

Chapter 15

“Okay, how do I look?” I stood in front of Jayza with my arms spread out.

“I don’t see why it matters how you look,” my best friend said. “Dressing nice is for humans.”

I dropped my arms, sighing. Never ask for a fashion opinion from a reaper. “I just want to try something different.”

“Shilah doesn’t care about how you dress. He just cares about you.”

“Tonight is special though.” I would finally have a few hours of uninterrupted time with him. Ziri had agreed to do tonight’s deaths by herself to make up for not helping with Kacie’s soul. The grim-in-training had been all too happy to have my scythe all to herself. At least she was coming in handy.

I inspected my outfit. I had looked around in a mall for the last hour to try to copy a more human look. I was still in all black as usual, but I had on a sparkly top and skintight denim pants inside flat boots that went halfway up my shin. I don’t understand how human females can wear those cumbersome tall heels. Heels are *so* not for a reaper.

“Jayza, can you at least tell me if I look human or not?” Since a reaper’s reflection couldn’t be seen in a mirror, she was my only hope.

Jayza cocked her head. “Don’t humans wear jewelry?”

I snapped my fingers. “Right. I forgot.” I gave myself dangling silver earrings and a long necklace with black jewels. “Better?”

“I guess. You know, you should wear your hair down like that more often. It looks pretty.”

“I don’t want these braids to get in the way when I’m reaping.” I straightened my blouse. “I guess I’m ready to go.”
“So how are you going to get there? By bus or taxi? Or maybe a spaceship?”

I glared as Jayza chuckled. “Make fun of me all you want. I’m just trying to *look* more human, but I’m still a grim reaper. Nothing will change that.”

“You’re doing all this because of Shilah’s friend, Lucy, aren’t you? You don’t want him wishing he was hanging out with a more normal girl like her?”

It irked me how Jayza could figure me out like that. “Maybe that’s *part* of the reason why I’m trying to be more human.”

“From what I’ve seen, you have nothing to worry about. Shilah likes you *because* you’re not normal.”

I smiled. “I don’t know if that’s a good thing.”

“It is. Now go, he’s probably waiting for you.”

I nodded and teleported from The In-Between to Chad’s Cliff. It was about twilight here. The sky was navy blue, fading to black, with patches of clouds choosing to reveal the moon and stars occasionally. There was no wind tonight; the trees were still and everything was silent except for the hooting owls.

“Xia.”

I turned at the sound of my name, and found Shilah walking toward me. He had changed too, wearing khaki pants and a beige button-up shirt. His silken hair flowed around his shoulders, and I wanted to run my fingers through it. He looked so gorgeous, even in the near darkness.

His eyebrows rose as he gave me a glance over from head to foot. “You look different. And...human.”

“I thought I’d try something new,” I replied. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah, you look great. But do you remember what I said, before I knew you were a grim reaper? I said you don’t have to try to be normal. I like you when you’re just you.”

“Funny, that’s what Jayza thought you’d say.” I walked forward and grabbed his hand, and this time I didn’t flinch when I felt his skin. “So where do you want to hang out tonight? I can teleport us anywhere you want to go.”

“You choose. I just want it to be any place that’s not dangerous.”

I chuckled. “Okay, no building rooftop this time. At least, not a tall one. I can’t teleport you out in the open, you know.” I thought. “The further away we go, the better. I don’t want to be where my superiors can find me if they come looking. Hopefully Ziri will cover for me. Want to go to another country?”

“Sure.”

I teleported, and we ended up on the roof of an apartment building. Here the sky was completely dark, and the streets were nearly empty. There was a wide river to our right, and one of the most beautiful structures in the world shone bright in the night about a mile away.

“I give you Paris, France,” I announced in my best impersonation of a French accent.

Shilah’s eyes lit up. “Wow. I’ve never seen the Eiffel Tower in person.”

I grinned at how happy he looked. “Then you’ll love it up close. Let’s go.” I looked over the edge of the building to make sure the coast was clear on the ground. Then I teleported us down. Bubbling with excitement, I pulled Shilah along as we walked beside the Seine River.

“Xia, what if someone sees us? I mean, sees *me* talking to the air?” Shilah asked, glancing around nervously.

“It’s about four in the morning here,” I replied. “There’s hardly anyone out. But just in case, I’ve made myself visible to humans.”

“You have? I forgot you could do that. Won’t you get in trouble?”

“Only if I get caught. That’s why I don’t do this in Arizona.” To prove my point, I waved to an early-morning stroller, who smiled and waved back.

“Wow. I wish you *could* do this back at home.” When Shilah saw the look on my face, he added, “Not that I don’t like that you’re only visible to me.”

“If you want, I could risk it so we could go on normal dates and stuff...”

“No, I don’t want you to get in any more trouble. Your next punishment might be another grim-in-training.” He grinned.

“Two Ziris would definitely make me certifiably insane.” We laughed.

The two of us continued walking toward the Eiffel Tower, a misty breeze blowing off the river and giving the night air a fresh scent. Paris was so magnificent in the dark. I had only been here once, just to see the sights. France hasn’t had any major disasters in the years since I’ve been a reaper. The only other countries I’ve visited to reap souls were Haiti, China, Afghanistan, Chile, and most recently, Japan. I told Shilah about those times while we walked.

When we got to the tower, we gazed up at it in wonder. I didn’t want to risk teleporting us to the top of it in case it had security, so instead I took us onto a nearby hotel rooftop to enjoy the view. Shilah and I sat with our arms around each other, talking for over an hour.

“Will we always get to do stuff like this?” Shilah asked, wrapping one of my braids around his finger. “Travel around the world?”

“Maybe, if you want,” I replied. “But I can’t dump my reaping duties on Ziri too often. And after she gets her own scythe, she won’t be able to help me at all.” I paused. “I never thought I’d say this, but maybe I should volunteer to receive more trainees after this.”

Shilah chuckled. “All your trainees might not be as helpful as Ziri.”

“I know. But I want to do this more often.”

“Me too.”

“And it doesn’t bother you that we can’t do things we could do if I was human? Like going out on normal dates?”

“No way, this is much better than normal dates. I love having a girlfriend who can teleport.”

I lifted my eyebrows, grinning. “Girlfriend?”

“Oh, sorry, I forgot you’re terrified of that word,” Shilah teased. “I meant girl *for a friend*.”

“No, you can call me your girlfriend.” I snuggled against his chest. “I’m glad I have a *boyfriend* to take around the world.”

He smiled, stroking my hand. Then he turned serious. “Xia, does skin contact still bother you?”

“Only a little. I’m trying to get used to it.” I lifted my head off his chest and put my legs under me, turning to face him.

“Give me your hands.”

Shilah placed both of his hands in mine. I squeezed them, trying not to freak out from the warm, electric feeling spreading up my arms. Swallowing, I slowly ran my hands up his forearms. His skin was so soft, so smooth. I’d never felt anything like it before.

I stopped at the crooks of his elbows and looked up, embarrassed. “Do you mind?”

He shook his head. So I continued running my hands over his muscular biceps, up to his shoulders. His skin felt so soothing against mine that I wanted to do this all night. I couldn’t get myself to stop.

I slid my hands over his shirt, up to his neck. He watched me closely, and my heart throbbed as I traced his jawline with my fingertips. I didn’t think either of us were breathing by the time my fingers brushed his lips. His lips were even more tender than his skin.

His warm breath caressed my fingers as they lingered for a moment. That weird stirring of emotions hit me again, jolting my entire body from head to toes. If I had been human, I would've thought I needed to see a doctor. This feeling felt natural, but unnatural at the same time.

I looked up, into his staring eyes. Blushing hard, I yanked my hands away. "S-sorry. I was...just..."

Shilah leaned in closer. Our faces had already been inches apart; now there was only one inch between us. I couldn't take my eyes away from his lips.

My breath caught in my throat as he hesitated. Maybe he was waiting to see if I'd pull away again. Waiting for me to object or run or something.

But this time, I stayed.

And then his tender lips pressed into mine. I closed my eyes and inhaled sharply through my nose, caught off guard by the incredible sensations that coursed through me. This touch felt a hundred times better than any other. My whole body felt like it was lifting off the ground. I was tingling all over.

My mind was telling me to pull away. I knew I shouldn't be doing this. Kissing a human must be completely against the Rules. A grim reaper should not be having these types of feelings.

But it felt so...right.

I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck and used my lips to explore his. It was a good thing I'd picked up some tips from those romance movies. Shilah responded by putting his hands on my waist and moving in closer.

I don't know how long we kissed. It could've been minutes, or even an hour. The morning sky was starting to turn purple and pink here, so I knew it must be getting late in Arizona.

Shilah pulled away first. Holding my face in his hands, he opened his eyes and breathlessly asked, "Is this okay for you?"

I nodded. “Definitely.” I wanted to pull him back toward me so bad, but then I realized how much time must’ve passed by. “Oh, should you be getting home?”

He sighed. “Yeah. My curfew is eleven.”

“Right.” Still a bit lightheaded from the kissing, I grabbed his hands, and we stood up together. In less than a second, we were standing back at Chad’s Cliff.

“Well...goodnight,” I said, gazing up into his brown eyes.

“Goodnight.” Shilah made no move to leave.

I didn’t want him to go. I rose up on my tiptoes and started kissing him again. He put his arms around me and pulled me against him, his hands caressing my back.

Nothing else seemed to exist in that moment. It didn’t feel like we were on Earth anymore. It felt like we were floating somewhere way up high, maybe in outer space. I lost sense of time and place.

And then I was brought back to reality when I received a Summons inside my mind. I broke away from Shilah, annoyed. How were my superiors contacting me after I had made sure Ziri would receive any of my Summoning Calls?

Shilah kept his forehead against mine, stroking my cheek with his thumb. I completely blocked out the Summons and focused on the way he was staring at me.

“Xia...” he murmured, his voice filled with emotion. “I love you.”

I froze. I hadn’t been expecting that at all. I wasn’t even familiar with the L-word concept.

I knew I should say something back, but when I opened my mouth, my voice stuck in my throat. Shilah must not have minded my silence because he kissed me one more time, then pulled away.

“See you tomorrow?” he asked.

I nodded, still speechless from what he'd said. He smiled, squeezed my hand, and then walked away so that my hand slowly slipped out of his.

As I watched him leave, the Summons came back, stronger and more persistent than before. I closed my eyes and sighed, wishing I could have time to think about everything that had happened tonight. It had been the best day of my non-life.

But I wasn't a normal teenage girl who could go home in a dreamy stupor. I teleported to The In-Between to answer the Summons.