

The Darkest Night

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

EVERY NIGHT DEATH CAME, slowly, painfully, and every morning Maddox awoke in bed, knowing he'd have to die again later. That was his greatest curse and his eternal punishment.

He ran his tongue over his teeth, wishing it were a blade over his enemy's throat instead. Most of the day had already passed. He'd heard the time seep away, a poisonous tick-tock in his mind, every beat of the clock a mocking reminder of mortality and pain.

In little more than an hour, the first sting would pierce his stomach and nothing he did, nothing he said, would change that. Death *would* come for him.

"Damned gods," he muttered, increasing the speed of his bench presses.

"Bastards, every one of them," a familiar male voice said from behind him.

Maddox's motions didn't slow at Torin's unwelcome intrusion. Up. Down. Up. Down. For two hours he had worked out his frustration and anger on the punching bag, the treadmill and now the weights. Sweat ran from his bare chest and arms, riding the ropes of his muscles in clear rivulets. He should be as exhausted mentally as he was physically, but his emotions were only growing darker, more powerful.

“You should not be here,” he said.

Torin sighed. “Look. I didn’t mean to interrupt, but something’s happened.”

“So take care of it.”

“I can’t.”

“Whatever it is, try. I’m in no shape to help.” These last few weeks very little was needed to send him into a killing haze where no one around him was safe. Even his friends. *Especially* his friends. He didn’t want to, never meant to, but was sometimes helpless against urges to strike and to maim.

“Maddox—”

“I’m at the edge, Torin,” he croaked. “I would do more harm than good.”

Maddox knew his limitations, had known them for thousands of years. Ever since that doomed day the gods had chosen a woman to perform a task that should have been his.

Pandora had been strong, yes, the strongest female soldier of their time. But he had been stronger. More capable. Yet he had been deemed too weak to guard *dimOuniak*, a sacred box housing demons so vile, so destructive, they could not even be trusted in Hell.

As if Maddox would have allowed it to be destroyed. Frustration had bloomed inside him at the affront. Inside all of them, every warrior now living here. They had fought diligently for the king of the gods, killed expertly and protected thoroughly; they should have been chosen as guards. That they hadn’t was an embarrassment not to be tolerated.

They’d only thought to teach the gods a lesson the night they’d stolen *dimOuniak* from Pandora and released that horde of demons upon the unsuspecting world. How foolish they had been. Their plan to prove their power had failed, for the box had gone missing in the fray, leaving the warriors unable to recapture a single evil spirit.

Destruction and havoc had soon reigned, plunging the world into darkness until the king of the gods finally intervened, cursing each warrior to house a demon inside *himself*.

A fitting punishment. The warriors had unleashed the evil to avenge their stinging pride; now they would contain it.

And so the Lords of the Underworld were born.

Maddox had been given Violence, the demon who was now as much a part of him as his lungs or his heart. Now, man could no longer live without demon and demon could no longer function without man. They were woven together, two halves of a whole.

From the very first, the creature inside him had beckoned him to do malicious things, hated things, and he'd been compelled to obey. Even when led to slay a woman—to slay Pandora. His fingers clenched the bar so tightly his knuckles nearly snapped out of place. Over the years he had learned to control some of the demon's more vile compulsions, but it was a constant struggle and he knew he could shatter at any moment.

What he would have given for a single day of calm. No overpowering desire to hurt others. No battles within himself. No worries. No death. Just...peace.

"It's not safe for you here," he told his friend, who still stood in the doorway. "You need to leave." He set the silver bar atop its perch and sat up. "Only Lucien and Reyes are allowed to be close to me during my demise." And only because they played a part in it, unwilling though they were. They were as helpless against their demons as Maddox was his.

"About an hour until that happens, so..." Torin threw a rag at him. "I'll take my chances."

Maddox reached behind his back, caught the white cloth and turned. He wiped his face. “Water.”

An ice-cold bottle was soaring through the air before the second syllable left his mouth. He caught it deftly, moisture splashing his chest. He drained the icy contents and studied his friend.

As usual, Torin wore all black and gloves covered his hands. Pale hair fell in waves to his shoulders, framing a face mortal females considered a sensual feast. They didn’t know the man was actually a devil in angel’s skin. They should have, though. He practically glowed with irreverence, and there was an unholy gleam in his green eyes that proclaimed he would laugh in your face while cutting out your heart. Or laugh in your face while you cut out *his* heart.

To survive, he had to find humor where he could. They all did.

Like every resident of this Budapest fortress, Torin was damned. He might not die every night like Maddox, but he could never touch a living thing, skin to skin, without infecting it with sickness.

Torin was possessed by the spirit of Disease.

He hadn’t known a woman’s touch in over four hundred years. He’d learned his lesson well when he’d given in to lust and caressed a would-be lover’s face, bringing about a plague that decimated village after village. Human after human.

“Five minutes of your time,” Torin said, his determination clear. “That’s all I’m asking.”

“Think we’ll be punished for insulting the gods today?” Maddox replied, ignoring the request. If he didn’t allow himself to be asked for a favor, he didn’t have to feel guilty for turning it down.

His friend uttered another of those sighs. "Our every breath is supposed to be a punishment."

True. Maddox's lips curled into a slow, razored smile as he peered ceilingward. *Bastards. Punish me further, I dare you.* Maybe then, finally, he would fade to nothingness.

He doubted the gods would concern themselves, though. After bestowing the death-curse upon him, they had ignored him, pretending not to hear his pleas for forgiveness and absolution. Pretending not to hear his promises and desperate bargaining.

What more could they do to him, anyway?

Nothing could be worse than dying over and over again. Or being stripped of anything good and right...or hosting the spirit of Violence inside his mind and body.

Jackknifing to his feet, Maddox tossed the now-wet rag and empty water bottle into the nearest hamper. He strode to the far end of the room and braced his hands above his head, leaning into the semicircular alcove of stained-glass windows and staring into the night through the only clear partition.

He saw Paradise.

He saw hell.

He saw freedom, prison, everything and nothing.

He saw...home.

Situated atop a towering hill as the fortress was, he had a direct view of the city. Lights glowed brightly, pinks, blues and purples illuminating the murky velvet sky, glinting off the Danube River and framing the snowcapped trees that dominated the area. Wind blustered, snowflakes dancing and twirling through the air.

Here, he and the others had a modicum of privacy from the rest of the world. Here, they were allowed to come and go without having to face a barrage of questions. *Why*

don't you age? Why do screams echo through the forest every night? Why do you sometimes look like a monster?

Here, the locals maintained their distance, awed, respectful. "Angels," he'd even heard whispered during a rare encounter with a mortal.

If they only knew.

Maddox's nails elongated slightly, digging into the stone. Budapest was a place of majestic beauty, old-world charm and modern pleasures, but he'd always felt removed from it. From the castle district that lined one street to the night-clubs that lined the next. From the fruits and vegetables hawked in one alley to the living flesh hawked in the other.

Maybe that sense of disconnection would vanish if he ever explored the city, but unlike the others who roamed at will, he was trapped inside the fortress and surrounding land as surely as Violence had been trapped inside Pandora's box thousands of years ago.

His nails lengthened farther, almost claws now. Thinking of the box always blackened his mood. *Punch a wall, Violence beckoned. Destroy something. Hurt, kill.* He would have liked to obliterate the gods. One by one. Decapitate them, perhaps. Rip out their blackened, decayed hearts, definitely.

The demon purred in approval.

Of course it's purring now, Maddox thought with disgust. Anything bloodthirsty, no matter the victims, met with the creature's support. Scowling, he leveled another heated glance at the heavens. He and the demon had been paired long ago, but he remembered the day clearly. The screams of the innocent in his ears, humans bleeding all around him, hurting, dying, the spirits having devoured their flesh in a rapturous frenzy.

Only when Violence had been shoved inside his body

did he lose touch with reality. There had been no sounds, no sights. Just an all-consuming darkness. He hadn't regained his senses until Pandora's blood splattered his chest, her last breath echoing in his ears.

She had not been his first kill—or his last—but she had been the first and only woman to meet his sword. The horror of seeing that once-vibrant female form broken and knowing he was responsible for it... To this day, he had not assuaged the guilt, the regret. The shame and the sorrow.

He'd sworn to do whatever was necessary to control the spirit from then on, but it had been too late. Enraged all the more, Zeus had bestowed a second curse upon him: every night at midnight he would die exactly as Pandora had died—a blade through the stomach, six hellish times. The only difference was, her torment had ended within minutes.

His torment would last for eternity.

He popped his jaw, trying to relax against a new onslaught of aggression. It wasn't as if he were the only one to suffer, he reminded himself. The other warriors had their own demons—literally and figuratively. Torin, of course, was keeper of Disease. Lucien was keeper of Death. Reyes, of Pain. Aeron, of Wrath. Paris, of Promiscuity.

Why couldn't *he* have been given that last one? He would have been able to journey to town anytime he wished, take any woman he desired, savoring every sound, every touch.

As it was, he could never venture far. Nor could he trust himself around females for long periods of time. If the demon overtook him or if he could not return home before midnight and someone found his dead, bloody body and buried him—or worse, burned him...

How he wished such a thing would end his miserable existence. He would have left long ago and allowed himself to be roasted in a pit. Or perhaps he would have jumped from the fortress's highest window and smashed his brains from his skull. But no. No matter what he did, he'd merely awaken once again, charred as well as sore. Broken as well as sliced.

"You've been staring at that window for a while," Torin said. "Aren't you even curious as to what's happened?"

Maddox blinked as he was dragged from his thoughts. "You're still here?"

His friend arched a black brow, the color a startling contrast to his silver-white hair. "I believe the answer to my question is no. Are you calm now, at least?"

Was he ever truly calm? "As calm as a creature like me can be."

"Stop whining. There's something I need to show you, and don't try to deny me this time. We can talk about my reason for disturbing you along the way." Without another word, Torin spun on his booted heel and strode from the room.

Maddox remained in place for several seconds, watching his friend disappear around the corner. *Stop whining*, Torin had said. Yes, that's exactly what he had been doing. Curiosity and wry amusement pushed past his lethal mood, and Maddox stepped from the gym into the hallway. A cold draft of air swirled around him, thick with moisture and the crisp scents of winter. He spied Torin a few feet away and stalked forward, quickly closing in.

"What's this about?"

"Finally. Interest," was the only response.

"If this is one of your tricks..." Like the time Torin had ordered hundreds of blow-up dolls and placed them

throughout the fortress, all because Paris had foolishly complained about the lack of female companionship in town. The plastic “ladies” had stared out from every corner, their wide eyes and let-me-suck-you mouths taunting everyone who passed them.

Things like that happened when Torin was bored.

“I wouldn’t waste my time trying to trick you,” Torin said without turning to face him. “You, my friend, have no sense of humor.”

True.

As Maddox kept pace, stone walls stretched at his sides; sconces glowed, pulsing with light and fire, twining shadow with gold. The House of the Damned, as Torin had dubbed the place, had been built hundreds of years ago. Though they had modernized it as best they could, the age showed in the crumbling rock and the scuffed floors.

“Where is everyone?” Maddox asked, only then realizing he hadn’t spotted any of the others.

“You’d think Paris would be shopping for food since our cabinets are nearly bare and that’s his only duty, but no. He’s out searching for a new woman.”

Lucky bastard. Possessed as he was by Promiscuity, Paris could not bed the same woman twice, and so he seduced a new one—or two or three—every day. The only downside? If he couldn’t find a woman, he was reduced to doing things Maddox didn’t even want to contemplate. Things that left the normally good-tempered man hunched over a toilet, heaving the contents of his stomach. Though Maddox’s envy abated at such moments, it always returned when Paris spoke of one of his lovers. The soft brush of a thigh...the meeting of hot skin...the groans of ecstasy...

“Aeron is... Prepare yourself,” Torin began, “because this is the main reason I hunted you down.”

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