

Chapter 9

The black phone was ringing.

Kats picked it up. The room turned dark. To her right was a plain chair made of black metal. This was a first.

“Sit,” said the figure in front of her. The hollow voice was filled with the echoes of an infinite pit of souls. Kats preferred the phone. She sat on the chair. It felt cold and bit her skin through her clothes.

Kats had never seen her benefactor. The woman in front of her was dressed in a dark, full-length dress made from a material that resembled black oil. Her face was long with a gaze as striking as a bladed weapon. Thick, black hair covered her head like a hood.

In her right hand she held a scythe that towered far above her head, making for an inefficient way to reap crops. Kats noticed the blade would disappear when she looked at it from a certain angle.

“It’s an atom thick and slices anything. Your infomercials have nothing on this cutting implement. Still, I’m not the biggest fan of the scythe. But the

agrarians amongst you humans got it into your head that this is the weapon of choice for me. And now, if I don't carry this thing when I introduce myself, no one knows who I am. And don't even think of bringing up the skeleton thing. Do you know what you lack when you're manifested as bones? Grip! It's near impossible to hold a hand of cards," said the woman.

Kats didn't know how to respond, so she didn't. The frivolity of the conversation coupled with a voice of a trillion deaths was jarring in its juxtaposition.

"You can call me Morana. The theme this time around was the letter M. Far more respectable than the last game when the theme was pickled juices. That was Mari's idea, of course. There's a reason why most of us don't like her," said Morana.

Kats sat there. She had spoken with Death before, but things seemed more appropriately sombre then. Less so now.

"Ah, yes. As I said, there are expectations with the role. No one likes a chipper Death. Do any of the other Ethereals have human expectation thrust upon them? No. Just me. There's also that urban legend about playing games with humans to stave off the final resting place. It's false, of course. If I played a game with every creature that died, everyone would still be alive. I'm horrible at games. The only chance I ever have at winning is the Game, because then it depends more on the character I choose and less on me."

Kats wasn't really following the conversation.

"Still, I changed my tactics this year. You came to me, of all things. That reminds me, do the other Ethereals get summoned? No! Why am I the only one forced to talk to humans? Wait, that's a rhetorical question. I know why: it's Mari's fault! We made a

bet and she won. I hate Mari, for the record,” said Morana. A book appeared in her hand. It was black with embossed writing in black* that read “The Rite of the Reaper.”

“How’d it go for you?” asked Morana.

“I have failed,” said Kats.

“Keep your chin up! You did everything else swimmingly, except for procuring the cryptex. Why do you want to become a Reaper? We never did discuss that,” said Morana.

“I needed a change,” said Kats.

“Good enough reason as any. I’m not really one for prying. You were a good sport about it. You didn’t even complain when I stripped you of your ability to kill. Personally, I found the irony of an assassin who couldn’t kill was too much to pass up. It was frightfully amusing,” said Morana with a chuckle. It sounded like the whisper of dying infants. Kats hoped her punishment would come soon. She couldn’t take this anymore.

“It’s not your fault, though. Moira played her *Level Up* card. That card is OP. It should have been nerfed a long time ago, but each of us hoped we would eventually get it. We all made bets for it, of course. Anything was worth the chance to get that card. I do like the *Revelation* card, though. You pretty much did everything I told you to do. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why we lost.”

Morana lifted her scythe, and with a quick motion, she sliced Kats.

Kats didn’t feel a thing.

“You probably know this already, but as a Reaper,

* Impractical? Yes. But someone really likes the colour black.

you don't need to push the soul out. It will already be out. You start immediately. It's normally cruel to put a Reaper in the same region they lived, but I need to repay one more debt. I don't know why I bother betting, since I keep losing. Maybe it's because people see Death as the ultimate loss. How pitiful is my existence?" asked Morana. She looked to be sulking.

"What?" asked Kats.

"You're a Grim Reaper, now. You certainly have the personality for it. I would say brush up on your social skills, but I guess that's not necessary," said Morana.

"But you gave me an initiation rite to fulfill in order to become a reaper. I failed it," said Kats.

"Yes, and I said failure results in Death, did I not?" asked Morana.

"Yes," said Kats.

"Well, you're Death now. Go forth and reap! Not a hard job, but you don't really get vacation. Humans die at an alarming rate. You think you'd be all extinct by now. Anyway, the less I have to occupy a continuum containing time, the better. I hate coming here," said Morana.

She started to leave.

"But I failed," said Kats.

"Good grief. You were the type of person who went to the teacher if they gave you half a point more than you deserved on a test, right? Here," said Morana. A cryptex appeared on Kats' lap.

Kats picked it up. It was made of bone and seven black bands were wrapped around it. Letters were on the bands.

"What's this?" asked Kats.

"That's the cryptex that was supposed to be behind the seventh door. I swapped it out when I real-

ized Paige would win.”

“What?”

“I cheated, ok? They always put me in charge of the final puzzle because ‘Death is the final journey’ or whatever. Anyway, I didn’t want Paige to get the cryptex because Moira almost always wins. Don’t get me wrong, I like Paige. She’s a good kid. But you know, she’s pretty cocky. So you got the real cryptex and technically you won. Happy?”

“I don’t understand,” said Kats.

“That’s why I made you team up with Paige; she’s the one that does the thinking. Come to think of it, I bet Moira knows I cheated. However, she’s not saying anything because she officially won. It’s better than Mari winning! I hate her.”

“Is my weapon in this cryptex?”

Morana looked at her. The silence was cold.

“I knew I forgot something. Hah! You’re right. It *is* in the cryptex. Here I thought I swapped it because of spite. Thing is, the scythe is symbolic. You don’t need it to sever a soul. But I guess humans won’t recognize you without it,” said Morana.

“How do I open this?” asked Kats.

“It involves the seven doors. Pretend you found this instead of Paige’s cryptex. Also pretend the seventh door was intact. Wait, you don’t know it wasn’t intact. Anyway, the answers help locate—hold on. You don’t know the answers either. That was Paige’s job. You know what? The final puzzle is really hard. Can’t you just ask Paige? You’re friends now, right?”

“Aren’t I officially dead as a Reaper?” asked Kats.

“I’m pretty sure seeing you as a Reaper isn’t going to surprise her. Oh, and before I forget, there’s a lot of paperwork in this job. It’s mostly paperwork, in fact. I hope you’re good at that. We don’t use

computers in the realm of the dead. Hackers and all. Could you imagine if someone could access a database of dead souls? That would be disastrous,” said Morana.

“May I ask one more question?” asked Kats.

“Sure.”

“What debt do you need to repay?”

“Well, I guess I *am* getting you to do that. It’s for Moira, although she’s doing it for Paige. It involves a human who gained immortality.”

“What would I need to do?” asked Kats.

“Live up to your title. Okay, I really have to go now. Ask Paige for help, because you can’t solve the cryptex without that Book of hers. Ta-tah!” said Morana.

She winked, and disappeared.