

Excerpt: The Darkest Kiss

CHAPTER ONE

Anya, goddess of Anarchy, daughter of Lawlessness, and dealer of disorder, stood on the edge of a crowded dance floor. All of the dancers were human females, beautiful and nearly naked, chosen specifically by the Lords of the Underworld to provide the night's entertainment. Both vertical and horizontal.

Wisps of smoke cast a dream-fog around them, and pinpricks of starlight rained from the swirling strobe, illuminating everything inside the darkened nightclub in slow, sweeping circles. From the corner of her eye, she caught a scintillating glimpse of a taut immortal ass pounding forward, back, forward, into an ecstatic female.

My kind of party, she thought with a wicked grin. Not that she'd been invited.

Like anything could have stopped me from coming.

The Lords of the Underworld were delectable immortal warriors who were possessed by the demon spirits that had once resided inside Pandora's box. And now, with a few rounds of hard liquor and even harder sex, they were saying goodbye to Budapest, the city they'd called home for hundreds of years.

Anya wanted in on the action. With one warrior in particular.

"Part," she whispered, fighting her intrinsic compulsion to shout "Fire" instead and watch as the humans raced away in a panic, screaming hysterically. *Let the good times roll.*

An erratic pulse of rock music that matched the erratic beat of her heart blasted from the speakers, making it impossible for anyone to hear her. They obeyed, anyway, compelled on a level they probably didn't understand.

A path cleared, slowly. . . so slowly. . .

Finally the object of her fascination came into view. Heated breath caught in her lungs, and she shivered. Lucien. Deliciously scarred, irresistibly stoic and possessed by the spirit of Death. Right now he sat at a table in back, expression blank as he stared up at Reyes, his friend and fellow immortal.

What were they saying? If Lucien wanted the keeper of Pain to procure one of those mortal women for him, a false declaration of fire would be the least of their worries. Teeth grinding together, Anya tilted her head to the side, zoned in on them while discarding all other surrounding noise, and listened.

" – she was right. I checked the satellite photos on Torin's computer. Those temples *are* rising from the sea." Reyes knocked back the contents of the silver flask he held. "One is in Greece and one is in Rome, and if they continue to rise at such a swift rate, they'll be high enough to explore sometime tomorrow."

"Why do humans not know about them?" Lucien scrubbed his jaw with two strong fingers, a habit of his. "Paris has watched the news stations and there has been nothing. Not even speculation."

Silly boy, she thought, relieved sex was not the night's topic. *You know about them only because I wanted you to know*. No one else would -- or could -- see them. She had made sure of that with a sweet little thing called chaos, her strongest source of power, hiding the temples with storms to keep humans away, while at the same time feeding the Lords enough information to draw them the hell out of Buda.

She wanted Lucien out of Buda and off his game. Just for a little while. A disconcerted man was easier to control.

Reyes sighed. "Perhaps the new gods are responsible. Most days I am sure they hate us and long to destroy us, simply for being half demon."

Lucien's expression remained blank. "Does not matter who is responsible. We will travel in the morning as planned. My hands itch to search one of those temples."

Reyes tossed the now-empty flask onto the table. His fingers curled around the top of one of the chairs, his knuckles slowly bleaching of color. "If we're lucky, we'll find that damned box while we're there."

Anya ran her tongue over her teeth. Damned box, AKA dimOuniak, AKA Pandora's box. Constructed from the bones of the goddess of Oppression, the box was powerful enough to contain demons so vile even hell had been unable to hold them. It was also powerful enough to suck those same demons out of the Lords, their once unwilling hosts. Now the wonderfully aggressive warriors were dependant on the beasts for their survival and needless to say, they wanted the box for themselves.

Again, Lucien nodded. "Do not think about that now; there'll be time enough for that tomorrow. Go and enjoy the rest of your evening. Do not waste another moment in my boring presence."

Boring? Ha! Anya had never met anyone who excited her more.

Reyes hesitated before ambling off, leaving Lucien alone. None of the human women approached him. Looked at him, yes. Cringed when they saw his scars, sure. But none of them wanted anything to do with him -- and that saved their lives.

He's taken, bitches.

"Notice me," Anya commanded softly.

A moment passed. He didn't obey.

Several humans glanced in her direction, heeding her demand, but Lucien's gaze latched onto the empty flask in front of him and remained, becoming a wee bit wistful. Much to her consternation, immortals were immune to her commands. A *courtesy* of the gods.

"Bastards," she muttered. Any restrictions they could place on her, they did. "Anything to screw with lowly Anarchy."

She had not been favored during her days on Mount Olympus. The goddesses had never liked her because they assumed she was a replica of her "whore of a mother" and would jump their husbands. Likewise, the gods had never respected her, again because of her mother. The guys had wanted her, though. Well, until she'd killed their precious Captain of the Guard, and they'd deemed her too feral.

Idiots. The captain had deserved what she'd done to him. Hell, he'd deserved worse. The little shit had tried to rape her. If he had left her alone, she would have left *him* alone. But *noooo*. She didn't regret cutting the black heart out of his chest, didn't regret placing said heart on a pike in front of Aphrodite's temple. Not even a tiny bit. Freedom of choice was precious, and anyone who tried to take hers away would feel the sting of her daggers.

Choice. The word rang inside her mind, bringing her back to the present. What the hell would it take to convince Lucien to choose her?

"Notice me, Lucien. Please."

Once again, he ignored her.

She stomped her foot. For weeks she'd cloaked herself in invisibility, following Lucien, watching, studying. And yes, lusting. He'd had no idea she lurked nearby, even as she willed him to do all sorts of naughty things: strip, pleasure himself. . . smile. Okay, so the last wasn't naughty. But she'd wanted to see his beautifully flawed face light in humor just as much as she'd wanted to see his naked body glisten with arousal.

Had he granted even that benign request, though? No!

A part of her wished she'd never seen him, that she hadn't allowed Cronus, the new king of the gods, to intrigue her with stories about the Lords a few months ago. *Maybe I'm the idiot.*

Cronus had just escaped Tartarus, a prison for immortals and a place she knew intimately. He'd imprisoned Zeus and his cohorts there, as well as Anya's parents. When Anya returned to save them, Cronus had been waiting for her. He had demanded Anya's greatest treasure. She'd declined – duh -- so he'd tried to scare her.

Give me what I want or I'll send the Lords of the Underworld after you. They are demon-possessed, as blood hungry as starving animals, and they will not hesitate to peel the lovely flesh from your bones. Blah, blah, blah. Whatever.

Far from frightening her, his words had caused excitement to bloom. She'd ended up seeking the warriors out on her own. She'd thought to defeat them and laugh in Cronus's face, a sort of look-what-I-did-to-your-big-scary-demons kind of thing.

One glance at Lucien, though, and she'd become instantly obsessed. She'd forgotten her reasons for being there and had even *aided* the supposedly malevolent warriors.

It was just that contradictions tantalized her, and Lucien had so very many. He was scarred but not broken, kind but unbending. He was a calm, by-the-book immortal, not blood hungry as Cronus had claimed. He was possessed by an evil spirit yet he never deviated from his own personal code of honor. He dealt with death every day, every night, yet he fought to live.

Fascinating.

As if that wasn't enough to prick her interest, his flowery fragrance filled her with decadent, wicked thoughts every time she neared him. Why? Any other man who smelled like roses would have made her laugh. With Lucien, her mouth watered for a taste of him and her skin prickled with white-hot awareness, desperate for his touch.

Even now, simply looking at him and imagining that scent wafting to her nose, she had to rub her arms to rid herself of goosebumps. But then she thought about him rubbing her, and the delicious shivers refused to go away.

Gods, he was sexy. He had the freakiest eyes she'd ever seen. One was blue, the other brown, and both swirled with the essence of man and demon. And his scars. . . All she could think of, dream about, *crave* was licking them. They were beautiful, a testament to all the pain and suffering he'd survived.

"Hey, gorgeous. Dance with me," one of the warriors suddenly said at her side.

Paris, she realized, recognizing the promise of sensuality in his voice. He must have finished screwing that human against the wall and was now looking for another bimbo to sate himself on. He'd just have to keep looking. "Go away."

Unaffected by her lack of interest, he grabbed her waist. "You'll like it, I swear."

She brushed him aside with a flick of her wrist. Possessed by Promiscuity, Paris was blessed with pale, almost glittery skin, electric blue eyes, and a face the angels probably sang Hallelujahs over, but he wasn't Lucien and he did nothing for her.

"Keep your hands to yourself," she muttered, "before I cut them off."

He laughed as if she were joking, unaware she'd do that and more. She might deal in petty disorder, but she never uttered a threat she didn't plan to see through. To do so smacked of weakness, and Anya had vowed long ago never to show a single hint of weakness.

Her enemies would love nothing more than to exploit it.

Thankfully Paris didn't reach for her again. "For a kiss," he said huskily, "I'll let you do anything you want to my hands."

"In that case, I'll cut off your cock, too." She didn't like having her ogling interrupted, especially since she rarely had time to indulge. Nowadays, she spent most of her waking hours dodging Cronus. "How's that?"

Paris's laughter intensified and managed to snag Lucien's attention. Lucien's gaze lifted, first landing on Paris, then locking on Anya. Her knees almost buckled. Oh, sweet heaven. Paris was forgotten as she fought to breathe. Did she imagine the fire that suddenly sparked in Lucien's mismatched eyes? Did she imagine the way his nostrils flared in awareness?

Now or never. Licking her lips, never removing her gaze from him, she eased into a sensual bump and grind and made her way toward his table. Halfway, she stopped and motioned for him to join her with a crook of her finger. He stood in front of her a moment later, as if he'd been pulled by an invisible chain, unable to resist.

Up close, he was six feet six of muscle and danger. Pure temptation.

Her lips edged into a slow smile. "We meet at last, Flowers."

Anya didn't give him time to respond. She ground her left hipbone against the hard juncture between his legs, turning erotically and presenting him with a view of her back. Her ice-blue corset was held together by nothing more than thin ribbons and a wish, and she knew her skirt hung so low on her waist that it failed to cover the bands of her thong. Oopsie.

Men, mortal or otherwise, usually melted when they caught a glimpse of something they shouldn't.

Lucien hissed in a breath.

Her smile widened. Ah, sweet progress.

Her unhurried movements were completely at odds with the fast-pounding rock, but she never ceased the slow gyrations of her body as she raised her hands over her head then leisurely ran them through the thick mass of her snow-white hair, down her arms, stroking her own skin but imagining his hands instead. Her nipples hardened.

"Why did you summon me, woman?" His voice was low, yet as disciplined as the warrior himself.

Listening to him speak was more arousing than being touched by another man, and her stomach clenched. "I wanted to dance with you," she said over her shoulder. Bump, bump, sllloooov grind. "Is that a crime?"

He didn't hesitate with his answer. "Yes."

"Good. I've always enjoyed breaking the law."

A confused pause. Then, "How much did Paris pay you to do this?"

"I get paid? Oh, goodie!" Stepping back, grinning, she brushed her ass against him, arching and swinging as sensually as she was able. Hello, erection. The heat of him nearly liquefied her bones. "What's the currency? Orgasms?"

In her dreams, he always grabbed her and meshed the hard length of his cock into her at this point. In reality, he jumped backward as if she were a bomb about to detonate, creating more hated distance between them.

A sense of loss immediately blanketed her.

"No touching," he said. He'd probably done his best to sound calm, but he had sounded on edge. Strained. More tense than arousing.

Her eyes narrowed. All around, people watched their interaction and his rejection of her. *This isn't primetime*, she projected at them with a scowl. *Turn the fuck around.*

One by one, the humans obeyed. However, the rest of the Lords closed in on her, staring intently, no doubt curious as to who she was and what she was doing here.

They had to be careful, and she understood that. They were still pursued by Hunters, humans who foolishly believed they could create a Utopia of peace and harmony by ridding the world of the Lords and the demons they carried inside them.

Ignore them. You're running out of time, chica. She returned her attention to Lucien by twisting her head to face him without actually turning all the way around. "Where were we?" she asked huskily. She ran a fingertip over the top band of her thong, not stopping until she drew the hot focus of his gaze to the glittery angel wings in the center.

"I was just about to walk away," he choked out.

At his words, her nails elongated into little claws. He still thought to deny her? Seriously?

She'd shown herself to him, even knowing the gods would be able to pinpoint her exact location -- something it was best to avoid since they planned to snuff her out like a mangy animal. She would *not* leave this club without a reward.

Determination intensifying, she swung around with another roll of her hips, the length of her pale hair caressing his chest. As she nibbled on her bottom lip, she plumped her breasts. "But I don't want you to leave," she said with a practiced pout.

He backed up another step.

"What's wrong, sweetness?" Merciless, she moved forward. "Afraid of a little girl?"

His lips thinned, but he didn't reply. Thankfully, he didn't move farther away, either.

"Are you?"

"You have no idea at what game you play, woman."

"Oh, but I think I do." Her gaze swept over him, and she stilled in renewed amazement. He was utterly magnificent. Rainbow-colored strobe lights rained down his face and body, a body so finely sculpted it could have been chiseled from stone. He wore a black tee and stone-washed jeans, and both hugged rope after rope of hand-over-your-panties muscle. *Mine*.

"I said no touching," he barked.

Her gaze snapped back to his and she held up her hands, palms out. "I'm not touching you, sweet cakes." *But I want to. . . I plan to. . . I will.*

"Your gaze suggests otherwise," he said tightly.

"That's because -- "

"I'll dance with you," another warrior said, cutting her off. Paris again.

"No." Anya didn't switch her attention. She wanted Lucien and only Lucien. No one else would do.

"Could be Bait," a different Lord piped in, probably eyeing her with suspicion. She recognized the deep timbre of his voice. Sabin, keeper of Doubt.

Please. Bait? As if she would try and lure anyone anywhere for reasons that weren't completely selfish. Bait, stupid girls that they were, were all about self-sacrifice; their job was to seduce a Lord to distraction so Hunters could sneak in and slay him. And really, what kind of moron wanted to kill the Lords rather than make out with them a little?

"I doubt Hunters were able to assemble so quickly after the plague," Reyes said.

Oh, yes. The plague. One of the Lords was possessed by the demon of Disease. If he touched any mortal skin to skin, he infected that person with a terrible sickness that spread and killed with amazing swiftness.

Knowing this, Torin always wore gloves and rarely left the fortress, willingly keeping to himself to protect humans from his curse. Not his fault a group of Hunters had sneaked inside the fortress a few weeks ago and cut his throat.

Torin had survived, the Hunters had not.

Unfortunately, there were many, many more Hunters out there. Seriously, they were like flies. Swat one away, and two more soon took its place. Even now they were out there somewhere, waiting for a chance to strike. The Lords had to remain cautious.

"Besides, there's no way they could have figured out a way to bypass our security," Reyes added, his harsh voice drawing Anya from her thoughts.

"Just like there's no way they could get into our fortress and nearly behead Torin?" Sabin replied.

"Damn this! Paris, stay here and watch her while I check the perimeter. Sabin, come with me." Footsteps, muttered curses.

Well, shit. If the warriors found any trace of Hunters out there, there'd be no convincing them of her innocence. Of that crime, at least. Lucien would never trust her, never relax around her. Never touch her except in anger.

She didn't allow her trepidation to play over her face. "Maybe I saw the crowd and snuck in," she told Paris and an approaching Lord, adding tightly, "And maybe the big guy and I can go the next few minutes without an interruption. In private."

They might have gotten the hint, but they didn't leave.

Fine. She'd work around them.

As she began to once again rock softly to the beat, she kept her gaze on Lucien and caressed her fingers down the planes of her stomach. *Replace my hands with yours*, she projected.

Of course, he didn't. But his nostrils did that delicious flare as his eyes followed every movement of her palms. He swallowed.

"Dance with me." This time, she said the words aloud, hoping he would not so easily ignore her. She licked her lips, moistening them.

"No." Hoarse, barely audible.

"Pretty please with a cherry on top of me."

His eyes flickered with fiery provocation. Not her imagination, she realized. Hope flooded her. But when several seconds ticked by and he failed to reach out for her, that hope turned to frustration. Time really was her enemy. The longer she stayed here, the greater her chance of being caught.

"Do you not find me desirable, Flowers?"

A muscle ticked below his eye. "That is not my name."

"Fine, then. Do you not find me desirable, Muffin?"

The ticking spread to his jaw. "What I find you matters little."

"That doesn't really answer my question," she said, close to pouting again.

"Nor was it meant to."

Grrr! What an infuriating man. *Try something else. Something blatant.*

As if I haven't been blatant already.

Alrightie, then. She turned and bent down to the floor. Her skirt rode up her thighs and gave him another, better, glimpse of her blue thong and the wings stretching from the center. As she pushed to a stand, mimicking the motions of sex as she did so, she slowly circled, offering a lingering full-body shot.

He sucked in a breath, every muscle in his powerful body tense. "You smell like strawberries and cream." As he spoke, he looked like a predator about to pounce.

Please, please, please, she thought. "Bet I taste like it, too."