death and I are going to have one final game of cat and mouse.

I ride through the streets of Orange like a ghost, the sun setting in the west. My eyes move over the few people I see, all of them going about their day as though nothing is amiss. They have no idea that *all* four horsemen of the apocalypse have been in their city within the last twenty-four hours. Or that the very fate of humanity has been bartered for like fruit at a market.

As soon as I reach the edge of the city, I start to pedal faster and faster and faster, until my thighs burn and the wind is whistling in my ears.

I let out a sob. It’s an ugly, wild sound, but releasing my pain like that is cathartic, so I do it again—and again and again until I’m screaming my agony into the sky. It doesn’t matter anymore. Nothing matters anymore.

At some point, I get it all out. All that’s left is this silence inside me.

I ride until my eyelids droop—which, if I’m being honest, is depressingly early in the evening. But I can feel the exhaustion seeping into every inch of me; I haven’t had proper rest—or a proper meal for that matter—in far too long.

I roll to a stop on a darkened stretch of highway. There’s nothing out here but a thick line of trees running alongside the road.

I get off my bike, then let it topple to the ground. It feels meaningful, leaving that bike behind. I’ve always needed one to run after—or away from—the horseman. But I won’t be needing it anymore.

I almost sleep alongside the road just to make it easier for the horseman to find me, but until Death kills everyone, there are still highwaymen to worry about. So instead, I drag myself past the line of trees and press on through soggy grass. I trudge towards the dark outline of a tree I notice in the distance. The ground is damp here, just as it is everywhere else.

I let out a sigh. At this point, I'm too tired to care. I lean my back against the tree trunk and close my eyes. It takes a few exhausted minutes, but eventually I fall asleep.

I wake to the thunderous sound of fleeing animals and the sensation of death creeping in. I sit up only to feel the slap of bugs against my face as swarms of them pass by. I duck as best I can. As I do so, rats and other rodents scurry by, many of them scrambling over me in their mad dash.

Overhead, I hear the cries of birds, and I see hundreds—no, *thousands*—of them backlit against the rising sun.

He's found me.

Faster than I expected, too.

The animals pass by, and I'm the only one left behind.

A light breeze rustles the wild grass, but other than that, the world is deafeningly quiet. That silence grows and grows until I swear it will swallow me up whole.

I stand, stepping out from under the tree. My pants are damp, the chill of the morning clinging to them.

The wet earth squishes beneath my boots as I cut across the marshy grass.

The pound of wingbeats has me stopping.

I don't realize that I've reached for one of my blades until it's in my hand. My muscles remember what my mind's forgotten—that I'm used to the sound of those wings preceding a fight. For so long that was the sound that heralded battle, pain, and—many times—*death*.

Now, however, I'm not sure what to expect.

I swivel towards the noise and I see him high in the sky. Death, God's last angel. He circles overhead, looking for me. I stare up at him, transfixed at this heavenly creature.

As though he can feel my gaze, the horseman pauses in the air, his armor shining painfully bright as the morning rays hit it. His wings beat at his back as his gaze falls to me. I feel that look like a finger down my spine.

It feels good to end the fighting and suffering between us. It feels right

even though I know it's wrong.

Death lowers himself to the earth. He lands fifty feet away, looking just as ancient and tragically mythical as he always has.

His eyes scour me. "Lazarus," he says, "you have been busy."

My skin goes a little clammy. I don't know how much he already knows about Ben.

Thanatos tilts his head. "Where is your son?" he says, as though reading my mind. "Surely a grieving mother wouldn't leave her child behind."

I lift my chin, even as guilt and anguish press down on my chest. I still haven't forgiven myself for letting the horsemen take Ben.

A cruel smile curves up the side of Thanatos's mouth, though it doesn't reach his eyes. "Ah, how I've longed to see that battle-hardened look of yours. My fierce kismet, what have you done with the soul I was to collect?"

"Does it matter?" I say. "It's not him you want."

Death's eyes burn as they look at me. "Lazarus," His voice is stripped of all pretense, "it was his time."

My throat works. So the horseman does know my son still lives.

"Your brothers didn't feel the same way," I say. "They made me the deal that you would not."

Thanatos is quiet for a long moment.

"What did they bargain for?" he eventually asks. His voice holds a note of —*something*. I can't place what.

I'm quiet.

Death's jaw clenches. "For all they claim to love humanity, they wouldn't just save a child slated to die. *What* did they ask for?" he demands.

I gaze at him for a long moment, and then, very deliberately, I drop my blade.

"I give up," I say. "I will go with you—wherever you want."

For a long moment Thanatos just stares at me, and I swear those deep, dark eyes see *everything*. Eventually, that gaze fills with heated triumph.

Death takes a single step forward, then another, and another, his silver armor clinking with the movement.

He reaches a hand to his shoulder, and piece by piece he removes that armor as he cuts across the field. His gaze remains fixed on mine the entire time.

He casts the last of his metal trappings aside right as he steps up to me.

I gaze up at him, feeling both fearful and laid bare.

He cups my cheek. “I’ve searched for you for a very long time,” Death says, his voice lethally soft. His eyes blaze. “I don’t intend to let you go.”

I swallow.

Cannot believe I’m doing this.

His gaze drops to my lips, just as they have many times before. But now he leans down, his mouth a hairsbreadth from mine.

“Now’s your last chance to run, Lazarus.”

I don’t run. I don’t retreat at all, my gaze transfixed to those expressive lips of his.

His eyes flick to mine and for the briefest of moments he smiles, looking both victorious and wicked. Then his mouth claims mine.

The shock of his kiss has me stumbling back, but Thanatos’s arm is there, first steadying me, then drawing me as close to him as he can, his fingers pressing into the small of my back.

His mouth moves against mine, and though I’ve kissed a dozen men and Death has likely kissed no one at all, the two of us feel evenly matched, his fire pitted against mine.

That’s about the moment I realize I am, in fact, kissing him back. I’m angry and terrified and lost, and my lips are doing battle with his more than anything else. But still. I am kissing him.

He smiles against my mouth, like he’s collecting this little victory, too. I feel that grin straight to my core.

Death bends just the slightest bit, so he can slip his arm behind my knees. A moment later he scoops me up, cradling my body against his.

I don’t see his wings spread wide, but I do feel his arms tighten around me.

And then Thanatos makes good on his long-held threat.

He takes me away.

PART II

Chapter 38

Orange, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I grip Thanatos tightly as we rise higher and higher, my heart hammering in my chest.

I've given up and given in, and yet I still can't banish the dread at being in Death's arms. Everything about him was made to end lives, and this close to him I can feel the wrongness of my continued existence.

Not to mention that the last time he held me like this, he *dropped* me. And okay, that only happened after I stabbed him, but still, the thought seizes me up.

"You're not going to let me fall again, are you?" I ask, my voice hushed.

His mouth brushes my ear, his breath warm and his voice low like a lover's when he says, "Not on my life, Lazarus. That is behind us."

Does he realize there's sex in his voice? His words practically drip with it, and my body seems to awaken—my stomach fluttering and my core heating.

We fly for *hours*, my body clasped tight in Death's arms. I assumed that even this all-powerful horseman would get fatigued trying to stay airborne while holding a full-grown woman, but I should've known better. The being that can kill off a city's population in an instant is more than capable of whisking away one measly human.

All the while, I'm burning with questions for the horseman: *Where is your horse? Where are you taking me? What happens now?*

Most of all, I want to ask him whether he left my son alone once he realized Ben was healed. But I'm terrified of drawing the horseman's attention back to Ben in case my son is alright. I can't imagine Death likes being robbed a soul.

I focus my attention on the world below me, just to distract myself. It's hard to see much with my hair whipping about and the wind stinging my eyes, but I do catch some glimpses. Mostly the land is a patchwork of fields with a few houses speckled like freckles across a face. Every so often, however, I see cities—or, in some grim cases, the remains of them. The latter look like a gray smudge on the landscape, the buildings torn down, the roads covered with debris. I bet if I looked hard enough, I'd see bodies too. I don't bother.

These are the places Death has claimed.

And now he's claiming you.

At some point I sense us lowering. Beneath us is a massive city, one that Death has already destroyed. We pass mile after mile of leveled buildings. I spot certain bits of topography—the curve of a residential street, the blue sheen of a pool, the spire of a church—but everything else is nearly unrecognizable.

Why is Death bringing me here?

Because we are still lowering.

Almost begrudgingly the broken buildings give way to wider and wider stretches of greenery. Unlike the city behind us, the few structures I spot in this area are intact. I don't have time to wonder why that is before manicured yards are blurring by beneath our feet.

With a final *whoosh*, we land in one of these yards. Death takes a few final strides forward before his wings snap shut behind him.

All around us is brilliant green lawn. My eyes move up, past the verdant gardens and towards the massive mansion that sits proudly before us. It gleams bright as a diamond and appears extraordinarily out of place amongst all the death and destruction we just flew over.

Almost reluctantly, Death sets me down. I take a few stumbling steps forward, feeling like a colt trying to find their balance for the first time.

I glance over at Death, his black wings looking like a cape at his back. Without his armor, there's something vulnerable about him. Or maybe it's simply that he doesn't look ready to do battle.

I draw in a deep breath, realizing that it's all coming back to me. That year of fighting him, studying him, trying to figure out what his weaknesses were. I'm falling right back into it, as though my time with Ben were merely a dream, and this, my reality.

The ground beneath my feet trembles, interrupting my thoughts. Then, all around the vast perimeter of the house, monstrous, thorned plants rise, growing and twisting until they create a massive, living wall.

“That looks painfully familiar,” I say.

Death is all cold, hard edges as he stares at me. How had I thought there was something vulnerable about him?

“I told you, I’m not letting you go again.”

“I’m not planning on running.”

“Ah, yes, because you have a deal to uphold.”

The two of us gaze at each other for several seconds. We have so much baggage between us. Literally, cities’ worth.

“You hid from me for half a year,” he says.

My brows pull together ever so slightly. I think that fact actually upsets him. Even though it meant that he could rampage towns without having to worry about facing me. And yet what did he do? He hunted me down like an animal.

It hits me then.

Death spent all that time searching for me *instead of* wiping out new parts of the United States.

For the first time since I made a deal with Death’s brothers I suddenly see the situation with clarity. *I have altered Thanatos’s motives.*

“You stopped chasing me,” he adds, accusation threading his voice.

“I had to,” I say. “You would’ve killed my son if I didn’t.”

“Your son,” he repeats, and I can hear the question in his voice. The horseman might not know much about humans, but I think he knows enough to be confused by the timeline here. The last he saw of me, I didn’t look pregnant, but now I have a son, one who is well over a year old.

Now that the topic of Ben has come up, my worries resurface.

“Is my son—is he—is he ... ?” *Dead?* It’s the question I wasn’t supposed to ask, but it came tumbling out anyway.

Thanatos’s eyes are flinty. “*No.*” He grimaces. “Your son is alive.”

“He’s *alive?*” My knees want to give out.

I see so much self-loathing on the horseman’s face.

Because he didn’t take my son’s soul, I realize. Death could’ve—and clearly he thinks he should’ve—but he didn’t. *Because that soul meant something to me.*

I let out a small noise, and then I am closing the distance between us.

Death gives me a confused look, but before he can do more than that, I grab his face. Without thinking twice about it, I press a harsh, grateful kiss to his lips. I can taste his shock.

Thanatos doesn't have time to react before I'm pulling away.

"Thank you," I say, my voice hoarse. I still hold his face captive, and we're still only inches apart, and it's close enough to see his rising desire. The look wars with his own guilt, but his eyes flick to my lips, and I see a little more of that guilt retreat.

"*Thank you,*" I say again, drawing his gaze back up to mine.

His jaw clenches, but he nods his head ever so subtly.

I drop my hands and move away. Those walls I've built to keep him out, they came down there for a few seconds, but even now I can feel them building themselves back up. I don't *need* to put those walls back in place, all things considered, but I can't help it. Over the last year, they've become comfortable.

I take a deep breath. "So," I say, clearing my throat. "How did you find me and my son in that hospital room?" I ask, trying to bring the conversation back to something civil.

"I sense the living, but I can only see through the eyes of the dead and dying," Thanatos says. "When your son began dying,"—I flinch at the word—"he invited me in. I peered through his eyes—and that's when I saw *you*. I flew as fast as I could, and I believe you know the rest of the story."

And now that I know my son is safe, I can truly breathe easy. All that's left now is to navigate this new path I've been placed on.

I turn my attention to the house.

An elaborate driveway lined with hedges cut into pleasing shapes leads to the massive home. Pale pink roses climb up a portion of the house and there appears to be more of them enclosed in a nearby garden. Amongst all the foliage there's an oxidized statue of a boy playing a flute, the calcium deposits along its body suggesting that it was once a fountain, though it doesn't look to be working at the moment.

A lion's head is mounted above the entryway and a circular room fitted with a stained glass window rests to one side of the house. And then of course are the other windows, which are so large, they seem to have no end.

I've never been anywhere near such a magnificent house.

"Shall I show you inside?" Death says.

That's when I realize that while I've been studying the house, he's been

studying me, watching me with those eyes that see too much.

My attention shifts to him. “We’re staying here?” I ask, just to be sure.

“Does it displease you?” Thanatos responds.

It’s the most breathtaking place I’ve ever seen.

I’m caught in the web of his gaze. I have no idea what he would do if I told him, *yes, this place displeases me*. Probably drag me inside anyway, the heathen.

But it *doesn’t* displease me. Not much about this situation displeases me, except for the fact that I’ve been forced to part with Ben, and I have no idea when I’ll see him again. That aside, I am unnerved by how much of me is okay with being dragged away by some ancient death deity who’s killing off the world and now wants to shack up with me.

“We’re really going to do this again?” I say, trying to shake the strange, uneasy feeling I have.

“Would you prefer that I travel ceaselessly, forcing you to never stop, never rest?” he asks. “Because *I* would prefer that.”

“Then why don’t you do that?” I ask.

The horseman’s expression grows solemn—and perhaps a touch fervent. “I want to see the expression your face makes when it’s happy. I don’t know why, but I do. I have seen you angry and hateful and disappointed and sad—so sad—Lazarus. I want to see what stokes the fire in that soul of yours and lights you up from within.”

I have to look away from him. There’s so much blame I place at his feet, it’s hard to see him when his humanity seeps in—and it’s especially so when that kindness is directed at me.

I move away from the horseman, trying to put distance between us. His pretty words are going to take my walls down faster than I can bear to part with them.

As I head up the driveway towards the massive front door, I hear Death behind me and I can feel those ancient eyes taking me in. But he seems content to just watch me do my thing. It’s only as I reach for the doorknob that I wonder about the house’s occupants.

And now I’m not feeling all that eager to barrel inside.

Under my hand, the doorknob turns, but I’m not the one turning it. It slips entirely from my grasp as the door is pulled open.

At first, my mind can’t process what I’m seeing. I mean, I notice the gleaming white bones that seem to be held together by nothing but magic

alone, all two-hundred-and-something of them defying the laws of gravity. It takes several more seconds for it to sink in that I'm staring at a skeleton. A *moving* skeleton.

A yelp escapes from my throat, and before I can think better of it, I'm kicking out at the thing, a primal part of me wanting to see those bones on the ground *where they belong*.

The skeleton falls—not in pieces, but like how a human would. It's only once it hits the ground that many of the bones chip apart.

Death makes a *tsk*-ing noise behind me. "Was that really necessary?" he asks, stepping up to my side.

I turn to him, and for a moment, I feel like a gaping fish, unable to find my voice. "Was having a dead man open the door necessary?" I finally manage to get out.

"It was a woman." Thanatos says it so reasonably.

A shudder works its way through my whole body when I realize *this is it*. Everything I was running from I now have to face.

I'm going to be living with a guy who can make skeletons come to life—among other things.

Not just living with him, Lazarus, but fucking him too.

My heart speeds up at the thought, and I feel myself flush, just thinking about it.

Sex with the embodiment of death itself.

I glance over at Thanatos, and that's a mistake. He's beautiful, something I can never forget, but holy fuck, I am going to have to bang the hell out of this dude. I should be mad about that. I have every reason to be mad. But I'm not, and that's somehow even more loathsome.

I move to step inside and put a little space between us.

"Ah ah," Thanatos says, erasing that space. His hand falls to my hip and a jolt moves through me at the contact.

"What are you doing?" I demand, glancing down between us where his offending hand is placed. It's not like he hasn't touched me before, but now I'm thinking about sex and those hands just feel different against my skin—better and more unwelcome.

The hand in question moves to the hilt of one of my daggers.

"Removing your claws," he replies calmly, pulling the blade out and tossing it aside.

"Is this really necessary?" I object.

I have to grit my teeth together when I hear the scrape of that skeleton pulling itself back together, and then reaching for the weapon. It picks up the blade, then retreats deeper into the house.

“You came to me willingly,” he reminds me.

I can’t argue with that either.

“Where are the owners?” I ask, looking around at the pale marble floors and the vaulted ceilings.

“Freshly dead.”

I blanch.

Death leans in so close that I can see the strange flecks of silver glittering in his eyes. They are unnatural, inhuman irises.

“Don’t look so shocked,” he says. “You have seen me end entire cities. This is nothing.”

“But you’ve never demanded that I eat their food or sleep in their beds,” I bite back.

“No, I never have,” he agrees. “And yet in the last year you have still taken from the dead, haven’t you?” he says softly. “You have picked from their pockets and stolen their food and yes, slept in their beds.”

“That’s different,” I say, trying defend myself. But he’s struck a nerve.

I take a deep breath. “Where are their bodies?” I ask.

“They’re taken care of.”

I frown. “They’re not going to show up like ...” I jerk my chin towards where I last saw that skeleton. It’s now nowhere in sight. Somehow, that’s even more disconcerting.

“No,” he says solemnly.

I guess I should at least be thankful that Death didn’t decide to raise the former owners. I think that might’ve been one unpleasant surprise too many.

Thanatos places a hand on my back—that touch is still doing weird things to me—and steers me farther into the home.

I want to weep as I take in the velvet furniture and the pristine white curtains. The floors beyond the entryway are a rich chestnut wood that looks the color of burnt sugar, and they have been polished to a gleam. There’s hand-painted wallpaper that shimmers when the light catches it just right and a curio cabinet full of porcelain dinnerware. It’s another world entirely, one that seems to belong to a time before apocalypses.

“How did you know that skeleton was a woman?” I ask as we move down the hall.

“Hmm?” Death says distractedly.

“The skeleton outside—the one I said was a man. You corrected me on its gender. How did you know it was once a woman?”

He glances down at me. “Kismet, there are many things that I know.”

And I have the uncomfortable urge to learn them all.

“That doesn’t answer the question,” I say.

Thanatos gives me one of his long, drawn-out stares. I’m getting used to them. I mean, I’m never going to be one hundred percent comfortable with the way the horseman takes his time gazing at me, but this is the one part of our relationship that has been consistent—him looking at me for far longer than is socially normal.

“You see bones and nothing more,” he finally says. “I see the afterimage of the soul who wore them.”

Death steers us into one of the rooms, though my focus is still on him.

“So you can see out of the eyes of the dying—and the dead—and you can see the person whose corpse you control?” I say.

These abilities ... they’re an intimate, discomfiting aspect of his power.

“You make them sound like two separate things,” Death says, “but it’s all interwoven.”

“If what you say is true, then why do you not understand humans better?” I ask.

I mean, the first time he captured me, he was utterly perplexed at the thought of me needing food and water and a bed.

Thanatos gives me a perplexed look. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to answer that. I guess seeing something is not the same as understanding it or living it.”

I glance away, just for a moment, but my attention snags on our surroundings. While I’ve been fully invested in this conversation, Death has led me to ... it seems wrong to call this a bedroom. It’s far too grand. Almost uncomfortably so. The chandelier above us is cut from crystal, and the floor beneath us is covered with a massive rug that looks imported from some far off place. Several gilded vases rest in alcoves, the windows are framed by heavy drapery and the bed has a matching comforter. The whole room is done up in wine-reds and golds and it’s just as impressive as it is impersonal.

I really have never been in a house this luxurious.

“This is your bedroom,” Death says. He peers around at it before his gaze returns to mine.

“Do you like it?” he asks.

“Does it matter?”

Yes, his eyes seem to say.

It’s shocking to think this powerful, almost omnipotent being might actually feel vulnerable around me.

“I’ve never slept in a room like this,” I say.

He frowns, and I feel the need to clarify.

“This is nicer than any house I’ve ever stayed in.”

I swear I see him relax just a touch.

I leave his side then, crossing the room. The man at my back is making me jumpy, but so is the fine bedroom with its embellishments. I can feel dirt and grime on my skin, and if this bedroom was sentient, I bet it would wrinkle its nose at me in distaste.

I sneak a peek into the closet, curious what I’ll find in there. Women’s clothing fills the space, all of it either neatly hung up or folded on the shelves. The sizes look all over the place, but there are so many outfits it seems to drown out the fact that the sizing is inconsistent.

“That’s yours,” Death says softly.

Wait. What?

I turn around, my eyes wide. “What do you mean, this is mine?”

Thanatos tilts his head down, his eyes looking up at me in a way that looks both shy and scheming. “They are items I thought you might like.”

Clothes he thought ... ?

“You mean, they’re not the former owner’s things?”

Thanatos gives his head a soft shake.

If they’re not the owner’s things ... then he must have gathered these items from elsewhere and brought them here.

My brows pull together as I study the horseman. Death wears a guarded look; he does not, however, appear embarrassed or possessive, or anything else to indicate that it is in fact *weird* to fill a closet full of women’s clothing in preparation for the captive you intend to kidnap.

I take in a deep breath as, all at once, it hits me.

He’s trying to care for me, like some sort of good partner. I mocked his first attempt, so now he’s found the biggest house with the nicest things to make up for it.

Don’t you dare be moved by this, Lazarus. Don’t do it.

In spite of my brain’s very sage advice, I thaw—just a little.

“You do realize this is not how humans do things, don’t you?” I probe.

“I am not human,” he says.

I glance away from him, my eyes landing on the bed sitting against the adjacent wall. The wine red comforter screams of decadent sex, and my heart speeds up at the sight of it.

“I’m supposed to sleep there?” I ask.

“If you like,” Thanatos says, and again, his words wake my body up. And he’s probably thinking about how I chose to sleep outside last time he took me, but *I’m* thinking about the weight of him on me, and the task I’ve been given.

What if ... ? What if I walked up to him right now and kissed him as I did before? What if he kissed me back? What if I pulled him onto that bed and stripped him bare and laid siege to his lethal body?

I think he’d want that. I know I would—I might hate myself for it, but I would.

And yet my pulse is thundering and I’m panicking at the thought of initiating something and it is *wild* that I can hurt this man over and over again but I am terrified of truly laying myself bare for him.

Later. I’ll make my move later.

I’m such a coward.

“Can I have—can I have a moment?” I say.

“I don’t know what that means,” Death says.

“I want to be alone,” I clarify.

“If you try to leave—”

I flash him an intense look. “The *last* thing I intend to do is leave.”

Those strange, beautiful eyes of his scour my face, and the longer he takes in my expression, the more heated his own gaze gets. This thing between us that has been building for a year now is raw and aching and set to erupt.

After a terse several seconds, Thanatos inclines his head, and without another word, he leaves me to my thoughts.

Chapter 39

Sugar Land, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I stare down at my hands.

I pinch my eyes shut. I have no answers. No way to understand what Death's brothers want me to do, or what I want, or anything else.

All I know is that it would be so easy to fall into Death's arms. He's beautiful, and for all his killing, he's not evil. That's probably what hurts my head the worst. He's taken my family, he almost took my son, he's going to try to take everyone else, and yet *his heart isn't wicked*.

I've seen wicked.

I scrub my face and take a deep breath, my stomach tumbling as my thoughts go round and round.

I'd like to say that resolve is what eventually draws me out of my new room, but the truth is, I catch a whiff of something delicious, and I'm painfully hungry.

Who is cooking? Surely it isn't Death? That would be one surprise too many.

Also, where *is* this kitchen?

I leave my room only to lose my way ... and then lose it again.

Who even *needs* this much space?

I still haven't figured out where the kitchen is when I make it to the living room. I come to a stop when I see Death standing before a wide window, his gaze fixed on something outside.

I swallow at the sight of those massive shoulders and large, folded wings.

Right now, with his back to me and his posture so still, he looks like those stone angels I've sometimes seen in cemeteries. The ones that look painfully

sad. The whole thing makes me shiver.

“I’m back,” I say by way of greeting.

Death’s wings hike up, just a little; that’s the only indication he gives that I surprised him. When he rotates around, his gaze is somehow both guarded and painfully exposed.

He takes me in for several seconds. “I am surprised you wanted to be alone,” he admits. “I have been alone for so long, I have come to detest it. I assumed the same was true for you.”

“It was,” I admit.

Before Ben, I thought I’d go insane somewhere along those deserted stretches of highway.

Thanatos’s jaw clenches with emotion. Or maybe he’s just unused to anyone relating to him. That’s another type of loneliness—when your deepest truths are locked away and no one but you can hear them.

“It was,” he echoes, letting that sink in. After a moment, he takes a step forward, and I can tell by the sheen in his eyes that Death is about to spill more secrets.

“The only thing that ever helped me was replaying our interactions,” he admits. “And when those ran out, I imagined your voice and a thousand different conversations I might have with you. I yearned to hear my name fall from your lips. I yearned to see your face. To touch your skin.”

My breath hitches at his words. While I spent the last year reminding myself of all the reasons why Death was awful, he’d been doing *this*.

He looks me over. “Now that you’re here, however, I have this deep, abiding fear that this isn’t real—that you’ll fade away in the night. And for all my power, I cannot shake the feeling.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I remind him.

Thanatos gives me another one of his long looks. I’m pretty sure he’d stand there all day staring at me if I let him.

But then he surprises me.

“You must be hungry,” he says, coming forward.

“I am,” I say warily.

The horseman reaches my side and takes my hand.

I close my eyes at the sensation. I don’t think either of us has truly been touched in a long, long time, which makes every bit of physical contact that much more potent. And with Death’s words still echoing in my mind, I know that this simple touch must mean a lot to him as well.

“Come, my fallen adversary,” he says softly, tugging on my hand. “I have a victory dinner to attend, and you are my guest of honor.”

I open my eyes to look at him, but he’s already moving ahead, leading me through this massive house he’s clearly familiar with.

How long has he been prepping this place for me?

Thanatos leads me into a grand dining room that I missed because it lays on the opposite end of this mansion. Like the rest of the house, it is ornately furnished, with another crystal chandelier and a gilded mirror hanging above a massive fireplace. The table itself is an enormous thing. I count twelve chairs tucked around it, the wood’s dark surface polished to a gleam.

Resting on it are several steaming dishes and two place settings—one at the end of the table and one adjacent to it.

Death releases my hand, letting me make my way into the room. My fingers drag along the table’s smooth surface. I glance back at the horseman, only to find him watching me, his eyes caressing me like a touch.

“How did you learn about cooking?” I ask, gesturing to the dishes set out. Technically, this is far more than just cooking. Every platter of food seems to be perfectly catered, and the table settings have been arranged with precise care.

Death lifts his chin. “Does it please you?” he asks curiously.

There’s that question again.

“Does it matter?” I whisper, afraid to tell him the truth—that this far surpasses any expectation I had.

“You already know the answer to that, Lazarus,” he says.

I can’t seem to look away from him. He’s mesmerizing.

He nods towards the table. “Go ahead,” he finally says.

I do. I make my way to the proffered seat, and after a moment’s hesitation, I pull the chair out and sit down.

Only then does Death move, silently making his way towards the remaining place setting at the end of the table. It’s only now that I notice his chair back has been cut away.

The horseman pulls the seat out, his wings lifting just the slightest so that he can situate himself into it comfortably.

A week ago I was beginning to look into traveling overseas with Ben. Two days ago I was sure my son would die. A day ago I bargained my life away for his. And today I was taken by the angel of death for the second time in my life.

And now I'm sitting at a table with him, about to eat a meal like any of this is normal.

I look over the spread of food. There's bread and cheese, but there's also a tossed salad and a creamy pasta and stuffed peppers and breaded chicken.

"Who made this?" I ask.

Death's eyes slide to a nearby door. It's closed, but as I watch, the knob turns and a skeleton steps out, carrying an open bottle of wine.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say as the thing moves over to us. "A dead person made this food? Tell me I'm wrong."

The horseman gives me a curious look. "You're not."

My gaze moves over the dishes. "*How?*" How did a mindless skeleton *make* all this?

As I speak, the skeleton pours wine into my glass. It then moves to Death and fills his glass before setting the bottle down on the table.

Thanatos lifts a hand and gestures to the creature. "I tell them what they must do, and they do it. But I don't confess to understand how human food is prepared, or—" he grimaces at the dishes in question, "what you find particularly *appealing* about it." As he speaks, the skeleton quietly retreats, exiting out of the door it entered.

"Well, normally, food is appealing because, you know, *it keeps us alive,*" I say, a small smile tugging at my lips.

"Says the woman who cannot die," he interjects.

My attention returns to the dishes in front of me. I *wish* I had no appetite. I wish what Thanatos just admitted would make *some* sort of difference, but the truth is, I haven't eaten much in the last several days, and right now, I'm willing to try corpse-made food.

"Is it going to taste normal?" I ask.

"I expect that it will taste exactly like food made by the living," Thanatos says.

I let out a shaky breath.

Alright. I'm doing it.

I reach for the pasta first and place a little on my plate. After a second's hesitation, I add a little to Death's plate as well.

"What are you doing?" His curious eyes are fixed on me.

"Serving you," I state. "You're the one, after all, who invited me to your 'victory dinner'."

His eyes are hard, but he still somehow looks wickedly pleased, though I

imagine it has more to do with the idea of this victory dinner than the actual food itself.

I end up putting a little of everything on both of our plates while the horseman leans back in his seat, watching me with a devious, calculating expression.

Once I'm done, I sit back down in my chair and survey the table. "So this is what mighty Thanatos is using his dark powers for—getting revenants to cook for him," I say.

He gives me a dark smile. "Would you prefer I simply let the dead sack cities and kill the living?" he asks. "War made quite a name for himself doing just that."

I feel my eyes widen with shock. The War I know—and I admit I don't know him all that well—seems like a reasonable man, even if he did throw me under a horse cart by forcing me to agree to this situation. He definitely doesn't seem like someone who'd do something so ... gruesome and perverse.

"You didn't know," Death states, reading my expression. "I assure you, every one of my brothers has killed entire regions of the world. And unlike me, most of their actions were cruel and full of suffering."

I search Thanatos's face, looking for the lie. Instead I find an unsettling truth.

And I sent Ben with them.

"Is my son okay?"

Death's brows pull together at the change of subject. Or maybe he's simply confused by my question.

"He's alive," he states. "And healthy. I can sense no more than that."

My body falls back heavily against my chair. Ben is not dying. Whether or not he's okay is another matter entirely.

I force away my fears. I have met these men, and I learned their motives. Perhaps they were once monstrous, but I have to trust that they aren't any longer. They have humanity's best interests in mind. If they didn't, they would've let my son die and Death and I continue on as enemies.

Despite my own reassurances I still have to take a few steadying breaths.

Thanatos studies my expression, and I swear he's noticing every little tick as though they were words on a page.

"Where are my brothers taking your son?" Thanatos eventually asks.

In response, I press my lips together.

Death continues to study my features. “Do you think I want to hurt him? That I seek to cause you pain? I seek to cause *no one* pain. I am the end of it, kismet.”

He has yet to realize that you don’t have to cut someone to make them bleed. Take away the most precious thing they have, and they will suffer.

Death settles back in his chair. “So, my brothers scheme. I cannot fathom what it is they hope to gain by having you surrender to me.”

War’s words ring out in my head.

Seduce Death.

I keep my thoughts to myself. But then the seconds stretch on, and the only thing punctuating them is a distant shuffling sound that must be Death’s skeletal servants. The entire time, the horseman stares at me.

“It’s rude to stare,” I eventually say.

“I don’t care about your silly human taboos,” he replies. And he continues staring. And staring.

I want to look everywhere *but* him, but if he’s not going to follow social etiquette, then fuck it, neither am I. So ... I decide to look my fill.

Almost instantly, I realize my mistake. He’s utterly perfect. Like something crafted out of my deepest yearnings. That black hair is beckoning me to run my fingers through it, and those sad, solemn eyes are begging for connection that only I can give. And those lips ... how I ache to taste them again.

The longer I look, the more my blood seems to heat. I can’t help it. I’m not made to withstand men this pretty.

But it’s not just his beauty. My attention returns to those ancient eyes, which hold all sorts of secrets. The longer I look, the more I seem to fall into their depths. And the longer he looks at me, the more heated *his* gaze becomes. Fuck me, but my pulse is hammering away and this cavernous dining room suddenly feels too small.

I lean back and sigh as I look at him. It’s supposed to sound one hundred percent annoyed, but it comes out sounding breathless and wistful, damnit.

Thanatos’s gaze flicks over my face. “What?” he demands.

“I’m just now realizing that I’m going to have to get to know you,” I say.

He arches an eyebrow as he watches me.

“And *you’re* inevitably going to get to know *me*,” I add.

Death’s eyes further heat, though his expression remains unreadable.

I continue. “I’m going to learn all your little habits—”

“I don’t have habits,” he cuts in.

“Oh, you have habits. I have a map marked up with those habits,” I say.

He frowns. If I didn’t know better, I’d say Thanatos doesn’t like the idea that he has human tendencies. Poor fool. He’s got some unpleasant revelations coming his way once he realizes this whole taking-me-captive thing is one giant human experience.

“And,” I continue, “you’re going to learn about all the annoying little things that I do. And we’re going to drive each other *mad*.”

He steeples his fingers. “Do you really think I have searched for you this long to be scared off by a few ‘annoying little things’? I was driven mad *looking* for you. I doubt I’ll be driven mad savoring you.”

How badly I want to make him regret those words, and yet at the same time, they make me feel breathless, off-balance.

“All the same,” I say, “we’ve been awful to each other ... and now we’re supposed to live together. So,” I take a breath, “I think we should air all our grievances.”

“Grievances?” He raises his eyebrows.

“You tell me all the things you hate about me,” I say, “and I’ll tell you all the things I hate about you.”

He frowns. “This is ridiculous, Lazarus. I don’t hate anything about you.”

I raise my eyebrows. “*Really*.” Call me a skeptic, but I’m not buying it.

Death watches me closely. “This is your game, Lazarus. So play it and get this over with.”

I stare him down. “I hate your very existence.”

Those words have been sitting there, at the back of my throat, ever since I first met him.

Thanatos’s eyes flash. “You don’t even realize what you’re saying. There is no life without death,” he says hotly. “So unless you’d prefer to be a rock, or some other inanimate thing, I think my existence suits you just fine.”

After he finishes speaking, silence stretches on between us.

“It’s your turn,” I say.

He glares at me. “I don’t hate you.”

“Sure you don’t.”

“Unlike you, kismet, I really don’t,” he says, and now he sounds weary.

I search his face. After a moment I say, “It’s still your turn.”

He gives a long-winded sigh. “Fine, Lazarus. I dislike it when you hurt me.”

I pick up my glass of wine, and I take a long drink of it. I can't say whether his words are immensely satisfying or painful. Both, I guess.

I set my glass in front of me. "I'm sorry," I say.

Death doesn't say anything, though I can feel his confusion.

"For hurting you," I clarify.

His gaze searches mine, and he takes a deep breath.

"What else do you hate about me?" he asks after a moment.

"I hate that you've taken my family from me. I hate that you've taken my son from me—"

"He still lives," Death interrupts.

Perhaps, but the fact remains that he's no longer with me.

"I hate that you've killed so many people—that I had to see it all. I hate that I felt compelled to stop you. I hate that in order to stop you, I've had to rob corpses, convince skeptics, and force myself to endure being injured and killed over and over again. I hate that my life has become one long list of sacrifices."

"What else?" he asks.

I pick up my wine glass, settling into my long-running list. "I hate that you're oddly kind," I admit, "and I hate that you get no joy from your task. It makes you seem so *noble* and it makes hating you that much harder."

Maybe it's my imagination, but I swear his face has softened with my admission.

"Is there anything else?" he asks.

I bring the glass to my lips, taking another swallow of the expensive wine. "I hate that you're beautiful." More to myself than him, I add, "I can barely *think* around it."

I exhale, feeling oddly unburdened.

The heat is back in the horseman's eyes.

Seduce Death.

"I hate that I am drawn to you," he admits.

Now I lower my glass.

When he sees my shock, Thanatos says, "Surely that can't come as any surprise to you?"

It's *always* going to surprise me that this ... this ... this *monstrous angel* is interested in *me*, the girl who never outgrew her hometown and never made much of a mark.

"I was better off before I met you," he says. "There were few thoughts in

my head then besides traveling and vanquishing. I spent no time musing on your eye color, or the savage expression you wear when you're determined. I never replayed the way your body moved when you fought."

I swallow, and I know I have a look in my eyes, the same one wild animals wear when they know they're trapped.

I force myself to tear my gaze from him, turning my attention to my plate. Only this man could make me forget that I'm a starving woman sitting before a feast.

Setting down my wine, I lift my fork and take a bite of the pasta. There's a moment where the sauce and the noodles gross me out—where all I can think about is that a dead body made this—but then the flavor hits and it tastes upsettingly good. I have another bite, and another, and pretty soon I don't much care who made this because I'm ravenous.

I can feel Death's eyes on me. I'm sure I look like a savage. I'm beyond caring.

Eventually, I do come up for air.

Next to me, Thanatos looks mildly horrified—which I take a gleeful amount of pride in—as well as very curious.

"Aren't you going to eat?" I ask him.

"Food of the living?" he says, his gaze fixed to my mouth.

My mouth quirks at his words. "That's a weird way of putting it," I say. "Do you eat food of the dead, then?"

"I'm a death deity. I don't need sustenance at all."

I look him over—from his dark, wavy hair to his chiseled features, to the black wings and shirt that seem to devour the light.

"Have you *ever* tried food?" I ask.

"What would be the point?"

He hasn't. He's never bitten into a ripe apple or twirled pasta around his fork, or had a bite of bread with melted butter.

I've known for a while now that Death doesn't have human needs, but to have never—not once—tasted food?

I set my fork down.

He's still watching me with burning curiosity when I push myself out of my chair and approach him. Ignoring Thanatos for a moment, I pick up a slice of bread. I grab the bottle of olive oil that rests nearby and I pour a little of it onto a small plate that seems to have been set out for such purpose.

I dip the bread into the oil and then I turn to the horseman. Bread and oil is

one of the most basic foods; it seems like a good place to start.

I take a steadying breath. Here we go.

Before he can do anything at all, I sit down in his lap. I hear Thanatos's sharp inhale, but then his hands fall on my hips.

"If you try to stab me—"

"With what, the butter knife?" I say teasingly. More serious, I add, "I've left that behind, Thanatos."

His fingers press into my skin at the sound of his name.

I hold up the bread, a line of oil sliding down its flaky crust. "I want you to try this."

Death grimaces. "Perhaps I would prefer a good stabbing."

I bite back a laugh. Only this man would say such a ridiculous thing.

"This is bread and olive oil. Humans have been eating it for thousands of years. It's good. And I want you to try it."

His chest rises and falls. "Why?" he asks. "Why do you care at all?"

"For a year now, you have forced me to experience what death is like. Maybe it's time you experienced a little life for a change."

He hesitates, looking half convinced.

"It won't kill you," I say.

"An unfortunate truth," he murmurs. "Death, I am comfortable with. This ... I am not."

I'm trying really, really hard not to snicker at the fact that this man—who has been shot repeatedly by me—is afraid of a little bread.

"This is your victory dinner," I remind him. "And dinners are meant to be eaten."

He frowns.

"And," I add, "if you try it—" I hesitate, my gaze dropping to his lips, "I will kiss you."

His starry eyes flash. In an instant his hand closes over mine, and he brings the bread I hold up to his lips. He stares at it for a moment, scowling.

"Everything in me revolts against this," he admits.

"Then you must really want that kiss." I say a bit breathlessly. I'm trying to make light of it, but inside, I feel raw.

Death's eyes meet mine. *Yes*, they seem to say.

While our gazes are locked, he brings the bread the rest of the way to his mouth. Without looking away from me, he takes a bite.

That seems to break the spell.

His face twists into a grimace, and I see him gag a little as he awkwardly chews, then forces the bite down.

“It’s *awful*,” he gasps out.

I can’t help it, I start laughing—I laugh so hard my entire body shakes with it.

“It’s really not,” I say, quieting down.

His eyes have returned to my face, and despite looking a little queasy, he stares at me like he’s never seen anything like me before.

“Do that again,” he says quietly.

“Do what?” I ask.

“*Laugh.*”

I give him a confused smirk. “I can’t just do it on call. Tell me a joke and I might.”

He stares at my lips some more. “Hmmm ...” Rather than telling a joke, he takes my hand and tries another bite of the bread—and proceeds to gag again.

“I can’t—eat this,” he admits. “It’s ... *atrocious.*”

He grabs the wine his skeletal servant poured for him, presumably to wash the taste out, but it’s wine he’s drinking, not water, and this too, is an acquired taste.

Thanatos nearly spits the liquid out, only stopping himself by pressing his fist to his mouth. Behind that fist, his face looks sickly.

His throat works over and over before he manages to swallow it all down.

“*Devils, woman,*” he wheezes out, his face twisting at the taste. “What is that?”

But now I’m laughing again. I shake my head, unable to tell him.

Death is doing his best to wipe his mouth with his hand, even as he watches me intently. “And you’d have me believe that life is enjoyable,” he mutters.

With one last grimace, he drops his hand, his eyes fixed to me, and I’m pretty sure he only took a second bite of bread to hear me laugh again. That thought sobers me up, even as unwelcome warmth spreads through me.

I take his glass and drink from it. I mean, it’s good wine and he’s not going to enjoy it.

He marvels at me. “*That* is really wine?” he asks skeptically.

I lower the glass from my lips. “Yeah, it really is.”

Death is the picture of disillusionment. “I have seen and heard much about wine over the ages. I did not imagine it would taste so ... *disappointing.*”

“I bet the bread was a letdown too.”

“Not entirely,” he says. He reaches out and takes the wine from me, setting it aside.

I give him a baffled look, not sure where he’s going with this.

Rather than responding his hand goes to the back of my head. Thanatos draws me to him and it’s only in the seconds before my lips touch his that I remember.

The kiss.

Then his mouth is there, firm against mine. I suck in a breath because—
It’s exquisite.

Holding his hand was one thing, but to be caught in Death’s embrace, his lips seducing mine—I’d forgotten that kissing him was an entire experience.

My mouth opens just the slightest, and he seems to be following my lead, his own lips parting. My tongue presses against his and Death’s fingers dig into my hair and he’s holding me to him like he doesn’t plan on ever letting me go. His tongue strokes mine and he kisses me with all the savagery that his reputation seems to promise.

I am sucked under.

My hands come up, cupping his face, cheeks, and I only promised a kiss, I can stop this. I *should* stop this.

I don’t.

I throw myself wholly into the kiss. I can taste the wine on Death’s tongue, and I’m sure he can taste the wine on mine, but he’s not gagging—in fact, by all appearances, he seems to like the stuff well enough after all.

The hand of his that’s still on my hip digs in, and he grinds himself against me.

I let out a breathy moan when I feel his erection against me.

Is he even aware of erections and arousal? I bet he isn’t—not in any real sense. I’d wager money that this is another bread-and-wine thing, where Death knows, but he doesn’t actually *know*. I doubt he has any real idea what he’s doing or why things feel the way they do.

The thought makes me smile against his mouth.

“*I like that,*” Thanatos growls, his voice rough.

I pause, breaking away just a little. “What?”

“The smile you gave me while your lips were on mine—and the other thing, the sound you made just a moment ago.”

The moan. Dear lord.

This is all supposed to be happening this way. I'm doing everything right, yet suddenly—

I pull more fully away from him, my breathing labored and my heart racing like mad.

Death's eyes are hooded when he stares at me, and he might not have any real experience with sex, but it's clear he's driven wild with want. That look is all it takes for me to once more feel like a cornered animal.

I slide off his lap, swaying a little on my feet as I gain my footing. I haven't slept well in several nights, and it's all catching up to me. The wine doesn't help either. I back away, even as my body cries out in protest.

Thanatos watches me, the desire in his expression banking until all that's left is a yearning so deep I can almost feel it. Or maybe that's my own lonely soul seeking out connection, even though Death is the last person I should find it with.

"Don't go, Lazarus," he pleads.

But I do. I flee him then like I have so many times before.

The trouble is, I have a yearning within me that rivals the horseman's. And I'm not ready to face it—not yet.

But I'll have to, and soon.

Chapter 40

Sugar Land, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I rub my eyes the next morning as I pad through the house. I didn't get great sleep last night. I kept waking up feeling as though I was forgetting something, only to then remember that something was *Ben*.

Even though my mind knows he's gone, instinct keeps demanding that I perform the same old parental habits I've done for the last six months.

I cut through the dining room, which has been cleared of last night's meal, and enter an enormous, industrial kitchen, lured in by the smell of breakfast. I stop in my tracks when I see several skeletons hard at work in the room.

Just how many of these revenants *are* there?

One of them is frying eggs in a skillet, another is cutting fruit. And oh God, dead people really are preparing food and I have never dreaded my own hunger as much as I do now.

At least the revenants are nothing more than bones. If they were still fleshy ... I don't think I could stomach that. Unfortunately, there's a faint smell that clings to them, one that I have no name for, but it must be what old, desiccated things smell like. That, or this kitchen has a funky odor all on its own.

One of the skeletons pauses their work and turns to me. I stare at the undead servant for several seconds before I realize—I think it's waiting on me.

I clear my throat. "Um, good morning."

Why are you saying good morning to the skeleton, Laz?

"Uh," I continue, "you wouldn't happen to have any coffee, would you?"

The revenant swivels around and heads for a French Press that I didn't

notice earlier.

I marvel.

It understands me.

The skeleton grabs a mug hanging in a nearby cupboard and fills it with the rich liquid.

Behind me the door to the kitchen swings open, and I sense Death a moment before I hear his deep voice.

“I see you’ve taken to my servants’ cooking, after all,” he says from behind me.

I spin around, my breath catching at the sight of him. Those dark eyes all but beckon me to come closer.

That’s when I register that from the waist up, Thanatos is naked. No armor, no shirt. Just hundreds of strange, *glowing* tattoos that bathe him in silvery light. I suck in a breath at the sight.

How have I never noticed these before?

Except ... War had tattoos like this along his knuckles. Only his had been red.

I study the markings. They look like ... *language*, though none I’ve ever seen, and they cover every inch of skin from the base of Death’s neck to his wrists. By the looks of it, the strange markings continue down beneath the waistline of his pants.

I try not to dwell on where else these tattoos might be.

“Where’s your shirt?” I say breathlessly, my gaze still pinned to his bare chest. The horseman is truly built like a god, his physique heavily muscled.

“Elsewhere,” Thanatos says.

Death’s gaze shifts over my shoulder, and I glance behind me, only to see the skeleton approaching me with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand, a porcelain creamer in the other. Behind it, the other skeletons are still busy at work.

I reach out for the coffee. My fingers brush against the skeleton’s finger bones, and I nearly drop the mug.

Get a grip.

Steadying myself, I take the creamer, giving the skeleton a tight smile, feeling like I’ve gone mad.

I sense Thanatos, meanwhile, watching it all with a perverse amount of pleasure, though perhaps I’m just assuming he enjoys my discomfort.

I pour a little cream into the drink, then hand the creamer back, proud that

my hand doesn't shake. I have seen and done many disturbing things, yet *this* is what spooks me. A skeleton.

I all but elbow Thanatos out of the way to escape the undead, pushing through the door and heading into the dining room. Only at some point since I entered the kitchen, undead servants have entered this room too. Two of them are beginning to set out more platters of food while another cleans drapery that already looks spotless. Through the windows I notice another two revenants tending to the shrubbery that surrounds the house.

I stare at them all in abject horror.

"Don't tell me there is something my wild-hearted Lazarus is scared of," Death says, studying my face as he steps up beside me.

My wild-hearted Lazarus. A shiver courses through me, and I tell myself it's from the sight and not his words.

"Make them stop," I say, uncaring whether or not they are capable of taking offense. This is wrong.

"I wouldn't *dare*," Thanatos replies just as fervently.

I rotate to face him, my coffee half-forgotten.

"Do you not remember, kismet?" he says, tilting his head. "You told me I didn't know how to take care of you. So I learned."

All the air seems to escape my lungs at his admission. I had assumed as much, but to have it confirmed ...

My gaze sweeps over the skeletons once more, and now instead of seeing the horror of their existence, I see—I see a horseman trying to prove his worth to a woman who scorned him.

"I was hoping you'd like it," he continues. "I want you to be comfortable. I gave you a reason to run last time. This time, I want to give you a reason to stay."

My throat bobs.

"How long have you been getting this place ready?" I ask softly.

"This house in particular?" he asks, looking around us. "A month. But there were other houses I found and prepared and other servants who assisted me along the way. I have spent our time apart amassing all the ... *necessities* you might need—clothes, food, and a dwelling fit for a queen."

My God. Meanwhile, I'd resented the hell out of him. I mean, I had good reason to—he was making my life a living nightmare. But still.

I rest a hand on a chair back near me, sagging against it a little.

The horseman's eyes flick over my form. "Care to sit?" Thanatos gestures

towards a fainting couch in an adjacent room.

Distractedly, I head over to it, taking a seat and setting my coffee down on a nearby side table. The horseman follows me over. Only when he sits down next to me do I realize that this piece of furniture may have very well been one of the items the horseman took with him to this home; the shape of it allows for Death to easily sit while accommodating his wings.

I want to ask about those wings, which are so large that they drape on the floor behind him like the train of a gown. I want to ask about the glowing markings too, the ones my eyes keep dipping down to. I find I want to touch them badly, and I have to clasp my hands to stifle the urge.

Death catches me staring, and embarrassed, I force my gaze away. I can feel his inquisitive eyes on me.

“How do these skeletons even know what to do?” I ask, nodding to one of them bustling by. Anything to distract myself from the fact that I want to unravel this man—and lick his tattoos while I’m at it.

“I already told you, kismet, though the soul might be gone, there is still an afterimage of the person who once existed.”

“What does that have to do with cleaning?” I ask. Up until yesterday I’ve never just sat next to the horseman and shot the shit with him. It’s almost as destabilizing as watching these revenants work.

“You’re asking questions that don’t have nice, orderly human answers, Lazarus. The dead clean because I tell them to.”

“But they know *how* to clean and you don’t.” That’s weird, right? “Do they have higher thinking?”

“Their spirits are gone, kismet,” he says softly. “What is left is not self-aware. But their bones still remember what their minds once knew.”

He gazes at me as I process that. And then he continues to gaze at me, even when the silence stretches out between us.

“It’s still rude to stare,” I say, picking up my coffee once more.

“I still don’t care,” Thanatos replies smoothly.

I turn to face him a little better. “What *are* you thinking of when you stare at me?” I dare to ask.

“That I could look at you for a thousand years and never get bored,” he says without missing a beat. “I am used to seeing a person’s essence, not their features, and I have taken the latter for granted.”

I give him a small smile, though he’s unsettled me.

“And when I look at you,” he continues. “I wish I could fully sense your

soul the way I can other humans. I'm sure I would find that it is strange and lovely. It—you—are a mystery to me, and I am unused to mysteries.

I sit there, not knowing what to say. Because I don't have anything reciprocal to say, except, perhaps, that beneath his powers, Thanatos is also strange and lovely.

"Come," the horseman says suddenly, rising from the couch. He reaches a hand out for me. "I never showed you the outside of the house."

I take his hand and let him lead me away from that fainting couch. We head across the room and through a door that opens to an expansive back patio. Death is quiet as he leads me on, his tattoos shimmering in the sun.

A pool glimmers in the distance, and that should be the most appealing feature on this warm day, but my eyes catch instead on the extravagant garden set at the corner of the house.

Now I'm the one who's tugging on his hand as I lead us towards it. I wind us through the rows of raised garden beds, eyeing each one. When I notice the fruit trees running along the back of the garden, I make my way to them.

I stop in front of an apple tree, its branches laden with fruit. There's a metal bucket sitting at the tree's base, as though someone was thinking of harvesting these soon.

"This is what you wanted to see?" the horseman says from behind me, inspecting the tree like it holds some decipherable secret.

"I'm hungry," I tell him.

"My servants have made—"

"I know what your servants have made for breakfast," I tell him, suppressing a shudder at the thought. "But I wanted something a bit—" less death-touched, "*more palatable*."

Thanatos's gaze narrows. "I have spent months sourcing the most skilled servants when it comes to preparing food. I assure you, kismet, they can fulfill all your needs."

"I know," I say softly. That doesn't stop me from still recoiling at the thought of those bones touching the food I eat.

My gaze flits over the apples. Spotting a ripe one, I reach out and pick it.

"You know," I say, staring down at it, "our relationship began with an apple."

This stupid, innocuous piece of fruit. It was there leading Adam and Eve into temptation, and now here we are, come full circle. From the first supposed fall of humankind to the last.

If, of course, the Bible is to be believed.

A part of me wants to chuck the fruit as far as I can and burn this entire orchard to the ground. Instead, I dust the apple off on my shirt and take a bite.

It's just an apple, after all.

After I swallow, I offer it to Death. "Want a taste?"

He grimaces. "Not unless you have another kiss to bribe me with."

I lower the fruit, tilting my head a little. "Would you really want that?" I ask.

His eyes move to mine, shining with intensity. "I would want *more*, kismet. But I will settle for taking what you offer."

I keep my gaze trained on him. "I don't think you know what you're asking for, Thanatos."

"Perhaps I don't," he says, his expression magnetic. "But I do know of the things humans do when they cannot stay away from one another."

He doesn't move any closer to me, but it feels like there's no distance between us and no air to breathe in. It doesn't help that he still hasn't found his shirt, and his glowing tattoos are making him look particularly unearthly.

"And that's what you want?" I ask again softly, my heart rate beginning to pick up.

I can't believe we're talking about this. Or that the man who thinks bread sucks is open to being intimate.

"I already told you, kismet. I would want *more*. Your flesh promises much, but for me, it is merely the beginning."

We're outside for a long time. I've taken to picking far more apples than I need, but there's literally no one else around to enjoy them, so I try not to feel too guilty.

Death has dragged over a stone bench and butted the thing up against a nearby tree. He lounges on it, his back leaning against the tree trunk, one leg stretched out in front of him, the other one bent at the knee. This is the most comfortable I've ever seen him. It's more than just his posture. The two of us have spent the morning chatting about things that don't revolve around the fate of humanity or the sexual tension between us.

As I move around a second tree now, I begin humming—then singing—"Scarborough Fair," the song stirring up old, aching sweet memories. It was a song my mother would often sing while she did the dishes or hung clothes up to dry, one that some of my siblings and I would harmonize with.

I don't know how long I've been singing when I hear the scuff of a boot.

I glance over my shoulder, staggering a little when I see the horseman standing in front of me, his gaze fixed to my mouth.

"So *that's* music," he says wondrously, as though he only just put a name to the sound.

I guess that's the irony of Thanatos. He's existed for forever, and he seems to be a well of wisdom when it comes to humans, but the horseman has only been a man for a short while.

Giving him a hesitant look, I nod.

His gaze scours my face. "Don't stop," he whispers.

Heat creeps up into my cheeks.

I don't really want to sing now that I have an audience.

"Please," Death adds. He's still staring at my lips.

I want to tell him that people don't ask these sorts of things, but he knows that. And he seems genuinely ... *moved* by the music. So, I clear my throat, and after only wavering for another moment or two, I begin to sing again, turning back to the tree so that I can resume picking fruit and pretend I don't have an avid audience.

Only, I'm not left alone for long.

Thanatos rounds the tree, his gaze moving over my eyes, my lips, my hair. He's looking at me like I'm the Eighth Wonder of the World and I have no defense for the blatant longing on his face.

My song ends, and it's silent for a long moment.

Death shakes his head, still looking possessed. "That was ... *opodanao*."

The foreign word draws out an instant reaction. I feel bathed in light, as though it were stroking my skin and running its fingers through my hair. I think I understand the word's meaning, but the horseman translates for me anyway.

"*Beautiful*."

Chapter 41

Sugar Land, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I need to start making good on my promise to the horsemen.

Seduce Death.

That was the deal.

I pull myself out of the cold bath I drew for myself, grabbing a nearby towel and wrapping it around my body. Water puddles at my feet as I cross the bathroom and enter my bedroom, the world beyond the windows dark.

The massive closet gapes open, and I catch sight of all those clothes neatly hung up inside. Curiosity tugs at me. Just what did the horseman—or his undead servants—think to pick out for me? Grabbing a nearby lantern, I head over to it.

The flame flickers in the glass container, making the shadows dance along the various materials.

My fingers drift over the clothing, the sizing and styles all over the place. My hand pauses when I come to a black dress, one that appears to be form-fitting. I pull it out, noticing that a slit runs up the side all the way to mid-thigh.

It's perfect for my needs.

It looks like it'll fit too. I grab it and pull it on. The dress is a little tight, and I've gotten so used to loose, practical clothing that I tug on it absently, trying to make it less constricting.

There are a dozen pairs of shoes stashed away in the closet as well, but only two of them are even close to my size, one a knee-high riding boot and the other a worn pair of flip-flops. Neither really matches the outfit.

I glance down at my bare feet.

Fuck it. I'm going shoeless.

Also in the closet are several shallow drawers which contain some random jewelry, including a single gold bangle and a delicate chain anklet—both of which I put on as well. I cannot tell if these were items owned by whoever lived here before me, or if—like the clothing—they were odds and ends that Death had his servants pick up.

I guess it doesn't really matter either way. The dead no longer have need for them, though I do.

Entering the bathroom once more, I find a stash of makeup in one of the drawers.

This is trickier.

Used makeup cannot hurt me any more than anything else, but it's still somewhat off-putting. Luckily, I find a couple lipsticks and some gold eyeshadow that look untouched, and I put those on instead.

The end result ... robs me of breath. I stare at my reflection. I haven't worn makeup in a long, *long* time. So much of the last two years has been about survival—Ben's survival and humanity's—that I hadn't put much thought into physical appearance. But now my skin shimmers where I put the eye shadow on, and my lips are rosy. I even added a hint of both to my cheekbones, and the overall effect is ...

I look feminine. Pretty and feminine.

Not even my damp, unstyled hair can take away from that, though I do my best to make even my hair as presentable as I can.

Hopefully this works.

I cannot believe I'm actually trying to seduce anyone at all—let alone *Death*. I'm a better archer than I am a temptress.

With that encouraging pep talk, I leave my room, forcing myself to find the horseman before I can chicken out again.

Thanatos is already in the dining room, waiting for me. He has a full plate of food in front of him and a glass of wine, but I doubt any of it will go between his lips.

Not unless I can convince him to give it another try.

It's worth a shot. All of it is worth a shot. Eating. Sleeping. Seducing. Saving the world.

All it takes is a little convincing.

As soon as he sees me, his eyes burn with some inner fire. But then his gaze sweeps over me, from my made-up face to my form-fitting dress, to my

bare feet, and a hunger grips his expression.

Oh God, he looks like he wants to devour me.

Maybe this was a bad idea, after all.

I steel myself and walk into the room like I'm headed into battle. I'm not the only one. At some point between when I last saw him and now, Thanatos has found his shirt and his armor. He looks ready to lead an army and vanquish his enemies.

Here goes nothing.

I head past my seat and over to his. Setting his plate aside, I hoist myself on the table and sit where his food should be. Tonight, *I'm* the main course.

Granted, this is not as drastic as sitting on his lap, like I did last night, but then I wasn't planning on actually getting carried away.

Tonight I am.

"Isn't sitting on tables breaking some arbitrary human rule?" Death says with a twist of his lips. He looks absolutely delighted at the notion.

Instead of answering, I pick up his fork. Spear a scalloped potato from his plate, I pop it in my mouth, trying not to think about the entity that made the dish.

I set the fork back down and, after a moment, I put one foot, then the other, on Death's lap.

Breaking etiquette rules is actually kind of fun. I think I could get used to this.

Thanatos stares down at my legs. Ever so slowly, he moves a hand to one of my calves, resting it there. The black material of my dress has slipped away, revealing my bare flesh.

"It will always cause me no little wonder to see you withstand my touch," he murmurs, staring at where his pale hand touches my skin.

"Oh, your touch does do things to me." I don't know what possesses me to voice *that* thought, but the words are out before I can think twice about them.

Death's gaze flicks to my face, even as that tantalizing hand of his slides up my leg.

He has no idea what he's doing.

I pick Death's fork back up and spear another slice of potato, trying to ignore my rising anxiety.

"How's the food?" he asks, his penetrating gaze on me.

"I haven't found any bones in it yet, so good." I'm only half joking. I'm actually more than a little terrified that someone's thumb is going to show up

in one of the dishes.

Thanatos's hand continues moving up my thigh, shifting my thoughts from one disturbing topic to another. He must know how intimate his touch is, he must—

All at once Thanatos removes his hands from my legs, but only so that he can grab me by the waist and haul me onto his lap.

I let out a small yelp, my fork slipping from my hand and clattering onto the ground. And then I'm back where I was last night.

Death's face is so close that I can see those strange silver flecks in his night-dark eyes and how his pupils dilate at my nearness. His cold, unyielding armor bites into me, and I can smell the smoky scents of frankincense and myrrh drifting off of him.

Ever so slowly he raises a hand and wraps it around the back of my neck. He pulls me into him.

Death has a hungry, predatory look on his face.

He's going to kiss me.

Only ... he doesn't.

He brings my ear to his mouth. "Last night we talked about all the ways you hated me," he says. "Tonight it's *my* turn to pick the game.

I go still in his arms.

He draws away from me so he can look me in the eyes. "No more dancing with words, Lazarus," he says. "I want your passions and your truths all laid bare. I will ask you questions, and you will speak to me plainly."

"*This is your game?*" I say, skeptical. I don't think I like what he has in mind.

"Yes," he says with relish.

His hands resettle on my hips, one of his thumbs stroking the soft material there. "Tell me what you feel when you look at me."

My throat seizes up. Alright, I officially hate this game.

Technically, telling the truth should be easy. I hold all the answers to these questions within me. Unfortunately, I've buried my truths underneath so many convenient lies that I'm frightened to unearth them.

"What I feel right now when I look at you? Or when I first met you?" I'm stalling. I know I'm stalling. But God, I don't want to admit any of this.

"All of it."

Of course he wants all of it.

My eyes dip to his armor, and I trace a finger over the skeleton and the

woman he's intimately embracing.

"When I first laid eyes on you—" I pause. Fuck I don't want to do this, "I thought you were the most beautiful man I had ever seen."

There. I did it, and only a little of my soul died in the process.

Death's eyes have a feral shine to them. "This ... is a good thing?" he asks curiously.

I huff out a laugh because *is* beauty really a good thing? I don't know ...

"It makes me want you even when I shouldn't," I admit.

"Want me?" he echoes.

I give him a look, trying really hard to ignore that overbearing beauty of his. "You know what I mean."

"You're dancing with your words again," he murmurs, brushing a stray lock of black hair away from his face. "I would like the unvarnished truth—stripped free from all your human assumptions."

I blow out a breath. God, he really is going to make me spell it out.

"You are so annoyingly handsome that even though I have hated you, I have *always* craved touching you and kissing you ..." I let my words trail off, petrified of continuing to give him the *entire* truth.

Thanatos leans forward, waiting for the rest of the sentence. Damn him for being perceptive enough to notice I was omitting some of it.

I mutter an oath under my breath then twist around, reaching for the horseman's full glass of wine. I take a long drink of the alcohol before I set it back down. I was ready for seduction, I wasn't ready to be confronted with these *questions* that cut to the most guarded parts of me.

You don't have to answer them, a cowardly inner voice whispers. *You could simply rush things along*. A kiss or two would make him forget.

The problem is that—as most people know—seduction isn't just physical. It's mental too. This is part of seduction every bit as much as tasting him and teasing him is. It just happens to be the part that I'm least prepared for.

My gaze drops to Thanatos's lips. "I have craved removing this armor, touching your wings, and running my lips over your bare flesh." I stop short of mentioning anything else.

Death's eyes have grown hooded. "Then do it, kismet."

I rear back a little.

Do it?

Death sits very still. Waiting.

Reaching out a tentative hand, my fingertips touch one of the velvety

wings that rise over his shoulders. Death sucks in a sharp breath, but stays still.

I hate it that since I first met him, I've wanted to do this. Even in my darkest moments, there was still the curiosity and the strange, perverse desire to feel him, my nemesis.

I continue to stroke his wing, transfixed. The black feathers are disarmingly soft. I've known that from past brush-ups with them, but it still surprises me.

I stare at the black feathers as I run my fingers over them. "These are ... beautiful," I say.

My eyes meet his. Something moves across his expression.

He's right, I have been dancing around the truth of us.

Never looking away, Thanatos unbuckles one of his shoulder guards, and lets it fall to the ground. Then he removes the other, the armor landing with a heavy clank. His breastplate is next, then his vambraces. Though he appears calm, I can see his fingers working frenziedly to undo the fastenings.

My hands move to his chest. The moment my palms sink against his pecs, I feel him jerk. His gaze flashes to mine, and I see the need in his eyes.

Turning back to his arm guards, he rips the rest of it off, buckles snapping and leather tearing. He tosses it all aside.

My hands smooth down his torso to the edges of his shirt. Thanatos reaches for the black material, and I can already tell he intends to yank it off with just as much savagery as his armor.

"Wait," I say, gripping his shirt tighter. "Let me do this." My cheeks flush as I speak.

Death pauses, then releases the cloth, settling back in his seat, though his eyes are a little wary.

I pull up on the dark material. I expect it to catch against his wing roots, but the material slides easily by. I notice then the slits at the back of the shirt that make room for his wings; they slice down the shirt all the way to the bottom hem.

Death is so tall, even sitting, that I have to rise to lift the black shirt over his head and off his arms. Once it's free, I drop it among the growing pile of discarded items.

I glance down, at Thanatos, at his bare chest and glowing tattoos.

Do it, he'd told me. Kiss and touch and take.

I lower myself once more on his lap, feeling his eyes on me. My own

attention moves to his torso.

If Death's face is that of a tragic hero, his chest is that of a warrior. Thick bands of muscle curve around his frame, his torso tapering down to a narrow waist.

I reach out again, this time to trace one of his glowing tattoos. My finger tingles a little, as though there's magic just in tracing the symbol's shape.

Thanatos makes a pained noise at the contact.

"More, Lazarus," he whispers.

I place both my hands on his skin, letting myself discover the shape of his shoulders and arms. I shiver a little. I've never been with someone who felt like *this*. He seems cut from stone.

I run a hand over his abdominal muscles, each one clearly defined. Soon, touching isn't quite enough. I hadn't been lying when I said I wanted to kiss his flesh.

I lean in. The moment my lips touch his skin, he groans.

He cups the back of my head, lightly holding me there against his skin. This close to him, he smells like the incense he burns from his torch, only now I have to wonder whether the smell came from the smoke itself, or whether it's a more innate part of him.

My mouth trails over several of the glowing symbols.

I cannot believe I'm actually doing this.

I press another kiss to his flesh, this time, tonguing his skin just a little.

Death hisses out a breath. "Do not tell me we could've been doing this the whole time I chased you," he says.

"We'll never know," I breathe against him.

He closes his eyes and tips his head back. "But I have you now," he murmurs, stroking my hair. It sounds like he's trying to reassure himself.

"You can touch me too," I say. I mean, I know he already has been touching me, but there's touching, and then there's *touching*. I'm offering him the latter.

His eyes open, and he tips his head down to look at me. "Where?" he says, his voice scraped raw.

Ah, that's right. He likes more literal answers.

I study those strange silver freckles in his irises. *"Anywhere."*

He holds my stare for several seconds before his eyes drift down to the rest of me.

Thanatos moves his hand from my hair and trails his fingertips over my

cheekbones then down to my jaw.

“How I’ve wanted to hear those words fall from your lips,” he admits, his voice desire-roughened.

Despite his words, he’s holding back. I can practically feel his body trembling with his restraint, and I imagine it’s because the places he wishes to touch are hidden.

I press my palm over his hand, which still cups my face. For a moment I lean into the touch. When I feel the cool brush of metal against my flesh I pull his hand away to inspect what it is.

On his finger he wears that strange ring, the one with the coin fixed to it bearing the face of Medusa.

I move his ring back and forth. “What’s the story behind this?” I ask. By now I’ve discovered that everything adorning the horseman has a deeper meaning.

“Charon’s obol,” Death says, distracted. When my brows furrow, he clarifies, “A coin of the dead.”

“Why would the dead need coins?” I ask.

“They don’t. It’s merely one of the gifts I’ve been given over the centuries.”

“Who gave it to you?” I ask, my voice carefully light.

It doesn’t work.

Thanatos arches a brow. “Why do you care, Lazarus? They have long since moved on.”

I stare levelly back at him. “Now you’re the one dancing with your words.”

Death gives me a smile, one that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Though I can recall the shape of their soul, the person who gave me this coin holds no more meaning to me than anyone else ... except for you.” His gaze is intense as he says this last part.

“I have known no one as intimately as I know you,” he continues. “*No one*. I cross paths with some individuals over and over again during their lives, but I cannot *know* the living. Not like this.”

Not as a living, breathing man.

The two of us stare at each other.

I don’t know who moves first, but our lips collide, the ring long forgotten. The kiss should feel like a lie. It should feel wrong, coerced—everything but what it *does* feel like.

Like brushing up against heaven.

My lips move hungrily over his. I knew he was yearning for this, I didn't expect the reverse to be true as well.

Thanatos falls into the kiss with all the intensity I've come to expect from him. But just when I feel like his passion is going to consume us both, his hands move up to my cheeks, cradling my face. He slows his movements, and the kiss goes from passionate to intimate.

"My kismet," he murmurs against my lips, "my Lazarus."

I pinch my eyes at the endearments, wanting to shut this part out—the part where he slips his way under my skin and sinks into my bones.

"How can I make you like me as I like you?" he says in between strokes of his lips.

I would laugh if I didn't find the thought so alarming.

I pull away and lean my head against his. "It's not that simple."

Our kiss might've ended there, but the horseman isn't done with me. He peppers light kisses along my jaw, then my neck. He moves his mouth to my shoulder, his lips dragging over the skin. His fingers grasp the thin strap of my dress, and he pulls it away, his mouth sliding over my flesh.

Aren't you tired of fighting?

His long ago words taunt me. I am tired, and not just of this battle between earth and whatever lies beyond.

I'm tired of pushing back against this attraction to him. I'm tired of my head overruling my heart. I'm tired of everything being so damned complicated when it doesn't have to be.

This is the apocalypse. All rules have gone out the window.

So I lean forward, pressing my lips to his ear. "Touch me," I demand. Only now, as I lean back, it's me who reaches for the straps of my dress.

I'm not wearing anything under the dress, so when I pull them down, I expose my breasts.

Thanatos sucks in a breath, entranced, and then he's gathering me to him, lifting me a little so that my chest is closer to his face. He does touch me then—just not with his hands.

His bows his head, pressing a kiss to the soft flesh above one of my breasts. He draws his teeth over the skin, and I can't help the goosebumps that break out along my flesh.

I thread my fingers through his wavy hair, enjoying the silken strands, which are nearly as soft as his wings.

And now Death's hand does come up to my other breast. He squeezes it lightly, his thumb gliding over my nipple, causing me to gasp.

Thanatos groans, leaning his forehead against my chest.

"My God, kismet, you feel better than words can tell."

I tilt his head up, my eyes meeting his.

This is where I fall.

My lips crash against his. This isn't like our other kisses. Maybe the change is from the carnality I've awoken in Thanatos, or maybe it's my own. Either way, I'm stripped free of my inhibitions.

I grind wantonly against him, drinking up the guttural sounds he makes.

Thanatos grabs my hips, keeping that pressure between us.

"Lazarus."

I can't tell if he's saying my name as an admonishment or as a plea. I'm not sure he can either. But his hands are pinning me in place, and his eyes are hazy with desire.

I grind against him again, more to goad him than anything else.

"What ... is this sensation you have wrought from me?" he says, pulling away a little. He still holds my hips prisoner.

I flash him a sly smile. "Come on, Thanatos, you must have some idea."

He closes his eyes and tips his head back. I see him swallow.

"Merciful God." He opens his eyes. "But this isn't sex."

"No," I agree, "it's not."

I lean forward, my lips inches from his. "You know of what humans do together. Do you still want that—with me?"

There is a moment, a single moment, where I feel exposed. He could reject me now, I have given him the power to—

"Always," he says, his face brilliantly alive. "I will *always* want that with you."

I smile at him again, though this one is genuine. It's hard not to feel genuine when the horseman is so unapologetically so.

His eyes flash at the sight of my grin and he leans forward, capturing my mouth again. "Your smiles ensnare me, kismet."

I kiss him back, still smiling like an idiot against his mouth. Thanatos begins falling into it, but no, no, no, I don't intend for us to stay here.

Breaking off the kiss, I begin to slide off of the horseman. He catches me, and I can't help the soft laugh that slips from my throat.

"Trust me, Thanatos, for this, you'll want me off your lap."

“I doubt it,” he says, his eyes stormy.

My hands move to his pants.

“These need to come down,” I say.

For the first time, Death appears alarmed. It’s that single look that dispels some of my own tension for what I’m about to do.

“Don’t be shy,” I tease.

“I am not shy,” he says, a little affronted. “What I have is yours.”

He’s making a lot of pretty pledges to me. I don’t know if I should be moved or alarmed.

Thanatos stands, his expression both curious and challenging as he lowers his pants and whatever lies beneath them.

His cock springs free, already hard—and large. Very, very concerningly large. It’s also adorned in the same markings as the rest of him. Holy shit. His maker put *markings* on his penis ... and the rest of him, by the looks of it. More glowing glyphs cover his abdomen and run down his thighs.

Before Death can begin to remove his greaves and his boots and take his pants fully off, I place a hand on his shoulder and press him back down into his chair. I kind of like the idea of his pants keeping him pinned in place.

“Kismet, please tell me—”

My hands fall on each of Death’s inner thighs, and his words cut off, like a life drawn short.

My bravery has washed away; my heart is pounding a mile a minute. I am no seductress, and I feel my confident façade crumbling away.

I kneel.

One last breath before I cross that line I drew for myself a year ago.

Inhale.

Exhale.

I take his straining cock into my hand.

The action causes Thanatos to hiss in a breath.

“You can always tell me to stop,” I say, heat burning just beneath my skin.

My core throbs, and my nipples have tightened despite the fact that Death’s the one being touched. I’m turned on and embarrassed of the fact, and somehow that only seems to heighten it all.

I hold Death’s gaze. His cheeks are flushed, he still looks alarmed, but he also looks frenzied for more.

And he doesn’t say *stop*.

I give his shaft a pump.

He bucks helplessly against me.

“*Lazarus*,” he pants. “What are you—?”

“Relax,” I say soothingly. “This is the fun part.”

And then I lean forward and take him into my mouth.

Chapter 42

Sugar Land, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Thanatos nearly comes up off the seat. He looks thunderstruck.

That won't do.

Gently I put a hand against his chest and push him back down.

“*Lazarus,*” he breathes, his voice pained. His chest is rising and falling fast. He looks frantic and bewildered, like he had no idea a human body could feel like this.

Has he never gotten himself off?

I pause, my mouth slipping from his cock.

“You can always tell me to stop,” I remind him.

“*Never,*” he says with all the conviction of a true believer.

The corner of my mouth curves up, then I take him back into my mouth. He groans, one of his hands making a fist on the armrest.

I can't fit all of him into my mouth, so I fist the base of his shaft, pumping in time to the slide of my lips—up, down, up, down.

I take him as deep as I can. There's not much finesse to what I do. To be honest, it's all I *can* do to ignore my gag reflex and the dull ache in my jaw. Despite the discomfort, my pussy *throbs* for the horseman.

I glance up at him as his cock glides between my lips. Thanatos's breathing has grown heavy and ragged. One of his hands is still fisted; the other one moves as though to touch me, but he draws it back, instead gripping the armrest for dear life.

I grab that hand of his and bring it to my hair.

You can still touch me, I want to tell him. My breasts, my face—anywhere. For now, it is yours.

Death's fingers delve into my locks, his other hand moving to my head as well.

He stares down at me with wonder.

"What is—" He cuts off as another stroke of my mouth leaves him breathless. "What is this?"

I grin around his cock, and the sight causes a shudder to roll through him.

"The sight of you kneeling—between my legs—*kismet*," he says roughly. "It is ... *erotic*." He says that last word as though discovering it for the first time.

I don't respond, not when I've found a rhythm. I pick up my pace, and Thanatos is now matching me stroke for stroke. His fingers have tightened in my hair.

His movements grow frantic, his face pinched in what looks like agony as he stares down at me, his hands fisted in my hair.

"Lazarus, something is—" He swears. "*Lazarus!*" he bellows.

Hot jets of cum coat my mouth as he finds his release. I swallow it down, even as Thanatos keeps coming and coming, his body jerking with every thrust.

I can hear his harsh breaths as his thrusts slow. The man sounds like he met his maker. Almost reluctantly his hands slip from my hair.

My mouth slides down the length of his shaft once more, and then I release him, sitting back on my haunches, my breasts still exposed.

Death, normally so rigid and poised, is sprawled out in his seat, his chest rising and falling. He looks completely undone. He stares at me like I'm a specter.

I discreetly wipe the corner of my mouth, licking off a final bead of cum, and I push myself to my feet.

I hope I still look confident because on the inside, I am quaking.

I just went down on Death himself. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop the crazy laugh that wants to bubble out of me.

I pull my dress back up, slipping my arms through the straps. Turning from the horseman, I grab a loaf of bread and the open bottle of wine. Then, casting him one last, heavy-lidded look, I retreat.

For once, I'm not fleeing the horseman. A conqueror doesn't flee from their conquests, they do as they please. And right now, I please wine and bread and a bed where I can deal with this sharp throb between my legs.

"Lazarus!" Thanatos calls out to me, a hint of some new emotion in his

voice.

“Goodnight,” I say over my shoulder.

Tonight was only the first real taste of what I have to offer. I plan to make this slow and excruciating. By the end of it, I intend to have the horseman wrapped around my finger—body, mind, and spirit.

For humanity, nothing else will do.

Chapter 43

Sugar Land, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I'm not surprised to find the horseman pacing the next morning in the house's living room. Death strides up and down a line of windows that overlook the backyard. Right now his back is to me, his wings opening and closing with agitation.

Around us, skeletal servants move through the rooms, carrying crates and other odds and ends.

"Good morning," I say.

As soon as he hears me, Death goes preternaturally still—even his wings pause.

At last, he turns. His eyes first meet mine, then they slide down to my mouth—the same mouth that was wrapped around him last night. One of Death's hands fist and I see his throat bob.

I know he's remembering what I did to him. I bet even now he's trying to figure out just how to slide that cock of his back between my lips and pick up where we left off. That's the trouble with seduction; one person holds far more power than the other. And for all Death's omnipotence, I'm the one in control.

"You left," he accuses. It's an echo of an earlier accusation—that right when he thinks he has me, I run. I can see his loneliness in his eyes, along with his frustration—he has built walls and makeshift prisons to hold me, yet still I slip through his fingers.

"I was tired," I say.

A muscle in his jaw jumps, and his eyes keep returning to my mouth.

"I have been here for hours, replaying what we did—what *you* did," he

admits. “The sight of you in the candlelight, the feel of your mouth around me—” Death’s wings hitch a little, like he’s recalling it even now. “I didn’t know the human body could feel things like that.” He releases a ragged breath. “*Why did you do that?*”

I lift a shoulder. “I wanted to taste you.”

That muscle in Death’s cheek flutters again. “But then you ran.” His wings open and resettle.

I decide to go for a little truth. “I’m still not completely comfortable ... with you.”

For an instant his features flicker, and I swear the horseman looks crushed. Then it’s gone again, his features wiped clean. “How do I make you comfortable?”

“That’s for you to figure out.” I’m not going to do the work for both of us. Seduction is hard enough as it is.

He takes a step forward. “Do all humans ... do what you did?” he asks, his gaze back on my mouth.

I can feel a flush creeping up my cheeks.

“I mean, not *all* of them.” I mean, there must be some pious motherfuckers out there who wouldn’t dare. The rest of us, however, ...

Death gives a slow nod, processing that.

“And does it go both ways?” he asks.

My brows come together. I don’t understand.

“But it must,” he says, more to himself than to me. “Can I make you feel the same sensations you made me feel?”

My eyes go wide. *Oh.*

“It’s a little different,” I begin, noticing how sharp his features are. He’s hanging onto every word. “I don’t have the same anatomy,” I gesture vaguely to my pelvis, “but generally speaking, *yes.*”

Death’s eyes light like an inferno. He takes a step forward, intention written into every solemn line of his body. “So you tasted me and gave me pleasure but didn’t stick around long enough for me to return it. I would’ve.” Another ominous step forward. “That I can swear to you.”

By the look in his eyes, I believe it.

He takes another step. “You must ache as I ached—as I *still do* ache. Let me ease it.”

Ease it?

The thought of my fingers in his fine hair as those supple lips stroke my

core—the very ache he speaks of now blooms within me.

“What would you do if I said yes?” The words are out before I can stop them.

Why did I say that?

Now Thanatos prowls forward, his eyes blazing. “Let me show you.”

I nearly trip over my own feet I back up so fast.

I put an arm out. “Wait—*wait!*” I say.

Very, *very* reluctantly, he pauses.

My mind is racing. I didn’t mean for him to actually act on the question, though now that the thought is in my head, I can’t get it *out*.

Who knows what would’ve happened if, right then, two skeletons hadn’t cut across the room, hoisting a chest between them.

I’ve been so focused on the horseman that I forgot about the dead moving around us, but now that I look, I see signs of them everywhere, stacking dishes, carrying crates, wandering down the halls.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Thanatos doesn’t look like he wants to answer.

“Packing,” he bites out.

My eyes move over them again. “Why?”

“Are we not going to finish our previous conversation?” he demands.

“There’s nothing to finish,” I say.

“On the contrary, there is the matter of *finishing* your pleasure.”

More heat rises to my cheeks. He takes another step forward, as though to resume.

I put my hand up again. “Oh my God, Thanatos, *stop*. I don’t want that right now!” I say this even as my pussy throbs in protest.

“I disagree,” he says vehemently, as though he can sense it as well. “I think you’ll find that any experience I lack in this I will happily make up for with enthusiasm.”

He thinks I don’t want this because he’s *inexperienced*? I want to laugh. Being a giving lover far outstrips *any* inexperience. It’s his eagerness that has me backpedaling. I can feel the power I wrested from him last night now slipping through my fingers, and I’m unwilling to part with it.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet,” I say, throwing out the first excuse I can think of. “And your servants are packing—*why* are they packing? What’s going on?”

Death might not concede defeat all that easily, but I can see that my words

have stopped him—for now.

His jaw clenches. “You have your instincts ... and I have mine.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“I need to keep moving.” The confession comes out quiet.

Moving ... and killing.

The thought chills my blood.

“Us horsemen were made to travel and destroy,” he continues. “I could snap my fingers and wipe out humanity in less than a day—”

Fear curdles in my chest.

“—but I won’t,” he continues. “That is not the task set before any of us horsemen. All four of us brothers *must* understand the creatures we are annihilating. That is why I visit each town. Only once I’ve truly come to understand humans can I make my ultimate decision on them.”

I stare at him aghast as it hits me all over again that he holds the power to destroy or save us all. And I am somehow supposed to change his mind.

“But you don’t know anything about us,” I say softly. “You kill a town before you even ride through it.”

“All the same, I must ride through them.” He glances at the walls around us. “And now, you will ride with me too, Lazarus.”

Outside the mansion, a procession of dead wait underneath the midday sun. Dozens more move about the courtyard, their brittle forms loading the final chests of clothing and crates of food and wine into wagons hitched to skeletal horses. All those sun-bleached bones—both human and equine—move as the living might, as though sinew and muscle and flesh held them together rather than magic alone. Some of the undead servants even seem to have their own particular gait, a trait that must’ve carried over from life into death.

They move with alarming efficiency, never tiring and never uttering a word—not that they could, but it makes the whole thing that much eerier.

I shudder as Thanatos comes for me, taking my hand and leading me to his horse. Neither of us speaks as he hoists me onto his dappled steed, though I suck in a breath when he joins me a moment later. The press of his thighs and chest feel equal parts intimate and imprisoning.

Death gives no order to his servants, he simply swings his horse around, then whistles. At the sound, his steed jolts forward, and then we’re charging down the long driveway, the horse’s hooves thundering against the asphalt road.

Ahead of us I can see the thick ring of monstrous foliage that encircles the property.

Thanatos doesn't slow as we charge towards it, and I brace myself. At the last minute, the plants part like a knife through flesh, and then we're on the other side.

I glance over my shoulder, trying to get a glimpse of the skeletal procession that must be following us, but I can see nothing beyond the broad sweep of Death's shoulder and folded wing.

It's only once we're on the open road that I hear the horseman breathe easy from where he sits behind me.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"West," is his only reply.

That much I actually did know. Death spent the last six months chasing me and Ben through East Texas and a bit of Louisiana. I'm sure he's more than a little eager to head towards new, untouched land.

The thought has me grimacing.

"Have you ever ridden into a city and simply not killed?" I ask curiously.

"I didn't harm the city I found you in," he says.

I'd almost forgotten. "Why didn't you?"

"I was preoccupied."

With me, he means.

Goosebumps prick along my skin. That was one of the few times I saw firsthand what sort of power I had over the horseman. Of course, it didn't much matter to me then because he wouldn't save Ben. But he did spare that city—if only for a day.

"What if you entered and left a town and didn't kill all its inhabitants?" I ask.

It's quiet for a long, drawn out moment. I realize belatedly it's because Death is looking down at me. I glance up at him only to see his skeptical expression.

"What?" I say defensively.

"I must end life," he responds. "That's another one of my instincts."

"You were the one who mentioned that you horsemen must experience humanity before you make your final decision on ending it," I say. "Seems like you're not going to be able to do that unless you let people live long enough to actually understand them."

He's still staring at me, but something flickers in his eyes. Is he ... is he

actually considering my words?

“I don’t always kill immediately,” he says.

“True,” I agree. “But do you actually talk to any humans? Interact with anyone?”

“I interact with you,” he says.

“I’m *one* person. I don’t think I’m a good example of humanity.”

“You’re wrong,” he says. “You are the best example.”

I swallow. I think he’s trying to give me a compliment.

“There’s so much more than me out there,” I say. But it’s clear that Death is too unbending to try to convince him to leave any town, no matter how small, unscathed.

“What if you let a city live long enough for you to experience more of humanity?” I continue, my words carefully light. I’m terrified that my own eagerness will sabotage even this concession.

“I have wings, Laz. I won’t just fit in,” Death says gruffly.

“That didn’t stop you that night in the hospital,” I say.

“I slipped into your room unseen,” he says.

I sigh. “No one is asking you to fit in,” I say. “You’re a messenger of God. People are aware of your existence.”

There’s a long pause.

“Lazarus,” he finally says, “what you’re proposing is madness.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?” I say. “Neither of us can be killed.”

“No good will come of this,” Death says, his voice solemn.

“Is that a yes?” It sounds like a yes.

He glowers at me, but after a moment he inclines his head.

My heart skips a beat.

This plan of mine might actually work.

Chapter 44

Rosenberg, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Death not only makes good on his decision, he extends it a step further. The travelers we cross paths with on the road are spared. They stare at the two of us with wide, petrified eyes as we pass.

Wait until you see the procession of dead behind us.

I reach down and thread my fingers through the hand that holds me fast, giving it a squeeze. I hadn't realized how much this small compromise actually meant to me until now.

Behind me, I feel Death lean in, his lips brushing my ear.

"You like my mercy?" he says softly as, ahead of us, a man turns on his heel and sprints back the way he came.

"That's all I've ever wanted," I say.

He says nothing to that, though his hand squeezes mine back.

We ride in silence until, up ahead, buildings come into view.

A city.

I tense, though I don't know why I do so. Thanatos isn't going to destroy anyone. Maybe it's simply that I haven't actually hashed out what I *should* show Death, now that I've gotten him to agree to leave this city alive for a time.

We pass more and more people—people who scream, people who run, and people whose fear roots them in place. The only thing they all have in common is their palpable fear.

"Tell me again how this is a good idea?" Death says as he steers his steed off the highway.

"It'll be fine," I reassure him.

Now, what human experience should I introduce him to? A restaurant? A shop? A place of worship?

I don't know.

Once we're on city streets, we see even more frightened people. Alarming, I notice several who are armed. More than one of them places a hand over their sheathed weapons.

"Kismet," Death says, "if this is what you wanted me to see, I could've saved you some trouble. I know this is how humans react to me."

I exhale. Of course he's right. People aren't exactly known for being friendly towards things they don't understand—things that have already destroyed much of their world—I just assumed that once they saw Death and realized he wasn't actively trying to hurt them, they'd lose their fear. And to be fair, some people do look curious rather than scared, though they are definitely the minority.

Despite the chilly response, I swing a leg over the saddle.

"*What are you doing,*" Thanatos demands, his hold tightening around my midsection.

"Getting off your horse—if you'll let me go." As I speak, I pry at the horseman's hand. It doesn't budge. "You cannot experience humanity atop a horse."

I sense more than see Death's grimace. "This is a bad idea, Laz," he says, his voice low. But he lets me go, and I slip off the horse. Seconds later he's dismounting as well.

"Now what, kism—?"

"Stop!" someone shouts from behind us.

The sound has me swiveling around.

A line of individuals streams out from behind a faded strip mall down the road. Each of them clutch a bow and a nocked arrow in their hands.

"Don't move or we'll shoot!" This comes from the same voice that called out the first time.

Death moves in front of me. "*I will do as I please,*" he says, his voice carrying down the street.

Bystanders are pinned in place, fearful yet transfixed by the scene unfolding before them.

And this is why my plan was too good to be true. I assumed the best parts of humanity would be at work, but in that assumption was the belief that *best* meant *bloodless* and *empathetic*, when clearly right now it means *brave* and

protective. These people are willing to defend the lives of their community, even against a supernatural entity that cannot be stopped.

“Turn back the way you came,” one of the men instructs, raising his bow in warning.

Unfortunately, turning back is the one thing Death *won't* do.

He prowls forward, and with every step he takes, I see my plan slipping further and further from my grasp.

“This is your last warning!” the man shouts.

The line of archers are now poised across the street, their arrows nocked and ready.

I jog forward. “He’s not here to hurt you!” I call out as I catch up to Death.

Well, he’s not planning on hurting anyone *yet*.

My words fall on deaf ears. I see the lead archer’s hand move, and then he releases the arrow.

I don’t know what I’m thinking. Maybe I’m not. All I have eyes for is that arrow arcing through the air, headed straight for Thanatos. That’s literally it. The sum total of my thoughts.

I lunge for the horseman, crashing into him. He staggers a step, caught by surprise.

I hear the soft hiss of the projectile slicing through the wind a split second before it slams into my chest with agonizing force. It rips through flesh as it pierces my breast.

“*Lazarus!*” Death’s bellow sounds far away as I stagger, choking on my own breath. I stare down at the arrow shaft protruding from my chest.

Forgot ... how bad ... this hurt.

Just as my legs begin to give out, the horseman catches me. His wings sweep up and around us, shielding me from more arrows. More of them do come, sinking into those wings with soft, sickening sounds.

He ignores them entirely.

“*Why did you do that?*” he demands, sounding grief-stricken.

I slump in his arms, forcing myself to focus on his face.

Everything feels wrong.

Think they hit my heart.

“Why?” he demands, those pretty eyes of his panicked. The universe really did make Death’s face just right. This truly is the sight I would most want to die to, his heroic face the final memory I take to my grave.

I reach for that face just as I hear more arrows cut through the air. One by

one they sink into Death's wings. Other than the tick in his cheek Thanatos doesn't react.

But several seconds later, I think I hear the collective thump of a city's worth of bodies hitting the ground, though I'm not sure if I imagined it. Everything feels so removed from me at the moment.

All there is, is Thanatos, his wings, and the sky far above us. I can feel myself slipping into that abyss that I've come to recognize as death. All while Death himself wants me to stay alive.

He reaches for the arrow sticking out of my chest, heedless of the ones that dot his wings. I know what he means to do. I can practically feel the rip of pain even now as I imagine him tearing the projectile out of me.

I place my hand over his. "Take it out ... *after*," I breathe.

After I die. It'll hurt less that way. That's all I can really ask for.

The horsemen's expression morphs when he realizes what I mean.

"So then I must watch you die and do nothing?" he says. He sounds almost angry.

"I thought ... that was ... your kink," I whisper, even as I feel the last of my life slipping ... slipping ...

Thanatos's jaw clenches and unclenches, and oh, the terrible irony that he of all people doesn't like watching me die. When did that become the case?

He gazes down at me, looking on helplessly. "Nothing can be normal with us, can it?" he says.

Death unable to save the undying girl.

I give him a small smile. "Not sure ... I'd want it ... any ... other way."

Chapter 45

Rosenberg, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I groan awake in Death's arms.

"*Lazarus.*" He sounds relieved.

I move a little, then groan again, flopping back into the horseman's arms. I feel like I've been trampled by a herd of wild horses.

Death's eyes pinch a little at the sides, and I'm not sure if it's from tension or humor.

"You protected me," he says softly. His brows are drawn down in confusion, but his eyes are wondrous.

I took an arrow for him.

I reach for my chest, feeling where the material of my shirt has been frayed open. Beneath it, I can feel the slick blood that still coats my skin, but ... the wound has healed over completely.

I heal faster than most humans, but for a mortal wound, it can take many, many hours to heal. I squint up at the sun—it hangs in the same place I last saw it—and Death is still holding me in the embrace he caught me in. My body didn't mend this injury at all.

My gaze moves to Death's. "You healed me."

The horseman is still looking at me like he's trying to see down to the very depths of my soul. The scrutiny makes me fidgety.

"Of course I healed you, kismet." Said like he couldn't imagine otherwise. Like the last two years of violence between us never existed.

I sit up more fully, Death's wings still wrapped tightly around us. For a moment, the horseman's hold on me tightens, but after another moment, he releases me.

As I straighten myself in his lap, something sharp pokes my arm. Turning, I take in the bloody arrowhead nestled among Thanatos's dark feathers. It's one of nearly a dozen that have punctured the horseman's wings.

I suck in a sharp breath. "You're still hurt."

"It is nothing," he says, brushing it off entirely.

"It is *not* nothing," I say, giving Death a look. He focused all his energy on healing me while ignoring his own wounds.

I push myself onto my feet to get a better look at them.

"What are you doing?" the horseman asks, beginning to rise as well.

I place a hand on his shoulder to keep him sitting. "I'm looking at your injuries." Lightly I trace around one arrow's entry point, the surrounding feathers congealed with blood.

"Would you like me to remove these?" I ask.

Thanatos goes still at the offer. Finally, he glances over his shoulder at me. "Is that an honest offer?"

I hold his gaze. He's so used to my tricks and the pain I inflict, that I can tell this throws him.

Slowly, I nod. "It is."

Thanatos stares at me for a bit longer, then faces forward, draping his arms over his knees.

"Then yes," he says. "I'd ... like that."

He stays still, his face turned away from me. I continue to study the arrows piercing his wings, feeling around them a little before I start. Death's feathers make his wings look thicker than they really are, but the flesh itself is no more than a thin membrane.

Since that is the case, the easiest thing would simply be to pull the arrows all the way through. I grab the first arrowhead. Something about my grip has Death's wings hiking up.

"Sorry," I murmur.

"You have nothing to apologize for," he says, turning his head a little towards me.

Slowly, I pull the arrow out through the hole it made in his skin. He doesn't react to the sensation, though I can't imagine it's pleasant.

"I do, though," I insist, giving the projectile one final tug to force the back end of it through. "I wouldn't be pulling arrows out of you if you hadn't agreed to my plan."

It's quiet for a few long seconds.

“You have an exceptional heart, Lazarus,” he finally says. “You shouldn’t apologize for it.”

I stare at the back of Death’s head, swallowing down the strange mixture of emotions rising in me. I see the best in humans, and he sees the best in me, and I’m not sure whether we’re both fools for it.

It’s intimate work, removing the arrows. Death’s wings jerk when I jostle the projectiles, so I’ve taken to smoothing my hand over his feathers. More than once I’ve heard the horseman sigh out a breath; he hasn’t said it, but I think those touches are soothing to him.

“What is it like, having wings?” I ask as I lift one to get at a trickier arrow. I watch in fascination as Death’s primary feathers splay out.

“I don’t know how to answer that,” he says. “It’s all I’ve ever known.”

I pull the arrow out as fast as I dare, making sure to keep my hand steady, even when his flesh catches on the projectile’s fletching.

It grows quiet again as I concentrate on my work, my hands slick with the horseman’s blood. I’m down to the final wound.

“Why did you do it?” Thanatos asks out of the blue.

“Do what?” I ask distractedly.

“You jumped in front of an arrow meant for me.”

Now I pause. Death is looking straight ahead, but I can sense his entire focus is on me.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say.

“Why?”

Because this is only supposed to be one-sided.

I pull this last arrow out a little too harshly.

“Because I *don’t*,” I say, tossing the projectile aside. A pile of bloody arrows now litter the road. “I’m all done.”

Thanatos stands, opening and closing his wings as though to test them. He turns to face me, and I can practically feel his dark power pressing down on me.

“Remember our game last night?” he says. “Tell me your unguarded truths.”

“That was your game,” I tell him, “and we’re not playing it anymore.”

Death takes a step closer to me, his blood dripping from his wings. “Why did you take an arrow meant for me?” he asks again. “You know I can’t die.”

“I can’t either,” I bite back.

“*Lazarus.*” He says my name like he’s calling to my very essence.

I sigh. I’m too weak to bicker and too tired to care anymore. The world is ending. What do my feelings matter?

“I don’t know,” I say. “Truly, I don’t. I saw that arrow coming and all I knew was that I’d rather get hurt than watch you suffer.”

Thanatos rears back a little, his eyes scouring my face, presumably to look for the lie. When he doesn’t find it, he looks ... he looks *very* pleased by my words, though I’m more than a little uneasy.

Traveling with Death—seducing Death—was never supposed to be about me or my complicated feelings. But I’m afraid that despite everything, I do care for this monstrous man.

As we ride through the city of Rosenberg, my eyes sweep over the carnage. A few bodies lie out in the open, and overhead, carrion-eaters are already beginning to circle.

My grandiose plan has blown away like dust in the wind. In fact, I’m not sure it could’ve backfired more spectacularly than how it did.

It’s not until the sun is setting that Death stops his horse out of the blue. He swings off the steed without any sort of explanation, hopping to the ground.

When he begins to walk away from me, I feel an unwelcome sense of abandonment.

“Where are you going?” I call out.

He turns around, though he continues to back away. “Miss me already, kismet?” he says, a curving smile on his lips.

I frown at that smile, even as my stomach flips in the most off-putting way.

First I took an arrow for him, now *this*.

Before I can answer, Death’s expression turns serious, his eyes intense. “Nothing in this world could part me from you for long.”

It sounds like a vow, and I think it’s supposed to be reassuring. And my stomach is definitely not supposed to do that stupid flip thing all over again.

Thanatos’s wings spread wide, and he looks as though he’s getting ready to fly off, but then he pauses.

His gaze finds mine. “Would you like to join me, Laz?”

“Where?” I ask skeptically. “In the *sky*?”

He inclines his head.

No, I wouldn’t. I distinctly hate flying and the horseman and—

I'm off his horse before I can complete the thought.

I cross over to where he stands in the middle of the highway, nothing but fields stretching out on either side of us.

Death stretches out a hand. Ignoring it, I step into him, my arms going around his neck. I tell myself I'm doing this all for Ben and humanity, but then Death smiles at me, and now the lightness in my stomach is back.

The horseman's massive arms wrap around me.

"Please don't drop me," I say softly.

A muscle in his jaw jumps. "Never again," he vows.

Then, as he stares down at me, another slow, delicious smile spreads across his face, even as something softer enters those glittering eyes of his.

"First you protected me, and now you come to me of your own free will."

He's now noticing the same awful pattern I am—I'm going soft.

Death leans in. "I will make sure you don't regret it."

With that, he wraps one of my legs around his waist, then the other. My pelvis is pressed against his lower abdomen, and with my arms wrapped around his neck and my face mere inches from his, this feels intimate. Very, very intimate.

That feeling only increases when Death's arms come around me again, bracing me against him.

"Hold on, Lazarus," he breathes, gazing down at me.

His wings spread wide, then with a leap, we're rising into the air. The pound of the horseman's wings is almost violent, and yet it's like the two of us are in the eye of the storm.

I stare up at Thanatos as we rise. I drink in that ancient face as the wind stirs his hair, my eyes lingering on his beguiling lips and sharp cheekbones. For once his own gaze isn't fixed on me. Instead, it roves over the land around us.

"What are you searching for?" I ask.

"A home fit for a queen," he responds, his eyes still scanning the landscape.

I continue to stare at him, feeling like even though I'm soaring, I'm also in freefall. I lean forward and press a soft kiss to the underside of his jaw. I know I'm immune to death, and yet somehow I'm sure I'm not going to survive this.

After a small eternity in the air, we descend towards an unremarkable patch

of land. I see green grass and trees nestled close together and some dirt roads that this far away look crudely carved into the earth. It's only as my eyes follow that dirt road that I realize Thanatos *did* find another house, one just as palatial as the last.

The ground grows closer and closer, and I can make out a soft knoll that gives way to a muddy pond, and a tiny chapel built off to the side of the house. Lastly, my eyes land on the hacienda-style house with terracotta-colored walls and a red-tiled roof.

Death lands in front of it with me in his arms. I'm reluctant to let go of him, though I tell myself it's just because my arms are stiff from holding on for so long.

Giving me an indulgent look, the horseman releases me.

The sun is low on the horizon, and already, the lampposts set around the property have been lit. Someone had to light each one manually, which means that either the people who live here are still alive ... or Death has just killed them.

I shiver at the thought.

"Cold?" Thanatos asks.

I shake my head, even as I wrap my arms around myself. I begin to walk around the house, my eyes catching on the painted tiles that border each window.

"This is where we're staying?" I ask over my shoulder.

"Mmm," Death murmurs, which I take for a yes.

I run a hand along the wall, only moving away when I notice the large, prickly cactus plants growing up ahead.

"I wouldn't go back there if I were you," Death calls out to me.

To the back of the house?

"Why—?" The word dies on my tongue as I catch sight of movement up ahead.

People are making their way out of the house and towards the trees that surround the property. No one speaks, no one interacts with each other, all of them just robotically march in the same direction.

Just like Death's skeletons.

A shiver wracks my body.

"Lazarus." The horseman's voice holds a world of meaning in it. "Look away."

"Why?" I say, transfixed by the sight ahead of me. "You've never given

me the luxury before.”

The ground gives a violent shake, and I barely catch myself from falling. Far in the distance, I hear a deep groan come from the earth itself.

Two hundred feet ahead of me the soil rips open, gaping like the maw of some primeval monster. The group of people I’m watching all seem to be headed straight for that rift in the earth. The first person steps into it, their body slipping from view.

I suck in my scream, even as another person calmly steps off the ledge of soil and into that hole, falling from view. One by one, this property’s former inhabitants do this until every last one of them is gone.

The earth trembles once more and with another rumble the rift seals itself back up.

I stand there for several seconds more, just staring.

“You shouldn’t have looked,” Death says from behind me.

I make a small noise—my horror nearly palpable.

“They were already dead,” he continues.

Like that makes any sort of difference.

Thanatos comes to my side, studying my face. Whatever he sees causes a spark of panic to flare in his eyes.

The land quakes once more, and prickly cacti begin to rise around the perimeter of the property, sealing me and Death inside.

“Why did you do that?” My voice comes out whisper soft.

“I see your fear,” he says. “I won’t let you escape.”

I feel like we’re right back where we started. How do I stop this man? How do I not lose myself or my integrity in the process? I haven’t figured any of it out, and I don’t see how I’m going to. The other horsemen were wrong. There’s no overcoming all the bad blood between us.

I tilt my head. “Would you take me too?” I ask. “If I were to become truly mortal?”

Thanatos’s wings open and resetttle. “It does not matter. You are not mort
—”

“Would you?” I insist.

He falls quiet, the two of us squared off against one another. Finally, he says, “Lazarus, I wouldn’t have a choice. One brush of my skin—”

“I don’t care about that,” I say. “Would you intentionally kill me if you could, even now?”

He stares at me, those strange and lovely eyes of his particularly tragic.

“Yes, Lazarus, if I could, I would. I *must*.”

I don't know why that hurts, but it does. It feels like a knife to my chest.

I look around at the property, then up at the stars, blinking, blinking.

“Kismet, it doesn't matter—”

My gaze snaps back to him. “You *know* it matters,” I say. This is the same man who refused Famine his mortality because the Reaper had the wrong motives.

Death flinches at my words. He must see me retreating emotionally because he closes the distance between us, reaching out for me.

“Do *not* touch me,” I warn him.

Death's eyes gleam and his wings widen a little behind him in what feels like a weird dominance display—if I knew shit about birds.

“Or what, Lazarus?” he says, his voice unnervingly calm. He takes a step into my space.

“Perhaps we should flip your question around: What would *you* do, kismet, if you could truly kill me for good?” he demands. “Imagine if my death could cause all of humanity to go back to the way it was, and you could be reunited with your son once more. Would you do it? Would you kill me?”

In an instant I would, God help me.

I glare at him, my jaw tightening.

Thanatos sees my answer written on my face. I know he does.

“Stop pretending we are normal,” he says. “We are not. There is no one like us. I cannot kill you and you cannot kill me. We've tried that. It hasn't worked. So let's try something else.”

With that, he closes the last of the space between us and kisses me savagely.

Chapter 46

Hallettsville, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I said I didn't want him to touch me, but I'm a liar. This is the only truth I know in the mess of our relationship.

I fall into the kiss, my arms snaking under the horseman's, my fingers brushing against the base of his wings.

He groans at the touch, pulling me tighter against him.

Stop pretending we're normal. We are not.

I think I needed that reassurance. I needed to be dug up from all of the assumptions of right and wrong that I've held my entire life.

While my lips glide against his, he bends. One of his arms slips under my knees, and never breaking off the kiss, he lifts me into his arms. He begins to move, and distantly I'm aware that he's heading for the house.

I'm only pulled from the kiss when Thanatos makes it to the front door. He lifts a leg and—

Crack, he kicks the door in, the wood ripping from the hinges.

I jolt at the sound, tearing my lips away. With a firm hand, Death turns my head towards him and reclaims my mouth.

Thanatos crosses the threshold, his footfalls echoing through the house as he resumes striding forward, still holding me close. I'm distracted by the kiss, but not so distracted that I fail to notice when we enter a bedroom, a massive bed on display. My stomach tumbles at the sight, even as my pulse pounds.

I've been so focused on seducing Death, that I never really gave much thought to *him* seducing *me*. But it's clear enough that's where things are headed.

He sets me on the bed, backing up only to watch me as he begins to

remove his silver armor bit by bit.

“What are you doing?” I ask breathlessly, pushing myself up on my forearms.

His eyes gleam. “Claiming what I should’ve long ago.”

Arm guards, off, breastplate, off, greaves, off. He removes it all, and then he reaches for his clothing.

“You can always tell me to stop,” he says, echoing my earlier words. It draws a smile out of me, even as my nerves buzz.

He pulls off his shirt, casting it aside.

My breath catches as I take in all of his glowing tattoos. They cover his skin like leopard spots.

With his armor on, Death looks like an angel of God; without it, he looks like something more. *More* than angelic, *more* than otherworldly. It’s hard to believe he can even somewhat pass for human most of the time; it’s so obvious to me right now that he’s something else entirely.

His hand moves to his boots, and he pulls them off one by one.

I almost think that he’s going to stop there.

He doesn’t.

His pants—and whatever lies beneath—come off, and he is completely, gloriously naked.

Thanatos returns to where I lay on the bed, still fully clothed. He places a fist on either side of my head, bracketing me in.

All I can see are miles of rippling muscle and tattoos, and I can’t think straight. My hands twist in the blanket beneath me. I feel like everything between us has been flipped on its head, and all that power and control I collected last night has been siphoned away.

He leans in close. “I have given you so much pain, kismet. Let me give you pleasure to match.”

As the two of us stare at each other, his hands move to the collar of my shirt and—

Riiip.

I suck in a breath as he tears the fabric apart, exposing my bare skin beneath. My heartbeat is quickening. Pain and pleasure will always go hand in hand with Death. I have too many memories of fighting him for it to be otherwise.

I begin to sit up, an action the horseman takes advantage of. He leans in and kisses me roughly. Despite myself, I laugh a little at how exploitive the

horseman is.

He groans against my mouth, nipping at my lower lip. “If I could, I would devour that laughter of yours. There is nothing sweeter.”

My smile fades away. Every time Thanatos says something like that, an unnerving warmth blossoms under my sternum.

To distract myself from it, I break off the kiss and undo my bra, sliding the undergarment off. I lounge back against the bed, though there’s nothing relaxing about this. I’m taut with tension.

Death has a wild look about him, and his eyes are transfixed on my breasts. Reaching out, he cups one.

Thanatos makes a noise low in his throat. “I cannot get over how soft you are,” he breathes. “Or why I find that so damn *alluring*.” As he speaks, his thumb sweeps over my nipple.

I hiss in a breath, my skin so sensitive.

Death grins and runs his thumb over my nipple again. Unthinkingly, I arch into the touch.

“You like that?” he asks.

Before I can answer him, he begins drawing circles around my nipple, staring intently at me. And damn him, but I can’t *not* react to those deft fingers of his, my chest rising and falling faster and faster.

“I know *I* like it,” he continues. “And I really like that look in your eyes.” Death’s voice has gone rough, and this is a wholly unfamiliar side to him.

What look do I have in my eyes?

“But,” he adds, leaning towards me once more, “I want those wicked lips of yours back on mine.”

That’s all he has to say for me to rise up to meet him once more. My arm wraps around his neck as I resume the kiss. Thanatos falls into it eagerly. His lips part my own, and then his tongue sweeps against mine, claiming every last inch he can.

His hips rock against me, and *Jesus*, I want to do bad, bad things to this horseman.

I bring a booted foot up, in between us, forcing him back. The man looks half feral as he gazes down at me, lust thick in his eyes.

“What could possibly make you wish to stop?” he asks.

“Take the rest of my clothes off,” I demand softly.

If there was heat in Death’s eyes before, it ratchets up now as his gaze descends on my lower half. Without responding, he grabs the foot holding

him back and, casting me a wicked look, he removes my boot, then the sock beneath.

He glances down at my foot. “Even your toes delight me, Lazarus. What a wonder you are. What a wonder *this* is.”

This.

That last line has my heartrate jackknifing.

I want to tell him that he’s the wonder, with his glowing tattoos and wings and deadly magic. But I’m afraid that if I speak, if I give into the churning mass of thoughts that he elicits, I’ll slide right into my feelings for this man and I’ll never get myself out.

Death removes the other boot and sock, and then his hands are traveling up my legs and just that sensuous touch has me panicking.

How have we gone from enemies set on destroying each other to *this*?

The thought has barely crossed my mind when I feel Death undo my jeans and begin to pull them down. His fingers snag on my panties, and those come along too. Inch by tantalizing inch, he removes the last of my clothing. He tosses it all aside, his gaze feasting on me.

“*Lazarus.*”

Looking like a man possessed, he prowls onto the bed. His lips and a few locks of his hair skim along my skin as he moves up my body. Death doesn’t stop until the two of us are face to face.

His eyes search mine. “You rob me of breath.”

“It’s *you* who robs me of breath,” I say. I can’t *not* admit that at the very least. Death is the most beautiful, unearthly thing I’ve ever seen.

Death’s gaze lowers to my lips. “I have wanted to kiss you from the moment you first ambushed me and demanded I end my ways,” he says. “It drove me mad, this need I felt but didn’t understand—a need I *still* don’t understand. I thought my brothers were weak for succumbing to it.”

I exhale slowly, trying to process all of that. “You’ve wanted to kiss me this entire time?” I ask.

His eyes fill with mirth. “Among many other things.”

“What other things?” I say curiously.

He trails a finger down the slope of my nose, over my lips and chin. “I wanted to steal you away the first moment I laid eyes on you. I wanted you completely. It was an agonizing, awful experience. I thought it only further proved how wicked humans were, to have desires like that, desires I was now forced to feel.”

My heart thunders to think he'd wanted me even then. I can hardly imagine it, given how everything between us played out.

"And when you didn't die—" Thanatos continues, his fingers skimming down my side, stroking my bare flesh, "when all my power proved useless against you—I knew you were mine, kismet. Knew it as surely as you know your own name."

This should be terrifying—especially in light of the fact that even after he had these realizations, he hurt me, again and again.

But I'm not terrified. Not at all.

There is no one like us.

"Why did you finally give in to your ... human desires?" I ask.

Now his expression softens, and I'm finding it hard to breathe.

"All those lonely months on the road, the monotony of my task only interrupted by your meager attempts on my life—"

"They weren't *meager*," I say, forgetting for a moment that a very naked horseman is pressed against me and that we're about to do filthy things to each other.

He flashes me an indulgent grin like I'm being cute.

"Fighting you became hard, and then it became agonizing," he admits his smile slipping. "But as bad as the fighting was, the parting was worse. I spent months wondering about who you were, and what it was about this miserable human existence that you found so worthwhile.

"And then, eventually, I wanted to know other things, *human* things, about you. Things that even now, I struggle to name because everything about living is so very different than dying. I wanted—I still want—to know about you—what brings you joy, what makes you sad. Wilder still, *I* want to be one of the things that brings you joy."

My throat tightens at his confession, and I cannot look away from the dark depths of his eyes. He's told me some of these things before, but in the fading light of dusk, with my body held against his, it hits me differently.

"Somewhere between all of our confrontations, Lazarus, I came to care about you, and leaving you behind became unthinkable.

"So I stopped fighting that wicked desire to take you, and I gave in. And here we are," he says.

"Here we are," I echo.

The moment stretches on, until finally, I can't stand it any longer.

Moving beneath him, I let one of my legs fall open.

The horseman lifts his body a little to look down between us. I see his nostrils flare, and after a moment, he runs a hand down my flesh—down, down, down—until he gets to my pussy.

Now he moves back to his haunches, his black wings hanging over the edge of the bed as he studies my sex, his eyes burning.

His gaze returns to mine as he deliberately runs his finger down the seam of my slit.

I suck in a breath, my hips moving against him.

“Do you like that?” he asks.

I part my lips to answer, but he’s already running his finger back up my folds again. The moment his finger strokes my clit, my hips helplessly move once more.

His eyes alight and his touch backtracks to my clit.

“What is *this*?” he asks, brushing it once more.

“My *God*, Thanatos,” I gasp out. His light touch is driving me mad.

I reach for his cock, which already looks painfully hard, his strange glyphs glittering along its shaft. The horseman catches my hand and pins it back against the bed.

“No, Lazarus. Let me learn you.”

My body is taut like a bowstring and I’m pretty sure I’m the one who looks agonized. I shudder out a breath and reluctantly nod. He’s never explored another body before. I can be patient with this. I just have to calm down my own raging libido.

Death’s fingers continue to explore my body. They travel down my clit, right to my core. Almost by accident, one of them dips inside me, and I let out a gasp.

Really have to calm down that libido.

In an instant, the horseman’s eyes have honed in on me and my reaction. His finger, meanwhile, retreats—only to slide back in, this time a bit farther.

I writhe underneath his touch, and Thanatos’s expression darkens with desire.

“I think I’m beginning to figure out how this works.”

After several more tantalizing strokes of his finger, it slips out of my core and his hand continues traveling back until his finger finds something else altogether.

“Please don’t make me tell you what *that* does,” I say breathlessly as he traces my other opening.

Death's eyes gleam, his expression somehow both intense and amused. "I don't really care what it does—only whether you like me touching you there." As he speaks, he presses a finger against it.

I bite my lip because *that is my asshole*. Despite myself, I'm still aroused.

Thanatos watches my expression, his gaze searching mine. "You *do* like that." But then his hand retreats and he turns his attention back to my pussy.

His hands slide over my legs, his attention fixed between my thighs. All at once, he grabs one of my legs and hoists it over his shoulder, his feathers tickling the pad of my foot.

I swear I see a shiver rack through him at the contact, but he pays it no mind. Instead, he places my other leg over his other shoulder.

I stare up at him, somewhat confused by this particular turn of events.

"What are you ... ?"

Before I can finish, Death leans forward and places a kiss against my clit.

My body jerks at the sensation, my hips rising to meet those lips of his.

"*Thanatos.*"

He smiles against my flesh.

I nearly die at the sensation of that grin against my skin.

"You *like* that," he says, a note of wicked triumph in his voice.

"It's—"

But he doesn't let me finish.

His mouth returns to kissing my clit, only now he begins doing something with his tongue that—*holy shit*. My hips buck against him, the sensation so sharp it's almost painful.

I reach for his head, my fingers threading through his black hair. I mean to push him away, but there *is* no budging this man. And that tongue of his ...

I go from moans to panting *real* quick.

How is he even *doing* that? He's had no practice.

Death pauses, "I was wrong earlier when I said there was nothing sweeter than your smiles," he says. "*This* is sweeter."

I'm not going to muse on the fact that the man won't eat bread but he'll gladly eat *me*.

I make a senseless, pleading noise because he got me all worked up and then he stopped.

The horseman's eyes blaze with masculine pride. And then his mouth is back on my clit, his tongue laving over it again and again.

"You have to move around," I beg him. "Please—"

“I’ll do what I want, kismet,” he murmurs against my flesh. “And you’ll endure it.” And then he’s back to devouring me.

Filthy, bossy man. I’d hold it against him if it wasn’t my pleasure he was demanding.

The pads of my feet slide against his wings as I writhe, and the horseman makes a satisfied sound as though he enjoys the sensation.

He moves down a little, his tongue slipping into my core.

I yelp.

Oh, that is *dirty*.

“*Death*.” It comes out as a moan.

I am *aching*.

He gazes up at me from between my thighs and he drinks in my expression. Whatever he sees there causes him to flash me a wolfish grin. Thanatos pauses his work to rest his chin on my pelvic bone, looking infinitely pleased with himself.

“What happens if I continue on like this?” he asks, a spark of knowing curiosity in his eyes. “Will you unravel just as I did?”

Yes, and probably within the next thirty seconds, too, if he keeps on doing whatever it is he’s doing with his tongue.

“It’s called an—”

Thanatos dips down and nips me, causing me to yelp again.

“I *know* what it’s called.”

“Please,” I gasp.

He glances back up at me. There’s an inferno in his eyes, yet I can also see his hesitation.

He’s never done this before.

I begin to sit up.

It’s as though he knows where my mind is at. Moving up my body, he captures my hands and pins them on either side of my head, his erection brushing my thigh.

“You are to stay *here*,” he commands me, his expression fierce.

“But—”

“Must I bring down the rain and lightning or draw the roots and the dead up from the ground? Or make the earth quake and buildings fall to remind you who I am? I set my sights on you a year ago, but I haven’t fully taken you—not yet. So lay back, kismet, and *let me show you what it means to be mine*.”

Chapter 47

Hallettsville, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Death is magnificent then, his wings spreading wide behind him, his tattoos glittering in the candle-lit room, his blazing eyes promising things that even I know nothing about.

I hold his gaze, then subtly, I sink back into the bed, relaxing.

His expression doesn't seem to change but his gaze looks oh so pleased.

His hands are still holding mine down, and now his fingers thread through mine. Death leans in, his mouth taking my own once more. Only, there's no mistaking the carnality of this kiss as his tongue slips between my lips. His mouth is searing. It's like a fire has been lit beneath my skin. And I'm kissing him back, and the two of us are going from gentle and sweet to hot and heavy *real fast*.

Rain begins to patter against the house, just like he threatened only moments before.

Thanatos releases one of my hands and grabs my thigh, aligning our bodies. I feel his cock then, right at my entrance. Thanatos breaks off the kiss, his hand tightening.

This is it.

The two of us gaze at each other as Death shifts his hips and begins pushing in.

He's big—really, really big—and even though I'm plenty wet, it's still an adjustment. My fingers tighten around his, bracing myself against the sensation of being stretched.

Death goes still, his cock throbbing as it rests partially inside me.

“Tell me to stop and I will stop,” he reminds me. His pupils are blown

wide, and his jaw keeps clenching and unclenching with the effort of keeping absolutely still, and I'm sure the horseman would learn what true suffering is if I did take him up on the offer.

But I don't. I've never experienced anything like this. I feel as though this must be what electricity was like—sharp and blindingly bright.

“Don't stop,” I breathe, dreading the thought as much as Death must. Already, my flesh is adjusting to his girth.

No sooner have I spoken than he simply *gives in*. With a groan, the horseman thrusts forward, sheathing every last inch of his cock inside me.

My lips part and my fingers squeeze his to the point of pain. I'm throbbing—or maybe he's throbbing. It's hard to say; there's so much more sensation down there than I've ever felt before.

Death's gaze devours mine. There's a sharp edge to his features and a muscle in his cheek keeps clenching and unclenching. Outside, the rain pelts down, and in the distance, thunder rumbles.

I pull my captive hands free so that I can hold him close to me. “*This is living.*”

He gives a soft laugh, though his features quickly sober up, especially as he withdraws, only to thrust back into me a moment later. My hips rise to meet his.

I let out a moan at the intensity of it all. Death does it again, a shudder coursing through him at the sensation.

“How I have yearned for this moment.” His knuckles graze my cheek. “And yet none of my wildest yearnings could've prepared me for the sight of you beneath me, or the press of your skin against mine.”

I shift a little, the action causing him to make a noise low in his throat.

“*And the feel of you clenched around my cock like you don't want it to leave.*”

“I don't,” I admit.

The ground trembles at my response.

Death's thrusts begin to pick up speed, his breath hitching as he finds his pace. A line has formed between his eyebrows and I've never seen anyone as sexy as Thanatos is in this moment, all his exquisite agony on display.

“I can't get over the feel of you.” His fingers skim over my flesh. “And the taste of you,” he adds, pressing a quick kiss to my lips. “You are how I expected wine to taste.”

His wings flex with each thrust, and I can't help but reach out and run my

fingers over the inky black feathers.

He groans, driving deeper into me. His cock pistons in and out—again and again and again.

I spread my legs wantonly, moaning. This is definitely worth the direct hit my morals are taking.

“Thanatos.”

His eyes flash. “Say my name again,” he demands.

“Thanatos.” I barely get it out. I’m all sensation.

Rain is battering against the house, and outside lightning flashes. For an instant, I see strange, skeletal markings overlay Thanatos’s skin and wings, then they’re gone. Somehow, the terrifying display only adds to his dangerous appeal.

I’m writhing against the horseman, my entire body moving with each throbbing thrust, barreling me towards an orgasm.

Not ready.

Not nearly ready.

This is the best sex of my life and I want to last more than a couple minutes.

But Death is having none of that. He’s given himself over to pleasure completely, pumping into me with abandon as he devours my expression. Somewhere along the way this went from soft and sensual to *primal*.

Can’t put it off any longer—

“Death!”

My orgasm explodes through me, my vision darkening in the wake of it.

The floor trembles, rattling the bed, and then Thanatos bellows, his wings spreading wide. His hips slam into mine, his cock sinking deep within me. The earth shakes and lightning flashes again, illuminating that skeletal overlay. Outside I hear strange, fearsome noises over the rain.

The two of us come down slowly from our orgasms. The horseman’s wings fold back up and his thrusts turn languid. Eventually, he pulls out. But then he’s kissing me all across my cheeks and the bridge of my nose, my eyelids and forehead, and finally my mouth.

I feel my throat tightening at how gentle he’s being, how cherished he’s making me feel.

“Lazarus, Lazarus, Lazarus,” he murmurs. Outside the rain is subsiding. “Tell me that was the most amazing experience you have ever felt—because *it was the most amazing thing I ever have.*”

Tell this virgin that he just gave me the best sex of my life? If I wasn't so mind-blowingly satisfied, I'd be annoyed at the sheer *audacity* Death has to not fuck up the most fuck-up-able first-time act.

My fingers slip through his hair and I catch his mouth with mine. And then I nod against him. "It was."

He pulls away, his dark eyes intense. His gaze moves down my body, his expression hazy with possessive pride. His gaze stops at the juncture between my thighs, and he must be seeing evidence of his own orgasm.

He shakes his head in disbelief. "This is very, *very* strange to me, Lazarus." He runs his fingers over my pussy, smearing his cum. "Strange and enthralling."

Now that my skin's cooling and the deed's been done, my heart begins to pound, my stomach knotting up as I look at him.

I don't know what to do.

In the past, I had so many reasons to push Thanatos away. But now, those have evaporated. More than that, I have a deep seated fear that somehow, this is what breaks the spell that's come over Death. Now that he has been inside me, whatever force that drove his obsession with me will wither away.

Yesterday, I left Thanatos after I had finished him off. I brace for him to do the same.

Instead, he withdraws his hand from between my thighs and stretches out on his side. A moment later he pulls me to him, his face aching close.

My heart is still pounding, but that sick feeling is evaporating away, particularly once he throws one of his legs over my own.

I reach out and touch that perfect face, with his enviable cheekbones, and I stroke his pale skin. He really does have the sort of face that myths are made of. I've never in my life seen someone who looks like this, and I could never imagine what it might feel like to have them look at me the way Death is looking at me now—like I am the only thing worth having in this world. His eyes are devouring me, the candlelight making them look like water in the moonlight.

I don't look away. I stare and stare and let this terrifying feeling between us build.

"*Lazarus,*" Thanatos says softly. He wets his lips, and the two of us are balancing on some precipice.

I don't respond, ensnared by his eyes.

"Kismet, tell me you are mine," he says softly.

I've spent so long fighting, it's a strange feeling, giving in.
"I am yours."
For better or worse, I am.

Chapter 48

Hallettsville, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I wake to the press of Death's mouth against my body. I'm already arching against him, my flesh hungry for more of his touch.

"I tried to let you sleep—I did—but I cannot get this fire you've stoked out of my veins," he whispers against my skin.

Why hadn't I thought to give in to the horseman earlier? This is so much preferable to fighting.

As Death moves up my body, trailing kisses in his wake, I feel the brush of his erection. He stops only when the two of us are face to face, his hips nestled between mine.

"Tell me you no longer want me like I want you," he says, searching my eyes. "Tell me I am mad."

"You are mad," I say.

Something flickers in his eyes. Disappointment?

"But then," I add, "so am I."

With that, I pull him to me.

Early morning sunlight filters into the room and someone is drawing shapes into my skin. I smile, stretching as I bask in the feel of it all.

I jolt when I remember.

Thanatos.

I turn, and there he is, propped up on a forearm, his naked body pressed against mine, and I can smell faint traces of frankincense and myrrh wafting off his skin—or maybe it's on my skin. Or the sheets. Somehow, he's everywhere.

In the sobering light of morning, this is all real in a way that last night wasn't. We don't just go our separate ways. This will continue on and on.

Death's eyes crinkle at their corners. "You look like I have left my mark on you."

I discreetly run my tongue over my swollen lips and smooth my tousled hair. "You seem pleased by that."

"I am. I have never left my mark on any mortal—at least, not like this."

I feel my cheeks heat.

His hand is back on me, his fingers drawing lines across my body once more.

"To think I once hurt this skin." A very real shudder courses through him. "Unfathomable."

I mean, my pussy took a beating last night and it probably will take another one today, so it's not *too* unfathomable ...

"I have hurt you too," I remind him.

"To protect yourself and your people. I was always the aggressor, even when you waited to ambush me. I know you only ever did it to protect those people—people who were strangers to you."

He strikes something raw and real, and it hurts.

"I would hunt down my enemies too if I knew they were bent on destroying all that I cherished." He has an intense look as he says that.

I swallow. "You have a lot of perception for a man who isn't even human." I don't know that many people can empathize this well.

Death exhales, still staring at me. "I have had hours alone to think about it all."

"But it changes nothing," I say quietly—almost questioningly.

"But it changes nothing," he agrees.

"I still intend to stop you," I say. Just in case he's forgotten.

"I know," Death agrees, his eyes sad.

Now it's my turn to exhale, the easy, uncomplicated morning dissipating away. Thinking of humanity reminds me of Ben, and all I must do to save him for good.

I have a plea for Thanatos, one I want to make so badly it hurts. But being in this man's bed changes nothing—he said so himself—and I am afraid of drawing his attention in this particular direction.

"What is it, Lazarus?" he asks. "You look as though a cloud has covered the sun—what troubles you?"

I stare into Death's strange and complex eyes and I come to a decision.

"I spent an entire year hiding from you, all to keep my son alive," I say.

Thanatos's face grows solemn.

"Can you promise me that you won't kill him?" I whisper.

"Kismet," he says, "I take everyone. Not even your son is exempt from that fate—but I have no plans to take him any time soon."

I nearly choke on my relief, even as a part of me now wants to analyze the horseman's definition of *soon*.

I grab Death's hand and clasp it tightly in mine. "Promise me you won't."

I'm supposed to be seducing Death for humanity's sake, but I've always placed Ben's life above the greater good. I'm not about to grow magnanimous all of a sudden.

A line forms between the horseman's brows.

"I will do anything you like." I press in closer as I speak.

Death's nostril's flare and his jaw clenches with his restraint. "Stop it, Lazarus. I don't make deals like that." Even though he wants to. He definitely wants to.

He's still unbending on this. I try not to let that worry me—but it does. Sleeping with him was supposed to soften him. What do I do if it doesn't?

You spent a year battling this man into changing his ways. You can spend a year banging the change out of him. Have a little patience, Laz.

"Tell me about your Ben," Thanatos says. "That night in the hospital, you said you thought he was deathless, like you. Why did you think that?"

I shudder out a breath. "The first time you took me captive, shortly after I escaped, I came across a nearby town ..." I fall back into the memory. "The people were all dead, but the structures still stood." I can still feel the chill sting of the rain and the desperation that pushed me onwards. "I only meant to stop long enough for supplies, but then I heard a baby crying inside one of the homes."

My eyes meet Death's. "Ben survived your attack on the town."

The horseman listens raptly, though now his lips pull down into a slight frown. "That's impossible," he murmurs, even though I can tell he believes me.

"You thought my survival was impossible too," I say.

Thanatos inclines his head.

I draw in a breath, and continue. "So I took Ben, and I fled from you."

I run my teeth over my lower lip, lost in thought. "The truly strange thing,"

I admit, “is that it is nearly identical to how my mother found me two decades ago.”

I swear the horseman’s gaze sharpens on me.

“How so?” he asks.

“My mother discovered me in a town that Pestilence had ridden through. She’d heard my cries as she was passing through, just as I heard Ben’s, and she saved me and took me in as one of her own.”

Death looks troubled by this information, but before either of us can say anything more, movement out of the corner of my eye has me jolting. Without thinking, I clutch Death close to me.

I feel the horseman gaze down at me as he pulls me in deeper.

“It’s only my revenants,” he says as the skeletons in question move through the room, hauling a chest. “I wanted to wait until you were awake before I had them bring in your things.”

I sit up, keeping myself covered with a blanket—even though the only other person in this room who has actual eyes is Death, and he’s already seen his fill. I watch as more skeletons enter and fill the closet and bathroom up with clothes and amenities.

I get my first real look at our surroundings now too.

The inside of the home has a southwestern feel to it, with painted tiles inset around doorways and windows and a red tile floor covered by a large sheepskin rug.

Even as I watch, the skeletons are removing some of the less permanent objects that decorated the space. They take hats, shoes, clothes—all those little, personal mementos of the previous owners.

I continue to watch the revenants. They still give me the chills, but when one happens to come over and lay out a platter of sliced bread and cheeses, I don’t pause too much before I start eating.

“This was considerate of you,” I say to Death.

“I live in fear of the day I hear your stomach *speak* again,” he says. “I think she hates me more than the rest of you.”

I almost forgot about that time Thanatos heard my stomach growl.

“I didn’t realize it had made such an impression on you,” I say.

“Everything you do makes an impression on me,” he says solemnly.

At that, I quiet.

Death doesn’t have much room for remorse in him, but he seems to have saved a little for me.

I polish off the bread and cheese, not bothering to offer the horseman any. I already know he'll refuse. Once I finish, I dust my hands over the tray.

"Can you have your skeletons draw up a bath—one with hot water?" I ask curiously. It's the rarest of indulgences in this day and age.

Thanatos's brows pinch together, but his gaze slides to the nearest revenants. Abruptly, one of them stops what it's doing and moves to the adjoining bathroom.

I can hear it working a hand pump, and then the splash of water.

"Have you ever had a bath?" I ask the horseman, perking up a bit.

Death shakes his head. "No."

I grab his hand and tug him as I slide out of bed. "Then let's hope the tub is big enough for the two of us—and your wings."

"Why would it need to be?" he asks.

"Because you're going to join me."

The bath is big enough for the two of us, I discover when I pull the horseman into the room. It's a sunken tub, the basin large enough to hold two adults—though Death is going to have to drape his wings over the edge.

The bath is mostly full, though the water is still being warmed up. A skeleton enters the bathroom then, holding a kettle. I ignore the burning urge to cover my naked body—*they don't have eyes*—though I do back up into one of Thanatos's wings.

It curves around me, and when I glance up, I see the horseman gazing at me, wearing a small smile.

"I have seen you face pain and certain death stoically, kismet. Surely my revenants do not frighten you."

"Of course not," I agree, not moving away from his wing.

Death's smile reaches his eyes. After a moment, he takes my chin. "You can *always* hide in my wings—though I will require a kiss every now and then."

Before I can respond, the horseman bends down and steals one from my lips. It's over before it's even begun, and I'm left staring at Thanatos's face as he pulls away.

"That was sneaky," I say, though my delivery comes out all wrong. I sound full of want.

"I am standing naked next to you," Death says, his voice low, "nothing about me is sneaky right now."

He does have a point.

The horseman turns his attention back to the tub, where more skeletons are pouring hot water into the basin.

“Tell me about bathtubs,” he says.

I try not to laugh. “I’m sure you know about them.”

He frowns a little. “I know humans wash themselves. But that is about it.”

Right. Okay.

“There’s not much to them,” I say as the skeletons file out of the bathroom. “You fill the tub with water, you get in, and you bathe.”

Death frowns again, and it makes my heart pound a little faster. I don’t really understand what divides the horseman’s vast knowledge on certain subjects with his ignorance on others, but with this ... he seems to be more than a little lost.

“Here,” I say, stepping into the bath. I almost sigh at the hot temperature. It’s been far too long since I took a hot bath. Turning around, I reach out a hand for him. “Come on in—I promise you’ll like it.”

He takes my hand but doesn’t immediately let me lead him in. Instead, he lowers his other hand into the water.

“Are we going to wash each other?” he asks, a note of curiosity in his voice.

“Of course,” I say, letting his hand go so that I can sink into the bath.

Ahhh. This is divine.

I think it’s my ease that finally convinces the horseman to get in—that or my boobs, since they’re basically waving to him.

Thanatos steps into the water, doing his best to sit down across from me. He glances over his shoulder at his wings, which do in fact drape over the edge of the basin. “I clearly wasn’t designed with bathtubs in mind.”

He really wasn’t designed for human life in general—not with those wings.

The horseman settles back as best as he can. “What now?” he asks.

“Now you enjoy it. I mean, if this was a *cold* bath, you’d grab a bar of soap and scrub yourself as fast as you could. But hot baths you soak in.”

Death sits there gazing at the water, a frown tugging at the corners of his lips, as though he doesn’t know how to just idly sit and enjoy something.

On a whim, I move over to him, slipping onto his lap and straddling his thighs, his cock trapped between us. Beneath me, I can feel it thickening.

His hands slide around my waist, and I can see the want in his gaze, but he

doesn't press me for any sort of intimacy. To be honest, the horseman probably has no idea how much sex is too much for a mortal to take. Death really doesn't have limits.

The thought of sheathing myself on him has my core aching despite the fact that I *am* sore. Instead of acting on the impulse, I slide my hands over the horseman's arms, touching his countless markings. My eyes keep coming back to them, these glowing glyphs that cover almost the entirety of his body. They start low on his neck and drip down his arms and torso, only tapering off near his hands and ankles.

"What are these?" I ask, tracing one. My finger tingles a little as I make the shape.

Death gazes down at me, his eyes intense. "They are my most innate language—Angelic."

"Angelic," I echo, staring at them. I think I understood that from the very first time I saw them, and yet I hadn't actually considered what that meant.

My fingers move from his arms to his chest. "What do they say?"

"Many things, kismet, but mostly, they speak of creation ... and destruction."

A shiver races through me. There's so much writing—his entire body is painted with it. The glow from all of them is making the bathwater luminous.

"Can you read me some of them?"

He stares at me. "These words are not for human ears."

Go figure. I trace a particularly unusual one.

"However," he continues, "you are not quite human either, are you, Lazarus?"

My eyes snap to his. Death stares at me with such naked longing. We've tasted and touched each other—there should be nothing left to long for. But it's there, in his eyes.

He holds my gaze. "*Inwapiv vip jurutav pua, uwa epru juriv petda og ruvawup keparip pufip hute. Ojatev uetip gurajaturwa, oraponao uetip hijaurwa. Repar pue peyudirwit petwonuv, uwa worjurwa eprao fogirwa. Uje urap haraop pirgip.*"

I close my eyes, my fingers digging into Death's skin as he speaks. I begin to tremble because I *feel* those words, though I don't understand them, and I swear they're strangling me from the inside out even though I can also sense their sanctity.

Death translates. "*I am the last of my kind, and I bring with me every*

manner of malady to plague humankind. Their fields shall blacken, their creatures shall flee. Mortals will quake before my name and all will fall to my touch. For I will end the world.”

When I open my eyes, I see the horseman for what he is—*death*. And I feel that stillness around us, the one that I have gotten so used to since being with him, and I once again smell the scent of frankincense and myrrh, even though the water should’ve rinsed most of it away.

“Yes, you understand, don’t you?” he says quietly. “I am no man.”

I swallow. “Tell me something else,” I say softly.

His eyes flick to mine. “You want to know more?” he says.

“I want to know everything about you,” I admit. And it’s the truth, even if it’s an echo of Death’s own words.

I want to learn about him the same way he wants to learn about me.

Thanatos’s eyes gleam. I think he’s actually moved by my answer.

After a moment, he says, “Ask, and I will answer as best I can.”

I’m supposed to *pick* a question? I don’t even know where to begin.

I settle for, “Why me?”

He scrutinizes me. “You mean, why, out of the millions of people alive, are you the one who is here, at my side?”

I nod.

“Can you not see for yourself how exceptional you are?” he says, tilting his head.

My gaze dips, and I trace a glyph on one of his pecs, leaving little droplets of water in my wake.

“I mean, I can’t die,” I say, “and I get how that makes me special, but why was I given even *that* ability? There’s nothing particularly extraordinary about me.” I’m a shitty marksman, I was a mediocre student despite my best efforts, and while I was a decent athlete, I never stood out. I’ve never actually stood out for anything—deathlessness aside.

Death reaches up, the water lapping around us. He strokes my cheek. “If you could see yourself through my eyes, you would think differently, *kismet*. The woman who worked valiantly to stop me—who fought and died again and again to protect her kind—I have met countless souls, and I can tell you firsthand that none of them have proven their worth in such a way.

“But even if you don’t see yourself as exceptional, *I* do, and the universe must as well, or else you never would’ve ended up in my clutches.” He reaches down and squeezes my ass to emphasize his point.

I yelp a little, and much to my shock, Thanatos throws his head back and laughs.

I drink in his amusement, mesmerized by the sight of him. I'm so used to Death's solemnity that, when he laughs, he transforms into someone else entirely. I find I want to get to know *this* part of him much, much better.

Even once Death stops laughing, the laughter doesn't leave his eyes. "Every single one of us horsemen was given a woman. You are mine."

"Given?" I echo, grimacing. I take *issue* with that phrasing.

He laughs again at my expression, the sound of it—

This is what euphoria sounds like.

"You look about the same as I did when I learned this. If it makes you feel any better, I was given to you as well."

The literal embodiment of death was given to me as a husband? That should sound terrifying, but right now, straddled on his lap with his absurdly pretty face mere inches from mine, I am not nearly as disappointed as I should be.

I clear my throat. "That does *not* make me feel better," I lie.

"Mmm ..." he murmurs pensively, "then perhaps this will."

Before I can respond, he lifts me, but only for a moment. Then he brings my hips down, driving himself into my tight sheath.

I gasp. So much for Thanatos holding back.

My fingers dig into his skin where I clutch him. "Are you really going to use sex to make—?"

The horseman cuts me off with a kiss, and yes, he does in fact use sex to make me feel better.

And damn that bastard, but it works, too.

Chapter 49

Hallettsville, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Neither of us leave the master suite for days. Now and then a skeleton brings in food and water—none of which Death partakes in. Other than that, all of our needs are encapsulated in the four walls around us.

Every so often the horseman's full regalia appears on his body by some invisible hand. It's never on him for very long before he casts it off again. Even his torch makes an appearance, the scented smoke giving the room a cloying, perfumed smell.

The days blur together. But, the more time goes by, the more frenetic the sex with Death becomes and the more often it occurs. It seems he's desperate to drive off his need to travel by leaning into his need for me.

I don't know what day it is when I slide out of the horseman's clutches and venture into the closet. I can feel his heated gaze on me as I look through the clothing, picking out a white shirt and a pair of jeans that I don't hate.

Death doesn't say anything until I've finished putting on the clothes and reach for a pair of boots.

"Where are you going?" he asks lazily, his eyes beckoning me back to him. It's almost enough to convince me to rejoin him in bed.

"My pussy needs a break, Thanatos." How many times has he slid into me today? Five? Six? *More*? I have been wrung dry of orgasms and it's still the morning. At this point, I need to ice my vagina.

"Do you ache?" Death says. "Come here, kismet. I will soothe it."

I know *exactly* how he plans on doing that.

I give him a look, even as I nab a pair of socks and begin putting them on. "I know you need to travel again. No amount of sex will change that."

He frowns. Whatever his reasons are, Death is trying to stave off his duty. I doubt it's because he has some bleeding heart for humankind—but I am moved by it all the same.

Still, just like many other aspects of this horseman, I cannot keep up with his sexual appetite. Not when it's in overdrive like this.

"I don't want this to end," he admits.

I give him an odd look. "It won't."

"But it will. I will carve a path through the next several towns and you will witness it all, and you will remember that beneath every gentle touch we have shared, you still hate me."

I swallow. I can feel the truth in his words.

"Why does that even matter?" I ask, grabbing one boot and pulling it on.

"I don't want you to hate me."

I stare back at him, unsure what to say. One moment he's omnipotent, and the next he's vulnerable.

This is your chance. The one Death's brothers were hoping for when they struck that deal with me. Death doesn't want me to hate him; there's an easy way to do that—

"Don't kill the next town, then," I say.

His black feathers ruffle a little. "You know I cannot."

I didn't expect him to say anything different.

"Then at least hold off on the killing until you have moved through the town and seen what life is like," I say, focusing on putting on my other boot so that I don't have to look at him.

"Kismet, I'm not doing that again."

I glance up at Death just in time to catch him staring at my chest, right where that arrow pierced me. I get the uncanny feeling that he's remembering how I dove in front of him, and how he held me as I died.

"You wanted me to catch a glimpse of humanity," Death continues. "I caught it—it's the same glimpse I always see. They want me dead and they don't mind hurting you to accomplish that."

My throat thickens with emotion. He's being protective of me. Context aside, it feels good to be cared about.

"Thanatos," I say softly, "if everyone was truly like that, I wouldn't be fighting for our survival."

He gives me a penetrating look. "No," he reluctantly agrees, "you wouldn't." After a moment, he adds, "And you're right, not all humans are

like that.” He studies my face for a moment.

Drawing in a deep breath, he nods. “I can deny you little. Just please don’t make me regret this.”

I move through the house like a specter, Death at my side, my eyes skimming over the few southwestern-style decorations the skeletons didn’t remove from the home. But I’m not really seeing any of it, not when my senses are more focused on the metallic scrape of Death’s armor and the quieter rustle of his wings. His presence, even now, has my flesh prickling. It was so much easier in the bedroom, when skin met skin and we simply gave into the tension between us.

Now, however, ... Thanatos was right to be nervous. I have no idea how to act or feel around him.

We cross the entryway, where revenants are already streaming in and out of the house, lugging barrels and boxes in their bony arms. The previously broken front door is propped open, its previously ripped out hinges repaired and reattached. As I catch sight of what lies beyond the open doorway, I suck in a breath.

What in the hell?

I can’t make sense of what I’m seeing, not until I actually step outside, the horseman at my back.

The last time I laid eyes on the house, I could see the terracotta-colored walls quite clearly. Now, they’re hidden beneath thick layers of dead vines.

“What is all this?” I ask.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed the light getting dimmer over the last several days,” Thanatos says at my back.

No, I actually hadn’t. Just as I hadn’t noticed the home’s decorations. This is just one more thing I’ll have to file away under “Shit Lazarus Doesn’t Notice When She’s Boning a Hot Dude.”

But I’m not about to tell the horseman that.

I give Death a wide-eyed look. “Were you trying to keep me locked in here?”

“You think *that’s* what I’ve been doing this entire time?” he says, mirth in his eyes. He steps in close. “Kismet, there are a thousand ways I could force you to stay at my side. Why would I even *bother* intentionally sealing you inside this house when seducing you has proven to be far more successful—and pleasurable?”

I stiffen at that particular word. *Seducing*. I'm supposed to be seducing *him*, not the other way around. He's just supposed to be blithely enjoying himself and dumbly falling under my spell. But to think that he's been trying to seduce *me*? I don't like that. Not one bit.

Thanatos continues, "I allowed myself to unleash my powers when I was inside you. That," he nods to the dead vines, "is merely evidence of it."

I face the vast front yard once more. I can't see much—the vines have wound themselves into a makeshift wall in front of me, though it's been cut away at. Death's servants must've battered through it to gain access outside.

I step forward, my boots crunching over more dead vines and leaves that litter the ground.

It's only once I get past the thick wall of vegetation that I notice *bones* scattered along the ground. They're *everywhere*—some of them even have grotesque, fleshy bits still attached to them. They're not moving—not like the other revenants that I can see even now in the driveway. Many of these bones don't even look human. They do, however, smell God awful.

I put the back of my hand to my mouth.

Death steps up to my side. "As I said, I unleashed myself."

He walks past me, whistling for his horse, as though that's all that needs to be said on the subject. I stare after him. He literally brought the dead back to life when he fucked me. I'm ... going to need some aftercare for that one.

Death's steed trots over from the back of the house, and the horseman looks over his shoulder at me, waiting.

I take a deep breath and head over. I don't look at Thanatos when I get to his side; instead, I pull myself into the saddle. Out here, beyond the vines that encircle the mansion, dozens of skeletons are loading up waiting wagons.

Thanatos hoists himself into the saddle behind me. He's been eerily calm, considering his earlier anxiety, but now that he is pressed against me, I can feel his body trembling with the need to move.

Still, he pauses. "I want to stay here forever and forget everything else that gets in the way of this," he admits.

But he cannot.

Yet, bones and vines aside—

"I do, too," I say quietly. Here, the world was not on fire. Here we were just lovers.

Death's arm settles around me, holding me tight. He clicks his tongue and his horse takes off, galloping down the long driveway.

Despite our sentimental words, neither of us looks back.

We've only ridden about five miles or so down the road, when a realization hits me, robbing me of breath.

Death and I have been having sex.

Sex.

That comes with repercussions, repercussions I've ignored up until now because I've been too caught up in the horseman himself.

Feel like someone kicked me in the chest.

"Do you want children?" I ask carefully.

Death has been idly stroking my thigh up until now. At my words, his fingers pause.

"Why do you ask, kismet?" he says.

That's not a *no*. There is, however, a note in his voice ... one I can't place.

"We're having sex," I'm trying to control the panic in my voice. *It's going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine.* "Sex leads to children." I can barely hear my own words over the pound of my heartbeat. I can't even say *what* I'm particularly petrified of.

"No," he says softly, "it doesn't. Not with me."

It doesn't?

I let out a shuddering breath. No children. I can rest easy.

Then I remember something else.

"But your brothers have families."

"Ah," Death says, understanding. "You think because they can get women pregnant that I can too?"

I mean ... can't he?

"Is it possible?" I say.

Thanatos is quiet for a long moment before answering. "Technically, yes. But I reign over *death*, kismet. That includes preventing the conception of life."

I glance back at the horseman, open my mouth, then shut it again before facing forward once more. Alright. The man is shooting blanks. Got it.

I take a deep breath. "So I cannot get pregnant," I say. I just need some affirmation.

"Not without my allowing it," he says.

Allowing it?

So he can choose whether or not to be fertile? I make a face because that is

way more information than I'm ready to process.

"And you won't allow it," I say. Just so we're absolutely clear.

"I won't," he agrees.

I exhale, relaxing against the horseman once more.

Well, that's one less thing to worry about at least.

After a long moment, Death asks, "Do you want children?"

"I already have a child," I say.

"But would you want more? Would you want ... my children?"

For several seconds, all either of us hear is the steady *clop* of his horse's hooves.

"Lazarus?" he prods.

"No," I admit.

At my back, I feel Death go preternaturally still.

"No?" he echoes. "Why not?" Again, something enters his voice, but I cannot tell *what*.

"Because you're hell-bent on killing the world, and that makes you the absolute worst choice for a father," I say.

"*Heaven*-bent," he corrects icily.

Is he offended? Why? He literally just told me that the last thing he wants is kids.

I clear my throat. "It doesn't matter anyway because like you said, it's not happening."

A tense silence falls over us. Despite all of his proud proclamations, I get the impression that the mighty Thanatos is actually hurt by my answer.

What a thought.

Chapter 50

Dripping Springs, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

We head north, retracing our long ago steps through Austin.

Or at least, what remains of it.

The buildings have fallen, and Death has to navigate us around debris scattered across the highway. I don't see much of the damage up close since we never move onto city streets, but I don't see another soul, living or dead.

The smell, however, lingers in the air, and the deep rooted stench of it makes me think that there were recently dead carcasses lying about that either scavengers dragged out of sight ... or Death had.

I wouldn't be surprised if it was the latter. I know he feels our newfound romance is fragile, and he probably wants to do everything he can to not mess it up—which would include hiding bodies.

Ah, horseman chivalry. What a concept.

We move through Austin, and continue on. The sun has just set when I start seeing standing structures in place of collapsed ones. Untouched land. Even then, however, the houses are sporadic.

"I have made a mistake," Death admits, out of the blue.

I glance over my shoulder at him. "What is it?" I ask.

"I have been so keen on passing the land I've touched that I have forgotten to find a place for us to stay."

Touched? That's what he's going to call the destruction around us?

I'm quiet.

"I don't like this silence of yours," he admits. "It feels ... accusing. Tell me where your mind is at."

"I'm thinking that you still understand very little about me," I say.

“Otherwise, you’d know that I’m not upset about the thought of sleeping under the stars.”

Behind me, the horseman pauses.

“But when I first took you, you hated being outside. You were cold—”

“I was uncomfortable,” I agree, “but mostly, I was trying to shame you into letting me go.”

Death’s hold tightens on me. “*Never*,” he vows.

I grimace as an electric thrill courses through me. I hate that I like that declaration.

I clear my throat. “I’m fine sleeping in a normal house—or outside, provided I have bedding to keep me warm,” I say. “And I was quiet a moment ago because I was thinking of all the cities you’ve ... *touched*,” I say that word derisively.

It’s Thanatos’s turn to go quiet.

“I will find you a ... *normal* house for tonight,” he says softly, not bothering to address the other part of what I said. “But I do not plan on making this a habit. I cannot give you what you most want,”—an end to the killing, he means—“but I can give you this, at least.

A short while later, I notice a cluster of lights in the distance.

A town.

It feels like a small eternity before we actually reach those lights. The gas lamps that run on either side of the road illuminate storefronts so weathered that it looks as though they were abandoned twenty-odd years ago, when the horsemen first arrived. If it weren’t for those gas lamps running through the town—lamps that someone had to light by hand—I would’ve assumed this place was nothing more than the bones of the world that existed before everything went to hell.

“You remember our deal?” I say softly to Thanatos.

The one where he doesn’t kill everyone right away.

“I have not forgotten.”

I can hear the frown in his voice.

His horse only takes a few more steps when the ground starts to tremble, and I can hear glass rattling in the warped windowpanes of a nearby building and the sound of a hanging wooden sign banging into the antiques shop it advertises.

The quaking grows and grows until the gas lamps begin to fall like

dominos, their glass casings shattering as they hit the ground. In the distance, someone shouts.

“*Thanatos*,” I gasp.

A few of the felled lamps still glow, and the flames flare brighter as the fire follows the trail of spilled kerosene. It casts an ominous orange glow on the buildings—which are thankfully still standing.

“You have forbidden me to kill,” he says. “This is all I have left.”

I give him a look over my shoulder. I hope he knows he sounds ridiculous.

Death meets my gaze as rain begins to fall, going from a sprinkle to a torrent in seconds. It washes away the kerosene, effectively snuffing out the streetlights. And completely drenching the both of us in the process.

“Are you doing that?” I ask, narrowing my gaze as the rain comes down faster and faster.

“I’m not too keen on any stray humans catching sight of me.”

Ah, now the broken streetlamps make sense.

I frown. “And I’m not *too keen* about getting wet.”

I can barely make out the smile spreading across the horseman’s face. “Oh, but I disagree, *kismet*. Given the right circumstances, I think you *very much* enjoy getting wet.”

Heat rises to my cheeks, his meaning clear.

Death pulls me in close. “But, if you are uncomfortable, I could peel off your soaked clothes and kiss the wetness from your skin,” he breathes. “Simply ask, and it will be done.”

My God.

I actually consider his proposition. That’s how hopeless I am.

“Why don’t you find us a place to stay in for the night? Then we can discuss ... the rest of that offer.”

“Fine,” he agrees, his lips brushing my ear, “I’ll find us a house if you focus on staying wet.”

“*Thanatos*.”

How has he already become dirtier than me?

Death lets out a husky laugh, then urges his horse onwards. It’s hard to see anything now that the lamps lay broken and scattered across the ground. I notice a few dimly lit houses, and there are even one or two with someone peering out the window, probably wondering what happened to the lamplight. But the rain keeps them in and hopefully the night hides Death’s identity from them.

I shiver a little, my body soaked through with rainwater. The horseman clutches me closer to him, and his wings move forward, wrapping around the sides of the horse. It looks like an awkward position to hold, but he keeps them there, and they drive off the chill.

Down a street to our right, I hear someone's voice carry over—

"I don't know why Coco's acting this way, she's never done this before."

That's when I notice that over the pounding rain, there's frantic, almost pained barking.

The animals sense Death.

We've gone another quarter mile when the horseman says, "You have bested me, Lazarus."

"What are you talking about?"

"You do not want to stay in an abandoned house, but you do not want me to kill the town until we have passed through it, so I cannot take one of the occupied homes either. I am at a loss for what to do."

My heart pounds. He's right, though I hadn't thought about it in those terms. Of course, there's still always the option of camping, though I'm not about to suggest *that* while it's raining.

"I'm fine staying in an abandoned house—"

"Liar."

"I am," I insist. "You can even do all those dirty things you were fantasizing about a minute ago—"

"Really, my kismet?" he says, sounding blatantly unconvinced. "You would happily get intimate if you were lying on moldering flooring, the stink of rotting walls and wet vermin around you?"

When he puts it like that ...

"As I thought."

"I'm sure not every abandoned house is that terrible."

"You think I'm willing to take the chance?" he laughs, even as he prods his steed into a full gallop. "I will ride through this city, then end it, *then* find us a place to stay."

"Wait," I say, even as Death's horse continues to gallop. I want this man to see a little bit of what humans are like. "We can do it your way, but please, we're already here. Let's at least stop at a house for a moment so I can show you what life looks like."

"You wish to introduce me to some hapless family?" he says, aghast at the idea. As though his job doesn't have him brushing elbows with countless

souls all the damn time.

I guess living souls are very different than dead ones.

“No,” I say, “I just meant that we could peer in on someone.”

Okay, that sounded *far* creepier than intended.

However, the idea does cause Death to slow his horse.

“You would like me to watch some living humans for a span of time?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“How long?” he demands.

I don’t know. “Just a short while.”

“And then you will not fight me when I kill off this town?”

I swallow. “I’m never going to be comfortable with that,” I say. “But no, I won’t fight you,” I agree.

The horseman draws in a deep breath. “Alright,” he says. “Alright. I can do what you request.” He glances around. “Where do you want me to go?”

The truth is, I have no clue *where* to go. I hadn’t really planned this far in advance.

“Let’s find a neighborhood,” I say.

There aren’t many. Not in a town this small. Eventually, however, we do stumble across one. Most of the houses are dark, but then there’s one up ahead where I can see the flicker of candlelight. As we get closer, voices and intermittent laughter drift out.

I nearly sigh out my relief.

There was always the chance that I’d pick a house where the people inside hated one another. That would only further convince Thanatos of what he already believes—that humans are better off dead than alive.

“There,” I say, pointing to the house in question.

We ride up to it, then dismount. It’s a single story ranch house, with a decorative rock chimney and a low-lying fence. Even on a dark and rainy night, lingering outside someone’s house is a great way to draw attention.

Taking Death’s hand, I lead him over to the gate. Silently, I unlatch it and lead the two of us through, heading towards the backyard.

Back here, I can see more light flickering from inside. The curtains aren’t closed, and I draw Thanatos over to an out-of-the-way window that peers into the home’s living room.

Inside, a family appears to be winding down for the night. One boy and two girls are sprawled out on the floor, playing a board game. An older boy is

curled up on a side chair, reading a book. Their parents sit close together on the couch, each of them drinking amber liquid out of mason jars. The woman's legs are thrown over her husband's lap as the two of them chat.

The horseman looks at me. "What now?"

"Just ... watch them for a little while," I say.

He frowns at me, water dripping from his dark hair. He extends one of his dark wings, shielding me from the worst of the rain, which is still pelting at our skin.

I glance up at the sky. "You can let up with the rain."

"Must I?" he says. "I do so like the way your clothing molds to your skin, kismet."

"Thanatos."

The corner of his mouth curves up. "You're only upset because I have armor on and you cannot enjoy the same sight."

A ridiculous laugh slips out, one that I have to bite back immediately. But when no one inside glances out the window, I know that nobody heard me.

Still, I give the horseman a friendly push. He sways a little, but uses his wing to nudge me into him. I fall against him, and he wraps an arm around me, capturing me in a kiss.

As his lips move against mine, the rain tapers off, then stops completely.

Death breaks off the kiss. "I do still intend to make you wet again later."

"*Stop it,*" I whisper, a flush creeping up my cheeks.

He grins, but turns his attention back to the family.

Their evening is pretty mundane, and yet next to me, the horseman has gone still, his focus riveted to the family.

The parents chat quietly while the kids on the ground argue about the rules of the game they're playing. The boy overturns the game board and then his sister is crying and running over to their mother, who gives her a hug and consoles her.

The oldest boy, who has been peacefully reading on the couch, now uses this moment to grab a pillow and whack his younger brother. The boy topples over, but before he can react more, their dad grabs another pillow and whacks the oldest boy. Pretty soon the crying stops and the entire family just has an impromptu pillow fight.

I feel my throat close up. This could've been me and my family ten years ago if you added a few kids in there. There's no grand proclamations of love, but it's so obvious in the silly, familiar way they interact with each other.

The pillow fight ends with the mother tickling her kids and her husband throwing one of them up into the air and catching them—and now all the rest of the siblings are clamoring around their dad, begging to be tossed up as well.

“Alright, time for bed,” I hear the mom say.

One of the girls groans and her younger brother droops his head. However, within ten minutes the living room has cleared out, and that’s the end of that.

Death blinks, like he’s waking from a trance.

“It is strange to watch them, Lazarus,” he admits, turning away from the window. “I have assumed that living is what you and I do,” Death says. “I forget that it’s the exact same thing that millions of other humans do every single day.”

Millions of humans. He’s mentioned that number before, and I cling to it. Millions. There are still so many of us alive. All hope is truly not lost.

Death is quiet as we return to his steed, which has been munching on the lawn like he’s a real horse.

Silently, the two of us get back into the saddle. It’s only now that I feel the rest of our agreement closing in on me. Death promised to hold off on killing a city until he caught a glimpse of their humanity.

Now he has.

Maybe he’ll wait until we’ve actually crossed the city lines—like he alluded to earlier. It honestly doesn’t really matter. The thought of what comes next makes my stomach twist all the same. This is the part where good people die, taking with them all their love, all their light, all of their spirit.

The thought of those small children not existing tomorrow is painful, as is the thought of that couple, who drank alcohol from mason jars and draped their legs on each other’s laps.

“Let them all go to sleep first,” I say hoarsely.

The silence stretches out between me and the horseman, punctuated only by the scuff of his steed’s hooves.

I feel Death’s heavy intake of air and I want to believe he feels some hesitation or regret for what he’s about to do. I want to believe it, but I don’t know.

Finally, he says, “I will, kismet. I promise.”

We’re still threading our way through the city when Death says, “I still need to find you a place to rest.”

“I don’t want to stop,” I say. “Not here at least.” The thought of waking up in that city once everyone is gone ... if I have a choice, then I want whatever the other option is.

After another pause, Thanatos says, “I will find us a house outside of the city, though I cannot promise you anything grand.”

I don’t care. I never cared.

Several minutes go by, and I’m still devastated by what will happen to that family—to this entire town. It never gets easier.

“Tell me a secret,” I say, my voice raw. “Something you know that no one else does.”

Maybe it’s the fatalism in me right now, but I need to make sense of all this anguish. If the world is going to burn—if some great God out there *wants* it to burn—then I need to understand *why*—or at least that it’s somehow right. Because I’ve looked at it from every angle I can, and I still can’t make sense of it.

“Curious creature,” Death murmurs fondly. “I will tell you all sorts of secrets,” he says, “but you must give up your human ones in return,” he says.

“What human ones?” I don’t have secrets.

“Oh, you have plenty,” he says.

I mean, I could give him the family’s secret recipe for the best peach cobbler in Georgia, but honestly that’s about as wild as my secrets get.

“What do you want to know?” I say.

“What is it like to be a child?” he asks.

The question catches me by surprise. I guess it shouldn’t, not when we literally spent an evening watching tiny humans run around.

“It’s always going to be strange to me that you don’t already know these things,” I say.

“I have met many souls who’ve died young,” Death agrees, “but I want to know what kids are like *alive*.”

“I don’t know ...” I begin. I mean, that’s such a big question, it’s hard to form any sort of real answer. “They’re like every unguarded emotion you’ve ever had,” I say. “And sometimes they’re annoying.”

“*Annoying?*”

I almost laugh at the note of shocked outrage in Death’s voice. Whatever he saw tonight has definitely warmed him up to kids.

“Yeah, they can be *really* annoying,” I say, thinking of my siblings’ kids, bless their souls. “When kids are upset, they can be the meanest little shits

you've ever come across. And they will happily ask you a million different questions. And they tell the longest—and I mean the *longest*—stories." I smile a little, remembering one of the last stories my niece Briana told me about her cat Melon. My throat chokes up at the memory. What I would give to get it all back.

"But," I add, "mostly they are just unfiltered joy and potential. The world hasn't yet worn away at them and they're loving and happy."

There's a long pause.

"I don't think I understand children any better than I did before I asked," Death says.

I laugh a little. "I didn't promise you I'd be any good at answering your questions." I settle back against him. "Now will you tell me one of your secrets?" I say.

It's quiet for several seconds.

"I do not like taking lives," he admits softly.

I go still against him.

"What?" I turn in my seat, trying to see Thanatos better.

"I do not like taking lives," he says again, more forcefully, his gaze almost challenging as he stares down at me.

That's ... I wasn't expecting that at all. Death's admitted before that he doesn't enjoy violence, but not this.

"Unlike my brothers, I have *never* enjoyed it," he continues. "I do it because I must, but, Lazarus, it is a terrible agony most of the time."

Am I hearing him correctly? "But—"

"I am not saying that death is wrong," he continues, "or that what lies beyond isn't better. I am not even saying that I don't believe in my task. But the act of taking someone who is scared of death, or who is happy with life, or who is not ready—and so few are ready—wears me to the bone. I grimly do my job, but I have never gotten joy from taking a life."

I am *reeling*.

"Is there joy in what you do?" I ask after a moment.

He's quiet again.

"Yes," he finally admits. "*After* I release them. When a soul sees what lies beyond, when they truly remember what they are and have been this entire time—that moment is joy."

Chapter 51

U.S. Route 290, Central Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

It's late. Or maybe I'm just exhausted from being in the saddle all day. Either way, my eyes are drooping before we've found a house to stop in for the night.

I fight to keep my eyelids open, and I think I'm doing a good enough job, except I'm drifting ... I'll just rest a moment—

I jolt awake when Death catches my body slipping nearly off of the saddle.

“Lazarus?” Thanatos says, a note of worry in his voice. “Are you alright?”

“What?” I blink, forcing my thoughts to focus. The smoky smell of Death's torch is thick in my nostrils, the scent oddly comforting. “Oh, yeah, just tired.” Even as I say it, I can feel myself drifting back off.

Death pulls his steed to a stop, then swings off.

“What are you doing?” I'm still too sleepy to be alarmed.

Rather than answering, I hear the clink of the horseman's silver armor. He casts his breastplate off, then his vambraces and greaves. He doesn't stop until every last piece lays in the dirt off to the side of the road.

Silently, he returns to the horse, swinging back on.

I stare at the armor, the metal giving off a dull gleam even in the middle of the night. “Why did you remove it?”

The horseman settles himself around me. “I'm still looking for a suitable house, kismet. In the meantime, you can sleep safely in my arms.”

It takes my slow mind another minute to realize that he removed the armor *for my comfort*.

Don't feel it, don't feel it, don't—

Warmth spreads through my core, and I'm touched at the gesture, even

though I don't want to be. It's not the same weightless feeling I've been getting around him more and more frequently. This feeling has depth to it, and it's far scarier than anything else I've felt for Thanatos up until now.

Death clicks his tongue, his steed starting forward again. I settle against the horseman, still unnerved. Thanatos drapes an arm over my shoulder and across my chest, like some sort of makeshift horseman seatbelt.

I lean my head against that arm and let myself drift off.

“I’ve found us a house, Lazarus.”

Briefly, Death's voice pulls me from sleep, but almost immediately I slip back into it. In some far off region of my mind, I'm aware of being pulled from his horse and carried into a house.

I'm laid on a bed and someone's tugging off my boots. I stretch a little, then flop onto my stomach. A minute later, I feel the comforting weight of a blanket.

Death's lips brush against my temple. *“Sleep well, ... love.”*

And I do.

I wake in an unfamiliar bed. An unfamiliar, *empty* bed.

It's insane how wrong that *empty* part feels. I've only been sleeping with the horseman for a week—and I use *sleeping* in the loosest, most sexualized context—but already I've gotten used to Death being close.

Rubbing my eyes, I sit up, stifling a yawn. At some point last night, the horseman found us a house.

All around me, books are *everywhere*. On bookshelves, on *top* of bookshelves, stacked in piles next to bookshelves.

Someone really likes to read.

Liked to read. They're no longer around to enjoy their massive collection.

I swing out of bed only to notice my boots waiting for me nearby.

Death removed my boots—and he tucked me into bed—and this must have all happened only minutes after he killed the home's previous owner. I frown at the conflicted emotions I feel.

Taking a deep breath, I pull on my shoes and leave the room.

“Death?” I call out, heading down the hall. I force myself to not gaze at the family sketches hanging on the walls or the cross-stitched artwork hanging alongside them. I don't want to feel anything for these strangers whose lives came to a tragic end.

“Lazarus,” Death says just as I enter the living room. He’s lounging on a gray couch, his back against an armrest, his wings draped over the side. His armor is off, just as it was last night, and the sleeves of his black shirt have been pushed up to his elbows. Most interestingly of all, he has one of this house’s many, many books in his hand.

“Why did you not start with *this* human secret?” he says, holding a paperback novel up. I can’t read the title, but by the cover it looks like a murder mystery. “These are *utterly* amazing,” he says.

“You know how to read?” I ask dumbly. Not everyone these days does.

“Of course,” he responds, as though it’s the most natural thing in the world. But apparently, even though he can read, he’s never done so until now.

My brows pull together, even as I begin to smile. “Is that what you did all night while I slept?”

“It was either that, or ...” His eyes grow hooded.

Or do the one thing we’ve been doing nonstop. Even now, at his look, it all reignites.

Death sets the book on a nearby glass coffee table and rises to his feet. He looks like a predator—a lethal, beautiful predator.

“How I want to whisk you back to that bed,” the horseman says, his form massive and looming. “But you must be hungry, and I want you to have energy for the things I plan on doing to you.”

Heat flushes my face. “*Thanatos*,” I whisper.

Beyond us, I can hear the scrape of bone and the clatter of silverware coming from what must be the kitchen. My stomach twists. Death’s servants are just one more reminder of all the death that surrounds us. There are bones and books and sketches, and somewhere on this property there’s a grave with fresh bodies piled in it, but there is no one else alive—no one besides me and Thanatos.

The horseman narrows his eyes at my mouth. “You say my name like that when you’re admonishing me. Tell me, Laz, do you not want my tongue to lave your pussy or my mouth to suck on your clit? Should I stop talking about how I wish to drive into your tight sheath until your breasts bounce and you’re moaning my name? And while I’m at it, should I not mention how erotic it feels to have your feet press against my wings as I thrust into you?”

I don’t think I can breathe.

“Humans don’t talk to each other this way,” I murmur. At least, no one has

ever spoken to *me* this way.

“Good,” Thanatos says, cupping my face. “I don’t particularly enjoy your kind’s arbitrary rules anyway—nor their penchant for dancing with their words.” He smiles a little nefariously, though his eyes are serious. “Most of all, I don’t want you to confuse me for some mortal man. I, *Death*, have chosen you. And you have chosen me.”

Chapter 52

U. S. Route 290, Central Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I stare at the world around me from atop Death's steed, the two of us on the road once more. There's dead grass and clusters of trees and some rusted cars off to either side of us. Every so often we pass a trading post or a farmhouse or a boarded up building that's long since lost its use.

No birds chirp, no bugs buzz. Even the air is still. It's all as quiet as the grave. That's how it's been since Thanatos took me captive, and yet sometimes the wrongness of that silence creeps up on me all over again.

"When you travel, is there ever a particular destination in mind?" I ask.

"I go where the most souls call to me," he says.

I remember assuming as much, back when I tracked him.

"And where are they calling you now?" I ask, dreading the answer.

"West."

I have to quell the panic that rises at that thought. West is where Ben is. Specifically, the Pacific Northwest. *We're still thousands of miles away*, I tell myself, just to calm my nerves.

"Why did you and your brothers all come to Earth in the first place?" I ask.

"God peers out at the world through many eyes. Yours, these shrubs—" he gestures vaguely to the plants growing near the highway. "The animals fleeing us somewhere off in the distance.

"If you understand that God—or the Universe, if you prefer to call Her that—is everything, sees everything, *feels* everything, and humans have, up until recently, been annihilating much of this earth—then you realize She has been hurting.

"You can think of your end as the Universe amputating a festering wound

rather than letting infection take her whole. *That* is why my brothers and I were sent here. We must stop humans in order to save everything else.”

Why did I ask this question? The answer is so heavy.

“But your brothers feel that humans should be saved,” I argue. They told me so themselves. There must be something to us that is worth sparing.

“Yes,” Death agrees. “They did. But their opinion is not the one that matters. *Mine* is.”

And he’s made it abundantly clear what that opinion is.

I try to imagine the world a hundred years from now, cities full of skeletons of an extinct race, the buildings collapsed and overgrown with foliage. It’s not hard to picture—we’re already halfway there.

“What would happen if *you* decided to spare humanity?” I ask.

“What use is it to talk of such things, Lazarus?” he asks. “I will not change my mind. Not even you and your brilliant mind are capable of such a feat.”

This isn’t the first time Death has made his opinion known, and normally, I would take his answer as a challenge. Now, however, his words worm their way under my skin.

I still haven’t stopped him. Death is still killing, and still as adamant as ever about his need to kill. I’ve had sex with the horseman—many, many times—and it hasn’t shaken his resolve.

I sit there in the saddle for several seconds before my hurt melts away to anger.

What is the fucking *point* of all of this?

I’m not usually rash, but right now I swing my leg over the saddle and hop off Death’s still-moving horse.

Thanatos is surprised enough by the action that by the time he tries to grab me, I’m already off the steed and walking away.

“What are you doing, Lazarus?” he calls out after me.

I don’t bother looking back at him, my mind and my heart in turmoil, my blood heating with my anger.

Behind me, I hear Thanatos dismount, but nothing else.

“Do you really think you can escape me?” he says conversationally.

I ignore him.

“There is nothing out here besides me.”

Still ignoring him.

I hear the rustle of the horseman’s wings as they spread, then the heavy beat of them as they lift Death into the air.

His shadow moves over me. He turns in the sky, facing me, sunlight gleaming off of his armor.

The horseman lowers himself to the ground, those dark wings smoothly folding behind him.

“What is going on, Lazarus? Is this because of what I said?” he asks. “That was not supposed to—”

“What are we doing, Death?” I cut him off. “What *really* are we doing?”

I’m weary—I have been for a long, long time. I’ve pretended my exhaustion away because I had to, but now the full brunt of it all comes crashing down on my shoulders.

“You’re ending the world and I’m what? A little amusement along the way?” My eyes prick as I force those words out.

“Of course you’re not *amusement*, kismet. I care for you above all others.”

“People bend, Thanatos,” I say fervently. “When they care for each other, they *bend*.”

“I am not human,” he says.

Ah, his old failsafe.

“Fine, you’re not human, and none of the rules apply to you,” I agree. “Just let me go.” I indicate to the road behind him. “Let me part ways with you once and for all.” Then I can find my son and live out whatever brief time we get together.

Death’s jaw clenches.

I begin to walk again, uncaring that I’m going to have to brush past him.

“No,” he says, his wings flaring. “I won’t let you go.”

I throw my hands into the air.

“So you want your human experience and you want your heavenly task,” I say. “And I suppose you want me to just shut up and go along with it all.”

He takes a step forward. “This is beyond me—”

“*Stop*,” I say. “Stop this whole ‘I’m not a human,’ ‘This is beyond me,’ ‘I’m just following orders.’ You have mocked your brothers for making a decision—”

“The *wrong* decision,” he corrects me.

“*At least they made one*. Meanwhile, here you are, thinking that you can play house with me while you end the world? You are the biggest hypocrite.”

“*What would you have me do?*” he demands, his voice like thunder.

I could tear my hair out. “*Make* a goddamned decision for once in your life!” I say hotly. “And don’t do it for me—or even God. Do it for yourself.”

You. You're evil and loving and gentle and merciless and refined and naïve and wise and complicated. *That's* the human in you. Stop pretending it's not there and acknowledge it."

He stares at me for a long time, his jaw working.

And this is the tale of how I, Lazarus Gaumond, fucked over the world.

"I am unbending because I am old," he admits. "I am uncompromising because I have always—*always* had to be this way. No one escapes death. *No one.*"

Except for me. Though, considering my situation, one might argue that I haven't actually escaped death at all.

"But," Thanatos continues, seeming to weigh his words, "I hear what you're saying. I have not questioned my own assumptions. I have not thought to until now, when you have asked it of me." He nods. "I will try. I will do this for you."

We spend a long moment staring at one another.

"I will not promise humanity some happy ending," he says, his dark eyes sad. "I cannot give you that. But I can give *you* happiness. I *want* to give you that. So, Lazarus," he says carefully, "what would make you happy?"

It takes me a moment to actually process this turn in the conversation. He actually wants to give me something. Unbendable Death is trying to bend.

I regain my composure.

"Ben," I finally say, finding my voice. "Ben is what would make me happy."

"Your son," Death says carefully. "You would like him by your side?"

"*Alive* and by my side." My heart pounds madly. Why am I even entertaining this? It's a mad, mad idea.

I see Thanatos swallow delicately, and that muscle in his cheek flexes again. Shit, that reaction alone means that he's serious.

"Then once we hit the West Coast," Death says carefully, "we will travel north and get your son."

I can't breathe, I'm choking on my own hope.

"And then what?" I force the words out.

"And then your son will be with you, with *us*—alive and well—until the very end."

I don't even realize I'm crying until I feel the tear slip off my cheek.

Across from me, Death's harsh features soften.

In several long strides he closes the distance between us. Reaching out, he

brushes away my tears.

“Is this a good cry or a bad one?” he asks, raising his eyebrows.

“A good one,” I admit softly.

Ben won’t die.

I pull away. “I thought ...” The words catch in my throat, “I thought you made no exceptions about killing humans.” As much as I want to see Ben again—to hold him again—I want him alive *more*.

“You have asked me to bend. This is bending, right?”

I don’t know *what* it is, but I don’t much care, either. The thought of having Ben back in my arms has my knees going weak.

Death seems to sense it too.

He scoops me up like he’s some valiant hero and I’m some helpless maiden. And for a moment, I can believe in that fairytale.

“Come, kismet,” he says, walking us back to his horse. “Let’s make good on my vow.”

Now that I have another goal besides seducing Death, I’m more impatient than ever to get to my son. So when, midafternoon, Thanatos leads his horse off the road, I’m jumpy to get back *on* it.

“I don’t need to go to the bathroom,” I say, assuming that’s the reason we left the highway.

“That’s not why I stopped us, kismet,” Death says, swinging himself off the horse. He lands with a heavy *thunk*.

Turning back to me, he reaches to help me off his horse.

I stare down at his hands but don’t make a move to get off his mount. “Then why have we stopped?” I ask.

He gives me a funny look, like it should be obvious. “I made the mistake last night of waiting too long to search for a house. I won’t make the same mistake again.”

A house. Right. Death has got it in his head that I need to be pampered with the most lavish houses, though for him that means choosing places that are sometimes far from the highways he travels. And once we’re there, we’ll stay for days. I can already feel the horseman’s sweat-slicked body gliding against mine as he thrusts into me, and I can picture the exact way his wings will loom over us, closing out the outside world.

My blood rushes through my veins just thinking about it. I want that so badly. So, so badly.

But there's another warring desire that keeps me firmly seated in the saddle—Ben. Right now I have this itchy, pressing need to get to him as quickly as I can, even if that means robbing the cities en route of a few extra days of life.

“Lazarus?” Death is still reaching for me, still waiting.

I stare down at one of his armor-clad forearms. A procession of mourners is hammered into the silver metal; I follow the line of those mourners, the design continuing up his vambrace and onto his breastplate.

My gaze moves up to his. “Let's not stop.”

A line forms between his brows, and he frowns. “But you need rest.” *And I don't want you to think me a monster.* I can almost hear those unspoken words of his.

“When night falls,” I say, “we can rest off to the side of the road.”

“No.” There's iron in his voice.

I still don't leave the saddle.

“I don't need fancy houses,” I say. “I just need—you.” That last part slips out.

“*Kismet*,” he finally says. The word is full of so much breathless hope. His strange, lovely eyes search mine. “I have yearned to hear you say such things. And I have long feared I never would.” His attention drops to my lips, and I can feel his desire to steal a kiss—and more.

The horseman's gaze returns to my eyes. “I can deny you precious little.” He works his jaw. “Okay,” he says, “I'll grant you this wish—for now. Tonight, it will be just you and me and the world before us.”

Chapter 53

Harper, Texas

July, Year 27 of the Horsemen

When we do eventually stop, it is truly out in the middle of nowhere. The land is a patchwork of wild elm trees and grassy expanses and little else.

“You are sure you don’t want to stay inside a house?” Thanatos asks for the twentieth time. The setting sun is casting him in the softest light, and it’s tempering all his hard edges.

“This is fine,” I insist, trying to ignore what the sight of him is doing to me.

He frowns like he doesn’t believe me.

Death unfastens his breastplate, casting it aside. I can see in his starlight eyes that he relishes unburdening himself of it.

Like taking off a bra at the end of the day.

A big-ass, metal bra.

My gaze returns to the breastplate as he works on removing the rest of his armor. On a whim, I move over to the discarded piece of metal, kneeling down next to it so I can study the images hammered into it. There are roses and gravestones and skeletons and a boat drawing people onward. There’s what looks like an egg and a snake eating its own tail. There are crescent moons and spirals, and right over the heart is that image of the woman caught in a skeleton’s embrace.

I run my fingers over the strange and seemingly unrelated images. The longer I stare, the more I find, and I’m so confused by it all.

“What are all these designs?” I say. I’ve seen similar detailing on Death’s saddle.

The horseman tosses aside another piece of armor.

“They’re chthonic images.”

I stare at him blankly.

“Images of death,” he says.

“They don’t all *look* like death.” Skeletons and graves aside. “There’s an egg on here,” I say.

“That’s the cosmic egg, from which everything was born.”

I frown, staring at the image. “*Did* everything start from an egg?”

“They are human symbols, kismet, not heavenly ones,” he says, removing the last piece of armor and coming over to my side.

My attention moves away from the egg, towards the image styled over what would be the horseman’s heart, if he were wearing the armor. I trace that unsettling image of the skeleton and the woman wrapped up in each other’s arms. *Life and death, the lovers.*

“They are inextricably bound in each other,” Death says now, noticing where my attention has wandered.

As I muse on that, Thanatos’s procession of dead arrives at our camp. The skeletons and their wagons encircle us, creating a wall of sorts with their bodies and the carts. Already they’re pulling odds and ends out of the wagon beds, shaking out blankets, uncorking wine, uncovering and lighting lanterns. When they’re finally done setting up, I am left breathless.

I have slept out in the elements before with little more than a pack as a pillow. I know what that is like. What I’ve never experienced is ... *this.*

They’ve covered the ground in blankets and placed lanterns around the edges, giving it a soft, romantic glow against the twilight sky. There’s a tray with travel-friendly food artfully arranged on it, and I try not to think of the skeletal fingers that meticulously placed each item just so.

I believe this is what glamping is.

“You didn’t have to have them set this all up,” I say.

“Yes, Laz,” Thanatos says very seriously, “I did.”

Under the glow of the lanterns, Death looks like a saint, his body and wings dusted by the soft amber light. It glitters in his eyes as well, making them look molten.

For the second time since we stopped, I’ve been caught breathless by the mere sight of him. Has he always affected me this way?

Every last inch of self-preservation within me wants to say yes, but the truth is, this feels different. It’s *been* feeling different, like my eyes are finally seeing something my heart already knows.

As though he can hear my thoughts, Death moves to me.

“Serious, beautiful Lazarus,” he murmurs. He studies my face like he wants to immortalize it in his mind. “You snatched my loneliness from me,” he breathes, “and I hope you never give it back.”

With that, he kisses me. The horseman’s wings wrap around me until Death is all there is.

I hear every soft sound our lips make, and I feel as though my heart is on blatant display.

The kiss is long and lingering, and when he eventually pulls away, I can see his desire stretched taut like a bowstring.

“Lazarus, what is happening to me? I cannot slake this thirst I have for you.”

My heart pounds harder as I stare up at him. “That’s what it’s like for humans,” I say. *When they fall in love.* I’m too terrified to utter that last part.

So instead my hands move to Thanatos’s clothing, because physical intimacy is much, much easier than talking about love with my old enemy. I tug on the horseman’s shirt until he helps me lift it over his head.

That’s all the encouragement Death needs. His hands find the collar of my shirt—

Riiiiip.

I gasp as he tears the material down the middle, exposing my bra. His hands move for my jeans, but I snatch his wrist before he can destroy these too.

Good jeans are hard to come by.

Under Death’s heated gaze, I remove my boots and socks, then unbutton my pants and step out of them, kicking them aside. The horseman casts off the last of his clothing, leaving him bare—save for the glowing glyphs that cover his body from neck to calf. There are so many that they give the illusion that his insides are nothing more than pure white light.

Thanatos kneels, his long, deft fingers gently peeling away my panties before returning for my bra. That, too, he removes with precision, letting it drop to the ground. Then he scoops me up and carries me to the makeshift bed.

It’s just as he’s laying me down that I notice the clatter of bones and remember the dozens and dozens of skeletons around us.

“I can’t do this with your revenants watching,” I whisper.

Thanatos gives a husky laugh. “Lazarus, they don’t have souls or minds.

They cannot comprehend what we do.”

Despite Death’s words, an instant later, the skeletons fall to pieces, their bones clattering as they hit the grass.

“Better?” he asks.

I nod, then shiver as the cool night air caresses my skin.

I’m only cold for a moment.

Death drapes himself over me, his wings brushing against our legs. Just when I think things are about to heat up, the horseman instead places a soft kiss at the hollow of my throat.

“Give yourself to me, Lazarus,” he whispers against my skin.

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?” I say, my fingers threading themselves in his silky hair.

He laughs against my flesh, where he trails more kisses down my sternum.

“I’m not talking about sex.”

“Then what are you talking about?” I ask, feeling suddenly ill at ease.

Slowly Thanatos’s gaze lifts, and when it settles on my own, I see it in his eyes.

I want your love.

He doesn’t say the words, but he doesn’t have to.

I’m shaking my head, my throat closing up. “I can’t.” I barely get the words out.

He took my family from me. He almost took my son from me. I don’t care that he is Death and it’s his job. I don’t even care that he gets no enjoyment from the act. He has still done it, and he will *continue* to do it. That’s a hard line for me.

“You can’t what?” he says softly.

He’s going to make me say it.

“I can’t love you.”

For an instant, the horseman looks wounded. Then the expression is gone like it never existed at all.

I see his shoulders rise and fall as he takes in a deep breath. “You can’t or you won’t?”

I hesitate.

Thanatos notices.

“Ah, you *won’t*.” Triumph flashes in his eyes and his lips curve into a cunning smile. “I’m correct, aren’t I?”

I don’t bother denying it.

“Why are you smiling?” I demand instead.

“It would be one thing if you *couldn't* love me—that you were incapable of it,” he says. “But you *won't* love me, and that is a choice.”

“Exactly.” I’m choosing not to love him.

Why does he still look so pleased?

He answers as though he heard my thoughts. “I don’t need your mind to change, kismet, simply your heart.”

My pulse is climbing. “I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Your mind is strong, Laz, but your heart is stronger still. All I need to do is convince your heart that this is real and true, and your mind will follow.”

“I still won’t change my mind,” I say stubbornly. He’s seen how long I can hold onto a cause.

Now his expression is downright wicked. “You and I are immortal. Even if it takes centuries, even if you and I are the last creatures in existence, I vow to you this: I will get you to love me—mind, body, and heart.”

Chapter 54

Interstate 10, Southwestern United States

August, Year 27 of the Horsemen

The days sift away like soil through my fingertips and the road stretches on before us. Some days we don't leave the home we've occupied or the camp we've made—sometimes we don't leave our bed at all. Death might have no appetite for food, but he's nearly insatiable when it comes to sex. I'm hardly better.

I tell myself I'm buying the world a little extra time—or perhaps, if this mad plan actually works, an end to this apocalypse altogether—but the truth is that I'm just as greedy to give into this desire I've ignored for months and months.

However, when we do get back in the saddle and continue on, guilt presses in on me. I'm supposed to be encouraging Death to travel as fast as possible to get to my son. Anything less feels like a betrayal to Ben. But not even that guilt is enough for me to change my ways, especially when every extra hour in the horseman's arms brings me that much closer to convincing him to stop the killing.

And so Death and I travel at a slow, leisurely pace.

The farther west we head, the more the cities thin out. This part of the country is truly empty. Just miles and miles of harsh desert. It's a sharp, strange landscape, empty of color save for the low-lying shrubs and the blue sky above me—though even these, too, seem to be muted, as though the sun bleached it all of color.

I long for the verdant land where I grew up.

We still rest in homes if we come across them, but Death has had to give up on his quest to house me in sprawling estates. The truth is, this bone-dry

earth is too harsh to make much of a living on. Based on what little evidence I've seen, the only steady occupation in these parts comes from the ranchers and cowboys who drive wild herds of cattle across the plains, and they are not living like kings.

Of the houses we do pass, most of them are left over from the time before the horsemen. As the sun begins to set, we stop at one of these abandoned dwellings. It's a weather-worn, dull thing; the sun has bleached its bones and the home's well has long since dried up. The inside is full of fine dirt and a couple of frightened lizards.

I move through it as I have a hundred houses before. I notice some peeling wallpaper, a broken television, a few ripped children's books, and some glow-in-the-dark stars that must've once been on the ceiling but now lie scattered on the ground.

I pause and really take it all in. A quarter of a century has gone by since this house was affected by the horsemen's arrival. The child who read those books or stared up at those stars is now an adult—if, in fact, they are still alive. An entire generation—*my* generation—grew up with our lives upended. And the next generation might not grow up at all.

I hear Death's footsteps from down the hall.

"I don't want to stay here." My voice comes out like a croak.

He pauses in the bedroom's doorway. "Alright, kismet."

It's as simple as that. Five minutes later we are back on Thanatos's horse.

Behind us, the house collapses. It feels like an old, worn-out dream finally crumbling for good—something sad but long overdue.

I force my mind from the family that once lived there. I have too many ghosts that haunt me already.

I really don't need any more.

I've heard that humans can get used to just about any situation. I don't know if that's true, but I have gotten used to this way of life—traveling, then camping, then traveling some more.

I've even gotten used to Death's and my ... relationship.

"Tell me another secret," I say, leaning back on the blankets that cover the ground. A plate of food and wine sits off to the side, and around us the skeletons and their wagons have circled our campsite.

Thanatos lays on his side, wearing only his pants. His tattoos illuminate all the sharp planes of his face.

"Hmm ..." He's been trailing his fingers over my features, but now his

hand moves to the buttons of my shirt. “I won’t tell you a secret,” he says, “but I *will* show you one.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about.

Thanatos unbuttons my shirt then and slides it off my arms. Then he removes my bra. Then my pants—then his.

A laugh slips out. “What are you doing?” I ask. There is *nothing* about this that is much of a secret between us anymore.

Death finishes undressing me, then pulls me into his arms. He wraps my legs up around his waist, locking us in this intimate embrace.

“You’ve shown me how humans have sex,” he says, lifting me as he rises off the bed. His black wings spread wide behind him. “Now it’s time I show you how angels do it.”

No sooner has he spoken than he leaps into the air. His wings beat at his back, each powerful stroke bringing us higher and higher into the chilly night sky.

I cling to Thanatos, my arms wrapped around his neck and my cheek pressed to his. The horseman’s dark hair tickles my skin. It doesn’t matter that Death has flown with me in his arms before, my fear still rises. The earth is a long way down.

“Relax,” he breathes, “I’ve got you.”

I try to, I really do, but then the heavens rumble around us as a storm rolls in, and I tighten my grip.

“Lazarus, I’ve got you,” he says, running a hand up and down my back. “I swear it.”

Reluctantly, I loosen my grip on him. I manage to even pull my face away when the sky flashes. For a moment, that skull superimposes itself over Thanatos’s features. Then it’s gone.

“Your face ...” I trail off. I’ve seen this several times before, but it never gets less unsettling.

“Life and death are lovers, kismet,” he whispers, shifting my hips to align us. “*We* are lovers. It has always been this way. It *will* always be this way.”

With that, Thanatos drives into me. A gasp slips out as I grip him harder. There’s nothing to hold onto but Death himself, and it’s as terrifying as it is exhilarating.

His cock stretches me, and has anything ever felt so good?

“I want to hear your moans, kismet,” he breathes against my ear.

When I don’t immediately reply, his lips drop to one of my breasts. He

kisses it hard, his teeth grazing against my nipple.

Now I do moan, shifting my legs a little to better accommodate him. He drives into me again and again while, at his back, his wings pound against the wind. He feverishly guides his cock in and out, in and out.

“*Thanatos*.” I moan his name.

“There is nothing better than being buried in your tight warmth,” he says. He kisses the underside of my jaw. “I want to fill you up with me and make sure you never forget that I was here.”

I pull his lips to mine and steal a kiss, one of my hands tangling in his hair. Angel sex is *wild*.

One of Death’s hands slip between the seam of my ass, until his fingers are touching that other hole.

Breaking off the kiss, I go tense in his arms. The action causes Thanatos’s cock to jerk.

He makes a pained noise. “Relax, kismet. You can tell me to stop and I’ll stop.” He waits for me to do so.

A part of me considers it, but another part of me is far too curious to stop things now.

When I say nothing, one of Death’s fingers presses against my back entrance until it gives way.

I suck in a breath, even as the pressure somehow coils up within me. Each thrust of his becomes much more sensitive.

“I can’t believe this was your idea,” I say.

In the darkness, I can see the gleam of the horseman’s dark eyes as he takes in my expression. “Next time, it can be yours.”

“You are filthy,” I breathe.

In response, he presses his finger in farther.

Jesus. I feel impossibly full like this, and having him work me from both sides is causing sensation to rapidly build ... and build ...

“Thanatos—”

It’s too much.

With a cry, I shatter, my orgasm exploding through me.

He groans as I come, and then his hips are pumping feverishly against mine. Moments later, I feel him thicken inside me. Death bellows my name as he comes, his cock slamming into me again and again.

Our climaxes seem to go on forever, but eventually, I feel him withdraw his finger so he can clutch me close.

I go boneless in his arms, my body shaky and spent.

Slowly, Thanatos lowers us back to the ground, landing at the foot of our makeshift bed.

He lays me out on the sheets before draping himself against my side.

Death looks at me and my breath catches. For an instant, a strange feeling passes through me, like everything I thought I understood was all a mirage, and that the curtain that separates life from death is so thin I might actually catch a glimpse—

“*Lazarus.*”

My gaze focuses on Thanatos. The markings on his skin glitter like stars and they seem ancient—*he* seems ancient. Ancient and otherworldly.

“You are exquisite,” he says. He leans forward and kisses the pulse at my neck, his dark hair tickling my skin. “Exquisite and troublesome and curious and *alive.*”

“I thought you didn’t like the fact that I was alive.”

He gives me a soft smile. “Even angels can be wrong.”

Chapter 55

Interstate 10, Arizona

August, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I wake to the sound of echoing howls.

I sit up, my eyes scanning the darkness for whatever animal might make that noise. I can't see past the wall of carts and the revenants around us, though those strange cries seem to be close.

Wait, *howls?*

But all animals flee death ...

The wooden carts shake and now I can make out whoops and bellows, and fuck, those aren't wolves.

They are the battle cries of marauders.

I suck in my scream just as Thanatos rises next to me, his hair mussed. I don't have time to read into that before, around us, dozens of figures materialize from the darkness.

They descend on our camp like a swarm of locusts. One man jumps on a cart, causing it to nearly overturn. Another smashes through a skeleton.

Death lifts his hand, but before he has a chance to unleash his lethal power, an arrow pierces him through the heart. A split second later, another slams into his head.

"*Thanatos!*" I scream, lunging for him as, all around camp, the remaining skeletons crumple, their bones clattering against the ground.

I catch the horseman as he falls back and cradle him in my arms, even as our attackers stream towards us.

"Death," I say again, cupping his face.

I know he's dead, I know the self-persevering thing to do is drop his body and fight, but I'm seized by a paralyzing panic at the sight of my horseman

limp in my arms. A sob slips out.

How many times have I seen him die? A dozen? More?

Never have I felt this way before. Like the world is collapsing around me. I can barely breathe around it.

Another arrow whistles by, grazing my shoulder. I cry out, reaching for the wound. That snaps me out of my grief.

Get up, Lazarus.

I force myself to my feet, my hands and forearms slick with the horseman's blood. It's a small favor that I actually decided to slip on an oversized shirt and a pair of underwear. I don't always when I lay with Death.

"Do not harm the woman!" someone shouts.

That's when I really notice the men approaching me, weapons drawn and aimed.

I have stopped wearing blades on me. What's the need when I'm now bedding my mortal enemy? He was the only person I ever kept them for.

Only now, as I see dark figures dismantling our camp, I regret it. I can hear them going through our things and whistling as they find this or that.

"Is the creature dead?" a deep male voice calls.

"He better be," another responds.

"Grab the woman!" yet another orders.

I shift my weight, readying myself as I watch those forms in the darkness. I may not have my blades, but I'm not entirely defenseless.

The first man to reach me grabs my forearm, but just as soon as he's touched my skin, his hand falls away, and a second later I hear the thud of his body hitting the ground.

I glance his way in confusion, but then another man reaches for me. I lash out, slamming my fist into his nose.

"Motherfucker!" he shouts, his hand slipping from me.

Another tries to grab me from behind, and I shove my elbow into his stomach. He grunts, stumbling away. I spin and approach him. I can see the hilt of a holstered blade at his side, and I make a desperate lunge for it.

My fingers brush the hilt of it for a split second before another man tackles me from the side.

I hit the ground hard, my teeth clicking together as my head whips back against the earth.

Still I struggle. Better to fight to the death than endure whatever plans

these people have in store for me.

My attacker grabs one of my arms, but then he falls away from me, limp. I have no time to worry about him before another man kneels down on me, and I thrash about, trying to throw him off of me.

“Stop—fighting—bitch,” he says, bringing his face close to mine.

I slam my forehead into his nose as hard as I can, smiling when I hear a crack. He makes a sound that’s somewhere between a howl and a groan.

I don’t see his fist move, but I feel it slam against my face. My head snaps back, and the pain is so intense it robs me of the breath I need to scream. Before I can even process that hit, his fist connects with my cheek again—and again and again. I try to cover my face but it’s useless, that fist keeps hitting me.

“Don’t kill her! Don’t kill her!” somebody shouts.

The man doesn’t respond, nor does he stop. Not until someone pulls him off of me.

Another man drags me onto my feet. I sway there as all around me, the night gives way to a deeper darkness, one I happily fall into.

I wake to pressure at my shoulders and dull, throbbing pain. Wincing, I try to move my arms, only to encounter resistance. Blinking my eyes open, I take in my surroundings.

There are tents all around me, some made from canvas, some made from hides. Beyond the tents, I can just make out an old, worn-down building, though I can’t say what it is. And the heat, it presses in on me from all sides.

Still in the desert.

In front of me is a dirt pathway that cuts between tents. Lining the pathway are nearly a dozen other women, their hands bound and tied to nearby wooden stakes. A couple of them are crying, several others appear catatonic. The rest are sharp-eyed, but they all look sunburned and miserable.

People—mostly men I notice—are moving about this strange outpost. They wear blades and bows and quivers, and there’s a vicious, uncompromising look to them.

I glance down at my overly large shirt that’s now covered in blood splatter and dirt. My last memories come back to me all at once.

Marauders attacked our camp last night. They looted our belongings, and Death ... Death ...

I make a small noise at the memory of Thanatos getting shot. My throat

closes up, and something that feels a lot like grief wells up in me.

He's fine, he's fine, he's fine, I try to tell myself. He was probably left for dead, and it's just a matter of time before he wakes up.

But the sun is making its way up in the sky and the morning air is already uncomfortably hot and Death should be awake by now, shouldn't he?

Unless they have him. Unless they've been hurting him. Nausea rolls through me, followed by anxiety.

I have to push away the sheer terror I feel for Thanatos. It's silly to fear for a horseman who cannot die and who is, in fact, killing people by the thousands. Yet my anxiety rises all the same, eclipsing my own dire situation.

Another troubling thought pops into my head: *These people were able to get close to Death.*

I assumed it was effortless for Thanatos to kill—his very existence beckons people to their deaths. It's keeping humans alive that he struggles with.

Yet when we were attacked, he had been awake, at least for a few seconds, and no one had fallen down dead. That should've happened—that's how it always used to play out.

It was almost like what was once natural to him now took actual intention.

Why would that be?

And what, for that matter, *was* Death doing when they attacked? Because if I didn't know better, I would've said that the horseman had fallen asleep next to me.

I pull at my restraints. None of my questions much matter at the moment. Not when I'm tied up and held captive.

My head still pounds, my throat is parched, and my skin has a tight, prickly feel to it like I've been sitting out in the sun for too long—which I likely have been.

At least I have clothes on. I mean, it really could've been worse.

My eyes return to the women, who are bound and bloody.

"Where are we?" My voice comes out as a croak, and I have to clear my throat as my gaze moves from face to face. None of them will look at me.

Two men pass by, one of them leering down at us, like there's something inherently sexual about dirty, battered women.

I glare at the man. "Who are these people?"

"Will you shut up?" whispers a woman across from me. Her eyes dart down the pathway to a man I didn't notice before. He sits on an old foldable

chair outside a nearby tent, his arms folded over a generous gut as he leans back and chats with another man. At his hip is a wicked looking whip. Another riding crop is propped against the tent behind him.

Jesus.

“Cynthia, be nice,” someone else says.

“Do *you* want to get lashed again?” Cynthia hisses back. “Because I don’t.”

My stomach churns. Violent midnight raids? Plundered goods and women held hostage? All in the middle of a desolate desert? I’ve heard of highwaymen, but this is far more complex and organized.

“What are they planning on doing with us?” I say softly.

A woman whimpers at my question.

Cynthia, who looks thoroughly annoyed, says, “Shut *up*.”

“Hey!” the heavysset man in the chair barks. His seat squeaks as he stands up a moment later, his hand moving to his whip. He’s got a bland face, but there is something about his eyes that makes me think he enjoys hurting women.

The man saunters over, glaring at Cynthia before his gaze lands on me. He eyes me up and down, then wordlessly, he turns back the way he came.

We all watch him leave. He heads past his chair, down the row of tents, until he disappears from sight.

Once he’s gone, the whole group of women seems to relax.

“We might as well talk now,” the woman next to me says. She has dirt-streaked hair and vivid green eyes.

“Yeah, now that we’re all going to get beaten,” Cynthia mutters, casting me another glare.

One of the women across the way says, “You wanted to know what this place is, right?”

Warily, I nod.

Taking a deep breath, she says, “These guys are a part of the Sixty-Six.”

When my expression doesn’t change, the woman exhales. “They’re a group of outlaws that patrol the highways in this part of the country.”

“Why has no one stopped them?” I say.

No one says anything, and I get the impression that no one actually knows why organized crime like this has been allowed to exist. It’s easy enough to imagine that this mostly deserted corner of the country is too remote to police well.

“Did they attack all your camps?” I ask, shifting a little to ease the pressure on my upper arms and shoulders.

The question causes another woman to whimper. The rest of the group is quiet. Finally, Cynthia says, “Yeah. Or, in Morgan’s case,” she nods to the brown-haired woman sitting next to her, “it was a bribe gone bad.”

There’s clearly more to all of this. And the fact that they know each other’s names ...

“How long have you all been here?” I ask.

“He’s coming back,” Cynthia hisses, interrupting me. “Everyone, shut up.” She gives me a meaningful look.

I narrow my eyes at her, but turn to face the man with the whip. Alongside him is another man wearing a cowboy hat. The two don’t stop until they’re right in front of me.

The man wearing the cowboy hat crouches in front of me.

“Morning, sugar,” he says. As he speaks, I catch sight of a silver front tooth. “We’ve been waiting for you to wake up.”

I glare at him. Whoever this man is, he had something to do with Thanatos’s death and my capture.

“Why don’t we start with the easy stuff—I’m Shane,” he says.

I just continue to glare at him. The women around me are ominously silent, although I can hear one of them making soft noises, like she’s trying to stop herself from crying.

When the silence stretches on for too long, Shane flashes me an easy smile, showing off that silver tooth.

“Now don’t be rude,” he says. “Introduce yourself.”

Well, now that I know that manners mean so much to him ...

I spit at his face.

He’s fast—I’ll give him that. I don’t see his hand move before the back of it connects with my cheek.

Smack.

My head snaps to the side, my skin throbbing. My already pounding head feels like it’s going to explode from the pain and pressure.

“We don’t let our cunts act out here,” he says conversationally. “Unless, of course, that’s the sort of thing we’re into.” The man behind him laughs.

I work my jaw as I glare at both of them, my cheek on fire.

“So, tell me,” he continues, squinting as he sizes me up, “how is it that a woman like you comes to be with a horseman of the apocalypse?”

He knows who Thanatos is?

Shane must see something on my face because he says, “I wouldn’t have believed it myself if I hadn’t seen those wings with my own eyes.”

My pulse pounds between my ears. What have these people done with my horseman?

“But that still doesn’t answer my question,” Shane continues.

I give him an unfriendly smile. “You can die confused.”

Smack.

My head whips to the side as he strikes me again. I have to bite back a cry.

“Do you know how many men it took to bind you up?”

I stare at him passively.

He leans in conspiratorially. “Five.” He shakes his head. “I wasted five good men to capture you.”

It takes me a moment to realize that he means five men *died* in their attempt to capture me. I remember how last night some of my attackers had fallen away right after they grabbed me by my forearms ... forearms that were coated in the horseman’s blood. My eyes widen.

Even Death’s blood is lethal.

“So,” Shane continues, “you *will* answer my questions, starting with how it is that you can touch that creature and live.” His eyes flick over me again, and I can see him asking himself, *who are you?*

I already know I don’t look particularly special.

I lift a shoulder in response to his question. “I don’t know how—or why. I just can.”

“Is he really dead?” Shane presses.

“Who?” I ask. “Your men? Yeah, they really fucking are—”

Smack.

This slap is lighter than the others, but I still taste blood in my mouth as my teeth cut my cheek.

“Don’t act stupid, girl,” Shane says. “The horseman. Is he dead?”

I scowl at him. “Of course he’s dead,” I respond hotly. “He had an arrow through his face.”

“An arrow that later came out all on its own,” he says, watching me carefully.

I try not to react, though I feel alarmed.

“He can regenerate, can’t he?” Shane presses.

Around us, the heavysset man and captive women have all gone quiet,

listening in to our conversation.

“Until you untie me, I won’t tell you a damn—”

Crack!

I cry out as the man backhands me with his full weight behind him, the hit snapping my head to the side. I have to grit my teeth as I ride out the throbbing pain. The skin around my eye is starting to swell, and the pounding in my head is making me queasy.

“You’re not in a position to make demands, sugar,” Shane says. “Now, you can either cooperate, or I can *make* you cooperate. The choice is yours.”

I raise my eyes to his, letting him see just how little fear is on my face. Then, without meaning to, I crack a smile, and a little laugh slips out. Around us, it’s ungodly quiet.

“Do you really think you frighten me?” I say. “I have seen *entire cities* fall and everyone I love die. I have been hurt more times than I can count, and I’ve been forced to live through it all. I have met the devil and he really is a fallen angel. So go fuck yourself, your threats don’t scare—”

Shane slams his fist into my face, and I black out.

When I wake again, I’ve been untied from the post, though my hands are still bound behind my back. Two men are each gripping me by my upper arms and hauling me forward, my feet dragging against the ground. My loose hair dangles around my head, and I can see droplets of blood dripping from my aching nose onto the dirt.

I moan. It’s not the worst pain I’ve endured, but it still hurts like a mother.

“*Shane! Shane!*” a man shouts in the distance.

I lift my head a little just to see what all the commotion is.

A man in his mid-twenties is pushing people out of his way as he races towards us, his eyes locked on the man in front of me—Shane, presumably.

The runner stops, sweat beading on his brow as he tries to catch his breath.

“Shane,” he says, drawing in a deep breath, “*he’s gone.*”

I go still, sharpening my focus on the conversation.

Ahead of me, Shane halts, as do the men holding me.

“What do you mean, he’s gone?” Shane says. I can hear the banked violence in his voice.

“The horseman,” the man says, breathless. “His cage was empty—”

The earth shivers then. Just a little. A few pebbles go skittering and some nearby people look around.

Shane steps up to the messenger, his voice dropping low, “Then where—”

the fuck—did he—”

All at once, the ground lurches. Shane tenses, and the man across from him stumbles a little. There’s a momentary pause where the earth seems to resettle, but then it begins to shake violently. Tents sway—a few of them even go down. Up ahead, I hear people shout and rush away from a spot up the path where the ground is swelling. The mound grows larger and larger until, all at once, it splits open. From it, a desiccated hand reaches out.

Now the shouts turn into screams, and people are running away from the undead creature rising from the ground.

As I kneel there, I smile.

Thanatos is finally awake. And he’s taking his revenge.

Chapter 56

Interstate 10, Arizona

August, Year 27 of the Horsemen

The revenant claws its way out, even as some of the braver men and women are grabbing machetes and hunting knives and moving towards the creature. Shane is one of them.

In the distance, I can hear more screams starting up, along with wet, meaty sounds. It's enough to spook my guards. One of them releases me, sprinting back down the path. The other man hesitates, then releases me, backing away before turning on his heel and fleeing as well.

Overhead, I hear the great roar of wings. My heart pounds madly as I look to the sky. I catch sight of Death's dark form heading towards us.

I smile again.

"I'd run if I were you," I say to Shane's back.

All around us, the screams are increasing. People are beginning to run every which way. I can hear someone shouting, "Zombie! Zombie! Zomb—" The voice cuts off in a gurgle.

Shane swivels around to face me just as the revenant finishes dragging itself out of the earth.

He eyes me as I rise to my feet.

"I'll deal with *you* in a moment," he says, pointing his blade at me.

"You won't though," I say as the horseman lowers himself to the earth several yards behind Shane. "Death will kill you, and then, if you're particularly unlucky, he'll force your corpse to serve me."

Thanatos lands, standing amongst the carnage like a true angel of the apocalypse. His black wings fold behind him.

I know Death's aware of me, but his wrathful eyes are focused on Shane.

He walks towards the man just as Shane turns around. He nearly loses his footing when he catches sight of the horseman.

“Lazarus is right,” Thanatos says. “You will die, and then you *will* serve my mate.”

Over Death’s shoulder, the newly risen revenant grabs a man with a ginger beard and stringy red hair.

The bearded man swings the blade he grips at the revenant, slicing through desiccated sinew and shattering several rib bones. The zombie grabs him by the head and twists.

Snap.

Shane curses, staggering back. Meanwhile, Death watches him, a cold, forbidding look on his face.

Seconds later, the bearded man rises, his neck bent oddly, his eyes unseeing.

“Jackson?” Shane says to the man.

Jackson strides towards Shane, his weapon still gripped in his hand. Shane barely has time to block the blow.

“What the fuck, man!” he shouts. But Jackson comes at him again. And then the mummified zombie and a few other newly dead men close in on Shane until he is the center of all their attention. I hear one bone break, then another. Shane cries out in pain, and I can see him struggling against all these new adversaries.

He glances over his shoulder, true terror in his eyes, as they begin to rip him apart.

It takes less than a minute for Shane to die, then only seconds for him to come back to life. His eyes are dull and lifeless; gone is that hot temper and the cruel confidence. Now he moves mindlessly with the others.

The group of them head towards me, but rather than attacking like they have everyone else, the undead circle me, standing guard.

Death’s gaze falls to mine, and I see his vengeance dissolve away into relief.

“Lazarus.”

He strides forward, and the circle of revenants parts to let him through. He takes me into his arms. His hands slide over my back and across my bindings.

“What is this?” As he asks, he rips them apart.

I collapse against him, my body feeling boneless.

Death pulls away long enough to take in my face. His gaze pauses over my

swollen eye and my cheek.

For an instant, there's murder in his eyes, and it might be my imagination, but I swear the screams around us ratchet up.

He reaches out, gently caressing my wounded flesh. "I'm sorry, Lazarus, so sorry."

Beneath his touch, I feel warmth spread out beneath my skin. My flesh tingles as the pain in my face lessens.

I lean into his hand. "There's nothing to apologize for." We were ambushed in the middle of the night. He was a victim every bit as much as I was.

"I should've been on guard," he insists. "I shouldn't have ..." *fallen asleep*. He can't seem to get that last part out.

A high, feminine scream drags my attention away from the horseman. All around us, the rest of camp is still getting slaughtered.

The women. My breath catches.

Shit.

I turn back to Thanatos. "Please, stop your revenants."

His jaw hardens. "Why?"

"Just please do it."

All at once, the dead fall to the ground.

I shudder out a breath.

"Thank you," I say. I slip out of Death's embrace, then rush back down the path.

"Lazarus!" Death calls out after me, but I don't stop and I don't respond.

Where are they? Where are they?

Every inch of this place looks the same—just tents and dirt paths and more tents—and I'm disoriented by it all.

I slip in a puddle of blood, nearly going down before I catch myself and continue running.

"Cynthia!" I shout. "Morgan!"

The rest of the camp is silent. Too silent.

I run and run and run.

Eventually, I do find the women. I'm just too late.

They are still tied to their posts—Cynthia, Morgan, and so many others—their bodies slumped over, their lifeless eyes open.

All at once, my knees give out. I let out a frustrated cry, tears pricking my eyes. They deserved better. So much better.

I hear the thump of Death's wings again, but all I have eyes for at the moment are these women.

I'm breathing hard as the last of the dust around me settles, the silence almost painful.

When I asked Death to stop his revenants, he hadn't just done that. He also killed off the last of the living.

"Lazarus, what are you doing here?" he asks, approaching me. "Are you—crying?" He sounds shocked by the sight, as though the thought of me crying over anyone in this camp is preposterous. And how would Death know that these women weren't the bad guys? There's still so much about us humans that he doesn't understand.

Tears are dripping from my eyes. "These other women, they were victims, just like us," I say.

Thanatos glances at the women in question.

"And that matters to you," he says. It's not a question, and yet there's confusion folded into it. They were strangers only a day ago.

"They didn't deserve to die."

"Kismet, *everyone* deserves to die—even that abominable man I cut down only minutes ago."

He kneels across from me and reaches out, caressing the skin that he just so recently healed.

"To live *is* to die," he adds. "That was the agreement you made when you came into this world. You cannot have one without the other."

Death stands. "All your life, all your suffering, all your loss—it was all for this." He gestures to the dead around us, his wings spreading wide. "You all have been running towards me your entire life."

Chapter 57

Interstate 10, Arizona

September, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I assume that the camp I was held at was the last I'd see of the Sixty-Six—or whoever the hell those people were.

But ... nope. A week after our last encounter, we run into more trouble.

Off to the side of the highway ahead of us is a large, abandoned warehouse. It's one of the few structures we've seen on this lonely stretch of road.

We're no more than a hundred yards from it when a flurry of arrows streak away from the structure towards Death and me. I've seen enough aerial attacks to know their trajectory is too shallow to hit us, but it still makes me catch my breath.

The projectiles clatter against the weathered road in front of us.

"Halt!" a deep male voice calls out, stepping away from the warehouse. "We have more arrows trained on you." He points his finger up, towards the top of the building.

My gaze moves to the structure's roofline. Only now do I notice the dozen men and women posted there, their bows trained on me and Death.

Thanatos's grip on me tightens, and I know this is their end. I hold my breath, waiting for their bodies to hit the roof.

Instead, Death stops our horse.

"You know," he says softly, "I have really come to despise bows and arrows."

The man on the ground continues to stroll out, one of his hands lightly resting on a sheathed blade at his hip. I don't know what he means to do with that blade; he's too far away to even throw it at us.

“This here is a toll road,” he calls out, gesturing to the highway. “No one passes without paying.”

Up on the warehouse’s roof, I very clearly hear one of the archers say, “What in the name of the devil ... Are those *wings*?”

A hush falls over the entire group of us—me, Thanatos, the archers. Even the man on the ground just stiffened, like he heard it too.

“*Horseman*,” I hear someone hiss. That’s followed by low, frantic murmuring.

Death bends his head towards me, his lips brushing my ear. “I take every man to the grave,” the horseman says. “I have compassion for all souls. But I have none for behavior like *this*. They desecrate what sacredness I do hold towards life, and they desecrate *me*.”

Thanatos straightens in the saddle. “You will all die,” he announces. “But I will make you suffer for it before I lead you on.”

That’s apparently all the encouragement the spooked group needs. The man on the ground sprints towards the warehouse, disappearing inside just as the archers fire another volley of arrows.

A gust of wind blows the projectiles away. Already the group is reloading and releasing another round. The wind blows these away too.

Heedless of the weapons trained on us, Death guides his horse forward.

“Why aren’t you killing them?” I ask softly as the group reloads once again.

“So eager for their deaths?” Thanatos asks, grim amusement in his voice.

I turn and give the horseman a look. He cracks a smirk, but the moment his gaze returns to our assailants, it dissolves away. I get a chill, gazing on that pitiless face of his.

Just as yet another round of arrows is released—then promptly blown off course—I hear a choking sound come from one of the men on the roof. I glance up just in time to see our negotiator—the man who had fled back into the warehouse—stagger near the edge of the roof. He clutches his throat, then collapses, disappearing from sight.

“Vince!” shouts a woman near him.

Another calls out, “Get your ass up man!”

Vince, however, doesn’t get up.

Two archers leave their posts to check on the fallen man, while the others keep firing arrows and Death keeps blowing them off course.

We’re nearly upon the warehouse when I hear the people above me start to

shout.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

“What the fuck, Vince?”

I can't tell what's going on, not until two people move to the edge of the roof. One of them—our former negotiator—has his hand wrapped around another man's throat.

Now I know what's happened to Vince.

“Vince, let Roy go!”

But Vince isn't Vince anymore.

Roy claws at Vince's hand where it grips his throat, and the others are trying to pry the two apart, but then amongst the chaos, another man seems to stumble and choke, then fall from view. A moment later, he too rises.

Thanatos stops our horse and watches this all calmly from where he sits behind me.

“Thanatos,” I say.

“Ah, I do so love it when you say my name like that,” he replies.

This time, however, I'm scandalized for an entirely different reason, one that has nothing to do with sex.

“Stop this,” I say.

“Violent lives lead to violent deaths, kismet. This is the tithe I will force them to pay.”

I assumed that being with me was causing Thanatos to soften towards humans, but after Death's last show of power and now this, I'm not sure anymore. I think perhaps instead I've made him human in the worst way.

I reach for his hand, gripping it tightly. *“Please.”*

My plea falls on deaf ears.

It takes another minute for them all to die, and it's horrible, so very, very horrible. I can hear their screams, and I can only imagine their confused terror as their former friends kill them. It's a senseless sort of betrayal.

Once every last one of them dies, and that silence sweeps in, that prickling, jarring silence. All I can hear is my own ragged breathing.

“You could've just killed them all at once,” I say. Even though they extorted us and threatened us and likely would've hurt us, I'm still unnerved by Death's cruel power.

“I could've,” the horseman agrees.

He clicks his tongue, and that's apparently all he has to say about that.

Chapter 58

Interstate 10, Western Arizona

September, Year 27 of the Horsemen

When will we leave this cursed desert? We have spent weeks crossing it, and as far as I can tell, we're still smack dab in the middle of it.

The day starts out hot and the temperature only seems to climb. I sweat, and sweat, and sweat. Just as quickly as it comes, the sweat evaporates away.

I think this corner of the world burned the memo that summer ends.

Death passes me a jug of water from one of the saddle bags. Wordlessly, I take it, swallowing the liquid down.

We're running out of water. The last two pumps we passed were dry, and I have no clue when we'll come upon another. It doesn't help that we just passed the skeletal remains of a horse, its bleach-white bones picked clean by scavengers. In the last few weeks we've passed many areas that were largely uninhabitable, but for some reason, I hadn't felt as close to death then as I do now.

Perhaps it's simply because it's been so long since I have seen fields of green grass and moist earth. It feels like we've traveled to a place where things go to die.

My panic rises, and I have to tell myself that neither the heat nor the lack of water really matters—I'll grimly survive it all. But it's fucking uncomfortable all the same.

As though reading my mind, Death says, "We'll need to find you water soon. This is no place for you, my Laz."

My Laz. My heart leaps at the endearment. It shouldn't, not after all I've seen the horseman do, but try telling that to my stupid organ.

I know Death is waiting for me to give in to that rush of emotion I feel for

him. I know he wants me to call him sweet things as well—for me to show *any* sign that this is more than just flesh and lust coming together. And I know he’s willing to wait.

Even if it takes centuries, even if you and I are the last creatures in existence, I vow to you this: I will get you to love me—mind, body, and heart.

His words still echo through my mind.

And I feel it happening. It has *been* happening.

I shove those feelings down. Instead, I study the ring Thanatos wears as he holds me in the saddle. The one fashioned from a coin of the dead.

“How does it work?” I ask, running my finger over the face on the coin. “How do you lead people on to the afterlife if you’re also here with me in the saddle?”

I don’t know why it’s taken me so long to voice this question. It’s one of the first ones I ever had concerning the horseman of death.

“I keep telling you, kismet. I am not truly human. I can do things that defy human nature and logic. Just as I can release thousands of souls from their flesh with a single thought, so too can I lead them onwards while sitting here in the saddle with you—just as Famine can make crops thousands of miles apart spoil at the same time. Just as Pestilence can spread disease in several places—and several species—all at once. It is an intrinsic part of who we are.”

I sit with that for several moments.

“Tell me about all the people you have met across time,” I start again.

His lips brush my temple, and I can feel his smile against my skin. He likes my questions and I think he also delights in answering them. Up until he captured me, his thoughts were his alone.

“That would take lifetimes, Lazarus,” he says softly. “I think you want a shorter answer than that.”

He is so literal.

“Give me the highlights—you have met everyone, haven’t you?” I say. “George Washington, Cleopatra and Marc Antony, Genghis Khan ...” I could go on.

“For a moment, and nothing more,” he says.

“What is it like? What are they like?”

“Souls are different when removed from their flesh. You want their humanisms—I can’t give that to you any better than your own written histories can, though I will tell you this: George Washington was at peace

when I came for him, Marc Antony and Cleopatra mourned for the lives they left behind, and Genghis Khan was grimly satisfied with his end.

“And those people we encountered back there—” he gestures behind us, “what most of them felt was shock. They had trouble processing the fact that they were dead.”

I’m fascinated by this—to be able to hear about the thoughts of people who died. My mind wanders to my own family. Naturally, grief wells up, just like it always does. But it’s a strange sort of gift to hear about their personalities continuing on, even after death.

“So,” I say, “my brothers and sisters, my mom and my nieces and nephews ...”

“They were confused for a moment because their deaths came without warning or pain. After that, there was peace.”

I force down the sudden rush of emotion.

“What is it like, taking souls?” I ask, turning the subject away from my family.

Death gets real quiet, and for several moments, all I hear is the clop of the horse’s hooves.

“I blink and ages have passed,” he finally says. “The man I took only a moment ago has decayed to dust. The roads of the town I just visited have altered their paths. Round and round the wheel of time turns, faster than even I can make sense of.”

“Does it still feel like that, even now?” I ask.

There’s another long pause.

“No,” he concedes. “Being human has made me experience time much differently.” After a moment, he adds, “I used to hate it. Each minute felt like an eternity, and the only thing to punctuate the monotony of my existence was the clop of my horse’s hooves. I thought I might go mad.

“But then,” he says, his hand finding the edge of my shirt. His fingers brush the skin beneath, “things changed once I found you. Now, I am absurdly grateful when the sun takes its time setting or rising. I’ve come to savor it like I do your skin, kismet. Every minute that drags on is one more spent with you, and I cannot imagine life ever returning to the way it once was.”

My throat closes up. No one has ever spoken to me this way—as though the world only turns because I am in it—and it makes me breathless. I can barely process that Death feels that way—and that I react to it. This would be

so much easier if Thanatos wasn't also responsible for all my grief.

I press my lips together, and though my thoughts are racing, I say nothing at all, and the two of us are left to ride in uncertain silence.

Chapter 59

Interstate 10, Southeastern California

September, Year 27 of the Horsemen

We do end up finding water shortly after we enter California. My heart pounds when I realize we've just about hit the western edge of the United States. I'm farther from home than I ever imagined I'd be, and I'm that much closer to seeing my son again.

We're also that much closer to the end of the world, and there are many, many people living on this side of the country. I spent all my time resenting the large swathes of barren land we crossed that I never took a moment to revel in the fact that then, there was no one for Death to kill.

The same cannot be said of the West Coast.

"What would happen if you just let people live?" I say softly. It's an old question, but one that bears repeating.

"I cannot," Thanatos responds, and there is true remorse in his voice. "You have your instincts, I have mine."

After a moment, he adds, "This is the same urge Famine fights even now."

The thought gives me goosebumps. *Ben is in his care.* To think that this need to kill and destroy still lingers inside him ...

My breath hitches.

"Is it just Famine who feels that way?" I ask, grasping at the hope that the other brothers will temper Famine's ... *instincts.*

"War and Pestilence are different," Thanatos says. "Their drives have been cleaved away from them along with their immortality. But Famine ... he is still immortal."

"*Why* is he still immortal?" I ask. I've heard enough of the story to know that he wanted to give up his purpose and his immortality. And he's proven

that he wants to stop Death every bit as much as War and Pestilence do.

“My brother tried to set aside his task for his own personal reasons,” Thanatos says grimly. “It had nothing to do with humanity, which he still wants to burn.”

Does he though? I’ve witnessed enough of Famine’s anger and resentment to believe Death, but then, I saw the unguarded way he looked at my son, and I know there’s more to that thorny horseman. I think Death knows it too.

I frown. “But if Famine believed giving up his mortality for a single human was worth it all the same, shouldn’t that still count?” That says so much about the power of love. *Is it being selfish then to choose that over destruction?*

Death doesn’t respond, but I don’t think it’s because he’s reconsidering. We ride for the rest of the day in silence.

Chapter 60

Interstate 10, Southern California

September, Year 27 of the Horsemen

That night, I wake from sleep to one single thought. The most obvious, stupid realization, one I've been too blind to acknowledge.

It's not going to end.

I can hear my soft breathing, and I can feel the warm press of the horseman at my back. He hasn't yet realized I'm awake. All around us, I can just make out the bones of the dead that follow us around. Blessedly, Shane is not one of them. Despite Death and I's earlier vows, the man's body was left to rot in the desert.

Things with the horseman are not going to end. Not if I want him to give up his purpose. Because the thing is, *if* I convince Death to turn his back on all the killing, he's not just walking away from his task, he's choosing *me* over it.

My deal with the horseman doesn't just *end* with that choice. I've been such a fool to believe otherwise. If this works as the other horsemen hope it will—as *I* hope it will—then I will be spending the rest of my life with Thanatos.

My breath catches at that. I should feel horror—or at least the crushing weight of reality. Instead, warmth spreads through me. I ... hadn't anticipated a lifetime of this.

If, of course, Death picks me over his task.

And that's a big *if*.

Humanity is so close to annihilation, and it doesn't seem to matter what I do—I can kill Death over and over again, I can make love to him. But so far, none of it has been enough. I am terrified that even once I have Ben in my

arms again, beautiful, frightful humanity will still fall.

And there's another equally frightful thought that I hadn't considered until now. Bringing Death to the horsemen's doorstep means exposing Thanatos to the other horsemen's wives and children. And then there's the fact that the horsemen are coming back for me and Death. That had been their time limit.

If they find us before I've convinced Death to give up his task ...

We're all screwed.

My panic rising, I begin to calculate the time Death and I might have until we could run into said horsemen. It only serves to frighten me. We've moved slow and lingered for days at our rest stops.

In that time, Death's brothers have surely already dropped Ben off—perhaps they've *long* since dropped him off. I don't know how much time we have left before they close in on us.

Why did I not consider this sooner?

It wouldn't have mattered, a small voice in my head says. *The time would've passed all the same.*

I take several deep breaths to calm my racing heart. There's still time to change Death's mind. He just has to pick me over his task.

He has to pick *me*.

My breath hitches.

At my back, the horseman's hand moves to my hair, stroking it back.

"I've got you, Lazarus. It's just a dream. It will pass," he says, unaware that I'm awake.

I have to bite my lip. Here he is, soothing me from a bad dream in the middle of the night. And it sounds like he's done this before—murmured sweet things to me when I've been restless.

I'm glad he can't see me, this man who lies awake at my side for hours just to be close. This man who I've fought and killed many times and who has hurt me in return. This man who, despite it all, has chosen me over and over again.

There is no one like us.

Even now, when I think of him, I can feel that lightness within me. I've accepted riding with the horseman, and I've accepted sleeping with him. But I have never given myself permission to love him.

I've been so afraid of what it would mean to give him my heart if he still decided in the end to kill us all. But if I actually give in to the hope that the world won't end, truly, I lose nothing.

So as I lay out there in the desert, our undead entourage spread out around us, I let that last wall around my heart fall.

Sex with Thanatos is a slow dance.

“Faster,” I whisper to him.

Death grins down at me, the muscles of his chest rippling as he moves. “I don’t think I will,” he says as he glides out of me. “I like this pace.” He thrusts back in, the action causing my lips to part and my back to arch. “And I *especially* like the way you look at me when I fuck you at this pace.”

He stretches the act out for an agonizingly long time, and just when I think he’s going to speed up, he stills.

“Tell me a joke,” he says softly.

“A joke?” I say breathlessly. “Right now?”

“I crave your laughter.”

That’s ... not how this works.

I give him a crazy look. “People do not tell jokes when they’re”—*making love*—“having sex.”

“Oh good—I do so like breaking tradition,” Death says, thrusting into me once and wringing a moan out of me.

He continues to gaze down at me, and aw shit, he really is waiting for a joke.

“Um ...” Trying to think over the enormous dick inside me.

An old joke my sister Juniper told me as a kid comes to mind.

I cannot believe I’m doing this.

“What should a sick bird do?”

Thanatos’s brows come together. “I don’t underst—”

“Get tweetment.”

He stares down at me, and there’s nothing in his expression. Not even the barest spark of understanding.

And I still have a giant, unmoving dick inside of me.

“You know,” I say, willing to help him understand, “because birds twee ___”

“That can’t actually be a joke,” Death says disbelievingly.

“Humor is wasted on you,” I respond, shifting a little because his cock is still just hanging out inside me and we’re supposed to be having sex not debating the quality of a joke that I was asked *on the spot* to make.

“I don’t need to be worldly to know that was a *terrible* joke,” he insists.

I mean, if he'd asked me at another time, maybe I would've had better material.

I lift my arms up in a *what-can-I-say* gesture. "I'm not a comedian."

"Yes, Lazarus, you've made that abundantly clear."

I scoop up a handful of dirt and toss it at him, uncaring that much of it also rains down on me.

Thanatos lets out a booming laugh, and it transforms his normally somber face. I feel like I'm falling as I stare up at it.

He notices the shift in me because the laughter dies from his face. "What is it, kismet?"

I shake my head. "I love the way you laugh," I say fervently.

Still falling ...

All mirth has left the horseman's features, but in its place is a searing intensity. Rather than responding, Death kisses me hard, his hips beginning to drive into me once more. Again and again he thrusts, his pace both quickening and deepening until I'm panting against him.

Between the two of us, Death may have started out the novice, but he's definitely become the master.

That's the last thought I have before an orgasm blindsides me. I dig my fingers into his back, clinging to him as wave after wave of pleasure washes through me.

With a groan, Death finds his own release, his hips slamming into me over and over.

Once we're both spent, he gathers me in his arms.

"This is the most potent magic, kismet," he says, searching my gaze. "When I am with you—when I am *in* you—I am *alive*."

My nostrils flare, and I have to press my lips together to stop myself from saying something sweet and painfully truthful back to him.

Thanatos notices the action. "What is it, Lazarus?"

I shake my head. Last night I gave myself permission to love the horseman; that doesn't mean I'm ready to voice those feelings to him, not when I'm only just accepting them.

So instead, I shift my attention to his chest. Reaching out, I trace his glowing markings.

"What does this line say?" I ask, my finger moving over a line of symbols that curves down his chest and abdomen.

Death watches me for a long moment, clearly reluctant to shift topics. The

man must sense just how close he is to cracking me.

His attention flicks down to his chest. *“Petav paka harav epradiva arawaav uvawa, tutipsiu epraip ratarfaraip uvawa. Uje vip sia revavip yayev uwa petawiev vivafawotu. Annu sia tuvittufawitiva orapov rewuvawa.”*

I get chills as the words move through me, and I can feel the power folded in them.

“I am death,” he translates, *“an end to all beginnings, a beginning to all ends. I am the one who can take the living and raise the dead. The one who can resurrect souls.”*

My eyes drop to his stomach, my finger gliding down the line of text. There’s so much more written across his flesh.

“Are you ever going to tell me the rest of what your tattoos mean?” I ask softly.

There’s a long, weighty pause as Death’s gaze moves over my face.

“One day I will,” he promises.

“Why wait?” I ask. I don’t know how, even with all my pestering, there is still so much about this man that I don’t know.

He catches my hand, bringing it to his lips. “Now is not the time.”

“When will it be the time?” I ask, staring at his mouth.

“In truth, Laz, I am not sure,” he says, releasing my hand. “But I will know when it’s come upon us.”

Chapter 61

Interstate 10, Southern California

September, Year 27 of the Horsemen

It's only after I've eaten breakfast and I'm preparing to get on Thanatos's horse that the horseman's earlier words echo in my head.

I am the one who can take the living and raise the dead. The one who can resurrect souls.

I pause mid-step.

The one who can resurrect souls.

I suck in a sharp breath.

My attention shifts to Death, who stands on the other side of his horse, packing up my water jug and a blanket into one of the saddle bags.

"You can resurrect people?" I ask, my voice hushed.

"Lazarus, you already know this," he says. He doesn't even pause in his work.

"No," I say carefully, my skin pricking, "I know you can *reanimate* a person's remains, but you said earlier that you can *resurrect souls*."

That gets the horseman's attention.

He pauses what he's doing. After a moment, his gaze moves to me. His face is as cold and uncompromising as I've ever seen it.

"You *can*," I breathe, reading the truth on his features.

I don't know why, but the thought closes up my throat. Maybe it's hope at Death's abilities or maybe it's resentment that he must've deliberately kept this from me until now. Had I not even caught the nuance, would he *ever* have admitted as much?

To be able to resurrect souls ... That opens an entire realm of possibilities. Perhaps I don't have to simply settle for Death giving up his task. Maybe he

can also undo the damage he and his brothers have wrought.

All those people who have passed ...

I could get my family back. All of them. My mother, my brothers, my sisters, their spouses and children. Even my biological parents, who were taken from me when Pestilence first rode through, perhaps they too could return ...

I stride up to him and I'm desperate, so desperate. And of course this is why Thanatos never spoke about it. I grab his hand, holding it to my chest.

"The day I first met you, you had just taken over a dozen family members from me," I say breathlessly. I can only imagine how feverish my expression must be.

Death casts me a wary glance. "And you want me to bring them all back for you," he says.

Yes.

He's already shaking his head. "Lazarus, you do not know what you are asking."

"You've showed me every other one of your powers," I squeeze his hand, "show me this one."

"It is a damnable, unholy power," Death's voice rises. He removes his hand from mine.

"And your others are not?" I challenge. I've seen him kill off cities, collapse buildings, grow plants, change the weather, and raise the dead.

No.

"You are wrong," I tell him fervently. "This one, this power, is a miracle."

A muscle in his jaw jumps. "You think you understand my powers better than I do?" Death says hotly. "You think I am so blinded by my purpose that I cannot see the truth for what it is?" His nostrils flare. "There is a reason life begins with birth and *not* resurrection. This is no miracle," he vows.

I don't believe him, I *do* think he's blinded by his purpose.

"Please," I say, even though it's futile. The man who won't spare a single city definitely won't bring someone back from the dead.

I feel my hope splintering apart, but I won't let this go. I won't.

The horseman stares at me for a long moment.

"Fine," he growls.

I open my mouth, ready to argue—

Fine?

... Does this mean he's going to do it?

“Seriously?” It comes out as a hoarse whisper.

Death looks as incensed as I’ve ever seen him. Incensed, but resolved. “I will show you the futility of what you ask,” he says darkly.

I close my mouth, my pulse pounding so fast I feel vaguely ill.

He’s going to do it.

“Who would you like me to bring back?” he demands, the same angry gleam in his eyes.

My lips part as we stare each other down. There are so many people I could choose. My friends, my neighbors, my birth parents, my siblings.

But in the end, I choose the one person who saved me. It’s my turn to save her.

“Jill Gaumond, my mother.”

Chapter 62

Interstate 10, Southern California

September, Year 27 of the Horsemen

A muscle in Death's jaw flexes. He turns on his heel and walks away from me, his boots crunching over the dead shrubbery. I stare after him, wondering if he's unwilling to do this after all.

"Are you coming or not?" he calls over his shoulder.

Oh.

I follow him, feeling more and more uneasy with every step I take. There's nothing out here—just miles and miles of desert brush and lonely hills. I glance around me, but all is as it always is.

Thanatos stops and holds a hand out towards the ground. He still looks angry, and the sight unnerves me. I step up next to him, unsure what's about to happen.

Then I sense it.

My skin pricks as a cool breeze sweeps through, rustling the nearby shrubs. At our feet dirt begins to rise, creating a human-sized mound. Dirt sloughs off the mound, and the hairs along my arms rise as, out of the earth itself, the body takes shape. Hips and legs and shoulders, breasts and fingers and toes and a face.

A face.

I barely have time to care that the woman is naked before I fall to my knees next to her, a sob slipping from my lips. I can't look away from that face—my *mother's* face. One I was sure I would never see again.

For a moment, she lays there, unmoving.

Death glances over at me, his lips pressed together grimly.

And then—

My mother's chest rises as she takes in a deep breath, and then her eyes flutter open.

"Mom." My voice breaks, and then I'm helping her sit up, the last of the dirt slipping from her body as I do so.

I should probably give her a second, but just seeing her eyes blink and her body move—seeing her *alive*—I can't help but do the one thing I've wanted to do since I lost her.

I hug her tightly to me.

"I love you," I whisper. I barely manage to get the words out before I'm crying. "I've been so lost without you." So, so lost. All of my long-held strength comes crashing down; I'm just a kid who needs her mom.

I feel the light, almost confused press of her fingertips against my arm. Then, next to my ear, my mom lets out a wail. The sound raises the hairs at the back of my neck.

It trails off into a whimper.

"Wh—what is this?" she whispers.

I pull away in time to see her looking at her arms and hands with spooked eyes.

A keening sound works its way up her throat. "What's happening? Why am I here?" She reaches for her hair, then pulls on it, like she's considering ripping it out.

"Mom," I say, glancing frantically at Death, but he's standing stiffly off to the side. "Mom," I say again. I catch her hands and squeeze tightly. "It's me, your daughter."

To Thanatos, I say, "Can you get her a blanket?"

Without responding, he turns on his heel and heads over to his horse.

My mom's frightened, wild eyes shift to me.

She sucks in a breath. "*Lazarus.*"

I press my lips together to hold back another sob, and then I'm nodding, even as tears slip down my face.

"What is going on ... ?" Her words trail off into another moan, and my mom's eyes unfocus. She pinches them shut, shaking her head as she starts rocking back and forth.

"Mom—Mom." I'm trying not to panic, but I feel my anxiety rising. She seems so distressed. "It's okay, I'm here." I practically choke on the words. Just like that, I force myself to gather together my strength once more.

Behind me, I can hear Death's boots crunching over the parched shrubs as

he makes his way to us.

Wordlessly he steps up to my side, handing me a blanket.

“Thank you,” I murmur, shaking it out and wrapping it around my mother.

My mom doesn’t seem to notice. She’s still rocking back and forth, a distant, haunted look in her eyes. As I watch, she brings a hand up to her face and begins to sob.

My heart plummets as I stare at her, feeling both helpless and terrified.

I glance over my shoulder at Death. “Why is she acting like this?” I ask, my voice high and panicked.

“I already told you why,” Death says, his jaw clenched and his eyes hard. “Your mother doesn’t belong here. She knows it, I know it. It is only you, Lazarus, who cannot accept that the dead do not wish to return to life.”

His words are like a physical blow.

I rotate back to my mom and place a hand on her back. “Mom. *Mom*,” I say. “You’re alive.”

“No,” she moans again, shaking her head and closing her eyes like she can shut out the truth.

I stare at her, aghast, something sick churning in my stomach.

“Death brought you back. He took your life unfairly,” I say.

She begins to laugh, and I think she’s lost it completely, but then she opens her eyes and they sharpen on me.

“Lazarus Gaumond, my beloved daughter, *shame on you* for doing this.”

For a moment, I don’t react to her words. I simply *can’t*. Once more I’m that lost, confused child, my heart breaking.

“Now you listen to me,” she says sounding just like her old self. My chest aches—it aches so damn bad—because *this is my mom*. Not the wailing creature I held in my arms, but this lively, take-no-bullshit woman. And clearly this situation has gone sideways, but only yesterday I would’ve given anything to hear her scolding me.

And now I get that.

“Whatever you have done to bring me here, you undo it.” Her eyes move to Death. “*You undo it*,” she repeats to him.

He stands motionless.

She turns back to me, her body trembling as though in shock. “I don’t want to be here, Laz. I lived, I loved, and I died,” she says carefully. “And you don’t get to change the rules.”

I suck in a sharp breath, and my tears, which never really stopped, are

coming faster now.

She reaches out, uncaring that the blanket has slid off her shoulders, exposing her once more. She cups my face in her hand. “I love you, Lazarus. You are strong and brave and I know you have endured so much more than what should be asked of you. You do me proud. But right now baby, you need to let me go.”

“*Mom,*” I protest.

“My time has come and gone. Let me go, my sweet girl.”

I begin to sob, my whole body shaking. My mother pulls me in for a hug, and I can feel her own body trembling.

“Let me go,” she murmurs to me over and over, stroking my hair. “Let me go.”

And I’m sobbing in her arms and this is all I get, and I know it’s more than anyone else gets, but I still feel robbed.

Reluctantly, I begin to nod. “Okay, Mom,” I whisper, my voice hoarse.

She releases me, and I rise to my feet, backing up. I suck in my cheeks and force myself to stop crying, even though tears continue to well in my eyes.

I glance over at Death. He stares back at me stoically.

Letting my gaze fall in defeat, I give him a nod.

I sense his own gaze soften on me before he turns to my mother. He doesn’t say anything, but I see the moment his power takes effect.

For an instant there’s a flicker of relief in my mom’s eyes, and then her features slacken as Death releases her. My mother’s body disintegrates before my eyes, skin and muscle and bone turning into earth once more. A gust of wind whips up, blowing it away until there is no trace of the woman who was here a moment ago.

I fall back heavily onto my ass. It feels like it was all some sort of horrible dream, but I know it happened, I know that Death called my mom here because I asked him to, and then he released her because I asked him for that as well.

I press my palms to my eyes, and suddenly, horrible, wretched sobs are falling from my lips, and I am violently crying, my entire body shaking from the effort.

I didn’t get to mourn my mother’s death—not really. I threw myself into hunting down the horseman, and it left me so little room to mourn. The only time I grieved was during those quiet hours when I traveled, but even then, it came second to my purpose: to find—and stop—Death.

Now I'm forced to relive my mom's death all over again, and the wound of her passing cuts sharper than it did the first time.

Thanatos moves to my side, kneeling next to me. Then he's wrapping his arms around me, holding me close just like he did the night Ben was dying. Then it was comforting, but now it mocks me. He's the one taking all my loved ones away. I don't want his comfort, I want him to *stop*.

I push Death away. "Don't touch me," I tell him.

The horseman frowns, but that anger that simmered beneath his skin is now gone. He looks as though he's the one carrying the heavy burden.

"I see your pain," he says, "and I hear it, and I don't like it. It makes me frantic."

I ignore him, my head bowed as I weep.

After a moment, Death stands. "Bringing the dead back—truly back—is a curse, Lazarus. I know you are grieving, but it is in vain. Your mother is in a better place."

I pause to look up at him. "My grief is in *vain*?" I whisper. He's taken my family from me and now he thinks that the one thing I have left—my grief—should go too?

I laugh at him, but I'm so angry. "How *dare* you say that. You don't even *know* what loss is," I say hotly, rising to my feet. "You've never loved anything enough to care if it goes."

"Lazarus," he says, his face fierce, "nothing actually *goes*. It transforms, but transmutation isn't actually lost or gone at all. You were you before you had a body, and you will still be you when you no longer have one. A caterpillar might become a butterfly—and a human might become a spirit—but it is still the same essence. It has simply been *transformed*."

"Lazarus," he continues, searching my face, "if you could see life as I see it, you would know it is all okay—that it will all *be* okay. That death is the end of suffering."

"Life is far more than suffering," I practically yell at him. "Why do you think we all cling to it so desperately?"

His eyes flash. "Because you know no better."

I shake my head. "You're wrong," I say.

But what do I know? I have never been dead. My mom seemed to prefer it. Maybe he's right. Maybe I've been fighting for the wrong side this whole time.

That's the most chilling possibility of all.

Chapter 63

Los Angeles, California

September, Year 27 of the Horsemen

It's a hard morning. I feel like I have a sob stuck in my throat, and I'm angry at Thanatos, but then it's not really him I'm angry at.

I thought I had cracked the secret to life. For a brief instant I'd even entertained the idea that perhaps I could do more than just stop the apocalypse—I could reverse it. But there's clearly no reversing the damage the horsemen have wrought. So instead I sit in the saddle, my heart heavy.

Death holds me close, his lips brushing my temple every so often. I think he senses how close I am to fracturing apart.

Gradually we enter the eastern edge of Los Angeles, one satellite city at a time. The first thing that catches my eye are the mountains of rusted appliances and vehicles left out here in this bone dry landscape. My gaze sweeps over all of the things people lost use of once they stopped working. Every so often I see a body or two lying amongst the debris, and it's clear that Death has already flexed his lethal powers.

We pass abandoned shopping centers and sun-beaten neighborhoods, the buildings missing windows and doors and roof tiles and whatever else people might repurpose. The landscaping around the buildings has long since died; all that's left are the husks of trees and bushes.

The sight of it all takes my breath away.

I don't know much about this part of the world, but I've heard stories about a time when this place was the seat of glamour.

I don't see it.

Maybe it's that time and the apocalypse have ground away at whatever beauty was once here, because all *I* see are collapsed overpasses, boarded up

buildings, and mountains of rubble.

And corpses.

The farther into LA we move, the more I see them, littering the highway and sprawled on the sidewalk, their belongings strewn out around them. I even see one lounging on their balcony, their head slumped against their shoulder as though they'd merely fallen asleep.

That ache in my chest grows, the one that makes me feel like all of this fighting against the horseman is futile.

Tell me something that makes this all worth it.

I nearly voice the question, but what would be the point? No answer Thanatos gives will make me feel better, and no arguments I make will convince him otherwise. So I keep my mouth shut and on we ride.

It takes another day for us to hit the literal edge of the United States. And suddenly, startlingly, there's the Pacific.

I have no words for it. I've seen lakes, I've seen inlets and rivers, but I've never seen the sea.

It's like a second sky, so vast and blue that it seems to swallow the world whole.

I suck in a breath, all my worries forgotten for an instant.

Thanatos must hear my reaction because he tilts himself in the saddle so that he can see my face. While I take in the water he takes in me.

"What is it that I'm seeing on your face?" he asks.

"Wonder," I murmur. "I've never seen the ocean before." It's almost funny, considering just how many thousands of miles I have traveled.

Death is quiet, though a moment later, he stops his horse.

I cast him an offhanded glance. "What are you doing?" I ask.

But he's already dismounting. No sooner have his feet touched the ground than he grabs my waist and pulls me down.

I frown at him, my brows drawn together in confusion.

"I want to give you a better view," he explains.

His wings spread wide behind him and, scooping me up, Death lifts us into the air.

Wind whips at my hair and drags tears from my eyes, but the higher up we go, the more that blue ocean takes up my vision, until it's all I can see.

Thanatos brings his lips close to my ear. "I want to stay here, Lazarus, just for a little while."

I assume he's referring to being airborne, but then, not ten minutes later, we're descending back to earth.

Beneath us, I see a strip of beach dotted with homes. We draw closer and closer to it, then we're flying over the homes, their roof tiles flashing beneath us. Death lowers us onto the front yard of one of the beachside homes.

I step out of Death's arms, taking in the palatial home. Bright, blooming bougainvillea creeps up the side of the house. A weathervane sits on top of the roof and a stone fountain is set into one of the walls of the home. These sorts of homes will never cease to shock me—that anyone can live such a grand lifestyle in a time when most people are eking out an existence. As I stare, I can hear the ocean calling out, the waves roaring as they crash upon the sand.

I turn around to face Thanatos.

"Why did we land here?" I ask.

"You need proper rest," he says, frowning a little as his eyes flick over me.

I don't know what he sees. I don't feel worn down by travel. But maybe he's reacting less to my physical state and more to my emotional one. I've been carrying a heavy sort of sadness around since I saw my mom.

"I'm fine," I insist.

Thanatos steps in close, the dying sunlight playing upon his features. "Let me be human with you for a few days—or have you already given up on the prospect of convincing me you are all worth saving?"

My breath catches, and I search the horseman's gaze.

I *had* given up on convincing Death. Maybe it was the criminals we encountered, or maybe it was seeing my mother. Maybe it was simply that for all my bending, Death wasn't changing.

"Don't look at me like that," he says, his voice pitched low.

"Like what?"

"Like you are grieving. Like I am the reason for it."

Absently, I touch the side of my face, unaware that I was looking at him like that.

I drop my hand. I don't know what Thanatos wants me to do. I *have* been grieving, and he *is* the reason behind it. We both know it. I may care for him, I may even, even ... *love* him, but it doesn't matter. You can love something and know it's bad for you.

"You fought me for months," Death says stepping in close. He brings his knuckles up to my cheeks.

“I’m tired of fighting,” I say.

“I’m not asking you to fight, I’m just asking for you to not give up on me.”

“Wouldn’t that be easier?” I say. This might be the most exposed either of us has been with one another. “You wouldn’t have to deal with me agonizing over every lost town, and I wouldn’t make you second guess yourself.”

“If it makes you lose that light in your eyes, then *no*, it would not be worth it. It would never be worth it.”

Thanatos seems torn in two, his human wants getting in the way of his base nature. And right now, it seems as though his human wants are winning out.

Despite everything, I feel the barest breath of hope.

Maybe not all is lost.

I nod a little. “Alright,” I say softly. “Let’s stay here—just for a little while.”

Death smiles, and the whole world could be crashing down around us and I wouldn’t notice because that smile bewitches me.

“Just for a little while,” he agrees, then seals the promise with a kiss.

Chapter 64

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

The inside of the home is even grander than the outside, everything done in whites and creams and pale neutrals that I could never, ever keep nice and clean.

The back of the house is hardly more than a wall of windows, and through them, I can see where the true magnificence of this house lies. The backyard is massive, the back patio bracketed in by a low stone railing. A pathway descends down the sloping lawn, eventually giving way to golden sand. Beyond that lies the Pacific.

On impulse, I grab Death's hand and head for the back doors. He lets me drag him outside. I don't linger on that spacious patio, though a part of me wants to. I can all but see the lavish dinner parties that might have once been held here, under the twinkling stars, the smell of the ocean thick in the air. If I close my eyes, I can imagine that world, full of shimmering dresses and bubbly drinks and soft music playing in the background.

It'll never happen again, at least not here and not anytime soon.

I lead Thanatos off the patio and down the sloping path to the beach. The daylight is already giving way to night, the sky a pale purple. The way the sun glances off the water makes it look metallic.

"Where are you taking me?" Death finally asks, a smile in his voice.

I know without looking that he is immensely pleased at being the one dragged along. I guess he's gotten tired of being in the opposite role.

"To the ocean," I say. I assumed it was obvious.

"Lazarus, we just saw the ocean. I do not need to see it again."

I glance over my shoulder at him. "But have you swam in it?"

He hesitates, and I already know his answer.

“Neither have I,” I admit. “But I want to, and ... I want you to join me.”

Thanatos gives me a penetrating look, one that makes my heart speed up.

The path ends and my feet sink into the sand. I release the horseman’s hand so that I can kick off my boots.

Death looms over me. “What are you doing, Laz?”

“Getting ready to get in.” I eye his armor. “You’ll want to take that off. Otherwise, you’ll sink like a stone.” I nearly shudder at the thought of Death trapped at the bottom of the ocean, waking only to drown again and again.

He touches his breastplate, no longer looking so excited about being dragged out here after all.

“Can you not swim?” I ask.

“Of course I can,” Thanatos says, affronted.

“Then why are you hesitating?” I ask. “I thought you liked getting wet,” I say, innuendo thick in my voice.

He doesn’t miss it.

Death’s eyes grow hooded, and now he does reach for the straps of his breastplate, unfastening them one by one.

Still staring at him, I undo my pants and shimmy out of them.

If Death was uncertain before about getting in the water, he is no longer.

I pull off my shirt, tossing it aside. My bra and panties are the last to go. Thanatos is still removing his armor, but I don’t wait for him to finish.

With a reckless laugh, I race down the beach, wet sand squishing between my toes. I hiss when the chilly water laps at my ankles, but I don’t stop running, kicking up salty water as I go. When I’m far enough out, I dive into a wave.

For an instant, being fully submerged is a shock to the system. The sea is painfully cold. Maybe that’s why it makes me feel so alive. I rise up to the surface, slicking my hair back.

“*Fuck.*”

The oath has me turning towards the shore.

Death wears a grimace on his face as he strides through the briny water.

Despite his mood, he’s a sight to behold. My gaze travels over the hard packed muscle of his shoulders and arms before moving down his tapered chest. His tattoos are on full display, and their reflection glitters on the surface of the water.

“I thought the heat and the cold didn’t bother you,” I say. My teeth are

already chattering, but I'm so exhilarated by the crash of the waves and the sand between my toes that I can't find it in myself to care.

"This would bother even the dead," Death says vehemently.

I laugh because he's being ridiculous; he probably doesn't even *feel* the cold.

Thanatos scowls at the water. "This is worse than wine."

That only makes me laugh harder. The sound lifts his gaze to my lips. Death moves towards me, the water slipping past his waist and wings. The way he's looking at me ... I'd say he seemed agonized if there wasn't a softness to his eyes.

Thanatos reaches me, and he cups my cheeks. He takes me in for several seconds.

"I love you," he breathes.

Then his lips descend on mine.

My hands tremble where I grip his arms, and I want to weep and laugh all at once.

He breaks away. "I love you," he says again, still cupping my face, his eyes searching mine.

I'm shaking my head—I don't know why I'm shaking my head. This is everything I want to hear.

"I do," he insists. "I have been waiting for you from the moment I was first formed, long before you ever drew breath." He takes my hand and presses it over his heart. "You have been here the whole time, even when I thought I didn't want it, even when I believed love was a curse and a weakness.

"Nothing has ever been the same since we first crossed paths, Lazarus. Nothing will ever *be* the same again. And I swear to you, until my dying day, I will love you."

He wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me flush against him and erasing what little distance remained between us. High above, the sky has turned a deep blue and the first stars have appeared.

Neither of us speaks as I wrap my legs around him, locking my ankles behind his back.

He only takes a moment to line us up before he drives into me. I cry out at the sensation, but already Death is withdrawing and thrusting back in. I twine my arms around his neck as he pumps into me like he's trying to get as deep as possible.

"God," he groans, "the way you grip me, kismet. I could live here, inside

you, forever.”

I capture his mouth and kiss him as a wave crashes around us, and I taste saltwater on his lips.

The horseman moves his mouth away to press kisses along my cheek. He nips at my earlobe as he slides out of me, then pistons back in.

I moan, my mind blown for the countless time at the witchcraft that is this horseman.

His thrusts are deep and languid, and his glittering glyphs illuminate his eyes, giving them extra luster as he stares at me.

“You are everything I thought I couldn’t have,” he breathes.

I want to hide from his raw admission, but only because I’ve been in the habit of doing so for so long. Instead, I lean into that weightless feeling that fills me.

I touch Death’s face. “And you’re everything I thought I shouldn’t have,” I respond.

Couldn’t, shouldn’t—we’ve defied ourselves to be together.

Thanatos’s thrusts grow deeper and more powerful. The waves lap at us, but locked in the horseman’s arms, I barely notice it.

He leans in for a kiss, his tongue stroking mine for the briefest of moments before retreating.

Death breaks off the kiss, his hand cupped against my cheek, his face inches from mine. “How I enjoy tasting you, kismet.” He’s still driving himself into me, and his eyes go molten at whatever expression I wear. “And that look—that look reassures me that I have ensnared you just as much as you have me.”

The horseman moves his hands to my hips, rocking into me again and again until my legs are tightening around his waist. When he’s thrust himself as deep as he can go, he pauses, holding us in that position.

“*Thanatos*,” I pant.

He grins. “This, however, is perhaps what I enjoy most—when I am fit so tightly inside you that I am not quite sure where I end and you begin. I love it all far too much for my own good.”

My hands thread through his hair. “I think you also like torturing me.”

Death grins again. “Only a little.”

With that he begins to move again, thrusting harder and harder until the water is frothing around us.

His hand slips down to my clit, and he begins stroking it, and oh dear God,

he's no longer playing fair.

I catch his wrist, trying to pry his hand from my flesh.

"It's too much," I pant.

"You'll take it," Death insists. He continues to toy with my clit, the pad of his finger gliding over it again and again as he moves in me.

It really is too much.

I moan, lost to the sensation. My other hand has tightened in Thanatos's hair, and he growls at the sensation.

He dips his head, his lips taking in the tip of my breast. His teeth graze over my nipple, and *I am done*.

I cry out as I shatter apart, my orgasm almost violent. On and on it goes, every stroke of Death's hips stretching it out a little longer. Even once it finally comes to a close, the horseman hasn't removed his hand from my clit.

I reach for his wrist again, and he laughs.

"I don't think so, kismet. You're not done yet."

I stare at him like he's sprouted two heads—at least I try to. It's really fucking difficult when he's stroking me from both the inside and the outside.

"*Thanatos*."

"Yes," he says, flashing me a wolfish grin, "say my name again like that."

"It's too much," I insist.

"Well, we both know you won't die from it."

Ha-ha, he's so funny. Not.

I'm panting again, and can feel another orgasm building like the first one never happened.

Now I do huff out a laugh. "I cannot *believe* you."

The water is freezing, the waves are crashing into us, and none of it is nearly as distracting as this sadistic horseman who wants to torture me with pleasure. Death's slamming his cock into me, and my aching pussy is throbbing.

Thanatos flashes me a devilish look, then pinches my clit.

Just like that, a second orgasm sweeps through me. My fingernails dig into his skin as I tilt my head back, giving myself over to the sensation.

Death leans in, pressing a kiss to my throat as I ride my climax out.

And though he's stopped pinching my clit, the horseman's hand *still* hasn't left it. I just about cry from the sensation, which was wonderful a second ago, but now is *way* too much.

I'm pretty sure Thanatos wants to see just how many back-to-back

orgasms he can wring from me.

I guess he doesn't realize that I can play him like an instrument too.

My hand slips down, between his legs, and I cup his balls.

Death groans, his legs trembling just a little.

"Oh, did you think you were the only one with keys to the kingdom?" I say, my voice raspy. As I speak, I let my nails scrape over his sensitive skin.

The horseman's eyes widen. "*Lazarus*," he pants.

"Yes," I agree. "Say my name like that." I throw his earlier words back at him. "Better yet—*beg*." As I speak, I continue to play with his balls, ignoring how his own touch is brutalizing me in the most exquisite way.

Death's thrusts become erratic. "You—are—merciless ..." he bites out. Then, with a shout, he comes, hammering into me again and again.

I sigh as finally his hand leaves my clit. His cock strokes me several more times before he slips out. And then he simply holds me close.

I wrap my arms tightly around his neck, my spent body plastered against his.

"You are a bastard," I whisper

I feel him grin against my cheek. "I'm *your* bastard."

I swallow.

"Yes," I agree. "You're mine."

The two of us lay out on the beach, still completely naked. The ocean air is chilly, but Death's wings are warm, and I've managed to sneak myself under one.

Above us, I can see the Milky Way stretching out across the night sky. The stars gleam like jewels.

"What do you feel when you look up at the stars?" I ask.

Thanatos turns his head, and I can feel his gaze on me. "I'm supposed to feel something?"

A laugh slips out at that. "I'm trying to be deep here, and you're ruining it."

He's still looking at me, and when I tilt my head to face him, I can see the want in his eyes, like he craves my entire essence.

"Do you feel anywhere what I do?" he asks.

A bead of saltwater clings to a wet lock of his hair. I focus on it as I swallow.

"Yes," I answer seriously, my gaze meeting his.

His starry eyes deepen at my admission.

After a moment, I tear my gaze away to stare back up at the sky.

“Every time I look up there,” I say. “I feel like I remember who I am.”

“And who is that?” he asks quietly.

I swear he’s bracing himself for my answer.

“That’s the funny thing,” I say. “I don’t even feel like a *who* when I look at those stars—more like a *what*. Like I’m something that doesn’t have worries or fears. I just am.”

Death is still staring at me, and I can feel the weight of that gaze.

Eventually, he turns his face towards the sky. “I have lived for a very, very long time. I have watched people die over and over again. I have caught so many glimpses of life, and I have learned much about the world here.

“And yet, so much of this is a mystery. Being what I am—*death*—makes experiencing life so very strange and foreign. The only thing that seems to ground me is being with you, *kismet*.

“This feeling I get when I’m with you is ... there aren’t human words for it. It’s incomparable. All I can truly tell you is that when I hold you close to me, I am sure no one has ever felt as happy as I do.

“So, to answer your question, I don’t remember myself when I look at the sky.” He takes my hand and tilts his head to face me once more. “I remember myself when I look at you.”

My heart pounds madly as I lose myself in those eyes of his. There’s nothing I can say to match his words, so instead I lean forward and kiss my horseman.

Death wraps an arm around my waist and rolls us. As he does so, he hikes up one of my legs and slides himself into me. And then the two of us are lost in each other once more.

Chapter 65

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

The sun is setting the next day when I coax Death into the home's grand kitchen. Not that it took much effort. We've been playing the let's-christen-each-room-of-this-house game, so Thanatos probably thinks this is me trying to add a food kink to our sex, which—good idea, but that's not where my head's at.

All around me are half a dozen skeletons, each one busy chopping or baking or stirring something.

Turning to Thanatos, I ask, "Can you tell your servants to leave the kitchen?"

He tilts his head. "Why? Aren't you hungry?"

"I thought we might do something a little different tonight," I say.

He stares at me for a long moment, and yep, he definitely thinks he's going to get boned.

Death must give his servants some wordless instruction because suddenly, every skeleton stops what they're doing. Putting down stirring spoons and knives and all other manner of utensils, they leave the room at once.

It's strange, those creatures are nothing more than puppets pulled by magical strings, and yet now that they are gone, the room feels so much more intimate.

Thanatos takes a step towards me, his gaze growing hungry.

Before he can do something that distracts me *into* christening the kitchen, I put a hand on his chest.

"Wait," I say breathlessly.

Death's eyes are heated, and though he pauses, he's clearly just waiting for

me to finish whatever it is I want to say so that he can continue.

And I'm getting awfully distracted by the look in his eyes.

"I wanted to show you something—something about me." I'm grasping at words, trying to turn my mind away from the thought of his skin pressed against mine, his lips dragging along my flesh—

"You want my human secrets," I say. "And I wanted to show this one to you."

Thanatos's eyes gleam.

"It's not sex," I feel the need to add.

"Alright," he says good-naturedly. "You'll share this secret, I'll bask in the wonder of your existence, and then I'll make love to you."

My God.

He leans a hip against a nearby counter, his wings rustling as he folds his arms. He's still gazing at me like he could eat me up, and it's all I can do to concentrate on finding flour and sugar and all the other ingredients I'm going to need. Then, rummaging around, I manage to procure a mixing bowl and some measuring cups and spoons.

Grabbing a wooden cutting board, I bring the items to a bit of counter space that Death's servants haven't already made use of.

"What are you doing?" Thanatos asks, nodding at the gathered ingredients. It's as though he's never seen his skeletons working with the same items.

I glance over then, a small smile curving the corner of one of my lips up. I'm actually kind of thrilled to be doing this. "I want to cook with you."

Now some trepidation enters the horseman's eyes. "What are ... we cooking?"

I relax a little, hearing his words. Death might not like food, but he's willing to do this with me.

I turn back to the cutting board and the gathered ingredients. "My mother liked to call this soul bread."

Just the thought of her conjures the memory of her brief resurrection.

Whatever you have done to bring me here, you undo it.

I swallow down the pain and guilt I feel.

Death's brows pinch together. "I know what spirits are, and I know what bread is. I do not know how the two of them meet up."

"Mom used to tell me that there are certain foods you make with love. You press a bit of your very soul into the ingredients—hence the name. "

"What a monstrous thought," Death says, looking offended. "I can assure

you, Lazarus, the souls I collect are *entirely* intact.”

I laugh at that. “Not everything is literal, Thanatos.”

His eyes heat when he hears his name on my lips.

“Supposedly this is a family recipe that spans hundreds of years,” I continue, beginning to add the ingredients together. Quieter, I say, “Sometimes, I like to imagine all those women—or at least, I *assume* they were women—making this recipe. That in this moment, I am linked to an unbroken chain of people all brought together by the joy of feeding their loved ones.”

“That’s not how it works,” he insists.

I laugh again. “For a supernatural being, you have zero imagination.” I move over a little. “Here,” I say, handing him a container of salt, “help me.”

Death looks at the salt as though it might grow eyes and teeth, but he does push away from the counter and reluctantly take it.

Together I help him measure out the salt and the last of the ingredients.

Now for the fun part.

I take his hands and move them to the bowl.

“What are you—?”

Pushing down, I plunge his hands into the mix, a powdery cloud of flour billowing up around our wrists.

“*Lazarus.*”

“Oh my God,” I say, “don’t act like I took your firstborn. This is how we mix bread dough.”

Death grimaces, though I can’t be sure whether it’s this method of mixing or the thought of bread itself that displeases him. And to be honest, I could’ve used a spoon for this part.

Regardless, he does let me lead him through mixing, then kneading, the dough.

The movements are unfamiliar to the horseman, but somehow those deft hands of his aren’t clumsy. Not that it makes him appreciate it any more.

“This seems like a frivolous task,” he says, the edge of one of his wings brushing against my back.

“I imagine if I were an ageless, deathless angel who didn’t need to eat, it might feel frivolous to me too,” I say.

Thanatos’s eyes move to my face and after a moment, I meet his gaze.

You see me, his expression seems to say.

I briefly glance at our hands.

“Now you’ve pressed a little of your soul into the recipe too.”

“That’s ridiculous, kismet.” But now he sounds less skeptical and more curious.

A little smile slips out.

“So it’s done?” he asks.

“Technically it is, but—” *We still have to cook it.*

I never get that last part out.

Death lifts me onto one of the counters, knocking over a bowl of red sauce that one of the skeletons worked hard at making. It shatters against the ground, splattering both me and him.

Neither of us pays it any attention.

“Good. That was a fun secret,” he says, his gaze fixed on my lips. His hands move to the edge of my shirt, his fingers still sticky from the dough. He lifts the garment off over my head.

Death glances speculatively around. “Now, it seems to me that a kitchen is the last sort of place one should be caught fooling around.” He flashes me a mischievous smile and pulls me to the edge of the counter. Grabbing my legs, he wraps them, one by one, around his waist.

I mean, in this post-apocalyptic hellscape of a world, there are *definitely* worse places to get down and dirty ...

I tug on his black shirt, pulling it off of him and revealing his sculpted chest and the lines of glowing writing that stream down it.

Thanatos’s grin falls away and he cups my face, his gaze growing heated.

“You were made for me,” he says fervently. “And I for you.”

He kisses me savagely, and we forget all about the soul bread.

The fully cooked bread loaf sits on a platter on the dining room table. Death stares at it like an adversary.

“You don’t have to try it,” I say.

“Of course I must,” he replies. “It’s soul food, and I am the overseer of souls.”

I give Thanatos a cautious look as I begin to cut it. Last time the horseman tried bread, he hated it.

I slice off a thin piece of the bread and hand it to him. Reluctantly, Death takes it. I don’t bother offering the horseman some butter or olive oil or anything else that might add some flavor. I’m afraid that anything might scare him off.

Around us, the candles flicker, and the only noise in the room is the soft sounds the flames make as they burn their wicks. It feels like the room itself is watching, waiting.

Death glances at the bread, a slight frown on his face, as though he's dreading what he's about to do. He brings it to his lips and, after a momentary pause, he takes a bite. He chews for a long moment, his face expressionless, and my stomach plummets at the sight.

I don't know what I was actually expecting or why it even matters. He's a horseman. He doesn't need to eat food nor enjoy it.

I just wanted him to, I guess. It's as simple as that.

Thanatos swallows, and his brows pull together as he studies the bread slice again.

"I *like* it," he admits, scowling. He takes another bite.

"Soul food," he says to himself, a private smile on his face. His eyes meet mine, and they twinkle like we're sharing an inside joke.

And maybe we are—but soul food or human food, Thanatos eats every last bite of it.

Chapter 66

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I've gotten used to the sensation of waking up confused. Different city, different bed, different surroundings. It always feels like I'm falling for a moment, like my feet are no longer on firm ground.

That's what happens tonight. When my eyes snap open and I stare at the massive windows, I don't know where I am. But then there's a familiar arm thrown over my waist, the glyphs along it softly glowing, and my body relaxes as I remember that I am with Death.

A smile slips onto my face. I keep doing that lately—smiling at the little details I notice around the horseman. It's a softer, more subtle emotion than the breathless rush of desire I usually get around him.

I think this is what being in love feels like.

I reach for Death's hand, threading my fingers through his. I expect him to give mine a squeeze. When he doesn't, I flip around.

His eyes are closed, his lips slightly parted. The sharp angles of his face are somehow softened in the dim light, and that tattoo-riddled chest of his is rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

He's ... asleep. Death actually managed to fall asleep. First he ate the bread, and now this. It isn't the first time this has happened, but it's the first time I've seen it with my own eyes.

I don't dare make any sound as I watch his wings lightly rise and fall with each breath. His arm is still slung over my waist, and his other one is buried beneath my pillow. A lock of his dark hair has spilled onto his cheek.

My heart flutters at the sight. Oh so gently I reach out a hand and tuck his hair behind an ear. And I stare and stare.

I've seen him unconscious plenty of times. This is different. There's no pain or strife to the horseman's features; this is the smooth set of a face that knows peace.

On impulse, I lean forward, pressing my lips to his. Next to me, Thanatos stirs. He throws a leg over mine, and pulls me in close.

"Love you, kismet," he murmurs in his sleep. One of his wings extends, just a little, covering me like a blanket.

I smile to myself, warmth spreading through my stomach. "I love you, too."

Chapter 67

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Death

I **startle awake**, my eyes snapping open. The room is dark.

Still nighttime.

I take in the woman tucked under my arm. Lazarus is curled up tightly to my chest, so close that even in the darkness I can see the arch of her eyebrows and the sweep of her lashes. The sight makes my chest tighten in the sweetest way before I remember—

I fell asleep.

Again.

It's been happening more and more. The whole experience is unnatural and off-putting. Humans with wings were not made to sleep like this—though one such wing of mine has stretched itself out over Lazarus, and at the sight of it, I feel a deep, primal sense of satisfaction that the woman I love is right here with me, tucked within my embrace.

I am not the man I used to be. Not in the slightest. And this woman is almost wholly to blame for that.

It would be a lie to say I haven't toyed with the idea of giving up everything for Lazarus. The thought has crept up on me more times than I should admit. She thinks I haven't been tempted to turn away from my task, but in truth, I've *always* been tempted. Back when I first considered it, it symbolized my fall, and it was something to fear.

Now ... now I could live with her here forever, making love under the stars, swimming in that unpleasant ocean just to hear the trill of Lazarus's laughter. My nights would be spent sleeping at her side, her body tucked against mine—just like this.

I *ache* for that.

My hand slips down her soft skin, resting on the swell of her lower stomach.

What if?

What if things *were* different?

What if I stopped killing? What if I gave in? Truly lived as a human?

What if I formed life?

My cock hardens at the mere idea.

I'm so close to waking her up. To spreading those thighs of hers and

driving myself in. Of making good on this one, truly forbidden thing.

She doesn't want kids with you. She thought you'd be a terrible father.

That stops me completely.

I could change. If I did, perhaps she'd reconsider. I *want* her to reconsider. None of it has to be this way—

This is how Famine fell.

That day, when the Reaper tried to strip himself of his immortality and his purpose, I felt his intentions while I lay in my stupor. They are what roused me. And how they now mirror my own.

Here I am, on the brink of giving up everything, all for the love of a good woman.

I've spent so long thinking I was better than my brothers, thinking I was different. And perhaps, in some ways, I am.

But my God, *this is how Famine fell.*

Unlike the Reaper, however, I *do* believe in humanity. I always have. None of this was ever about humans' innate goodness. One look at their souls and it's plainly obvious.

No, this has always been about carrying out the task the four of us horsemen were given.

Even as I think on this, I sense those brothers of mine. I haven't mentioned to Lazarus how close they are, but now they lie just outside this city. Tomorrow they will be here.

A decision must be made.

My fingers tighten on Lazarus. At the sensation, she murmurs in her sleep, then her eyes flutter open and she gives me a sleepy smile.

She's about to roll over and fall back asleep when I caress her cheek. "In all of my existence, I have never come across anything worth forsaking my duty for until I met you," I say fervently. "You are my everything, kismet."

She wears a sleepy smile. "It's not fair to say such pretty things when I'm too tired to process them." She leans forward and gives me a kiss, her body brushing against mine. My grip tightens on her.

In response, she shifts herself, spreading her legs in an invitation. I am an angel, but even I cannot resist this.

With a single hand, I remove her panties, then push my way inside her, hissing at the intoxicating feel of her around my cock. I nearly come undone right then and there. Instead, I pump in and out of her with a franticness that she mistakes for passion, each deep thrust pulling moan after moan from her

until, all at once, her pussy clenches around me and her moans turn into a cry, my name on her tongue.

At the feel of her orgasm and the sound of her release, I can hold out no longer. I drive into her, harder than I should, bellowing her name as I come.

Before I have even slipped out of her, I pull her to me.

Lazarus's face nuzzles into my chest, and I can feel in this moment the trust she has for me. Here she lays in my arms, naked, vulnerable, with my seed spilling out of her as though she'd choose no other fate for herself but this one.

And I feel loss, bone-cutting loss, at what I know I cannot have.

Because I know I cannot have *this*, a human life—one full of laughter and children and ... Lazarus.

Always Lazarus.

Without meaning to, I clutch her tighter.

I will not let her go.

The entire world could burn to ash, and I would not care, but I will not give Lazarus up. Not my Lazarus.

I was given a brief human experience—one filled with horror and tragedy but then, most powerful of all, beauty and hope and love. I was given it, and tonight I almost slipped wholeheartedly into that existence, I nearly threw away *everything* for it.

That's what Pestilence did.

It's what War did.

It's what Famine has been trying to do.

It is what I cannot do.

I've questioned my own motives for too long. But this must end. It is what we horsemen were sent here to do. It is what I *will* do.

And nothing, nothing—not even Lazarus—will stop me.

PART III

Chapter 68

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Lazarus

The next morning, I pad into the dining room where a spread of eggs, toast, and fresh fruit waits for us. I'm so distracted by it that I almost miss Thanatos. He stands at the back of the room, in front of the massive windows that look out onto the yard and the ocean beyond.

"I was wrong," he says, his back to me.

I round the table.

"Good morning to you too," I say, reaching for the steaming mug of coffee that's been set out for me. Snagging the nearby creamer, I pour a little in.

Death still doesn't turn around. It's a small thing, but it pricks the back of my neck all the same.

"What were you wrong about?" I ask, my voice wary. I pull out a chair and slip into the seat.

"Staying here."

I raise my eyebrows as I grab a piece of toast. *Ah*. He needs to keep moving, and no amount of beach sex can distract him from that.

This had been a blissful escape, but I'm also eager to leave, to go get Ben. Now that we're on the West Coast, he seems tantalizingly close, even if hundreds and hundreds of miles still separate us.

"Do you think any of this was random?" Thanatos says, out of the blue. "That God hasn't reached Her hand in and played you like a puppet?"

My brows pull together. Right now the horseman has this ominous energy about him that's setting me on edge.

"What are you talking about?" I say.

"Did you really think it was random when your mother found you as a child?" he says, still staring out those windows. "Or when you found Ben alive in a city of dead, despite the fact that he is painfully mortal—did you think that was random too?"

His words make the hairs on the back of my neck stand on edge.

"How about our paths crossing? What about that? Or when you met the other horsemen just in time for them to save your son and take him away?"

Death turns to me then, and his eyes look so sad. "Do you really think *any* of it was random? Because it wasn't. That was intercession. It happens to humans all the time, but you're all so blinded by your own perceptions of

reality that you miss it. You miss the most potent forces of magic in your lives even when they unfold right before you.”

My heart is beating so loudly I’m sure the horseman can hear it. “Why are you telling me this?”

He takes a step towards me, his eyes magnetic. “Because it’s happening again—right now.”

I stand then, the chair scraping back; it feels too weird to sit when Thanatos isn’t himself.

Something must be wrong.

The horseman strides towards me, and I have to fight myself not to take a step back. When he reaches me, he cups my cheeks. He looks so mournful.

His eyes search mine. “I still wouldn’t change any of it—except for maybe the ending. But it’s too late for that.”

Before I can ask him what he means, he kisses me, the fierce press of his lips somewhat startling.

Thanatos breaks away just as abruptly. “I love you, kismet,” he says, his jaw clenching. “I love you with everything I am. Please don’t forget that.”

My brows draw together. “Why would I forget that?”

But the horseman has already let me go. He strides away from the room, and I watch him leave, baffled at his behavior, I get the oddest sense that for the first time in a long time, he’s fleeing me again.

Death’s strange behavior lasts all morning. He’s kept his distance from me, and there’s a gnawing fear festering in my heart. I can’t figure out what’s wrong, only that something *is* off. For once, I feel uncertain around Thanatos.

Even when we leave the beach house for good, the horseman keeps his distance, walking ahead of me.

I stand at the front porch, watching those folded wings of his sway with each step. My gut is telling me that something isn’t right.

He admitted to you that he loved you. He slept next to you and ate your food. Perhaps it’s not that something isn’t right. Perhaps he’s just different. Changed.

Reluctantly, I rejoin Death at his horse. Smoke coils around the animal, Thanatos’s torch already secured to the side of the saddle. All around us, skeletons are loading our belongings into the carts. I’m all for keeping a steady clip to our travels. Still, when I glance back at the house, there’s a lump in my throat.

Things between us changed here, and I am afraid once we get on that horse, they might change back to the way they were.

I sense Death's eyes on me, and I rotate to face him. Like earlier, he still looks a little melancholy, but then, maybe I'm just reading into things. Maybe I'm reading into *all* of this.

"What?" I say, a little self-consciously.

"What were you thinking, just then?" he asks.

My attention returns to the house, with the bougainvillea growing up its walls and that weathervane perched on its roof. Even from here I can hear the ocean crashing in the distance.

"I'm going to miss this place," I admit.

Now I know I'm not imagining Thanatos's sadness when his gaze sweeps over our surroundings. "As will I, Lazarus."

Reluctantly, I hoist myself onto Thanatos's steed. The horseman settles in behind me, and without another backwards glance, the two of us leave.

We head north, up one of L.A.'s many highways. The few bodies we pass are already decaying, and the faint smell of death permeates the air, even over the incense burning from his torch.

Death holds me tighter than usual, like I might slip away.

"Thanatos," I say, placing my hand over his, "You can let up—" I pause when I notice the tremor in his hand.

"You're trembling," I say.

"It's nothing."

Something isn't right. And if I'm being honest with myself, it hasn't been right since I woke up this morning.

"What is going on?" I demand.

Nothing.

"*Thanatos*," I say, "As long as I have known you, you have never skirted around hard truths," I say. "Is it that bad?" I ask.

Ominous silence.

Finally— "I love you, Lazarus. Everything is going to be alright."

I'm beginning to panic. His viselike grip only tightens further.

I reach for his hand again. "Why are you holding me so tightly?"

But then it hits me—

He thinks I'm going to run.

And now I have to wonder what could possibly be so bad that he thinks I'm going to flee him. He's raised the dead, killed entire cities, and done just

about every other frightening thing in the book.

“Whatever it is, Death, you can tell me about it,” I say, trying to sound reasonable when internally panic is setting in.

Is it another terrible power? Is it—Ben?

“My son,” I say. “Is he okay?”

“Your son is fine,” Death says grimly.

For a moment, I’m placated.

Perhaps whatever mood has wormed its way under Thanatos’s skin is not so bad.

We continue to head north, passing one decayed building after the next, and things almost go back to normal—until we come to a stop.

Several skyscrapers loom over us, many of them missing windows. In between them are other multistory structures with weathered walls and peeling paint; all of it is crammed together like there wasn’t enough room to build so they had to squeeze themselves upwards. The road itself is relatively free of bodies and debris, though there is one overturned bicycle and a dead woman sprawled out next to it, and farther up the highway I can make out several more bodies lying on the road.

Behind me, Death hops off his horse.

I glance down at him. “Why did we stop?”

“I feel them coming,” Thanatos murmurs, staring northward.

A wave of trepidation rolls through me.

“Who?” I say, dreading the answer.

“My brothers,” Thanatos says, casting a grim look at the road ahead of us.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I thought we had more time.

“Then let’s go around them,” I say. I’ll explain my reasoning later. I just want Thanatos to get back on his horse.

“They intend to stop me,” he says, ignoring my words. “I will not let them get between me and my purpose.”

My blood goes cold, even as my heart begins to race.

“Your purpose?” I say, my tone light.

He turns to me now. “It is time, kismet.”

My brows pull together, even as my chest rises and falls faster and faster.

“Time for what?”

Death reaches for the buckles of his breastplate and begins undoing them

one by one.

“What—what are you doing?” I demand. I don’t mean for my voice to waver, but it does.

He continues removing his armor until every last piece of it lay at his feet. Then he tugs his shirt off, his eyes never leaving mine. “I never read to you all of my markings.”

Something is very, very wrong here.

I slip out of the saddle, my boots hitting the ground heavily. I swivel to Death. “What are you doing?” I ask him. “You’re not acting like yourself, Thanatos.”

Those mournful eyes meet mine. “I am acting *exactly* as I should be.”

He takes a step forward, his hand moving to his chest, his finger touching one of his many markings.

He reads it all in his native language. I understand none of it, but the power of the words sweep through me, making my knees go weak.

I back up as the horseman moves forward. He begins to translate.

“From the darkest reaches of the universe my form was forged. I am death, an end to all beginnings, a beginning to all ends. I am the one who can take the living and raise the dead. The one who can resurrect souls. I have unto me, all the powers of my forbears and that which ties the threads of creation fast.

“I am the last of my kind, and I bring with me every manner of malady to plague humankind. Their fields shall blacken, their creatures shall flee. Mortals will quake before my name and all will fall to my touch. For I will end the world.

“The buildings will break, the roads will be torn asunder. The world will unmake itself until every last remnant of man’s creation crumbles to dust. The brave will return to the soil, and the cowardly and cruel as well. And the barley shall grow wild once more, and the beasts of old may return to their lands. All shall be as it once was. For I am the heart of God, and I will carry out Her will. I am the last judgment of humankind.”

I have fallen to my knees and tears track down my face and I don’t remember crying or falling.

Death’s hand drops from his skin. “Do you know what happens once I have made my final decision?”

I can feel the world’s collective mortality hanging in the air between us.

“Why are you doing this?” I whisper.

“Do you know?” he presses.

I close my eyes and swallow. I have heard enough talk of the End of Days to know what he’s alluding to. He spoke of it himself only a moment ago.

“The Last Judgment,” I say softly.

The end of human life as we know it.

Chapter 69

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Death

I gaze upon Lazarus, and I want to tell her this was never my idea. I take souls, but I've never hungered for their deaths. I've only ever carried out the orders I was given, from the very first death to this one.

I make exceptions from time to time—my brothers' wives are proof of that. But in the end, the four of us horsemen must finish our task, regardless of our personal feelings.

Still, I am shattered because I love Lazarus and she will hate me as she once did. Because all the rest of humanity hates me and I love them and I cannot help them cling to these lives they covet. Not without betraying the entire sentient universe.

And I will not do that.

Lazarus

I ... failed.

I seduced Death, I made him fall in love with me—I even fell in love with him. I have given up everything—my cause, my son, my body, my heart—and Death is still set to slay the world.

The thought closes up my throat. I can't breathe around this paralyzing fear.

He looks grief-stricken, so I guess there's *some* consolation in that. Not that it changes anything.

"I'm sorry, my love—"

"*Don't,*" I say, my voice breaking. "Don't call me that."

His expression shutters. After a moment, he moves away from me. He reaches for his discarded clothing, putting it on once more.

Preparing for battle. Because I think that's what's about to happen.

In the distance I hear the pound of horse's hooves, and it startles me from my thoughts.

The highway curves around a steep hill, so I see nothing beyond the bodies already scattered along the road.

A minute later, however, a figure on horseback rounds the curve, coming into view. Shortly after that, two other individuals follow on foot.

Death's brothers.

I feel the last sand in my hourglass slip through my fingers. The task they gave me—*seduce Death*—didn't work. All it did was make me love the one thing I shouldn't. I didn't even get to hold Ben in my arms one final time.

The closer the three men get, the more details I can make out. The most obvious is Famine with his coal-black steed and bronze armor, his scythe rising up behind his back. Both War and Pestilence wear black, though they lack the armor of their brother. Pestilence carries a bow and quiver, and War has a massive sword strapped to him.

They, too, came ready for battle.

The horsemen stop thirty or so feet from us, though it feels like they're still an ocean away.

War's gaze falls heavily on me, and I know what he must be thinking.

She failed.

“Lazarus, it’s good to see you again,” Pestilence calls out. He takes me in, his eyes pinched with worry. They harden a bit when they move to the man behind me. Returning his attention to me, Pestilence says, “Are you alright?”

That single question—that simple but heartfelt concern—threatens to crush me.

No, I’m not alright. I thought I was but this is really, really bad and I’m just one woman and I think we’re all about to witness the end of the world.

My own gaze moves from horseman to horseman. Without even fully intending to, I begin to walk towards them.

Death doesn’t stop me, though I swear he wants to. I think, despite how remote he’s being, that he wants to clutch me to his chest to ensure I never leave.

Famine hops off his steed while the others cast their flinty gazes on Death, as though the winged horseman might detonate at any moment.

I don’t stop walking until I get to Pestilence.

He likes to be called Victor, I remind myself.

The horseman doesn’t hesitate. The moment I’m within arm’s reach, he pulls me in for a hug I wasn’t expecting. His hand rubs up and down my back in an almost fatherly fashion. Without meaning to, I sort of collapse into the embrace, and he holds me all the tighter.

None of this makes sense. My lover killed my family, the man hugging me killed my parents, and the other two have killed countless more. My son is staying with people I have never met, and all of it might not matter very, very soon.

“You’re alright,” the horseman says, his voice gentle. “It’s going to be okay. Truly, it is.”

It’s such a small, innocuous line, and yet I’m choking up the same way I did when I saw my mother only days ago.

I nod, maybe a little too quickly, and pull away, flashing Pestilence a tight smile.

“How is Ben?” I ask, even though Death probably has more insight than he does.

“He’s well taken care of,” he says, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “My wife Sara has dubbed herself his fairy godmother.” Pestilence winks. “She was feeding him sugar cookies when we left.” His eyes skim over me again. “How are you doing?”

I’m in love with Death, and my soul is screaming, but—

“*Fine.*” The word comes out raspy and wrong. It’s so obvious it’s a lie. Pestilence frowns, his brow crinkling. His eyes flick up to Death, his gaze going steely.

“What have you done to her?” Pestilence demands.

Thanatos takes a step forward. “How *dare* you accuse me of such a thing.” His voice thunders. “Lazarus is the one thing I love above all else.”

“Is she?” Famine says, pulling out his scythe from behind his back as he swaggers forward. He spins the weapon in his grip. “Because it looks to me like you wouldn’t give up your task for her.” The Reaper sounds almost gloating.

I frown at him.

“I am glad you, my brothers, are here,” Death says, his voice echoing across the hills. “We came to earth to end humankind. And today we will finally do so, once and for all.”

Chapter 70

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

“**Thanatos, stop being** a fool,” Pestilence says. “Can’t you see that none of us want this? Not even you.”

At the horseman’s words, I swear Death’s gaze flickers, and there’s that agony in his eyes.

“If you want a war, you will have to go through me,” War says, looking like a god despite his mortality.

Thanatos scowls at him, taking a step forward. “How easily you forget that I saved your wife and child from certain death.”

“And you wish to once again take them from me before their times.”

“*After* their times,” Death corrects. “Many, many years after their times. You have become as greedy as the rest of these humans.”

Famine brushes past War, his scythe gripped tightly in his hand. “If anyone gets to stop this asshole, it’s *me*.”

Thanatos’s mouth curves into a mocking smile, turning his tragic features haughty.

“You wish to do this *again*, brother?” Death demands, prowling forward like some great cat, his wings spreading wide. “Twice I have hurt you. I cannot be beaten.”

“Stop it,” I say. Pushing past the horsemen, I return to Death once more.

I put a hand on his chest, my gaze going to his eyes. I’ve fought this man so many times it makes my head spin. I don’t want to fight him anymore. And I know I didn’t imagine that glimmer of unease in his eyes.

“You don’t have to do this,” I say, my voice low.

Death’s dark, depthless eyes glint, and I am reminded that he’s no true

man.

“I must.”

“No,” I insist, “you *don't*. Your brothers made their choice. You can choose too—or you can choose to wait.” I’ll take even that at the moment.

Thanatos casts a spiteful glance over my shoulder. “My brothers lost their way out here, and I am on the brink of losing it myself, but I must not.”

“You told me you loved me.” My voice breaks. “Is that not enough?”

Death’s harsh features soften, and his knuckles stroke my cheek. “My love for you is eternal and unfaltering, Lazarus. Do not doubt that. Stars will form and die, and what I feel for you will remain undimmed.”

Death tilts my chin up. Even as he does so, the earth begins to tremble, and in the distance I can hear the groan of old buildings.

“What I do today is a separate matter entirely. This”—his gaze sweeps over our surroundings before returning to me—“is my burden and my duty. I won’t be stopped.” His expression is resigned. Sad even.

He doesn't want to do this. I cling to that.

“What about Ben?” The question comes out as a whisper. It’s the one thing I’ve dreaded asking this entire time.

Death’s eyes are heavy on mine. “Forgive me.”

A choked sob slips out, and my knees nearly buckle. I’m shaking my head. “How can you even ask me that?” I say. “You *promised*.”

He presses his lips together.

Now my legs do fold. Death catches me before I hit the ground, hauling me up to him.

I’m shaking my head over and over. “Please,” I beg. “I will do *anything*. Just please, not Ben.” He’s just a baby.

The horseman holds me close. “It’s going to be okay, Laz.”

They’re nearly the same words that Pestilence just said, and yet they hit all wrong.

“Don’t do this,” I whisper. “*Please don't do this.*”

The earth is violently shaking now, the buildings around us swaying and groaning. I can hear things in the distance breaking from the strain.

“I cannot gratify you and the universe, kismet,” Thanatos says. “But I don’t want this. I don’t want to do it at all.”

A building in the distance goes down.

BOOM!

The earth shakes violently, and if it weren’t for Thanatos’s grip on me, I

would've been thrown to the ground.

I cast a wild glance around us. The world is about to be unmade stone by stone, and Death is responsible.

Death, who held me close at my worst moments. Who has agonized over my suffering, even when we were enemies.

“So this is how it all ends?” I say. “This is how *I* end?”

Death cups my face. “Life and Death are lovers, Lazarus. There is no end for us, no me without you, and no you without me. You are the one exception to all of this. *My* one exception. I can reap the world ... but I cannot—*will not*—take you with the rest. I will not leave you at all.”

I can't wrap my mind around what Death is saying, but what I do understand is that I'll be left behind. Everything else will go, but not me.

The mere possibility of that future is *terrifying*.

The horseman's expression turns distant, and I can see Death as he must appear to others—remote, remorseless, and uncompromising.

My heart beats madly. He's really going to do this. I can see he is. Dear God.

Thanatos moves away from me, his attention turning to his brothers. “The time for talking is over,” Death says. “Join me or fight me, but the Final Judgment is now upon us.”

Chapter 71

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

It's a clear day, the day the world ends.

The trembling ground shakes more violently than ever, making one of the wheels of the nearby overturned bike start to spin. Rocks and other debris skitter along the highway.

I back away from Death as he spreads his wings.

With a leap, the winged horseman surges into the sky. His face is all sharp edges. Solemn, tragic beauty only tempered by his fierce purpose.

He spreads his arms out. “Come for me, brothers—come for me if you *dare!*” he challenges.

At his words, several buildings explode around us. Glass and wood, drywall burst like fireworks before raining back down to earth. All the while, Death looks like the dark angel he is.

The wind whips about, lashing my hair against my face.

“Thanatos, please, *stop!*”

He ignores me.

I turn then and rush back to the other horsemen, who are all grimly reaching for their weapons, preparing for battle.

“Do you know how to stop him?” I ask them when I reach their side.

War glances up at me from where he's strapping a leather harness filled with blades across his chest.

“You mean, is there a way to strip him of his powers?” War says. He gives his head a shake, his eyes blazing as he studies his airborne brother. “Nothing can do that except God or Death himself.”

Well, fuck.

Death

I can feel Lazarus's life burning like a flame as my power whips out. Her spirit doesn't feel like Pestilence's or War's—those two are mortal, their souls easy offerings. I spare their lives only because, willing or not, they *will* see this to the bitter end. Famine's spirit is a bit trickier. He's still immortal, but it would be short work to strip him of his mortality, if I so desired. And from there, I could claim his soul as well.

Lazarus, however, her unending life is still beyond my reach, and though I would not take it regardless, I am absurdly grateful that the choice has been lifted from me.

It was always meant to be this way. That's clear enough.

After it is all over, I will make Lazarus see that it had to be this way, and I will win her love back. Because, unlike everyone else, she and I have all the time in the world.

Lazarus

I stare up at Death.

War's gaze follows my own. "Every minute that passes is another mile of death he's spread," he says solemnly.

My heart bottoms out, and I imagine that all of us—Pestilence, War, Famine, and myself—are doing the math.

Just how many miles lie between here and Vancouver Island? How much time do we have until Death destroys the humans we care about above all others?

Pestilence removes bundles of arrows from one of Famine's saddle bags, setting them near his feet. He pulls another arrow from his quiver and nocks it while Famine spins his scythe as though he's loosening up his wrist.

A warm hand falls on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. I glance over at War, just as the massive horseman withdraws a massive dagger from one of the sheathes criss-crossing his chest. He presses it into my hand, his red glyphs glittering against his knuckles.

"We're not dying without a fight," he says, his voice low. His eyes, however, dance with dark excitement. The angel of war practically thirsts for this. "And no matter how deathless you may be, you need a weapon. Ready yourself."

Ready myself? For *what*?

My hand closes over the hilt of the dagger just as Pestilence raises his bow toward the sky. He pauses only for an instant, then shoots.

The arrow arcs high into the sky. For a second, I think that it's going to hit Death, but a gust of wind blows it off course.

Thanatos doesn't so much as look our way, though in the distance, I hear a thunderous groan, and then another building is falling—

BOOM!

The ground beneath us shudders.

Not missing a beat, Pestilence nocks another arrow, then releases it.

Again, a gust of wind blows it aside.

Pestilence releases an arrow then, adjusting his aim, fires another shot to the left of the horseman.

When Death's wind blows the first arrow aside, it propels the second

arrow on course. The projectile skims by Thanatos, slicing the outer edge of his leg.

Death falters in the sky, then rises higher. As I stare up at him, the clouds begin to gather, looking like mottled bruises.

“He’s moved out of range,” Pestilence says. “I won’t be able to hit him, unless ...” Pestilence scans the horizon. All around us are buildings.

Crumbling buildings.

Pestilence’s eyes settle on one in particular. I follow his gaze. An abandoned high rise sits just off to our right. The structure looks as though it is already halfway to the grave, the thing leaning precariously.

“I can get him from there,” he says, nodding to it.

“Brother, he’s destroying the buildings as we speak,” War argues.

As if to punctuate the thought, a nearby church collapses, its spires disappearing into the rising plume of dust.

But already Pestilence is jogging towards the boarded up structure.

“Fucking fool,” Famine mutters, but it’s Death the Reaper flashes his lethal look to. “Let *me* give this bastard try,” he says, malevolence lacing his voice.

A strong wind kicks up, but as soon as it comes, Death seems to counter it with one of his own.

“Going to have to do better than that, brother,” War says, flipping his sword over and over in his palm, clearly impatient to do something.

“Calm your tits for a fucking moment, will you?” Famine says. As he speaks, a drop of rain drips onto my head.

The Reaper raises his arm, and a bolt of lightning spears directly into Death. I gasp at the sight. For a single instant, I see a winged skeleton and not my horseman.

Thanatos’s wingbeats falter, and I tense, waiting for him to collapse out of the sky. He falls several feet, then rights himself.

His wings spread wide once more, and he looks ... unharmed.

“That’s better?” War scoffs.

“That should’ve worked!” Famine says.

“Your power is his power too, and he’s immune to the effects of it.”

Death turns his attention briefly to Famine, his eyes unfocused as though he’s not really seeing his brother.

An instant later, another lightning bolt slices through the sky, slamming into the Reaper.

THA-BOOM!

Swallowing my scream, I stumble back as the blinding light blasts Famine ten feet away. He lays on the asphalt, unmoving.

So much for being immune to your own power ...

“He will be fine,” War reassures me. To the Reaper he calls out, “Get up, brother! You have more war to wage.”

Famine groans. A moment later, he rolls to his side, then pushes himself up. He sways a little, his feet unsteady.

A sound like thunder roars all around us.

The Reaper frowns as he comes over to War and me. “That’s not my storm.”

“No,” War says darkly, “That would be mine.”

I glance over at the horseman. “What do you mean, yours?” I ask uneasily. “I thought your powers were stripped from you.”

As I speak, the ground quakes violently, nearly throwing me off my feet.

Famine catches me by the arm, meeting my eyes as he rights me. He gives a single, solemn nod. Asshole or not, the two of us are in this together.

War glares up at Death, who looks as untouchable as ever.

“*You dare to turn my old allies against me, brother?*” War bellows at the sky.

Thanatos doesn’t so much as glance down, his expression remote.

To me, War says, “You better get ready with that knife. We’re about to have a lot of company.”

“A lot of company?” I echo, turning back to our surroundings, “But there’s no one ...” *Alive.*

There *is*, however, a city full of corpses.

The trembling ground grows more and more intense. As it shakes, several buildings in the distance collapse.

“*Pestilence!*” Famine shouts, “Get your ass out of that building!”

Pestilence, however, is nowhere in sight, and if he heard the Reaper, he isn’t listening to him.

Along the highway, a nearby corpse picks herself up. I spin, only to see more rise from behind us. The more I look, the more I see—in the buildings, on the streets that line the highway. The dead reanimate, their rotting faces fixed on the group of us.

For a second, all they do is stare blankly. Then, as one, they begin to run at us.

Chapter 72

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Judgement Day is happening—in the City of Angels, no less.

I tighten my grip on the dagger as the dead charge towards us. A few minutes ago, the weapon had seemed excessive. Now, it feels like it won't be enough.

I count our opponents—one-two-three, five-eight-ten-twelve-fifteen. And more keep coming.

“Get ready,” War says as the corpses close in on the three of us.

I tense, raising my weapon. The Reaper spins his scythe one last time, the blade making an ominous chopping sound as it slices through air.

And then the dead are on us.

The revenants go for War and Famine, their teeth bared. They're so much worse than the corpses that came for me back in San Antonio, when Thanatos had first tried to capture me. Those ones had been dead for minutes. These creatures, however, are pure putridness, their skin mottled and sagging and decayed—or eaten—away in places.

And the smell. What little I ate this morning comes up.

The revenants ignore me as I sick myself, which is fortunate for me. Otherwise, I'd probably be missing an appendage or two. Instead they move around me, their viciousness focused entirely on Death's brothers.

War laughs like a maniac as they come at him. He slices through the mass of dead bodies, congealed blood and other bits going flying as he takes off their arms or slices them below the legs.

I join in then, despite everything in me recoiling at the sight and smell of the revenants. I pry one away from Famine, kicking the woman in the chest.

Her body makes a sickening sound as it hits the ground, and I grimace. I swipe at another.

“Aim for their legs and arms,” War commands the rest of us. “The goal is to render them useless; there will be no killing them.”

I glance over at the massive horseman just as he swings his sword like a baseball bat, cutting through a line of opponents. I avoid looking at them as they fall apart.

This is the sickest situation I have ever been in.

War meets my gaze. He nods to my blade. “That one can cut through bone, though I’d aim for joints,” he says conversationally, even as a revenant jumps on his back. He grabs the creature by the neck and tosses it off of him and into more approaching undead, knocking the group of them over.

“Think of it like you’re carving a turkey,” War continues as, on my other side, Famine swings his scythe around his body, mowing down the dead encircling him.

I flash War a horrified look, even as I swipe my blade at the shoulder of a nearby revenant. “I’m never eating meat again.”

War flashes me a ferocious grin, then turns his attention back to his attackers.

I do aim for the joints, cutting through shoulders and wrists and elbows, the rotted flesh falling apart beneath my blade, their blood and other unmentionable juices getting on me.

These are not people, these are not people, I have to remind myself.

The dead keep coming, even as mounds of writhing, broken bodies pile up around us.

Across the way, I catch sight of Pestilence on the roof of the building he’d eyed earlier. There are only a few revenants on the roof, and as I look, I see the horseman kick an undead man off the side of the structure, the corpse’s body pin-wheeling as it falls. But even as I watch, more dead are climbing up the walls. They’re not getting very far before their grip gives out and they plummet back to the ground, but more are moving within the building.

Near me, Famine drops his scythe, scowling as his eyes take in the hordes of dead swarming the highway as they rush towards us. The Reaper moves his hands as though scooping magic from the air, his fingers splayed. His arms shake with the effort.

From deep beneath us, the earth shudders.

Asphalt and concrete cracks as massive, twisting plants rise from the

ground. Vines and branches snatch the undead as they run by, coiling around the corpses like snakes. I can hear the sick sound of hundreds of bones breaking. More unnerving yet is that there are no screams of pain. The dead make no noise at all as their bodies are crushed.

To my right, the building Pestilence is on groans.

“*Brother!*” Famine shouts with more emotion than I thought he was capable of.

Before he can say more, a portion of the high rise collapses. Corpses fall with the rubble, and at the very top of the structure, I see Pestilence lunge for the edge of the roof as the floor falls away.

Famine throws out a hand, and a line of twisting vines sprout from where we stand all the way to the base of the building, rising and weaving themselves together to make a bridge of sorts. On the other end of this makeshift bridge, a thick, vined monstrosity slithers its way up the building’s walls. Halfway to the top, it slows.

“I can’t make it any bigger!” Famine shouts. I doubt Pestilence can hear him, but it’s clear enough that this is the limit of the Reaper’s help.

Pestilence pulls himself to his feet and, slinging his bow across his chest, he moves directly above where Famine’s ropy bridge of vines has attached itself to the plant growing up the building’s walls. The high rise groans again, and then the rest of the structure begins to collapse.

I suck in my scream as Pestilence leaps, his body plummeting towards the earth. Before he can hit the ground, Famine’s plants reach out and catch the horseman. The foliage rustles as it deposits him onto the far edge of the bridge.

It takes Pestilence a moment to get his bearings, but once he has them, he moves across the ropy bridge with surprising agility. He steps off of it, giving Famine a nod.

“Thanks brother,” Pestilence says, lifting his bow off of his chest.

“Just doing my job,” Famine says. “Ana tells me we must take care of our elderly.”

The Reaper seriously does not know how to handle gratitude.

But Pestilence guffaws and claps him on the back. “I hope you get the chance to experience it too, brother.”

Famine’s expression grows serious. “I will.”

Now that the horsemen are all safe and accounted for, we take in the carnage around us. Hundreds—if not thousands—of corpses are wriggling

around, either caught in Famine's plants, or lying in piles. One decaying hand latches onto War's ankle. The horseman punts the appendage clear across the highway, the thing smacking into the face of a trapped revenant.

In the distance, I can see more undead scaling the foliage, and while the plants make quick work of these new corpses, there's no way they'll be able to hold off the horde for long.

The Reaper grimaces at the bodies. "They smell ... like shit,"

"They're corpses," Pestilence says, digging through the dead. From beneath them, he grabs one of the bundles of arrows he had set aside earlier. "Did you expect them to smell like your precious purple roses you like to rub all over yourself when you think no one is watching?"

In response, a bush near the horseman opens, releasing a mostly pulverized revenant. The creature lunges for Pestilence.

"Whoops," Famine says.

Cursing under his breath, Pestilence drops his weapons just as the creature collides with him. Grabbing it with both hands, Pestilence tosses the undead over his shoulder, aiming the body right at the Reaper.

The corpse crashes into Famine, nearly knocking him off his feet. The Reaper begins to swear when War steps up and swings his sword, cutting the undead off at the knees.

In the sky, Thanatos falters. He looks downwards at the sight before him. If he notices me at all, he makes no sign of it.

Instead, all around us, the plants Famine had grown wither away. They don't release the trapped revenants, but then they don't need to. Hundreds more are already climbing past the wall of plants.

"Shit," the Reaper curses. The ground trembles as more plants push through.

While Famine's focusing on regrowing our defenses, the bodies around us begin to vibrate.

"Pestilence, Lazarus, Famine," War calls, "*ready yourselves.*"

My gaze sweeps over the dead just as piles of severed body parts rejoin, corpses fitting themselves back together as though they were never cut apart. I've seen this before with Death's servants, when it seemed as though magic and nothing more stitched their forms together. But never have I seen it with fleshy bodies.

The severed appendages don't physically reattach; instead magic seems to hold them in place. Within seconds, legions of dead are whole again.

Teenagers, adults, children and the elderly. All of them stare at us through rotted eyes.

Then, as one, they attack.

I kick out at the previously severed arm of a nearby revenant. My boot meets resistance, but then, not a second later, the appendage falls away. I wait for it to reattach itself. Instead it gropes around on the ground.

Well, that makes things considerably easier. I begin kicking out at knees and arms, swiping my blade across arms and legs and anything else that's within easy reach. Even still, the horsemen are largely overwhelmed.

Famine keeps growing plants, and they're picking off some of the dead, but there are so many more corpses closing in on us that his efforts merely staunch the flow of them, not stop them altogether.

Amidst the chaos, I catch sight of a line of skeletons marching up the freeway. There must be a dozen of them, and they slip through the grasp of Famine's plants and weave their way through the debris. Unlike the other dead, they aren't hasty, and they aren't focused on the horsemen.

Instead, they move towards me.

"*Lazarus,*" Pestilence's calls as he cuts through an undead, "they're coming for you!"

I race away from the skeletons, swinging my borrowed blade and cutting off limbs of attacking revenants where I can.

Death's servants approach me as a unit, and the fact that I'm moving around doesn't seem to bother them. Half of the group simply walks past me and the horsemen, while the other half fans out in front of us. It's only then that they truly close in on me, moving into a tighter and tighter formation until they encircle me. Once they're in place, they stand eerily still.

I try to shove past them, but the moment I take a step towards one of the skeletons, the entire group shifts in the same direction, maintaining a three-foot boundary around me as best they can. It puts them frustratingly out of reach.

I try again, stalking towards another skeleton on the opposite side of the circle, and again, the same result. I blow out a breath before I wonder: what would happen if I ignored the skeletons altogether and approached one of the revenants fighting *outside* of the circle?

I spot one charging towards Pestilence, and I move to cut the creature off. The skeletons move with me, but once I reach the charging undead, my guards stop moving forward, preventing me from getting any closer to the

creature.

I swipe at the putrid corpse beyond the skeletons. My dagger sinks into the woman's mottled skin, but it doesn't do much, not with a skeleton between the two of us. So, withdrawing my blade, I close my fist around my weapon's handle and punch the skeleton in front of me right in the skull. It jerks back, smashing into the rotting corpse and throwing both revenants off balance.

The fresher corpse falls to the ground, and moving over to it, I put a boot on the undead woman's chest and slice her arms off at the joints, trying not to gag at the awful smell of her or the fact that she was once a human. I remove her legs the same way, only pausing to turn aside and retch when the sights and sounds and smells overwhelm me.

I'm not a monster, I chant to myself. Because dead or not, this *feels* monstrous.

Already, my skeletal bodyguards have reformed around me, but it makes no difference because I can suddenly fight again.

More revenants pour in by the second, and it seems to be taking everything to keep them at bay.

"Famine!" War shouts, slicing through more undead as he speaks. "Forget the revenants!"

At that, the Reaper seems to go still, a disbelieving look on his face. "Are you mad?" he bellows back.

"I may be mortal, but I am still a warlord and you *will* heed my command. Stop using your powers against the revenants and make a barrier around both you and Pestilence strong and tight enough to keep the undead out."

No sooner has War spoken than two separate circles of trees rise from the ground. Each tree trunk is so close to the next that not even the smallest revenants could hope to get through. The circles of trees close in around Famine and Pestilence.

"What about you and Lazarus?" the Reaper says, for once not bickering with his brother.

"Lazarus doesn't need protection. Death wouldn't dare harm her."

The Reaper's eyes flick to me before returning to War. "And you?" he asks.

"One of us still needs to move around freely," War says, even as he slices through a row of incoming corpses.

"Now, my brother," War continues, "use everything in your power to get our brother out of the sky."

My heart is hammering.

“Pestilence,” he calls out, “get your bow ready—once Famine brings Death low enough, I want you to shoot him.”

“Lazarus,” he says, cutting through a few more undead before he looks at me, “once Death’s out of the sky, if he’s not yet dead, you will be the one who must kill him.”

I blanch.

War must see my expression because he adds, “You’re the only one who can get close enough.”

I have killed Death many times, but that was when I didn’t love the horseman.

I do now.

“*I don’t know if I can,*” I whisper, my voice hoarse.

“Then we’re all doomed.” War’s eyes are hard. It’s the voice of a general, one who knows there’s no room for compassion on the battlefield, not when your enemy has none to offer.

But Death *isn’t* my enemy, and what he’s doing might be both misguided and wrong, but I don’t know that it’s evil. To be honest, I’m not really sure *what* evil is anymore.

Do this for Ben and everyone else who hasn’t yet lost their lives.

I breathe in hard through my nostrils, then nod, mostly to convince myself.

War holds my gaze with his shrewd one, and I feel like subliminally he’s saying, *We all must make sacrifices. This is yours.*

I realize then what he’s not saying—that while Famine and Pestilence are working to bring Death down from the sky, and while I’ll be priming to kill the un-killable horseman, War—*mortal* War—will be taking on the revenants alone.

He’s not going to survive this.

That’s why he’s giving me the intense look.

I draw in a deep breath. “I will do it,” I say. And I mean it, even if it means breaking my heart in the process.

Slowly, War nods. “Good.”

Still staring at me, he calls out, “Famine, Pestilence, Lazarus—it’s been an honor fighting at your sides. It will be an honor dying at them too. Let’s make it worth it.”

“Aww, don’t get emotional on us now,” Famine quips, but the set of his mouth is all wrong and his sharp eyes glisten.

“An honor,” Pestilence says, nodding to War.

I know nothing about honor and this whole *glorious death* business. Life still stretches out in front of me, vast and unfathomable and frightening.

But as the undead rush towards the horseman, I have to face all of it, just the same. I slash and kick and sometimes, when my guards get in the way, I shatter bone. My breath comes in pants as I try to be everywhere at once.

War is doing his best to aid his brothers, dragging the undead off of Famine’s makeshift cages as well as grabbing the last of Pestilence’s arrows and slipping them in to the horseman. While he does that, I shadow him, cutting down the creatures that are trying to break the warlord’s bones and tear his flesh.

Above us, clouds gather and the air shifts. A heavy drop of rain hits my head, then another and another. It begins to pelt down on us, washing away the grime but also making the revenants that much more ... gooey.

Lightning flashes, and I draw my gaze up just as the bolt strikes Thanatos. His back arches a little as electricity courses through him, and my throat closes up at the sight. Another bolt drives down into Death. He hasn’t recovered from this one before a third slams into him. Famine strikes Thanatos again and again. With each hit, the horseman drops several feet before regaining his composure.

Do I feel bad that my true love is being roasted to death by supernatural bolts of lightning? Yes. Do I think he deserves it for being a bastard and forcing Judgment Day on everyone?

Also yes.

“Can’t steal souls now, brother, can you?” the Reaper taunts.

“That’s it, Famine!” Pestilence encourages, nocking an arrow into his bow while War slices through the revenants climbing up Pestilence’s cage.

Pestilence aims his bow, and for an instant, I stop fighting, just to watch. I can’t say what I feel. My emotions are in tangles. I want War’s plan to work; I’m also dreading that it will.

Pestilence releases his arrow, the projectile arcing towards Thanatos. Just as it closes in on Death, a gust of wind blows it asunder.

Of course, I forgot about this.

Pestilence curses, then pulls out another, aiming it then letting it fly. It too is blown off course at the last moment.

“I need some help with the wind!” Pestilence shouts.

“I’m a bit busy roasting this motherfucker!” Famine shouts back.

I resume smashing the bones of my captors and slicing off limbs of the undead, but it's slow, aggravating work.

How many minutes do we have left before Death's power reaches Ben and the others? I'm moving in a frenzy now, panicked by the thought that so much time has already passed, and yet our efforts haven't gotten us very far.

Pestilence begins to aim not just at Death but around him too in the hopes that something might just get by the winged horseman and land where it needs to.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The rain has stopped, but the lightning hasn't. Bolt after bolt strikes Thanatos, the onslaught so intense that the skeletal mantel that overlays Death's face and body looks permanent. His back is arched, his wingbeats a bit erratic. Beneath the skull that shrouds his face, I can see that he's grimacing. Shared power or not, this is doing something to him.

Near me, War is shouting a battle cry while he fights. He slices into the dead two and three at a time. The bodies are piling up around us, but every second, more are coming.

"I'm down to my last sheaf of arrows!" Pestilence calls out.

I glance up at Death just as, at last, he folds his wings and falls.

For an instant, the lightning stops as he hits the wall of foliage about a hundred feet from us.

My ears ring in the sudden silence.

The revenants are still coming and still attacking, but Thanatos lays slumped in the branches, his wings laying funny.

I take a faltering step towards him, my heart thumping madly.

There is no relief or victory in this. I should be pleased, but all I feel is panic at his state, and grief over the situation.

I slice through more revenants, my gaze locked on my horseman.

As he lays there, the plants around him seem to wither away to dust, the dead caught in their clutches free once more. Death falls to the debris-strewn highway.

War bellows, dragging my attention away from Death. Two undead are grasping the warlord's sword arm, and the arm itself is bent at a funny angle. Broken.

War tosses his sword into his other hand and begins swinging the blade like it makes no difference. Still, my stomach drops. It's clear enough that he can no longer fight at full strength, and already revenants were swarming him

faster than he could kill them off.

War glances at me, and nods.

Fuck, this is where I come into play.

I grip my dagger tighter, my earlier nausea rising once more.

I take a tentative step, then another, bracing myself for what I must do.

I can make Death's end swift. It won't be forever. He put his duty towards God above me; I can put my duty towards humanity above him.

Still, it *feels* wrong, every agonizing step I take.

Around us, Los Angeles no longer resembles itself. The buildings have all come down, and mountains of rubble sit in their place. The dead are moving over that rubble, and there are so many of them.

They're all headed this way.

I'm nearly halfway to Death when one of his wings twitch.

Seconds later, Famine's lightning bolts are back.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

They slam into Death, the force of them so intense, I lose my footing and fall into a pile of squirming limbs.

The smell, the texture, and the movement, all of it is too much. I turn to the side and retch, though nothing comes out. My stomach has already given up all its contents.

"Lazarus!" War bellows. "Now!"

I glance up at Death, breathing heavily. He's only fifty feet from me, but it feels like an ocean separates us.

I force myself to my feet, even as my legs quiver. Lightning continues to strike Thanatos, but as I watch, the horseman's wings move some more, and I can't be sure, but I don't think it's a reflexive movement brought on by the lightning.

Then, Death's arms move beneath him, and that's *definitely* not reflexive.

I slog through twisting corpses, my skeletal guards moving with me.

Death gets a leg under his body, then pushes himself up as lightning continues to strike him. It's hard to see around the skeletal mantel overlaying him, but I think his dark eyes glint with fury as he stares down Famine.

He reaches out, his fingers looking half like bones, half like the flesh they are.

Abruptly, the lightning halts. I glance back at Famine in time to see him stumble into the living bars of his cage, his eyes and cheeks sunken in.

Pestilence fires off an arrow, which embeds itself into one of Death's

wings, then another that impales him right through his throat.

Thanatos reaches behind his head and drags the arrow out from the back of his neck, his wound healing right before my eyes.

“Death!” I shout at him, stepping over another body.

But he’s still focused on Pestilence, who’s now raining arrows down on him. The wind kicks up around Thanatos, knocking the projectiles away.

Hurry, I tell myself, quickening my pace as I stumble over wriggling human remains.

There’s only twenty feet between me and Death now. Twenty feet of carnage.

Pestilence makes a choking sound, and his back arches. His bow slips from his grip as he falls to his knees. His quiver and the few precious arrows clatter to the ground, and as I watch, the horseman, the very one who took my parents so long ago, now withers before my eyes.

Panic courses through me.

“*Stop.*” The word comes out as a whisper as I begin to run towards Death. “*Stop!*” I call out again, louder.

But War’s roar eclipses my words. I turn in time to see that he’s fallen to his knees. I can barely make him out from the mountain of revenants closing in on him. He reaches for one of the daggers sheathed across his chest, his sword nowhere in sight.

War pushes the corpses aside long enough to throw a needle thin knife at Death. The blade makes a hissing noise as it spins through the air. But Thanatos knocks it away with that strange wind just as easily as he had Pestilence’s arrows. War throws another and another.

As he reaches for a fourth blade, I see a glint of metal just as a revenant shoves it forward, into War’s abdomen. The horseman bellows again, and I realize, finally what’s happening.

The undead got his sword, and now they’re killing him with it.

But Thanatos isn’t done with this brother of his either. The warlord is still trying to reach for another weapon when his cheeks hollow out and his skin sags.

All three brothers wither away, succumbing to whatever dark power Death wields over them.

I face Thanatos once more, and now I’m sprinting forward, leaping over bodies and broken asphalt, my skeletal bodyguards keeping formation around me.

“Stop!” It’s a ragged, agonized scream.

Death moves his hand towards me, his eyes unfocused, and for one haunting moment, I think he’s going to do to me what he’s done to his brothers. Instead, the ground cracks and a tangle of foliage rises up, creating a cage eerily similar to the ones around the other two horsemen.

“*Thanatos!*” I shout, trying to scramble out of the rising cage. One of the skeletons surrounding me shoves me back into it while it finishes forming, branches weaving together. “Why are you doing this?”

For a moment, Death’s eyes sharpen, and he looks agonized. Then his attention returns to his brothers, and he’s cold and unforgiving once more.

My living cage continues to grow and twine around itself. Once it’s filled out, the skeletons that have served me for weeks clatter to the ground, nothing but bones once more. A moment later, the other undead follow, their rotted bodies making wet sounds as they hit the ground.

In their wake, the silence is deafening.

Around me, the other horsemen lay dying. There’s no more lightning, no more arrows, no more knives. I see kind Pestilence, and fierce War, and mercurial Famine twisting on the ground, their bodies aging before my eyes.

“You’re killing them!” I shout. Two tears slip off my cheeks. When did I start crying?

“They cannot truly die, Lazarus,” Death says, his voice emotionless. “None of us can.”

Using my dagger, I saw at one of the trees, but with every passing second, its trunk seems to thicken. I give up cutting it down and start to climb up it. I slip over and over again as I climb, and when I finally do get to the top, the plants are woven inward, amongst themselves, creating a domed ceiling of sorts that is frustratingly impenetrable.

I still saw at it with my blade, my heart beating frantically.

Faster, faster.

There can’t be much time left.

My dagger slides from my slick palms, and I make the mistake of reaching for it. That knee-jerk reaction throws me off-balance, and I lose my grip. I slip, then fall to the ground, a groan slipping out as I land hard on my back.

I roll to my side, my body feeling brittle and bruised. Through my makeshift cage, I catch sight of Famine’s own enclosure. It’s no longer needed, now that the revenants have fallen back. Inside it, the Reaper lies curled up in a fetal position, his caramel-colored hair hanging lank about him.

His skin has taken on a grayish hue, and it sags from his bones. One of his hands is pressed to his chest, and his face is set in a grimace.

A small sound slips from my lips at the sight of the once fearsome man brought to the brink of death.

At the sound, Famine eyes snap open, and they find mine. The terrible, moody horseman and I share a long look.

Finish this, his eyes seem to say.

Famine reaches out a hand towards the plants that imprison me, his arm shaking. The trees caging me in part just enough for me to pass through.

Famine lowers his arm, giving me a slight nod—one that I return to him.

Grabbing my dagger, I force myself to my feet and lunge free of the enclosure.

Death begins to turn to me when Famine calls out, “You fucking fool!” His voice is weak despite the fact that I think he’s trying to shout. “You held the entire world in your arms and you squandered it for what? *This?*” He gives a hollow laugh that turns into a cough. “You can rot for eternity, Thanatos. You’ll regret this moment until the end of your shitty existence.”

Eerily slow, Death turns to him. He looks mythical, his silver armor unblemished, his dark wings looming behind him.

Famine bought me this moment. Silently, I move towards Thanatos. Right now, Death has eyes only for Famine.

Thanatos takes a step forward, his boot crunching over bone, his wings dragging through the rot on the ground.

“You wanted your mortality, brother?” Death says. “You have earned it. Once this is all over, you will die alongside your beloved humans.”

A choked sound slips from Famine’s lips. As I watch, his bronze armor disappears from his body. At his side, the scythe he once put against my neck fades away until nothing remains.

Then, all at once, Famine goes limp. I think he’s dead for a second, but then I hear his shallow pants. With Death’s gaze still fixed on him, I take several more steps towards my horseman, all but holding my breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Famine put a hand to his chest.

He lets out a weak laugh. “You bastard,” the Reaper wheezes out. “You *bastard.*”

I fear War and Pestilence are already dead. I fear that if I waste any more time being subtle, Famine will die too.

I step over the scattered bones and corpses, not bothering to muffle my

steps. The world around us is quiet, so painfully quiet.

Achingly slow, Thanatos turns his attention to me.

He's just as beautiful and tragic as the first time I laid eyes on him. Only now, I see that he was shaped for this moment.

"I can't let you do this," I say.

Those strange and lovely eyes of his—the ones that seem to hold the entire universe—take me in.

"What is there to fear, kismet?" he says softly. His hair is rippling with the immensity of his power. "*You will not die, and I will not leave you behind.*"

"Damn you, Thanatos, this isn't about me." It's never *been* about me.

Death spoke of God watching—meddling even.

Surely in this moment I have Her ear.

Let me stop this. Whatever role I'm supposed to play, let me play it. Let me end this.

There's a sound like the crack of thunder and a blinding light that seems to come from behind my eyes.

I stumble, unable to hear beyond the ringing in my ears or see past the light clouding my vision.

Slowly, the ringing in my ears turns into the sound of my pulse pounding. *Th-thump—th-thump—th-thump.*

I blink several times, the world coming back into focus.

"Lazarus." There's a hand on my back, and I glance up into Death's unearthly eyes. Those silver freckles in his irises seem to shine brighter than before, and they're full of the concern I'm used to seeing on Thanatos's face.

Solemn, tragic Thanatos, who is not afraid of death, but hates suffering. Thanatos, who is universally hated, even by his own brothers. He who is forever chained to his awful task. Forever misunderstood. Forever alone.

Except when we're together.

Do you really think any of it was random?

Tightening my grip on my weapon, I lift the blade, my eyes meeting Thanatos's. It's just us. The other horsemen are as good as gone. The city lays in ruins, and its inhabitants are scattered around us.

The hand holding my dagger trembles as I point it at Death's chest, the tip of it hovering over those chthonic images hammered into the metal. I'm petrified as my gaze lifts to the horseman's. What I'm about to do goes against everything I believe in.

For an instant, Death's eyes flicker with betrayal. I take a deep breath, my

entire body quaking.

“You would hurt me?” he says softly.

I swallow as I stare at him.

His mouth forms a grim line as he takes in my expression.

Thanatos squares his chest. “Do it,” he dares. “This is the only chance I’ll give you.”

I draw in a shaky breath. *Give me strength.*

There are two ways to stop Death: kill him—

Or kill me.

I turn the dagger on myself and drive it into my chest.

Chapter 73

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

I've read stories about people falling on their own swords. They always made it seem noble and tragic.

Fuck all of that. This hurts like shit.

"NO!" Death roars like a wounded creature.

I barely hear it over the rushing sound of blood pounding in my ears. The strange way my heart spasms makes it clear that I hit something important.

I choke on the pain as I glance down at my chest. The blade is still sticking partway out, but it hurts so damn bad I don't think I can push it in any deeper.

I reach for the wound, slicing myself on the exposed blade. Blood slips between my fingers, and it's coming out ... fast. Real fast.

Then Death is there, his body enveloping mine. He lowers us both to the ground, cradling me in his arms.

"Why, Lazarus?" he says, his voice breaking, **"Why?"** No longer is he remote and larger than life.

It takes effort to move my eyes to his.

"Someone ... needed ... to stop ... you."

Death's wings come around us. The battle has been forgotten. Humanity and Judgement Day has been forgotten. All of it has been sidelined as he stares down at me.

He's shaking his head. **"You cannot stop me."**

I slump against him, a ragged sound slipping from my lips.

He presses a hand to my wound, and I gasp at the pain it elicits.

"I need to get this out," he says, wrapping a hand around the hilt of the dagger.

I shake my head, but he isn't listening.
Grimacing, I see his face grow resolved. Then—
He pulls the blade from my chest.

I scream—or at least I try to. It comes out as an agonized moan, and blessedly, I black out.

“Kismet ...”

I stir, pulled to wakefulness by that lamenting voice.

I blink my eyes open, and—

Agony. Blazing, suffocating agony. It's all I feel—that and the rivulets of blood soaking my chest as they leave my body.

“I'm sorry, Laz. It will be alright soon,” Thanatos vows. “It will be.”

He places a hand over the wound, and I hiss in a breath. Even that light touch is brutally painful.

I feel Death's power brush against my skin. I wait for my flesh to warm and itch as my body stitches itself back together.

Only—

“It's not working.” Panic laces the horseman's voice.

The most powerful creature cannot heal me. I gasp up at him.

That desperate plea of mine, that bolt of light behind my eyes ...

That was intercession.

It happens to humans all the time, but you're all so blinded by your own perceptions of reality that you miss it. You miss the most potent forces of magic in your lives even when they unfold right before you.

I think ... I think I have been made truly mortal.

Terror lances through me. I've never feared death before because I never actually *stayed* dead.

But this time around, this one feels like it's going to take.

Oh God, I thought I'd have more time. Endless time.

I close my eyes, exhausted from the pain.

I want to say I'm at peace, but fuck, I feel like I'm leaving before the closing act.

“*Thanatos*,” I murmur. I blindly reach for his hand.

I especially don't want to leave him. He's *all* the reasons I want to live.

“Laz ...”

Laz. I open my eyes at the intimacy of that name.

I meet Thanatos's gaze. Fear fills his eyes. He's afraid too. But it's only

death. It's his most natural state.

"S okay," I breathe, even as I start to shiver.

He hold on me tightens. "No, Lazarus, I'm not going to let you go," he vows.

"Life and death are lovers." I remind him. "Nothing ... changes that." I squeeze his hand. "I love you," I finally admit.

His expression crumbles. "No." He says it like a plea, a tear slipping out from the corner of his eye.

My eyes begin to close.

"Lazarus, *stay with me.*"

But my stubborn body ignores his commands.

He kisses my lips, and even in that act I feel the desperate press of his power, willing me to live.

It makes no difference.

With that kiss, my breath stills, my heart stops, and I am finally, truly *released.*

Death

The moment my lips leave hers, I know.

She's gone.

And for the first time since I met her, I feel her spirit untangle itself from her body.

No.

Lazarus's immortality is not so different than ours. It can be removed.

It's *been* removed.

In the distance Famine laughs, a wheezy, wet sound. I can't think of a more inappropriate reaction.

"She made another deal behind your back, brother," he says.

My breath catches as I stare down at my Lazarus.

Did you? I silently ask her.

But of course she must've. She couldn't remove her immortality herself. And there is only one person who can freely take and give life.

God has forsaken me.

"Finally, you understand as we have all been made to understand," Famine wheezes. "You cannot have both. You must make a choice." Famine wheezes.

"The choice has been *taken* from me," I spit out.

"It hasn't."

I glance up at him then. I can feel my steady heart pick up at what he's insinuating.

My hand shakes as I glance back down at Lazarus. Lazarus who was never supposed to die.

Lazarus bargained for humanity. I don't know if the voice in my head is my own, or *Hers*. This form muddles my extra senses. *What will you do? It is your decision in the end.*

"It's *not* my decision," I say vehemently. I've only ever followed the universe's orders.

My gaze passes over Famine before touching on the still forms of Pestilence and War. My three brothers were willing to do everything to stop me. I'd accepted their decision to fight for humanity. I'd even understood the deep drive that fueled them. They loved their wives and their children, and

they all came around to appreciating humanity—Famine and his hardened heart included.

I have seen each of my brothers clutch their woman in death. I've heard their bargains. I thought myself above it all.

And now here I am, with this woman of flesh and blood, who fought me and fueled me, and who loved me. The woman who I am hopelessly in love with.

“Take your woman and run, Thanatos,” Famine breathes.

“I *cannot*.” My voice breaks.

I have never once broken the rules. Not in all my long years of existence. I have delivered every single soul to its afterlife.

Just as I will hers.

I have to take her.

I'm heaving as I lay her body gently down.

“Fool,” Famine whispers.

I rise and face Lazarus's soul. It is every bit as brilliant as I knew it would be.

Clasping her close, I slip us into the world of spirits, and I take my kismet to the afterlife.

Chapter 74

The Beyond

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Lazarus

Death is ... the wrong word for this. Death is an ending, but this isn't an ending at all. It feels like a beginning. Like rebirth.

Transmutation.

I smile—or at least, I feel like I'm smiling even though I'm not sure I'm solid. I honestly don't know *what* I am, just that I exist and I am aware.

I look around. Wherever I am, muted light surrounds me. I take a step back, my body—or essence—bumps into something solid.

I turn, and the first thing I see is that gleaming silver armor, then those large black wings. Finally, my eyes settle on that beloved face that I swear I've always known.

"*Thanatos.*" I say his name softly. I thought I had left him, but of course not, he *is* death. "You were right, this isn't so bad."

But now I notice how agonized his eyes still are.

Rather than answering, Death looks down. I follow his gaze, and the muted light blows away in wisps, as though it were merely thick smoke. Below, I see my lifeless body resting among the wreckage.

Finally, the fighting is over. And I lost—all of humanity lost—but this isn't so bad. That urge to beg and plead, to leverage and threaten and bargain my way into some compromise is gone. The time for that passed with my life.

Death takes my spectral hand and I grip his tightly. As I watch, my body below grows smaller and smaller, as though we're floating away from it.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

Thanatos's grieving eyes burn as they look at me. "*Founipa.*"

Heaven.

The dim light around us brightens, and it's like sun breaking through the clouds.

In the distance, figures appear. At least, I *think* they're figures. To be honest, they're more impressions of people than actual, physical bodies. Instead of skin and bones, their forms seem to be made of light.

As they come into focus, I begin to recognize them. At the front, there's my mom. Then there's River, and Nicolette, and Robin, and Ethan, Owen and

Juniper. I see my nieces and nephews—I even see Harrison, my adoptive father; I’ve only ever known him through pictures, and yet he’s still here, welcoming me.

Near the front of the group are two more people who I have no memory of, and yet I inherently know them. My birth parents.

I make a small noise. They’re all here, all waiting for me. And though it makes no sense, I can *feel* their love for me.

You’re loved. You’re home.

I glance over at Thanatos and his tormented eyes.

Death the ferryman, who takes souls and delivers them, but does not join the dead. Death, who belongs neither to earth, nor to the afterlife.

He belongs with *me*. That is the one thing I am certain of.

He releases my hand to touch my cheek. “I will dream of you every day, Lazarus.” He looks as though he’s burning in his own sort of hell.

“Come with me,” I insist.

“I cannot,” he says, his voice hoarse. Worse, I *feel* his devastation as though it’s my own.

He gives me a tight smile, and nods to the people waiting for me. “Go to your loved ones. They are waiting for you.”

This is where I should feel fear, but the closest I come to it is confusion. This ... isn’t supposed to be how we part. But my essence is being called towards my family and it’s hard to ignore.

“I love you, Thanatos,” I say, taking him in. “Forever and always. Nothing will ever change that. And I’ll be waiting for you when even you, the Angel of Death, meet your own end.”

Chapter 75

The Beyond

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Death

Lazarus's words are nearly my end. I have endured much over my existence, but this moment makes all past traumas pale in comparison.

How am I supposed to let her go?

Despite her words, she lingers in front of me. I stare down at her as, with a spectral finger, Lazarus draws a shape on my armor.

To her, it must simply be a mindless doodle, but the shape her finger idly makes, *I know that symbol.*

Opotu.

Love.

Realization slams into me, so potent that I can barely catch my breath around it.

I knew God had given me a word, just as She had my brothers, a word that was both a lesson and a choice wrapped into one. I even knew early on what my word was—*life*. I thought I had figured it out and pressed on.

But I hadn't understood my task and my challenge, nor had I understood the word. Not until now.

I was wrong. I misunderstood it all. The word—the choice, the lesson—it was never *life*.

It was *love*.

Love.

And for whatever reason, that shifts the way in which I see *everything*.

Lazarus frowns, her eyes regretful as she glances up at me. "Until we meet again, Thanatos," she says.

I can feel the sharp edge of her love as she moves away from me.

She looks over the gathered crowd once more, her eyes searching. I know who she's looking for. It's the one human she loves above all others, the one she tried to bargain her life for. Ben.

The moment Lazarus saved that baby and claimed him as her own was also the moment she truly stopped fighting me. She gave up humanity for that child because she loved him.

There's that human selfishness—to pick one human over millions.

But *is* it selfishness?

That choice made Lazarus vulnerable to my brothers' manipulation—and

to my own. All for a little boy she just happened to save. Perhaps you could call that selfishness, but perhaps you could also say that what she had was a love so intense and selfless that it eclipsed everything else.

My lungs seize up at the thought.

That same love made Lazarus desperately bargain her life for her child's. An extraordinary sacrifice—one I didn't accept—but also one I've heard many, many times from humans.

My life for theirs ...

I would do anything ...

And perhaps it was that same love that made Lazarus turn her blade on herself rather than sinking it into my own flesh.

My brothers and I have assumed we were better than these humans we were tasked to destroy, but we have been the ones pitting their compassion against them.

I have followed orders this entire time. That's what I'm good at. Even Lazarus was fated to me by God, so she too sat comfortably in my world ... until, of course, she didn't. She gave me raw, painful, *messy* humanity. With all its spontaneity and beauty. She awoke me, and no matter how today ends, I cannot go back to who and what I once was.

I see Lazarus hesitate and look back at me. I see plainly in her eyes that she doesn't want to leave me, even though the afterlife and all her loved ones are calling her home. My heart aches so fiercely at the sight of her.

I quake at the thought of existing without her.

What will you do? It is your decision in the end.

Those words ring in my ears. They feel like a trick, even though that is not the way the universe works.

Cities have crumbled and legions have died and I have felt nothing. But the sound of Lazarus's laughter has stirred my heart, and the slide of her body under mine has awoken my soul. How many lonely miles have I traveled with the memory of her voice keeping me company?

What would my future look like when Lazarus is nothing but a memory once more?

The thought is like a physical blow. That future is *unfathomable*.

You don't even know what loss is, she said not so long ago. *You've never loved anything enough to care if it goes.*

Now I know.

I cannot lose her.

It's not even a question. It's a certainty. I simply can't. It's the same damnable choice Lazarus made when she discovered Ben. A single person can change your life. As a human, you can love deeply enough to doom humanity.

Or redeem it.

Chapter 76

The Beyond

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Death

“Wait,” I call out.

Lazarus’s family is already welcoming her; she is frightfully close to that blinding light of the beyond. Have I ever considered heaven *frightful* before this moment? Because right now, it is. And she’s a hair’s breadth from it.

“Wait,” I say again, softer this time.

Lazarus turns back to face me. The raw hope in her eyes cuts me deep. Too long that hope has been dashed.

It won’t be ever again. I don’t care if I have to apologize every day for the rest of our mortal lives, so long as we get those lives.

I move towards the spirits that surround her, brushing past them to get to Lazarus.

I clasp her spectral face in my hands. When I look into her eyes, I feel a deep sense of certainty not just that I can give up my task, but that I *must*. Not even God’s commands can drown out this drive I feel. I would tear away my immortality, my heavenliness, and I would unmake the world, all for the press of this woman’s lips against my skin and her voice in my ear.

“If I gave you everything you wanted—your son, an end to the apocalypse and the killing—would you return to Earth?” I ask.

Her brows draw together in confusion, and the sight of it wounds me. I have set her expectations so low, she cannot make sense of this.

“You—” my voice fails me, and I have to start again. “You can go with your loved ones and enter the afterlife. There will be no more pain.” I draw in a shuddering breath, the possibility terrifying to me. “Or, you could stay with Ben, on earth. I can’t promise that there will be no pain. To live is to feel pain.”

She doesn’t say anything, and I can’t read her face.

“What about you?” she eventually says.

I inhale sharply, and it’s as if I’ve drawn in my first breath. “I want you, Lazarus. With every part of me, I do. That will never change.” My love is just as vast and unending as the rest of me. “But I hurt you, and then I took you and then I disappointed you—”

One of her spectral hands presses against my lips, silencing me.

“I have done all the same to you,” she says. “It is forgiven.” She searches

my features. “We have spent the entirety of our relationship fighting for our causes. What if we started fighting for one another?”

I go still at the implication.

Lazarus continues. “I want to return to Earth—and I want everything you promised. But I also want one more thing—” She smiles, “*you.*”

Chapter 77

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Lazarus

I gasp in a breath, and my lungs expand. Rocks are digging into my back and everything feels ... well, less than whimsical.

I blink my eyes open and stare up at Thanatos.

Except for that face. That face is *pure* whimsy.

The horseman smiles at me, and that smile manages to drive away all the shadows that linger on his face.

I grin back at him, my entire body feeling alive.

But then the smile slips from Death's face. For a moment, he looks confused.

"Thanatos?"

Just as I begin to sit up, he chokes.

"*Thanatos!*" What's going on?

I slip out of his arms so that I can kneel in front of him.

"Death?"

He looks at me, but his eyes are unfocused. The horseman rises to his feet, and for an instant I think that he's fine. But then he staggers backwards, looking at something in the distance that only he can see. His armor dissolves away completely, and I realize I'm seeing an angel being stripped of his immortality.

Death's wings flare wide and he cries out, his body taut with pain. He reaches for his back as the feathers begin to peel off his wings one by one, the inky black plumage tossed about in the wind. The feathers fall away faster and faster. I brace myself for the sight of the flesh beneath them, but there's nothing there. It's as though the appendages themselves are being blown away.

I ache at their loss. I know they were cumbersome for him, but I thought they were one of the aspects of the horseman that was beautiful *because* it was inhuman.

He breathes heavily. All that's left of his immortal attire are his clothes and boots. With effort, he straightens.

"Your wings," I say, pulling myself to my feet.

He glances at me. "*Waterava. Transmutation.*"

Nothing actually goes. It's transformed, but transmutation isn't actually

lost or gone at all.

I laugh through the tears.

I close the distance between us and kiss him savagely.

Chapter 78

Los Angeles, California

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Death chose us. In the end, he chose *us*. Humanity.

And he chose me.

Well, technically he chose me and then I chose him and then he chose me again—or something like that—but whatever, we chose each other.

I can't seem to wrap my mind around it.

I stare up at him. Those silver flakes still sparkle like jewels in his eyes, and I can see the barest hint of his glowing glyphs around the collar of his shirt, and when I look down at his hands, he still wears that ring with the coin of the dead.

“So, it's over?”

He nods as he leans in close, his nose brushing against mine. “It is,” he says softly.

I pull away from him and glance around. There are piles of dismembered corpses and twisting plants and broken bits of asphalt. Everything is so quiet.

Deathly quiet.

The other horsemen.

I turn from Death then and move towards the first horseman my eyes fall on, which just happens to be War. I'm afraid of what I'm going to find when I get to him.

The fearsome man lay slumped on his side, a mountain of dead surrounding him. I can't make out much of his face from this angle, but last I saw of him, he'd been stabbed and his body withered.

I still see blood on his skin, and his hair is hiding his features, but his sword arm ... I swear it's no longer broken.

Still, I hesitate for a moment before I crouch in front of him. Taking a stabilizing breath, I move the hair from his face.

War's eyes are closed, but he looks ... better. Much better. His olive skin has the same healthy glow I remember. As I touch him, I hear him murmur, "Wife."

A ragged exhale slips out of me.

He's alive.

"Sorry to disappoint," I say.

His eyes flutter open. He groans a little as he pushes himself up. "Did he do it?" he asks.

I glance over my shoulder and meet Death's gaze. He stands where I left him, and without his wings and armor, the horseman looks all the more vulnerable.

"He did," I confirm, giving Thanatos another small smile. I turn back to War. "Humanity has been saved, once and for all."

"That ... bastard," War grits out. "I knew he had it in him."

Spoken as though we weren't wholly and completely screwed thirty minutes ago.

A short distance away, I see Famine just as he flops onto his back and laughs at the sky.

"I'm mortal!" he shouts. His words are cut short by a sharp, hacking cough. "Fuck," he wheezes, "I'm *mortal*."

"Just wait until you age," Pestilence calls out hoarsely.

"Looking forward to it, grandpa," Famine replies.

One by one, the men pick themselves up. Death hadn't killed them after all. Or perhaps he did, and then he saved them. Or perhaps it wasn't him at all. Perhaps God—the universe, whatever you want to call Her—meddled once more.

Regardless, it's a wonder, seeing them alive.

As soon as they're back on their feet, I tense once more, afraid of the fallout that might come. But if I thought Death's brothers would hate him for what he did, I thought wrong.

The men leave their weapons behind before they approach Thanatos. And then, when they do close in on him, they give him thumping hugs.

"All is forgiven," I hear Famine quietly say to him. Death holds his brother a bit tighter after he hears that.

"You put up a good fight," War concedes. "But in the end, nothing is quite

as tenacious as a human woman.” The two men share an amused look.

The last one to embrace him is Pestilence.

“Welcome to mortality, brother,” he says simply. “You’re going to love it.”

Chapter 79

West Coast, North America

October, Year 27 of the Horsemen

Thanatos does love it.

As the Four Horsemen and I travel up the West Coast, steadily making our way to Vancouver Island, Death is forced to learn about the joys of hunger, and going to the bathroom, and so many other little humanisms that his immortality shielded him from.

And ... it's a joy. *He's* a joy. There's a light and excitement in his eyes that I've never seen before. Even when he complains about how barbaric shitting is. Or when he grumbles about hunger pains. He really is in love with life; it's as though before he'd forced himself to hold back from enjoying it. Now he doesn't need to.

Pestilence, War, Famine and I have taken to giving him foods like lemons and olives, cheese and yogurt and fish, just to gauge his reaction. Perhaps he tries them out of guilt, or perhaps it's curiosity, but Death goes gamely along with it. And now that he has an appetite, he eats like a horse—as does Famine. Those two get to enjoy the learning curve of mortality together.

As for me, my own mortality is less apparent, but I notice it well enough when I cut my hand on accident or scrape my shin. These little knicks would've healed within hours. Now they take days.

Despite the high we all have from surviving the apocalypse, we cannot escape its gruesome aftermath. There are so many dead. We pass them for miles and miles, days and days, the smell suffocating, and the flies and scavengers that have descended on them only make the scene more horrific.

The dead stretch from Southern California, through Oregon, all the way up into Washington. War had been wrong when he said Thanatos was destroying

the world a mile per minute; Death had been killing people off far more aggressively.

The bodies are a prickly, uncomfortable reminder of what Thanatos did, and what the rest of us so narrowly escaped. But then my own perspective is altered. I have glimpsed the afterlife. Death was right—it is nothing to fear.

It's not until somewhere in Washington that we see the first living person traveling along the road. The man's eyes look haunted, and when he sees us, his attention lingers on the four brothers a bit too long.

The traveler has barely passed us when Pestilence clears his throat. "Unless any of you are interested in more fighting—"

"I'm *always* interested in more fighting," War interjects.

"Psycho," Famine mutters under his breath.

War turns in his saddle to Famine. "Brother, you say that as though you aren't one," War's voice booms out, louder than the rest.

The two of them laugh then, as though they're sharing the most hilarious joke and not some traumatizing truth.

"Let me rephrase:" Pestilence continues, ignoring his brothers, "unless you *all* wish to cut your hard-won mortality short, I suggest we move off the main road from this point on."

Despite War's enthusiasm for battle, we do move off the road.

In the evenings, after we've put out our campfires, Death and I drift away from the others. Tonight, like every other night since the almost-end-of-the-world, Thanatos holds me, the two of us staring at the stars.

Well, *I'm* staring at the stars. Thanatos is tracing my lips and doing his absolute best to distract me.

"I cannot believe it took me so long to see what I should've all along," he admits.

"I don't hold it against you," I say, smiling softly against his touch. "You were thinking about death, and I was thinking about life."

"Yes, but life and death are lovers, kismet. They always choose each other in the end."

I turn my face from the stars and meet Death's dark gaze. "We did," I agree, and then I kiss him.

Just when it seems like we will be doomed to travel forever, we arrive on Vancouver Island. I've had butterflies in my stomach all day.

Today I will see my son.

The trees around us rustle in the breeze, and this place is one of the most beautiful sites I've laid eyes on in a long time. All of the Pacific Northwest is. And maybe that's because for the first time in over a year I know I don't have to continue traveling—but I'd also like to believe it's because this place looks like a slice of heaven.

Figuratively speaking, of course.

I still have so many questions for Thanatos—about the apocalypse's inception, about its outcome, about God's feelings on all of it—you know, those big questions that keep you up at night. But for now, I'll make do with the fact that I stopped Death in the end. Stopped him and then decided to keep him around.

Pestilence leads the group of us off of the paved road, and I cast a glance over at the horsemen. Pestilence—Victor (I will get it right one of these days)—War, and Famine all have an excited gleam in their eyes.

We must be close.

My hands begin to tremble, and Death's grip on me tightens. For the next few minutes the group of us ride in silence.

I hear children's laughter before I see the house.

"My girls," I hear War murmur, now grinning like a mad fool.

I crane my neck to see anything, but the trees block out my view.

But then the trees part, and the late afternoon sun glitters down on green, green grass that slopes away from an enormous two story home.

And out in front of that home stand a group of people, most of them women. They're barbecuing something, and a young man is sitting on the steps, tuning his guitar. Out on the front lawn are a gaggle of children—also mostly girls.

I hear one of the women whoop.

"They did it! Pussy power for the win!"

I hear someone cackle. One of the women with dark, curly hair comes running towards our group, and grumpy Famine basically flings himself off his horse like he's the most dramatic thing to ever enter North America. He sprints the last of the distance between them and swings the woman into his arms.

I'm taking it all in when I catch sight of Ben. He's tossing a ball in the grass with a young girl who bears an uncanny resemblance to War.

Making a small sound, I slide out of Death's arms and off his horse, my eyes trained on my son.

“Ben!” I shout, my entire body shaking from excitement and happiness and the best sort of nerves.

Ben looks up then, catching sight of me. For an instant, I’m paralyzed by a bolt of fear. Does he remember who I am? It’s only been four months, but to a small child, that’s an eternity.

My worries evaporate the moment Ben drops his ball and starts running. Running! When did he get so good at running?

But then of course he trips and falls because his little legs are still unsteady and I’m laughing even though my cheeks feel wet.

I sprint towards him, cutting the distance between us as he gets back up and, wearing the most blinding smile, begins running at me again. As soon as he’s within arm’s reach I sweep him up into a hug, spinning him as I do so. And then I’m kissing his temple, and I can hear him saying, “Mama! Mama!” And I’m still crying big, fat, stupid tears, and he’s holding me like he’s never going to let go and I’m one thousand percent fine with that.

There were countless times when I feared this day would never come, but it has. It has at last.

I sit down with my son in the grass, brushing his hair back and trying to memorize his features.

A shadow falls over me, and my skin pricks with awareness. Thanatos no longer brings that deadly stillness with him, but he still has a supernatural presence to him.

I glance up at the horseman, surprised to see a soft smile on his face. But his eyes are full of uncertainty.

Do I belong here? His expression seems to say.

I reach out and give his hand a squeeze because he *does* belong here.

Ben pulls away from me and stares up, up, up at the horseman, craning his neck to see the man. He tilts his held to the side, his eyes a little wary.

Death squats on his haunches so that he and Ben are roughly eye level. I marvel that the horseman no longer has to lean forward in that position to make room for his wings. My heart thumps in a mad way; I was so sad to see those wings go, but there are so many casually human things Death can now do. Like crouching.

“Hello, Ben,” he says. “I’m Thanatos.”

Ben continues to stare unblinkingly at Death, and I think that’s going to be the sum total of his reaction, but then Ben reaches out for Death’s face.

I see the horseman’s eyes widen in surprise as Ben points to one of them.

“Eye,” Ben says very seriously.

Thanatos nods, equally serious. After a moment, he himself reaches out. About an inch from Ben’s skin, he hesitates, his fingers curling inward. I remember that, up until several weeks ago, Death’s touch killed. Even then, he could control that power, but I still understand his reluctance.

“It’s okay,” I say softly, giving him permission.

The horseman takes a deep breath, then draws his fingers down the side of Ben’s face.

And ...

Ben gazes at the horseman for several long seconds, and then he shyly smiles.

Death smiles back, the uncertainty no longer in his eyes. “I can’t wait to get to know you,” he says earnestly.

After a moment, Death wraps his arms around both me and Ben. It’s an eerily similar embrace to the one he gave us months and months ago, when Ben’s life hung in the balance.

Only now, everything is different.

Chapter 80

Somewhere in the World

March, Year 28 of the Horsemen

Down a long abandoned road in a long abandoned neighborhood in one of the many long abandoned towns of the world, a streetlamp flickers. On—off—on—off—

On.

And it stays on.

Epilogue

Death

In the end, it is just as I hoped it would be.

A good, long life. Children. Grandchildren. All of them are mortal, all are wingless, some share my blood and some don't, and—blessedly—none seem to have inherited my ability to slip a soul from its flesh. Thank goodness. Within a single lifetime, I've created a human legacy I thought would be impossible.

There is an inherent magic to life, a magic that not even the afterlife can give. That's why creation exists at all, and it's why humans, who balance on the edge of good and evil, are as they are.

I still have my secrets—the quiet conversations with the Universe. I am still Her intermediary, even if I relinquished my powers. I won't ever be fully human. My memories stretch farther back than anyone—even my brothers—can remember. I will always be the pause between sentences, the silence that follows the end of a story. I fit between things, and no amount of mortality can erase that.

Time here doesn't work as it did before I was made into a man. It's blindingly fast, and aching slow.

But eventually it does come to a close.

My brothers and their wives go. I don't choose the day; I cannot any longer. That aspect of my power is gone. And one awful day, Lazarus goes too, and none of my knowledge of the afterlife does anything to dull the unbearable agony of her passing. I feel her soul slip away, I see its flight up into the heavens, and this time, though a part of my essence does lead her there, it's not *this* part of me—the conscious, mortal man I've become.

And then she's gone.

And somehow, I still live, though by all rights, the part of me that matters has left. For a handful of years I exist without her, and I understand finally, truly, Lazarus's words about loss.

Then, there comes a day when I feel my own death upon me, and I want to laugh that I have somehow come full circle—I am both Death and the dying.

My children and grandchildren gather around me—and those of my brothers' flesh as well. Ben, who's an old man himself, holds my hand as I draw my final breaths.

Between one thought and the next, I slip away. There is no ferryman to lead me on, but it doesn't matter. I know the way. I have memorized it over the eons.

There, standing at the threshold of the afterlife, are my brothers, their wives—

And Lazarus, my sweet Lazarus.

She opens her arms, and I walk into them.

And once again I am home.

The End

Author's Note

Trying not to cry. Trying not to cry.

Phew.

Alright. I think I managed it.

The end of a series is a magical, gut-wrenching experience, and *Death* is no exception. While I'm so thrilled to finally close out this final story in *The Four Horsemen* series, it hurts to part with a world and characters I have grown to love and care about.

I came up with this idea back in 2015 and decided to start writing *Pestilence* in 2017, when that first horseman started whispering in my ear. He wouldn't leave me alone until I had his story down on paper. And that's how the Four Horsemen shoved their way onto my computer. They've been my world for the last four years and this is truly a parting.

I am forever grateful to those of you who took a chance on these books and stuck with the series all the way until the bittersweet end. You all humble me.

For the readers wondering if there will be any other books after this one in *The Four Horsemen* series, I'm sorry to say that this is it. I do have plenty of outtakes from the book, and if you twist my arm hard enough, I will share them on my website and in my newsletter.

As far as future projects go, I have two separate series in the works—one paranormal, one fantasy, both heavy on the romance. To be honest, I'm not exactly sure which of these two series I'll officially be releasing next, (I'm sort of just rolling with whatever the Muse throws at me) but I intend to release the first book in one of these series in 2022, so I hope you'll stick around for it!

In the meantime, don't be a stranger! You can find me on Facebook and Instagram, Twitter and Goodreads, and we can gush about our favorite reads!

Until then—

Happy reading!

Laura

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FOUND IN THE forest when she was young, Laura Thalassa was raised by fairies, kidnapped by werewolves, and given over to vampires as repayment for a hundred year debt. She's been brought back to life twice, and, with a single kiss, she woke her true love from eternal sleep. She now lives happily ever after with her undead prince in a castle in the woods.

... or something like that anyway.

When not writing, Laura can be found scarfing down guacamole, hoarding chocolate for the apocalypse, or curled up on the couch with a good book.