

Home. Four. The Holidays.

"We need to kill Pestilence."

Death stayed silent, having heard War make that exact same complaint countless times since their youngest Horseman joined them.

Night threatened the Gloucestershire sun, a milky dusk easing over the frosty Cotswolds sky. The village was larger than Death recalled but his memory of the place was scattered, bits and pieces of blood-soaked stones interspersed with the few times he and War returned to Stow-on-the-Wold for a stroll. Strung strands of lights were beginning to glow, brilliant spots of gold warming the stone structures lining the square's narrow walks.

The battle fought on those lands was ancient but not forgotten and the stones whispered to Death, reminding him of all the souls he'd left behind during those awful days. The souls wandered still, slippery mist-wraiths holding onto their memories, probably no better than Death held onto his. Time was too long, too stretched out and it turned to cobwebs when pulled. Yet there was one solid presence who stood beside him and no matter how irritating and contrary, *he* remained.

Still complaining about the turns of life and how they could fix the things they could not change.

"You can't kill a fellow Horseman. You know that, Ari," Death chastised. "Besides, you're mad at him because he's *too* good at what he's doing. Turn left here. We're almost at the trees. We can slip in there and go home."

"Trees. Got it, Shi. Watch your step. There's some gremlins lurking about. Don't want to take any of those bastards home with us. We've got enough vermin." Forging ahead, Ari ducked under a low branch, watchful and protective, his right hand unconsciously clenched around a sword that wasn't there.

The name Ari suited War, shortened from Ares and one of many names he wore and shed over the centuries. Death never took another name but his on-off lover often called him Shi, a macabre word play on Four and Death in Japanese. They were nothing alike but still fit into one another, bound together through time. Neither man knew what death blow made them candidates for the Horsemen, but the scar running down Death's brow and cheek and the starburst keloid on Ari's side were good hints. Their souls and bodies were plucked from where-and-when-ever they'd been and dumped back into a time where man first began to take another's life for anger, pettiness, resources, or whatever spurred on the rapacious needs of an animal with too much intelligence and too little common sense to live very long.

Ari was right about one thing. The sticky proto-gremlins were gathering slowly in their wake, drawn by the ripples in the Veil cloaking the underworld from reality. The two Horsemen were disturbing the shadowy curtain with their presence, drawing the tiny creatures to feed on the energies Death and War created in the mortal world. The sooner they left, the quicker the gelatinous organisms would dissipate. The growing puddle at Death's feet was thick enough to take a happy man down into a deep depression if the horde chose to suckle on him and it was too close to the holidays when dark thoughts led to darker acts.

Ari already had the doors to the church open, the trees guarding the sacred portal trembling under the weight of the parted Veil. The shadows lapped at the roots spread over the sparse lawn, wooden valleys teeming with growing mounds of hungry wraiths and slivered darkness. They were feeding on one another, larger eating the weak and then eaten in turn by the even stronger. Death hurried, mindful of where he stepped and Ari held his hand out, beckoning Death to take it.

"You're going to carry me across?" he teased War, smiling at the blond man who stood guard against only the Gods knew what. "I can take myself over, you know. I'm Death."

"Yeah, but how many times do I get to carry you across our threshold?" Ari snorted, grasping Death's hand. "Quit faffing around and let's go home."

The slide into the Veil went quickly, a dizzyingly familiar wrench and twist of their guts and minds then the thousand miles between the Cotswolds and San Diego slithered away and Death's next step was firmly on their penthouse foyer's polished wood floor. War's fingers intertwined with his helped anchor Death, pulling the Veil back into place behind them.

"Hold on. You've got a hitchhiker," Ari murmured, bending down to scrap at the black oily smudge on Death's calf. He flicked the tiny gremlin through the rapidly closing Veil, sending it off to another space. "We're going

to need scanners or something pretty soon. The world's getting thick with them. Probably because of Mal's plagues. Lots of dead to feed on."

"You know things like that sometimes happen. We put things in place and..." He trailed off, giving Ari a small shrug. "Look what happened to the plague Batu unleashed in 1918. No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get the mortal world to cleanse it."

"Yeah, he couldn't get ahead of it." Ari rubbed his thumb over the back of Death's hand, warming his skin. "Nobody expected it."

Leaning in close, Death whispered softly into Ari's left ear, "No one ever expects the Spanish Influenza."

"Oh, I see what you did there," Ari murmured, cupping Death's chin. "You've got to pay the price for that, Shi."

No one could kiss him like War. No one knew Death as closely, as intimately as the blond warrior who'd probably died in battle, pinned to the ground by a sword or a spear. War knew where to touch him, where to put his hands, his fingers... his mouth.

Pressing his thumb against Death's jaw, War pushed gently until Death's shoulder blades touched the foyer wall. Sliding his hand under the heft of Death's hair, he found every sensitive spot along the base of Death's skull. War's mouth found his, teasing and tasting then delving in deeper, overwhelming Death's senses until his body grew too hot and needy, wanting more but unwilling to surrender to War.

Because once he surrendered to War, he would be lost.

"I hate what you do to me," Death whispered, desire drowning out the bemused irritation he felt when Ari's mouth moved away from his lips.

"I love what I do to you." War's rough chuckle was muffled against the curve of Death's jaw. His teeth found Death's throat, biting at a pulse point and Death growled, fighting still. "I love the noises I can pull out of you. I love how you sigh and struggle, wanting everything I can give you but needing to control this. You can never just simply let go, Shi. You never trust me to catch you."

"You're the one pushing me over the cliff," he muttered back, working his hands under War's loose T-shirt. "How the hell do you expect me to trust you?"

"Because no one knows you like I do." War's eyes were dark, roiling with a fire Death recognized. It was more than lust. It was a hunger Famine would envy, would ache to master. It was an illness Pestilence would never have a cure for. The only thing capable of satiating War's needs was Death. One way or another, only Death could quench the flames burning within the man who held Death close.

Ari savaged Death's mouth, drawing out moans and husky words in dead languages from Death's throat. He returned War's hunger, fueling the fire stoking up between them, tasting the heady weight of War's years and the velvet touch of his lips despite the rough rake of his mouth over Death's. War coaxed Death slowly, drawing him open and pulling in more, taking everything Death was willing to give him and perhaps a bit more. Or maybe Death simply wanted to give more than he was willing to admit.

"You guys coming in?"

Their youngest peered out at them from the open front door, the light gleaming on Mal's wire-rimmed glasses. He'd gotten a haircut, or at least Death could see his nose again but he was still a bit shaggy or maybe that was the style. Either way, the earnest Pestilence unequivocally could now see them without being hindered by a wealth of sandy blond hair.

"Close the fucking door, Pest," War growled.

For a brief second, it looked as if Pestilence was going to argue. Their youngest Horseman loved to argue but either common sense prevailed or perhaps the mumbled call from someone inside the penthouse made him rethink things.

Mal closed the door.

"I'm definitely going to kill him," War promised in a dark mutter, pressing his lips against the aching bite marks he'd left on Death's throat. "I don't know how but I'm going to figure out a way."

War found a spot, a sensitive, skin-warming spot Death didn't realize existed on his neck and his mind numbed at the electricity sparking across his nerves. "Keep that up, Ari, and I'll help you."

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“What are they doing?” Min tucked her feet under her, settling down into the couch while digging into a bowl of bright white popcorn.

“Kissing.” Mal replied, shaking his head.

“Better kissing than fighting,” Famine replied philosophically. “When they fight, the world goes to shit.”

Mal made a face. “I think War wants to kill me.”

“Lucky for you no one can kill an Incarnation.” Min fluffed her short pink hair away from her face. “Although if anyone could kill you, it would be War.”

“Why the fuck are we doing this?” Kismet’s voice drifted out from under the eight-foot tall Christmas tree erected in front of one of the living room’s expanse of windows. “And where the hell is the plug?”

Mal didn’t want things to be perfect but in some small way, he did. Another misstep and he’d blown yet another chance to bring humanity together, driving divides between families and nations with a simple virus. Again. This time was much worse and the backlash from the others had been a quiet reproach — except from War who was quite vocal about his displeasure. This was a chance to bring some much needed relief from the tension building up between the Four and maybe even bring a bit of joy to Kismet’s life.

Because if anyone needed joy more than Mal, it was the human-turned-Immortal who’d chased away the Veil’s predators by submerging himself in a drug-haze.

“You know, you’ve got a nice ass, Kiz,” Min drawled from her spot on the couch, her cheeks slightly plumped up from the handful of popcorn she spoke around. The petite Chinese Horseman wiggled her eyebrows at Mal. “You share?”

“We’re...” Mal exhaled slowly, refusing to rise to Min’s teasing. “Can you stop eating the popcorn? You’re supposed to be stringing it on the thread.” Sneaking a quick look at the tree where only Kismet’s jeans and bare feet could be seen, he muttered, “And you can’t even see his ass.”

When he’d first proposed the idea of a Holiday dinner to Kismet, Mal wasn’t surprised to be met with a hefty dose of skepticism from the former human. Still coming to terms with living behind the Veil, Kismet didn’t see the value of embracing the parts of Mortal life Mal was so fascinated by. Maybe because he’d been immersed in that world for all of his conscious time but Mal hadn’t been. The Horsemen might have lived through all of human history, Mal argued, but they didn’t experience life. They lived outside of the human condition, outside of its joy and pain and all of the things that made their eternal charges so intriguing.

Kismet thought he was nuts.

But agreed to help Mal anyway.

It was what Mal loved about him. One of the things, anyway. A willingness to support Mal during some of his more quirky ventures, even if they were sometimes ill-advised. Like climbing under an artificial Christmas tree to look for an outlet to plug the whole damned thing into.

Mal was grateful for Kismet’s arrival in their lives. The tension between the four Horsemen seemed to thicken every day since Mal’s creation. No matter how hard he tried — or worse, how well he succeeded — he was a Pestilence none of them seem to appreciate or want. He questioned everything he did now and sometimes he questioned his existence. The other three seem to always strike a balance between what they needed to do to affect the world and guide humanity towards some kind of enlightenment. All he seemed to do was birth chaos and death.

Gods, Death.

He was so patient with Mal, so much the older brother and even with the unexpected forged Immortal thrown into the mix, Shi just seemed to roll with things. Yes, he had countless eons of being an Immortal, but he just made it look so damned easy.

Or maybe it was just because War made it feel so damned hard.

“We’ve never done this kind of thing before,” Famine observed. “I’ve gone on a few trick-or-treats during Halloween because that’s just fun but I never thought About the whole dragging a dead tree into the house thing.”

"It's not really dead. They make it out of this kind of plastic, I guess. They look real — most of them anyway. There was one I really wanted that looked like it was made out of aluminum foil strings but Kismet said he would cut my balls off if I bought it." Mal shrugged then grinned broadly when the tree lit up, seemingly thousands of tiny white sparkles dancing through its needles.

"Found it," Kismet called out, muffled from the tree's branches. "Watch your legs. I'm coming out."

It looked even better than Mal imagined. Even without the ornaments or whatever else was supposed to hang off the tree's limbs, it was as magically human and delightful as anything he'd ever seen. Even greater than the huge spectacles humans erected in their cities and towns. Standing alone, reflected in the glass and snugged up against the penthouse wall, the tree shone bright, an intimate treasure Mal could share with the others.

"What the fucking hell is that?" War's harsh words screeched over the calm Mal found in the lights. "And what the hell is it doing in our house?"

"Christmas tree. You've probably seen thousands of them. Losing your mind there, War?" Kismet dusted his hands off on his jeans. His long dark hair obscured most of his pretty face but Mal would have bet everything he had that Kismet's sensual mouth was curled into a mocking smirk. "Never knew you guys got senile when you got older. Maybe it's time to put that little pony out to pasture, Shi."

"Kiz," Death's gentle reproach did nothing to cow the street kid and Kismet snorted, flopping onto the couch near Min. "Did you miss doing this?"

"Nuh-uh. None of this is me," Kismet shook his hair away from his face then reached for some of the popcorn from Min's bowl. There was a quick slap fight as she defended her hoard but Kismet was quicker and surprisingly deft at pushing back on their contentious Famine. "Do I fucking look like I ever had this kind of Christmas? This is all Mal. He's even got a train around here somewhere to put around the tree. Don't be surprised if he bribes someone to make is snow or something."

"We're older than this shit. Older than the religion." War moved into the living area, close on Death's heels. "Shit, we're older than the whole damned tree thing."

"Speak for yourself." Min countered. "I came in way after the setting shit on fire because there's candles in a dried up tree where Grandma used to sit."

"Kiz helped me get things and Min's supposed to be stringing popcorn so we can hang but...I thought it would be nice to..." Mal glanced at the tree — his tree — it was still as magical as it'd been before the other Two walked in, still sparkling and waiting for the glass baubles and bits he and Kismet painstakingly picked out from the gleaming thousands of decorations at the store. Turning back to War, he squared his shoulders and said, "Can't you just give me this *one* thing? This one *damned* thing, Ari? Would it kill you to meet me halfway? You don't even have to help decorate it. You just have to shut up about it and let me enjoy this. Who *cares* if it's a human thing. *We're* human and maybe you'd be a better person if you remembered that sometimes."

Death and War exchanged a look, the kind of knowing, telling look Mal *hated*. There was so much between them, languages no one knew, people no one would ever know about, and in the middle of it, there was War and Death, eternally circling one another, letting no one else in.

"Tell me you've got some beads in that pile over there," War finally muttered. "'Cause Min's eaten that whole bowl and doesn't have a damned thing to show for it."

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"Is this table big enough?" War grumbled from behind the couch. "There's a lot of tracks. We're going to need something bigger."

"It should work," Mal replied, sounding less than sure. "The box says it's only twenty feet wrapped around. The table's twelve feet so—"

"Less math. More clicking stuff together." There were sounds of rustling then a cry of triumph. "Hah, found that damned sign we were looking for. They hid it under the station wall."

"They sound like how Chance and I were like when..." Kismet's gaze was dark with shadows, the lights from the tree catching on his pale face but not penetrating the sorrow in his eyes. "Don't see him as much any more. I thought I'd be okay with that but... don't think I am."

Death was fond of Mal's human. In some strange way, he fit into the Four. Kismet grounded Mal's exuberance, tempered Min's frenetic outbursts and volleyed back a lot of War's banter and growling. For Death, Kismet seemed to be a student of sorts, an Immortal without purpose and understanding of the world the Manifestations moved in. And ultimately, he was also a puzzle Death sought to solve.

"Do you miss him? Your brother." Death shifted on the couch they both were lounging on.

Kismet was comfortable in his own body, often slung over chair arms and nested into pillows. He didn't fight for space like Min or needed to move constantly like Mal. And he was definitely a better musing companion than the often busy-headed War. With the living room lights dimmed down and the city lit up behind the decorated tree, Death could almost not hear the light-hearted bickering of War and Pestilence as they wrestled with the train set and the tiny village that came with it.

"Truth? I have no fucking clue," Kismet finally replied. "We were both... little kids and well, he's stuck at that age. It's like I've been taking care of him all this time and he talks to me but—"

"He's an echo. A wraith of a memory," Death finished. "Sometimes that happens. Especially with certain people. Energy... a bit of someone's soul, maybe? I don't know exactly but it snags on them, follows them around. Or stays in a place."

"Next time he comes around, I'm going to give you a call. Maybe you can get him to move on like you do with the dead. I feel like shit for sticking him with me and I don't know how the fuck to get him some peace." Kismet snorted. "Because the drugs sure as hell didn't work."

"No, not really." Death smiled, picking up his tea mug. "I've been thinking about you. About your purpose. About why you're here."

"Because that asshole fucked with a bunch of drugs, I took them and kind of died?" The young man leaned his head back against the couch, wrapping a fuzzy blanket tighter around his slender body. "I can't do anything you guys can do. I mean I can go along for the ride but beyond that, I'm like a goldfish flopping around on the ground."

Death sipped at his tea, still warm enough to drink without being bitter. "I think there's a reason you... manifested. That's the best word I think I can use."

"What? So I could teach you guys the wonders of using instant miso soup for your ramen broth?" He wiggled his feet beneath the blanket, his toes creating waves in the fluff. Waving his hand limply at the sparkling tree, he kept going, sarcasm thick on his words. "Or causing shit because I say sit like; sure, Mal. Let's drag Christmas into a place where people who are older than rocks live?"

"Both of those things," he responded. "And more."

Choosing his words carefully, Death sorted through the threads he'd unraveled in his musings about Kismet's arrival. Glancing over his shoulder, he watched Mal and War for a second then returned his attention to the young, conflicted human next to him.

"There used to be... a balance between the Four Horsemen and the Other Four," he began. "We're intertwined in so many ways—"

"Like War and Peace?" Kismet interjected. "Shitty book, by the way."

"Agreed. About the book. Not War and Peace. War and Faith used to co-mingle much more than they do. And not just for religious reasons. Faith represents the firm conviction and fortitude of humans beings to do right and War would bring their fervor to fight for those convictions." He shrugged at Kismet's puzzled gaze.

"Sometimes Faith would enter into the fight only to discover he was blind. Zealots blind Faith, entering into battle without thought. War had to follow along, guiding Faith through the conflict. Now, I worry Faith enters those battles without War's guidance and fully aware of the zealotry fueling the savagery."

"Well, not like we don't know Faith isn't fucked up," Kismet pointed out. "Asshole tried to wipe us all off the map."

"Something's changed. Peace used to walk with me. Helping put to rest the souls who wandered." Death closed his eyes, missing the quiet solace of a friend he'd held dear for so long. "Now he never comes, even when my ankles are wet in blood and the dying can't find their way out of their own bodies, he is absent. The balance is lost, Kismet. And since the Universe hates imbalance, I think you were manifested to create that balance."

"How the fucking hell am I supposed to do that?" Kismet's scoff was loud enough to echo off the glass pane. "I can't even get from my place to yours without taking an Uber or walking. I can't do shit."

"I don't know," Death admitted. "I don't always get instructions. Sometimes I have to figure things out myself. Nothing happens without a reason. Not to us. Is there a consciousness guiding all of this? I don't know. I can tell you I woke with a purpose and the tools to do my duties but the rest of it, I've had to make up as I went along."

"In the span of the whole Universe, you are so very young. Not even a full blink of an Immortal's life. Perhaps your existence alone is enough. There are certainly sparks of karma flickering around the world. I've seen them rise up more and more despite the darkness trying to smother them." Death noted Kismet's frown, wishing his tea were warmer and longing for more answers to every puzzle unraveling in his mind. "We do fight evil. Or rather mankind's instinct to destroy and dominate itself. We're here to guide humanity to its full potential, even as it struggles to fight us — all Immortals — every step of the way. And here you are, Kismet. Fully named and realized with an awareness of humanity's struggles and pain."

"Can't do much to help you still." He murmured. "I'm a tattoo artist. And I can't even do that now without seeing some of the spooky ass shit people drag into my space."

"I think you will do more. I think you're helping more now. You remind the Four of what it means to be human. We're outside of that so much and we do it instinctively. Because the constant pain and struggle can cripple us, break our spirits and we'd want to move on. It becomes too much. We need a constant now, more than ever but we also need to understand how things are around us but without being immersed in it." Death saluted Kismet with his mug. "That means you. You are our Kismet and perhaps the Universe's response to the Others' refusal to help us maintain the balance. It's too dark now. Too stormy and as a wise man once said, it cannot rain all of the time."

"I think that was The Crow," Kismet snarked. "Too much thinking and my tea's cold. Give me your cup and I'll make us some more. Because in a few minutes, I'm pretty sure we're going to have to go and watch a train go round and round a table just to make a couple of little boys happy."