

Excerpt: The Darkest Night

Chapter Three

Get home, get home, get home. Maddox chanted the command in his mind, trying to distract himself from the pain. Trying to dampen the urge to do violence. . . an urge that was building steadily. The woman – Ashlyn – bounced on his shoulder, an unwelcome reminder that he could break at any moment and slaughter everything around him. Her, especially.

You wanted to drown in a woman, his demon taunted. *Here's your chance to drown in her blood.*

His hands curled into fists. He needed to think, but couldn't do so with the pain. She had mentioned a power, asked for his help. Hadn't she? Some of what she had said was lost amidst the roar in his head. All he knew for certain was that he should have left her behind as he'd intended.

But he had heard her cry out, a tortured sound, the sort of crazed groan Maddox himself had often wanted to release. Something inside him had reacted deeply, and he'd been filled with a need to help her, a need to touch her soft skin just one more time. A need that had somehow proven stronger than Violence. An amazing, unbelievable feat.

And so he'd returned to her, even though he'd known she was in more danger with him than she was alone in the forest. Even though he'd known she had most likely been sent to distract him and help Hunters gain access to the fortress. *Fool.* Now she was draped over him, her feminine scent teasing his nose, her soft curves his to explore.

Or slice, the demon goaded.

Hauntingly beautiful as she was, it was easy to understand why Hunters had sent her. Who would want to mar such lush femininity? Who would turn such blatant sensuality away? Not him, it seemed.

Fool, he inwardly cursed again. Hunters! They truly were in Budapest, their tattoos a grim reminder of those dark, dark days in Greece. Clearly they were once more out for blood, for each of the four men following Ashlyn had carried a gun and silencer. For mortals, they had fought with expert skill.

Maddox had emerged the victor in that bloody tête à tête, but he had not emerged unscathed. His lower leg had been sliced, and one of his ribs was surely cracked.

Time, it seemed, had only honed their skills.

He wondered how Ashlyn would react when she found out they were gone. Would she cry? Scream? Rail? Would she attack him in a grief-stricken rage?

Did any others wait in town?

At the moment, he couldn't seem to make himself care. Holding Ashlyn in his arms, he was transported, the hell that was his life momentarily receding, leaving only. . . something he didn't think he could rightly name. Desire, perhaps. No. He discarded the word instantly. It failed to explain the intensity of the rush, the heat.

Instant obsession, maybe.

Whatever it was, he didn't like it. It was more powerful than anything he'd experienced before, threatening to control him. Maddox absolutely did not need another force vying to pull his strings.

She was just so. . . lovely. So lovely it almost hurt to gaze upon her. Her skin was smooth and supple, like cinnamon dipped in a honey pot then churned into lickable cream. Her eyes were that same honey shade and so haunted they made his chest hurt. He'd never seen a mortal look so tormented, and felt a strange kinship with her.

While strands of long, silky hair, also the color of honey yet veined with copper and quartz, had wisped around her delicate features, he'd ached. He'd wanted. Wanted to touch, to taste. Wanted to devour. Consume. But he hadn't wanted to hurt. The knowledge still amazed him.

Ashlyn. . . Her name whispered through his mind, as delicate as the woman herself. Taking her to the fortress was against the rules, a threat to their most guarded secrets. He should be ashamed of himself for carrying her forward rather than away, and she should be crying in terror.

Apparently 'should' did not mean anything to either of them.

Why wasn't she crying? More importantly, *why hadn't* she cried? When he'd first pounced on her, clearly splattered with the blood of her allies, a delicious smile had lit her face, her plump lips showcasing perfect white teeth.

Remembering that smile, Maddox experienced a jolt of blistering arousal. Underneath it, however, confusion still lingered. Though it had been an eternity since he'd last dealt with Bait, he could not recall the Hunter's decoys ever being so transparent in their satisfaction.

Not even Hadiee, the Bait who had helped bring Baden, keeper of Distrust, to his knees. Hadiee had played the abused, frightened soul to perfection. Seeing her, Baden had decided to act without suspicion for the first time since his demon had been placed inside him. Or maybe not. Maddox had always wondered if the man had *wanted* to die. If so, he'd gotten his wish. He'd been stabbed in the throat moments after opening his *spiti* to Hadiee -- who in turn allowed armed Hunters inside.

Most likely, the stabbing alone might have killed Baden, but there'd been a chance for recovery. The Hunters, however, then proceeded to decapitate him. Baden hadn't stood a chance. Not even an immortal could recuperate from that.

He'd been a good man, a fine warrior, and hadn't deserved such a bloody demise. Maddox, however . . .

My murder would be justified.

The Bait before Hadiee had seduced Paris. Not that such a thing required much effort. During the act, Hunters had crept inside the woman's bedroom and stabbed the warrior in the back, attempting to weaken him before going for his head.

Paris, though, was strengthened by sex. Even injured, he'd managed to fight his way free and kill everyone around him.

Maddox couldn't imagine the woman in his arms being cowardly enough to strike from behind. She had faced him and hadn't backed down, even when the spirit inside of him clamored for release. Perhaps Ashlyn was innocent. He hadn't found cameras or dynamite on the trees where she'd lingered. Perhaps --

"Perhaps you are more a fool than you realize," he muttered.

"What?"

He ignored her, knowing it was safer that way. Her voice was soft and lilting and prodded at the spirit, mocking in its gentleness. Best to keep her silent.

Finally he spotted the dark, crumbling stone of the fortress. None too soon. An excruciating pain ripped through his stomach, almost knocking him to the ground. Violence poured through his veins and shimmered in his blood. *Kill. Hurt. Maim.*

"No."

Kill, hurt, maim.

"No!"

Killhurtmaim.

"Maddox?"

The spirit roared, desperate, so desperate for release. *Fight it*, he commanded himself. *Remain calm.* He drew air into his lungs, held it, slowly released it. *Killhurtmaim, killhurtmaim.* "I will resist. I am not a monster."

We shall see. . .

His nails elongated, itching with that inexorable urge to strike. If he didn't compose himself, he would soon assault anything and everything within his reach. He would kill, without mercy, without hesitation. He would destroy this home stone by stone, kicking and clawing. Raging. He would destroy everyone inside of it. And he would rather burn in hell for all eternity than do such a thing.

"Maddox?" Ashlyn said again. Her sweet voice drifted to his ears, an entreaty that was part soothing balm, part kindling. "What's – "

"Silence." He skimmed her off his shoulder, still holding her tight, and burst through the front door, nearly ripping the wood from its hinges. Angry voices greeted him. Torin, Lucien, and Reyes stood in the foyer, arguing.

"You never should have let him leave," Lucien said. "He becomes an animal, Torin, annihilating – "

"Stop!" Maddox shouted. "Help!"

All three men spun, facing him.

"What's going on?" Reyes demanded. Seeing Ashlyn, he gaped. Shock settled over his features. "Why are you bringing a woman into the house?"

Hearing the commotion, Paris and Aeron raced into the foyer, features taut. When they spotted Maddox, they relaxed. "Finally," Paris said, clearly relieved. But he, too, spotted Ashlyn. He grinned. "Sweet! A present? For me?"

Maddox bared his teeth. *Kill them*, Violence beseeched, a seductive whisper now. *Kill them all*.

"You shouldn't be here." The words ripped from his throat. "Take her and leave. Before it's too late."

"Look at him," Paris said, his relief and amusement gone. "Look at his face."

"The process has already begun," Lucien said.

The words spurred Maddox to action. Though he found he didn't want to release Ashlyn, even in his madness, he tossed her at the group. Lucien caught her effortlessly. The moment her weight settled on her feet, she winced. Must have twisted her ankle on the hill, Maddox realized, concern slipping past bloodlust for a split second.

"Careful of her foot," he commanded.

Lucien released her to look at her ankle, but Ashlyn scrambled away from him and limped her way back into Maddox's arms. His concern intensified as his arms wound around her. She was trembling. But, a moment later, he stopped caring. A pestilent haze fell over his mind, brutality obliterating every emotion in its path.

"Release me," he growled, pushing her.

The woman clung to him. "What's wrong?"

Lucien grabbed her, jerking her backward and locking her in an iron grip. Had she touched Maddox a second longer, he might have clawed her to pieces. As it was, he slammed his hands into the nearest wall.

"Maddox," she said on a tremulous breath.

"Do not hurt her." The words were for himself as much as the others. "You," he grated, pointing to Reyes with a crimson stained finger. "Bedroom. Now." He didn't wait for a response, but pounded up the stairs.

He heard Ashlyn fight for freedom and call, "But I want to stay with you."

He bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. He allowed himself a single glance over his shoulder.

When Lucien further tightened his hold on the struggling Ashlyn, his dark hair brushing her shoulders, Maddox's need for bloodshed strengthened. He almost changed paths, almost sprinted back into the foyer to hack his friend to pieces. *Mine*, his mind shouted. *Mine. I found her. No one but me should be allowed to touch her.*

Maddox wasn't sure whether it was the spirit or himself who thought such a thing, and he didn't care. He just wanted to kill. Yes, kill. Fury, such fury, exploded through him. He *did* stop. Did change direction. He was going to slice Lucien in half and coat the floor with his friend's blood. *Destroy, destroy, destroy. Kill.*

"He's going to attack." Lucien.

"Get her out of here!" Torin.

Lucien dragged Ashlyn from the room. Her panicked cries echoed in Maddox's ears, which only managed to increase his darkest needs. The image of her pale, lovely face flashed in his mind and took hold, becoming the only thing he saw. She was terrified. Trusted him, wanted him. Her arms had reached for him.

His stomach was a stinging mass of pulsing agony, but he didn't slow his steps. Any minute, midnight would arrive and he would die – but he was taking everyone here with him. *Yes, they must be destroyed.*

"Ah, hell," Aeron muttered. "The demon has taken over completely. We'll have to subdue him. Lucien, get back in here. Hurry!"

Aeron, Reyes and Paris advanced. With the speed of a single breath, Maddox unsheathed his daggers and launched them. Expecting the attack, all three men ducked and the silver blades soared over them, embedding in the wall. Two seconds later, the men were on top of him and he was lying flat on his back. Fists jabbed into his face, his stomach, his groin. He fought. Roaring, growling, punching.

Knuckles slammed into his jaw, dislocating the bone. A knee jammed into the sensitive flesh between his legs. Still he fought. And as the battle raged, the warriors managed to drag him up the steps and into his bedroom. Maddox thought he heard Ashlyn sobbing, thought he saw her trying to tear the men away from him. He jabbed his fist forward and hit something – a nose. Heard a howl. Experienced satisfaction. Wanted more blood.

"Damn it! Chain him, Reyes, before he breaks somebody else's fucking nose."

"He's too strong. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold him."

Minutes passed as he fought, maybe an eternity, then cold metal locked around his wrists, his ankles. Maddox bucked and arched, the links cutting into his flesh. "Bastards!" The pain in his stomach was unbearable now, no longer sporadic but constant. "I'll kill you. I'll take every one of you to hell with me."

Reyes stood over him, a dark glaze of determination and regret blanketing his tanned features. Maddox tried to knock him down by raising his knees and kicking, but the chains held. The warrior, too, held steady, withdrawing a long, menacing sword from his side.

"I'm sorry," Reyes rasped as a clock chimed the hour. He stabbed Maddox in the stomach.

The metal sliced all the way to his spine before leaving his body. Instantly blood poured from the wound, wetting his chest and stomach. Bile burned his throat, his nose. He cursed; he bucked.

Reyes stabbed him again. And again.

The pain. . . the agony. . . His skin felt scorched. With only those three slices, his bones and organs were already shredded, each tear a point of anguish. Still he fought; still he felt a desperate urge to kill.

A woman screamed. "Stop! You're killing him!"

When her voice pierced Maddox's consciousness, his struggles became all the more wild. Ashlyn. His woman from the forest. *His*. Get to her, had to get to her. Had to kill her – no! Had to save her. Kill. . . save...the two needs battled for supremacy. He jerked at his chains. The metal shackles dug deeper into his wrists and ankles, but he reared up and kicked. The bed shook with the force of his movements, and both the headboard and footboard bent forward with a whine.

"Why are you doing this?" Ashlyn shouted. "Stop! Don't hurt him. Ohmygod, stop!"

Reyes stabbed him again.

Black cobwebs wove over his vision as he searched the room. Paris, he saw dimly, was striding toward Ashlyn. Reached her, wrapped his arms around her. She was dwarfed by the larger man, enfolded in his shadow. Tears glistened in those amber eyes and on her too-pale cheeks.

She fought, but Paris held firm and dragged her from the room.

Maddox uttered an animalistic roar. Paris would seduce her. Strip her and taste her. She would not be able to resist; no woman could. "Let her go! Now!" He strained so fervently for freedom, a vessel burst in his forehead. His vision blackened completely.

"Get her out of here and keep her out." Reyes stabbed Maddox once more, the fifth blow. "She's making him more crazed than usual."

Had to save her. Had to get to her. The sound of rattling chains blended with his panting as he struggled all the more.

"I'm sorry," Reyes whispered again.

Finally, the sixth blow was delivered.

That's when all of Maddox's strength seeped from him. The spirit quieted, retreating to the back of his consciousness.

Done. It was done.

He lay on the bed, drenched in his own blood, unable to move or see. The pain didn't leave him, nor did the burning. No, they intensified, more a part of him than his own skin. Warm liquid gurgled in his throat.

Lucien – he knew it was Lucien for he recognized the deceptively sweet scent of Death -- knelt beside him and clasped his hand. That meant his demise was close, so torturously close.

But for Maddox, the true torment had yet to begin.

As part of his death-curse, he and Violence would spend the rest of the night burning in the pits of hell. No lush, tranquil hallows of Hades for them. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a cough emerged. More and more blood was rushing into his throat, choking him.

"In the morning, you'll have a lot of explaining to do, my friend," Lucien said, adding gently, "Die now. I'll take your soul to hell, as required, but this time you might actually want to remain there, eh, rather than deal with the trouble you've brought into our home."

"G – girl," Maddox finally managed to say.

"Don't worry," Lucien said. Whatever questions he had, he kept to himself. "We won't hurt her. She'll be yours to deal with in the morning."

"Untouched." The request was odd, Maddox knew, because none of them had ever been possessive of a woman. Ashlyn, though. . . He wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do with her. He knew what he should do – and what he couldn't. Both mattered little just then. Because, more than anything, he knew that he didn't want to share.

"Untouched," he insisted weakly when Lucien said nothing.

"Untouched," Lucien agreed at last.

The scent of flowers intensified. A heartbeat of time passed, and then Maddox died.