

Beautiful Death

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CHAPTER ONE

“Damn, Thanatos, who pissed you off this time?”

“No one,” Isabella Thanatos replied as her second-in-command fell into step beside her. No matter the hour, the skyways were usually packed with busy citizens heading to MedCorp offices or one of the exclusive shops that crowned Athens the diamond of New Olympia. Today, the pathways circumnavigating their City were deserted. “Oracle simply ordered me to an audience with the Pantheon Council before reporting for duty.”

“And yesterday was simply a parade, right?” Herakles laughed, a grim, hard sound that sent Isabella’s hand sliding down to grip the gun on her hip. “Our perfect City still simmers with rage at such injustice.”

All citizens had selected new names when they were accepted into New Olympia, and it hadn’t surprised her when he’d chosen Herakles. He was the biggest human she’d ever seen. Unfortunately, he also had an equally big mouth. “Our citizens would follow Beautiful Death all the way to Olympus.”

Isabella shot him a dark look. “You’re talking about treason. I ought to terminate you.”

“But you won’t.” Grinning, Herakles shook his head. “I’m talking about justice and you know it.”

They paused at the entrance to Omonia Square, the most famous shopping mall in all of New Olympia. Nearly deserted, only a few people huddled in the corner shadows after yesterday's riots. Demanding the immediate dissolution of the Pantheon Council, the rioters had tried to throw the Councilors outside Athens to face the rampant pandemic.

She'd stopped them, despite the dread banding her chest in agreement with the angry Citizens.

"Listen to them," Herakles whispered, motioning his head at the patrons in the corner.

At the sight of the two black-clad Marshals striding through the empty café tables and abandoned benches, they chanted, low and fierce. "Beautiful Death. Beautiful Death. Beautiful Death."

"Shit," Isabella muttered. Responsibility weighed on her shoulders as heavily as the soaring biodome on the City's massive cement pilings. Her throat tightened, her jaw clenching. *I must keep them safe, even from themselves.*

"I'll never forget how they celebrated when you decked Councilor Perikles," Herakles said so cheerfully she ground her teeth. "It was a thing of beauty."

"I never touched him."

Against the stark ebony of his face, Herakles' ear-to-ear smile damned near blinded her. "One glare from the infamous Marshal and he fainted dead away. A very, very large sum of money must have been involved to put such a bunch of worthless morons in control of New Olympia. They couldn't find their asses with both hands."

"The only reason I requested an audience with the Pantheon Council yesterday was to stop the riots."

"Requested?" Herakles guffawed, slapping his right thigh. "You charged inside the Parthenon with a fully-charged stunner in one hand and a sword in the other. No wonder they agreed to vote again."

"They're the idiots who decided to open the Gates in the first place." Her stomach wrenched, clawed by dread and anger. Did they honestly expect her to kill innocents? "Why open our Cities and then kill anybody who steps inside? Especially when the biggest monster holds a chair on the Pantheon Council!"

"I know how much you love to hate Hades, but he's not that bad."

Jerking to a halt on the marble stairs to the Parthenon Building, Isabella turned and squared her shoulders. She gripped the butt of her gun so hard she was afraid it would crack. "Have you forgotten who brought the virus to Earth? Who started the pandemic?"

Standing at the base of the steps, Herakles slowly shook his head. He held his big hands up and out, well away from his own weapons. "I lost my parents and my baby brother to the virus. I haven't forgotten one damned thing. Nobody in New Olympia ever will."

Finger by finger, she unclenched her hand from the stunner. Herakles knew the cost of paradise as well as she, and he'd stood at her back countless times. But he hadn't survived the streets in the midst of starving, suffering, dying multitudes. He didn't know how the monsters feasted on the weak.

"Hades is responsible for thousands of deaths." Her voice sounded harsh to her own ears. "Millions. Yet he sits safe and sound on the Pantheon. He even calls himself Lord of the Underworld now, while he's the worst murderer in the history of our planet."

"And every time you see him, you end up trying to kill each other."

Clenching her jaw, Isabella fought to keep her hand off the gun. She took a deep breath, another, forcing her shoulders to relax. Her heart hammered in her

chest, though, and she could feel her palms grow clammy. Every instinct that had kept her alive for two long years on the streets urged her to draw the weapon and hunt down every single monster still alive, starting with their leader, the worst monster of all.

"I'm just trying to finish what he started."

"Yeah, well, if anyone can actually kill him, you certainly will." Herakles winked and turned back toward the skyways of Athens. "From what I hear, though, he's one tough bastard. After all, he's still alive with Beautiful Death gunning for him, what, five years, now?"

He paused, glancing back over his shoulder. The wicked glint in his eyes made Isabella groan. "By the way, I have a little bet with the First Marshal in Sparta. See if you can make Perikles do something worse than faint this time."

Shaking her head, she laughed. Leave it to Herakles to make a joke. Butterflies still swarmed in her stomach, but at least she could smile without her face shattering. "I'll see what I can do."

#

"Kill any monsters today, Marshal?"

Halting before the ornate table, Isabella attempted a casual, confident stance, which was damned difficult considering she gripped a sword hilt with one hand and a gun in the other beneath her ankle-length coat. "Not yet, Councilor. My duty interval just started."

Six chairs were occupied by the esteemed members of the Pantheon Council, leaving two chairs empty, including the position of honor at the head of the table. Founder of New Olympia and CEO of MedCorp, Zeus never actually made a personal appearance on the Pantheon. In fact, no one had seen him outside Olympus in years. Isabella swore to gleefully shoot him as soon as she caught sight of him.

Hades, too, was absent. The knots in her stomach loosened along with her grip on the weapons. Still, a twinge of disappointment fluttered through her stomach. She'd been looking forward to a good fight.

Already clammy and rather pale, Councilor Perikles cleared his throat loudly. "How many contaminants have you terminated for Athens?"

Isabella shrugged. "I lost count."

"Marshal Thanatos has successfully terminated nine hundred ninety seven contaminants." Oracle's annoyingly helpful masculine voice sounded both in her earpiece and from the large monitor on the wall.

Beaming, the Councilors nodded and murmured with approval, their gushing goodwill as fake as the idyllic view of sparkling ocean waters and blue skies on the screen.

"Your service to Athens and New Olympia as a whole has been exemplary, Marshal." Councilor Perikles' face scrunched sourly despite his praise. "Without you, the peace our Citizens enjoy would be lost to chaos like the rest of Earth."

Isabella's face tightened, her jaw aching. She forced her fingers to unclench from the stunner before she shot someone. He had no idea what life was like Outside. He'd never killed to protect someone he loved. He'd never watched his family suffer the ravages of the virus, or worse, watched them be dragged off by the aliens who'd released hell on Earth.

She ground her teeth and glared at the empty chair on the end. The aliens should all be exterminated for what they'd done.

"To thank you for your faithful service these past five years, the Pantheon is pleased to promote you to First Marshal of Athens."

Why did he glare at her like a beady-eyed gutter rat? He didn't even mention yesterday, when she'd threatened them at gunpoint until they'd agreed to vote again.

She hated politics. As long as MedCorp kept churning out the latest and best vaccinations, she'd keep the skyways of Athens clear of trash. Too bad she couldn't throw out the Pantheon as so much rubbish.

Councilor Perikles smoothed the front of his heavily embroidered robes with jeweled, well-manicured hands which had never picked up a weapon. The golden chain holding his Pantheon medallion of wreathed laurel leaves dug into his fat neck. "Aren't you going to thank us, Marshal? The extra compensation should be quite welcome if your taste for clothing is any indication."

His envious gaze trailed down her favorite *On Death's Wings* original outfit: black neowear slacks gleaming as brightly as her polished boots; exquisitely cut coat with wide flaring tails perfect for concealing weapons; and a brilliant indigo blouse that matched her eyes perfectly, trimmed in cascading ruffles at the neck and wrists. Her best friend owned the shop, and Icarus always managed to design practical clothes that looked good. Even the ruffles never got in the way of her gun.

A wry smile curved her lips. The Councilor would probably suffer an aneurism if he knew she got her clothes at cost. "What's my first order?"

Councilor Perikles looked down the table for assistance. Dressed in the unadorned white robes of Sparta, Councilor Helen answered in her usual brusque manner. "We have two orders, actually. There are rumors of a new monstrosity breeding near the Lost City of Argos. We suspect that Hera has continued unauthorized research."

Isabella's stomach clenched. The original virus mutated at an alarming rate all by itself, turning humans into ravenous beasts feeding on flesh and blood. Why would anybody tamper with such a thing?

"We authorize an expedition Outside to investigate these rumors. Any...creature...you encounter must be terminated on sight, of course."

Her hand hurt, and she realized she gripped her stunner again. She hadn't been Outside in five years. Even then, any sort of civilization and culture had already been abandoned in mankind's desperate attempts at survival. How bad would it be now? "And the second order?"

"Oracle has sighted a criminal inside Athens. You will proceed to the specified coordinates and terminate Sybil of Delphi at once."

Heat suddenly flared down her body, instant sweat dotting her skin. Two orders involving the Lost Cities exiled years ago? Something smelled bad and it wasn't a decomposing, virus-induced, shapeshifter. "Is Sybil contaminated?"

Councilor Perikles wouldn't meet her gaze. "Not exactly."

"Kill the monsters before they kill you. That's always been my motto." Isabella smiled but shook her head stiffly, her neck and shoulders straining with tension. "I never kill humans."

"Delphi was in full cooperation with Argos at the time of their exile. If Hera continued her research, Delphi must be assisting her. Sybil is a criminal and must be terminated at once! Monsters, they're breeding monsters!"

An appallingly bouncy ditty from Athens' tourism campaign played in Isabella's head. *We guarantee safety and purity for our Citizens' health and security!* "Look, we went over this yesterday. You're the ones who voted to open the Cities again, making us vulnerable to Hades only knows what sort of mutations left untreated all these years Outside. Delphi and Argos may be exiled as far as you're concerned, but if this woman's not contaminated, I won't kill her. I refuse to kill Outsiders just because they enter our City!"

Sweat oozed down the Councilor's face. A sharp, bitter stench emanated from him. "I want Athens and our Citizens protected at all cost. You must terminate Sybil of Delphi at once."

"Why her?"

Councilor Perikles stared down at the cold, smooth marble of the table, gripping the edge so hard his fingers turned white. Shoulders hunched, he forced the words out. "You know how instrumental both Hera and Apollo were in our initial vaccine trials, but you don't know the entire truth. No one knows outside the Pantheon Council. At first, they merely studied the monsters. Who cared if they experimented on them? They were going to die one way or another anyway. However, their Cities were exiled when they--"

His voice broke, trembling and breathy. His gaze darted up to hers, his eyes wild and dark with the fear of a trapped animal. "They began deliberately contaminating people, twisting innocents into monsters in the name of science."

A fist slammed into Isabella's abdomen, talons unsheathing to twist and shred her stomach. Her skin felt tight, prickling with heat and stinging with cold chills. Sheltering monsters was bad enough, but the thought of somebody experimenting on humans--deliberately infecting them with the virulent virus--made her want to commit murder.

Her pulse raced. Her chest ached until she finally hauled in a deep breath. She knew first hand what atrocities happened to specimens in a laboratory. She'd grown up as little more than a lab rat. The sharp bite of antiseptic, the cold metal of the table, the instruments: the stuff of nightmares that she'd never forget.

"Sybil is Apollo's research assistant. Who knows how many people suffered in Delphi's labs at her hands."

Isabella forced hoarse words through her tight throat. "Call the Erinyes down from Sparta. I'm sure--"

"Zeus recalled the Erinyes to Olympus," the Spartan interrupted. "Besides, we do not send our most elite executioners after a simple criminal."

No. You send me. Isabella tried to think of a valid excuse, but her head was stuffed with memories, whirling from nightmare to nightmare: her childhood, her

father, the virus, and the hard years of life on the streets. Constantly searching for food, she'd fought off the maddened humans transforming into monsters before her eyes, keeping hope alive that her father would eventually come for her as he promised. He'd never come, though, and her hope had died with her mother. She'd lost her sister to the aliens and had almost died herself.

Athens had saved her. She'd dedicated the rest of her life to protecting the City and the Citizens within. If she could prevent Hera--and now Sybil--from deliberately torturing people, maybe someday the dismal failure and killing rage she carried in her heart would ease.

The thought of killing a human--no matter how justified--made acid burn in her stomach. "All right."

They surrounded her, talking excitedly and patting her on the back. Even Councilor Perikles smiled, although the sour twist of his mouth betrayed him. Underneath their jovial praise, Isabella saw the truth.

They were afraid of her.

Within moments she found herself outside in the hall with the door slammed in her face. She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the cool marble wall. Her hands trembled and her stomach churned.

As if it were yesterday, she saw her sister slung over an alien's shoulder all those years ago. She'd never struggled, cried out for help, or tried to escape. A look had come over her face that would still send Isabella shooting up out of nightmares in a cold sweat if she slept for more than an hour or two. Her sister had surrendered to the inevitable. She'd given up.

"Never," Isabella whispered. "I will never surrender."

"Ah, but what a sweet surrender that would be."

Stiffening, she tried to whirl and draw the weapon, but it was too late. A hard male body pressed against her, pinning her to the wall. She knew that sinfully

low voice, smooth and dark and rich. An alluring scent filled her nose, whispering of a decadent, secret world far away.

This alien starred in her nightmares as often as her sister. Her heart pounded in her chest, pumping adrenaline through her veins. She was going to get that fight after all. "Hades."

He breathed in her ear, his long silvery hair caressing her face. "You thought to avoid me? How rude, First Marshal. I treasure each rare appearance you make to the Pantheon."

"They call you Lord of the Underworld, Master of Erebus and Ambassador of the few aliens who miraculously survived your kamikaze mission of destruction. They even gave you a seat on the Pantheon, however reluctantly. But I will never call you anything more than a murdering monster."

"They also call you Beautiful Death, my lovely Marshal. Have you killed any of my people today?"

Menacing power slid along her skin until she shivered. She hated the immediate thudding pulse of her blood at his touch. "Get off me and I'll terminate you now."

"I think not. No, I must take advantage of this rare moment of surprise."

"So you can feed on me again?" Throat tight, she bit off the words, refusing to allow her voice to tremble. He would pounce on any weakness. "So you can drain me dry? Is it my lifeforce you want to steal this time, or my blood?"

He shuddered against her. "Both. I can't get you out of my mind."

Silver radiance filled the hallway, sizzling through her clothes, through her mind, stroking deep inside her. His power touched where no hand could reach. Breathing shallow and fast, she fought to remain calm and control her body temperature. For his kind, scent was an aphrodisiac. She certainly didn't want him to know how much he affected her.

"Since I tasted you, I haven't fed on any other woman. I need you, Isabella."
What a liar. "You're a monster. A murderer!"

"I never murdered a single innocent. Look into my mind and know the truth for yourself."

She felt the subtle stirring in her mind, a tendril of alien thoughts uncurling in the innermost chambers of her brain. She slammed every mental door she had, locking him out forcefully. Her stomach clenched and dread boiled up in her throat. If he ever got a solid foothold in her mind, she might never be free of him.

Shifting between him and the wall, she drew the stunner out from beneath her coat. Calibrated to short out a contaminated human, it probably wouldn't do more than give him a little jolt, but she always felt better with a weapon in her hand.

"I understand your fear, and I assure you, I will not lose control again."

She slid the gun slid out of the holster. "I'm not afraid of you."

His mouth grazed her neck and her knees turned to water. He didn't hurt her, far from it. Heat coiled in her stomach, reluctant attraction stirring despite her loathing and fear, the memory of his ravenous power draining her dry. This damned desire terrified her more than facing a whole army of monsters without a single weapon in her hand.

"You've run from me so long, Isabella. When I do see you, you annoy me with threats and weapons. Let me show you how it could be between us. Feel me, now, instead of fighting me."

His aura rubbed against her, tasting of his scent and dark, seductive power. His hair slid across her shoulder, pooling between her bare neck and the wall. He didn't touch her with his hands. He didn't have to. His power seeped into her, spreading a heavy, liquid heat through her body.

For a moment, she let herself forget what he was, what the aliens had done

to her people, and how she'd nearly died at his hands years ago. Instead, she imagined his incredible silken hair trailing across every inch of her skin, his power sliding like velvet inside her, his lean, hard body beneath her...while his teeth sank into her neck and he sucked her down to the biggest surrender of all.

I must never forget that he's a monster.

Hades whispered low tonal words in his language against her ear. Bathed in his purring energy, she turned her head to give him better access. Murmuring appreciatively, he kissed her neck, sliding his mouth higher.

Fangs scraped her skin.

Gasping, she arched against him. Her heart tried to claw its way out of her chest, even while her blood heated, burning with a terrifying need. His tongue stroked over the minor sting, easing her fear, and his hands came up to draw her hips harder against him.

"Feel me, Bella. No fear this time, only pleasure."

She slammed her skull back into his face.

He grunted and eased back enough to let her turn around. She shoved the stunner's muzzle into his chest.

Even now, his beauty stole her breath. His angular cheekbones and high forehead gave his face an exotic triangular shape, balanced by full lips and stunningly large, tilted eyes sparkling with all the colors of a rainbow. Waist-length silver hair fell thick and luxurious about his shoulders. Taller than her by a foot, he was deceptively lean and graceful like a dancer, when she knew that his species carried enough juice to shatter the biodome protecting Athens. In the worst of the chaos, she'd seen an alien demolish a skyscraper, burying the rampaging humans in rubble to protect himself.

His delicate, alien features should have made him look feminine--or at least sent her running in the opposite direction--but the untamed power rolling off him

was wholly masculine and attractive. Her breath hitched in her throat and her body tightened, whether with desire or anticipation of all-out warfare, she refused to consider. "I said, get off me, Hades."

Carefully, he moved his jaw back and forth, testing for damage, but he didn't withdraw. He smiled. He enjoyed their occasional bloody squabbles as much as she did.

He stroked his fingers down the long column of his neck, drawing her attention to the scars framed by his high-collared shirt of glistening silver the same color as his hair. Those scars were hers, left by her pitiful human teeth and nails when he'd tried to feed on her, another brutal reminder of what he was capable of, and what she in turn was capable of when cornered.

Blood trickled down his chin. One of his fangs must have punctured his lip. "I'll have you one way or another."

"Never," she replied automatically. But she couldn't look away from the slow trail of red. She knew what his blood tasted like. Forbidden jungle fruit, ripened in the blazing summer sun, flavored with spicy flowers and wine to intoxicate her. The memory rolled on her tongue as fresh and real as five years ago. Had she really been fighting him so long?

His low, rumbling growl thrummed down her nerve endings to pool at the base of her spine. His rainbow eyes darkened, swirling with light and shadow both. This was not good. If his eyes went glistening black, she was in seriously deep trouble.

A sharp pain thrust through her stomach, startling a gasp from her lips. She actually glanced down to make sure he hadn't stabbed her. Her skin suddenly felt too tight, too hot, too confining. Something deep in her gut crawled and pitched uneasily, as if her organs were in the wrong position.

He leaned closer, and the scent of his blood made her mouth water. "You

will soon have need of me."

Her finger tightened on the trigger, even while she felt her face slacken at the thought. He was so close, so warm, so powerful, so damned tempting. Was that her tongue gliding across his chin, making him tremble? Did she actually make that pitifully weak sound of pleasure at the heady taste of his blood?

His lips pressed against hers, silken heat and strangely gentle. All the times she'd woken up shuddering with a weapon gripped in her hand from the latest nightmare, he'd never been gentle. Monstrous, yes; arrogant, always; powerful, manipulative, merciless, all apt descriptions for her nightmares of him, but never tender.

His fingers fluttered across her cheek to tangle in the tight coil of hair at the base of her neck. She braced for the crushing strength of his body, the commanding press of his hand on her nape, but he simply stroked her ever so lightly. A soft, aching sound of need from deep in his throat broke through her defenses.

Wrapping her free hand in his hair, she jerked him closer. The heat of his body, the taste of his mouth, she couldn't get enough. Hunger flooded her, roaring through her body. Every inch of her burned with need.

She wanted him frantic against her, power drowning her while he hammered into her hard and fast. As if he knew her thoughts, his scent spiced with musk. He smelled incredible, good enough to eat. She pushed her tongue into his mouth.

Fangs.

Wrenching her mouth aside, she laughed harshly. Foolish tears burned her eyes. She was so stupid to fall under his seductive spell for even a moment. One puncture, even accidental or innocent, would seal her death warrant. "I should have killed you when I had the chance."

He sighed and backed away reluctantly. His hair slid through her fingers, a

silken cascade that made her shudder. Despite every logical warning surging through her--*shoot him, shoot him now!*--she ached with longing. In fact, she ached so badly she couldn't muffle a groan of pain. She sagged against the wall and concentrated on not sliding to the floor. "What did you do to me?"

"I hoped to spare you this."

The regret in his voice sent her defenses screaming to full alert. She raised the weapon, struggling to hold her aim steady at his chest. "What did you do?"

"Come to me, Isabella."

Horror roiled in the pit of her stomach, that terrible shifting sensation of imbalance inside her own body. What was happening to her? She swiped a hand across her damp forehead and shivered. Her teeth chattered.

"I'm the only one who can help you."

"I'd sooner kill you first." Her threat would have sounded better if her teeth didn't punctuate each word with a jarring crash.

Hades turned and glided away with a boneless grace more animal than human. "You may wish yourself dead when next we meet."

Every time she saw him, he pushed a little harder. The raw lust between them worsened. Somehow he even made her feel pain this time. He weakened her, left her trembling against the wall, dizzy and breathless and sick, her weapon forgotten in her hand. Damn him. Stiffening her spine, she shoved the gun back into its holster.

Come to me.

Like hell she would, unless she carried enough firepower to blow him back to his planet for good.

CHAPTER TWO

Coiled tight with nerves, Isabella trailed the criminal through the circular skyways of Athens. She monitored the targeted human as carefully as any shapeshifter, senses alert, weapon charged, ready to intervene at any sign of danger. More Citizens were starting to brave the skyways, now, although the shops weren't nearly as busy as usual.

All the while, she steeled her determination and courage, something she'd never had to do before, even when facing the monster she hated above all others.

Killing a human couldn't be that different from terminating a contaminant. Killing monsters saved innocent lives. Anyone experimenting on other humans deserved to die, especially if they were trying to breed a new kind of monster. Unfortunately, these reasonable arguments justifying the execution didn't make killing a human any easier.

Isabella wiped her sweaty palms on her pants and wrapped her fingers back around the gun beneath her coat. At least she'd recovered from whatever Hades had done earlier. Next time, she'd shoot first, even if the Pantheon Council exiled her. She couldn't risk letting him get that close again. She pushed away the memory of his kiss, his scent, his blood, and concentrated on her target.

The human didn't appear dangerous: short, not much above five feet tall, although her shoulders were hunched. Her gaze darted from shop to shop, whether with awe or alarm, Isabella wasn't sure. The woman's fashion sense was certainly

deplorable, her clothing the brown of filth and muck of the streets Outside. If Isabella were to wear such an outfit, Icarus would faint in horror at the sight of loose baggy trousers and coat on his walking billboard.

She wished the criminal would do something...incriminating, like break into a store, threaten a Citizen, or better yet, collapse with the raging fever and convulsions of the virus. Instead, the woman stepped into a shop outside Dionysus Theater, one of the few shops that had opened today.

Isabella glanced at the display as she passed and took up position across from the Theater's side entrance: books. Oh, now that was incriminating.

Herakles marched up the skyway flanked by two of her subordinates. All three saluted smartly. Damn him, he even snapped his booted heels together.

"Marshal Herakles reporting for duty, First Marshal!"

Isabella rolled her eyes. "Shut up, Herakles."

He merely grinned.

"Take Jason and Atalanta down to the opposite end of the skyway," Isabella ordered. "I don't want this target getting into the residential tower or Omonia Square."

"Are you sure you don't need assistance down here? I don't think you'll be able to apprehend our monster in those clothes."

Always, he teased her about her clothes. The other two Marshals in her squad were just as bad. *Damn Icarus and his fascination with ridiculous sleeves!*

She let Herakles rile her, smiling stiffly, but her stomach was full of bile. So far, her squad didn't know the exact details of her orders. The longer she kept their target a secret, the better. "If you don't shut up, I'll slap you with my sleeves. Get out of here."

"Maybe if you flap them hard enough you'll fly."

Isabella resisted the urge to tug at the lacy indigo ruffles trailing out of the tighter sleeve of her neowear coat. As long as she could get to her gun, who cared? "Did you hear my orders, Marshal? Move out."

Herakles started to turn away but paused, scrutinizing her face. He jerked his head toward the end of the hall and sent the two younger Marshals off as ordered. When they were out of earshot, he asked quietly. "What're you not telling us?"

She gave him her best stone face. "Take your position as ordered."

"You're sending us out of this entirely. Why?"

"Are you questioning orders, Marshal?"

"Yours? Never. The Pantheon's? Hell, yeah. What're your orders?"

A cold, grim knot of dread blocked her throat. "I'm terminating Sybil of Delphi."

"A human." Voice flat and cold, he waited for her reluctant nod.

"Contaminated?"

Refusing to meet his gaze, she shook her head.

"What happened to the Beautiful Death who threatened to feed Perikles bit by delicate bit to the monsters Outside when he gave you an order you disagreed with? You can't do this!"

"I have reason to agree with the order." Isabella took a step forward, standing toe to toe with the big man. She let the familiar merciless death fill her, the death that ended nearly one thousand lives in the name of justice and safety for thousands of Athenians. "Don't make me bust your balls over this."

Herakles met her gaze, but it cost him dearly. His jaw ticked and his black skin glistened with sweat. "You really are going to kill a human simply because the Pantheon orders it."

She nodded, once, never breaking eye contact.

"Shit. I hate politics. Why?"

"My sentiments exactly." Relaxing a tiny fraction, she tried to smile but her face felt frozen and stiff. "Sybil works in a lab with Apollo of Delphi." A shudder roared through her, and she blocked the horrible memories threatening to shriek to life in the darkest corners of her mind. "They experiment on innocent people, turning them into monsters. I have to stop it."

"At least let me back you up."

"Not this time. I want you and the others as far away from this as possible."

"Hell, Thanatos, all you have to do is take a stand. We're all behind you, every Marshal in this City. We'd follow you to the Underworld."

Her eyes burned. Turning away to hide her furious blinking, she stared at the antiquities shop. "The termination orders are mine. I'll do it alone. Get out of here."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Herakles reach a hand toward her shoulder, hover a moment without touching her, and then turn away. "If we're terminating uncontaminated humans, then who're the monsters?"

She couldn't answer, just as he intended.

Citizens took one look at her grim face and bypassed this branch of the skyway. A few shopkeepers who'd braved the possibility of repeated violence after yesterday's riots now shut down their stores. In moments, the usually busy shopping area was deserted.

The criminal came out of the shop and hesitated, shocked to find the skyway mostly empty. Her gaze settled on Isabella and her very human brown eyes widened.

Taking a deep breath, Isabella pushed away from the wall and drew the stunner. Her mouth was so parched she could barely speak. "Sybil of Delphi, prepare for termination."

The woman clutched a tattered bag to her chest. "Why? What have I done?"

"You are charged with treason against the Pantheon and New Olympia. I'm authorized to terminate you immediately."

"Who are you?"

Isabella longed to turn away from the terror filling the woman's eyes. She'd give away every Icarus-created original in her closet if the human would attack her and force her hand. "Isabella Thanatos, First Marshal of Athens."

"Beautiful Death." Sybil dropped the bag and clutched a strange black medallion hanging around her neck. "Please, don't kill me. I don't want to die!"

Flinching, Isabella dropped her gaze from those soft brown eyes. Her arm lowered.

She couldn't do it.

"Is there a problem, First Marshal?" Oracle asked in her ear.

Deliberately, she pictured every horrible murder she'd ever witnessed: innocents torn apart, eaten, violated, or wounded just enough to contract the virus themselves. Most humans counted themselves very lucky if the virus itself killed them before the mutations began.

She tried to summon up the killing rage that always swept through her when she remembered her mother's death, blood seeping from her mother's ears, nose and mouth, the convulsions. How her mother had pleaded for death, for peace, for mercy.

"Marshal Thanatos, please report. Your heart rate has accelerated dramatically. Are you experiencing difficulty?"

"No," she ground out. Sometimes she hated the lack of privacy that technology brought. The earpiece fed Oracle her every stat--blood pressure, body

temperature, heart rate. The computer must have got quite a shock when Hades had cornered her earlier.

She brought the stunner back up, inwardly cursing the trembling in her hand and arm. Forcing her eyes to focus on the criminal, she took a long, deep breath and released it. Again. Her hand steadied, her frantic pulse slowed.

Tears leaked from her eyes, though. She hadn't cried since her mother died. Hadn't her eyes been brown, too? "I'm sorry."

"Please--!"

Isabella pulled the trigger. The energy blast slammed into the other woman, and Isabella thought her own heart would explode with agony. Pain arced across her chest and she sagged to her knees, unable to draw a deep breath.

A furious roar rebounded in the skyway and a blur of shadowed leather, fur and wings shot over her. Instinctively, she rolled to the side to avoid the slashing talons. She leaped to her feet and dialed up the stunner to full blast.

Here was something she would enjoy killing. "Come at me again, you son of a bitch."

Wheeling about, the monster towered over her, shredding the cushioned floor of the skyway with six-inch razor talons. Enormous pitch black wings beat the air, filling the skyway with feathers. Ebon scales plated the shapeshifter's head and barbed spines lined its sinuous neck. Jagged teeth snapped in a pointed reptilian snout, splattering poisonous saliva on the floor.

With another roar, it hurtled toward her, shaking the skyway floor beneath her feet.

Isabella fired and struck a direct hit with maximum power. "Go back to the Underworld where you belong."

The monster jerked, but its furious charge continued unchecked.

Twisting away, she felt claws slash deep furrows down her left arm. Pain bloomed, blazing with immediate fever. She ducked the slapping wings, but the serpentine tail slammed into her. Grunting from the impact, she flew through the air, crashed into the polished marble wall, and slid to the floor in a heap.

Hot with fury, Isabella flipped to her feet. She hadn't let a shifter wound her in at least a year. Unsheathing her sword, she re-evaluated the monster.

With a high silver content, the deceptively slim and elegant swords were standard issue for Marshals. The aliens and the monsters they'd spawned with their virus all reacted badly to Earth's metals. This one would be no different. Even Hades, with all his fearsome power and seduction, would shriek when her sword bit into his perfect skin.

Leaping at the beast so fast her coat flapped like wings about her, she fainted at those baleful red eyes. She evaded a vicious snap from the poisonous mouth and dodged beneath the gaping jaws. With a quick stab into the unarmored underbelly, she vaulted backward from a swipe of talons that would have gutted her.

The shapeshifter reared to its full height and clawed at its abdomen. Smoke rose from the wound and blood spurted in a scarlet fountain. A shriek pierced the air, shattering the glass windows of the antiquities shop. Still screeching, the beast fell on its back, tail and legs lashing the air in agony.

Isabella circled the howling shapeshifter and raised the sword over her head with both hands. Nothing indicated this contaminated, grotesque body had once been human. It would kill and feed with absolutely no respect for human life. This, she could terminate with a perfectly clear conscience.

She brought the sword down with all her strength and severed the head from the scaly neck. Sidestepping the splatter of gore, she pulled out a cloth to clean her sword. The blade would etch and corrode if she didn't get the venomous blood off.

Isabella dropped the disintegrating cloth on top of the dead shapeshifter and

tapped her earpiece to make her report. "I need a decontamination unit to Acropolis Book Antiquities."

Oracle responded immediately. "Thank you, First Marshal Thanatos, for your faithful service to our Citizens. Please confirm the status of Sybil of Delphi."

Isabella turned away from the already decomposing monster and froze. The bag lay discarded on the floor, and the woman was gone. A flash of ugly brown at the entrance of Dionysus Theater caught her gaze. "Sybil, stop!"

Citizens surged from the Theater exit, talking and laughing over the performance. Not even riots would keep them away from a good show. Isabella pushed forward, trying not to injure any of the people. "Oracle, the human criminal somehow survived a direct charge from my weapon. She's heading into Dionysus Theater. Herakles, guard the other exits!"

The crowd made way for her, cheering when they saw the dead monster in the skyway. Even the weapon in her hand didn't frighten them. Charging into the opulent entrance of the most famous theater in New Olympia, Isabella searched for possible hiding places.

The criminal would need to find a way Outside. She had to know Oracle monitored all Gates. She had no hope of escaping.

How did the human survive the blast in the first place?

"Marshal, do you have a visual on the criminal?" Oracle asked in her ear.

"Negative. Could she have entered a private area free of monitoring?"

"There are maintenance areas below the floor where you stand, as well as access panels on each side of the Theater. These areas are not currently monitored. I will note this deficiency for the next Pantheon meeting."

Sagging, Isabella sheathed the weapon. Her heart still pumped fast and furious, adrenaline burning in her veins, but relief overrode the buzz. She wasn't guilty of killing a human after all. "What are my orders?"

"You are injured, First Marshal. Take a full interval for your care."

Oh, yeah. Now her arm hurt like a bitch, blazing with fever and cramping as poison seeped into her bloodstream. She needed to wash the saliva off and stop the bleeding immediately.

"Herakles, take command of the squad. I'll check back in before you go off shift."

"Understood, Thanatos."

She tapped her earpiece once more, sending it into standby. Outside the Theater, a decontamination crew already worked on the remains. Off to the side, the tattered bag still lay on the floor.

"Any reason I can't take this for evidence?" She asked the supervisor.

He shoved the ghastly head into a containment box marked for MedCorp research labs. "You can have anything you want, Marshal."

Isabella swallowed hard and looked away. She certainly didn't want to know what they did with the bodies she supplied.

She picked up the discarded bag and opened it. The simple backpack was filled with ancient books. What could be so terribly important in these moldering old tomes that would drive an exiled Delphian to attempt to smuggle them out of the City? How had the woman survived a full human-rated blast?

Even more troubling, she feared the monster had deliberately interfered with the criminal's termination. Perhaps Delphi and Argos truly were united in some treason against the Pantheon. Why else would a shapeshifter risk termination to assist a human?

She didn't know, but she intended to find out.

#

Hades stepped out into the night and the airlock whooshed shut behind him. Those poor ignorant Citizens, locked inside their protective prison dome all these

years. They didn't know what real air smelled like. They didn't know what real life was like.

Most of all, Isabella had no idea how her life was about to change. Guilt ate at him but couldn't suppress his surging desire and hope. Touching her had been sweet torture. Leaving her behind in Athens made him clench his hands into fists to keep from razing the City to the ground.

All these years, he'd waited, never dreaming the response he would feel in his own aura. The spark of her fledgling power called to him even now.

Charon glided out of the shadows and paced beside him, silent and dark. The Enforcer's skull gleamed in the moonlight. Prowling like a beast in a cage, he looked left and right, scanning the underbrush for something, anything he could attack. He would need to transform soon; his *drakon* loved its freedom when the light of the full moon brightened the night.

"Any trouble?" Hades asked.

"Nope. Everybody's staying away from the City, exactly as you ordered."

Hades detected an edge to his Enforcer's voice. Was it the restless beast demanding freedom, or was it frustration with the Master himself? The centuries of politics and warfare between their races were hard to forget, no matter the personal debt and bond between them. Perhaps a reminder was necessary. He would face enough challenges bringing Isabella to heel without his Enforcer turning feral on him. "I need to be at full strength in the days to come. You will feed me tonight."

Charon jerked to a halt. His golden eyes gleamed in the night. As bright as his eyes, his aura tightened around him, crouching, preparing for battle. A hint of black feathered wings shadowed his back.

Hades drew on his power. Molten rock moved sluggishly through his veins. Mostly dormant all these years of exile and devastation on this barbaric planet, his

power was slow to respond. He strained harder for the glorious rush that should have come automatically at his first thought.

He must be at full strength to keep Isabella. His blood was in her veins and her time was near. *She will be mine.*

Power finally rocketed through him and he threw his head back, reveling in the raw pulse of energy. If just the thought of her sent his energy levels soaring, how much would a true feeding expand his strength?

Without moving a muscle, he seized the rising *drakon*. He chained it in burning silver power, caging its wings and paralyzing its fearsome body before it could flow from energy into reality. Then he thrust his mind into Charon's.

The bond Hades had established by sharing blood with his Enforcer was still there, though weakened these years away from their homes. Bonds took power to maintain, and he'd been forced to conserve his energies. Besides, even pleasant chains chafed after a time.

Hades pushed deeper, filtering through memories, dreams and nightmares. His Enforcer's mind was a tangled seething mess of hatred and frustration. Then there was that curious dark area beyond the last shield, a shield he'd never been able to penetrate during these long years of exile.

Charon was a time bomb waiting to explode, whether from madness or whatever hid behind the shadowed shield. Groaning, he fell to his knees. "Do it, Philip. See who's hiding there."

Hades grimaced at the use of his true name. When New Olympia was founded, the humans took Greek names from Earth's ancient history, a dedication of sorts to the new age of civilization. It was only appropriate that he take such a hated and feared name as Hades, Lord of the Underworld, when so many of his people were murdered outcasts.

He was tempted to push through that last shield, but he felt the blazing pain in his Enforcer's mind just from his touch on it. Trying to force a way through could kill them both. Whoever crafted it was skilled, more skilled than he. Unfortunately, he feared he knew exactly who had placed that shield strong enough even his bond could not penetrate it.

The question was not if Charon betrayed him, knowingly or not, but how much.

"Kill me and end this misery."

Dampening his power but maintaining the silvered cage, Hades gripped Charon's chin with one hand and ripped the black shirt away from his shoulder, baring his neck. Old scars from an early human weapon told of the hard years of survival they both endured. "Who do you fear more, me, here, now, or the *Megaskyr* weaving her poisonous webs on Macedon?"

Charon closed his eyes. "Neither of you scares me."

"What does scare you, my friend?"

"Never standing before my father and telling him how my brother died. Dying before I find my mate."

Hades leaned down to the scarred but inviting expanse of flesh. He hungered. He needed power to keep the precious few surviving Masters and Enforcers under his control. Power would allow him to conquer Isabella and chain her to his side, to protect her from others who would use her. Power meant he could overcome exile, possibly even defeat the most powerful *Megaskyr* in Macedonian history.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the Enforcer he wanted to taste.

Fangs lengthened painfully in his mouth. Although the virus had corrupted his hunger into darker desires of flesh and blood, every cell in his body ached to introduce Isabella to a true feeding in the manner of his species.

Charon shuddered, his rumbling voice raw and broken. "We'll never get off this forsaken rock."

How much to promise him? Staring into the kneeling Enforcer's eyes, Hades decided to take a small risk. "Isabella is my *sarissa*. With her at my side, my power will be nearly limitless."

Charon's eyes gleamed like the predator he was. "Power enough to topple a *Megaskyr*?"

Hades let a slight smile curve his lips.

"Take what you need from me, Master."

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