

Mama said there'd be days like this.

Yeah fuckin right. That's just a line from an old tune I heard on the juke at Nasty Nate's. Stuck with me. I wish she *had* told me helpful shit like that. Or any shit for that matter. Hell, I'd pay good money just to hear the sound of her breath. But Mama's been gone since the day I crept outta her, remember?

She died bringin me into this carnival world after namin me "Ramsay Oswald Carnes" – the name that got spit out the Machine over seven hours ago. The same name that'll be etched on a marble rock, six feet above my bones if I actually give up the ghost in sixteen hours and thirty-nine minutes... 'cause accordin to my death notice, that's how much life I got left.

At least I'm in a fuckin Ferrari.

It's just before dawn and we're doin 110 up the I-95 in Dead Dukes's ol-school grounded Testarossa, even passin the boosted cars cruisin above us. *Us*. Not often in my life I get to say that fuckin word. Feels good. I got my angel Camille at the wheel and the devil at my six. And that creep better be fast 'cause he's gonna have to catch me if he wants to put his gold coins over my fuckin lids.

Guess I've always been runnin from death.

We all have. From the minute we slip out our mothers' hot pockets, we're on the lam. Everyone's got a bullseye on their skulls just waitin for the black arrow to leave its exit wound on our fuckin lives.

But in the good ol days, people had it made. They'd be at a ball game downin beers and chompin on a dog when they had a heart attack. Or openin Saint Nick's presents with little Timmy and Suzy when a switch in their fusebox flipped and they crashed into the fuckin Christmas tree. Lights out, kids. Happy New Year. Poor bastards never saw it comin, never knew when their last gasp was upon 'em.

The Death Notification Agency changed all that.

And I was their reaper, deliverin death notices in the dark like they were fuckin pizzas. I was happy, too. Whatever the fuck that means. Content, at least. Maybe 'cause I always kept the blindfold on and never peeked out from under it. Never asked questions, never wanted answers. Never gave a shit about how the Machine worked 'cause I never thought my name would come across that little screen in my company car...

Till it did.

Now I give a shit. All the shits. My eyes are open for the first time 'cause I'm marked for the Exodus. But it ain't my time and I fuckin know it.

So does Camille.

My holy driver. Her hair's blowin in the wind and she's fuckin pristine as she throws her eyes my way, both of us knowin damn well what we gotta do today...

Hit the Machine.

And we aim to hit it hard. The minute Camille blew a 12-gauge gaper through Dukes's sternum, she became the keeper of my ragged soul. And she aims to get this dyin spirit on that fuckin plane to New York. I didn't put this on her or nothin, but I think she wants to see it through – see *me* through – to the bitter end. Which makes

her a better man than me, that's for fuckin sure. Not a high bar, but nonetheless, you gotta respect the principle.

"We'll land outside Manhattan in about three hours. That doesn't give us long on your clock to get into the city, and get to Moirai," says Camille.

*Unfuckinreal.*

Here I am waxin poetic, tryin to make sense of death's mysteries and machines, and she's over here thinkin on practicalities. On how to save me. God bless the heart beatin in her beautiful chest—

*Sorry. Can't help it sometimes.*

I know, I know, I sound like every other fuckin pig with a pair, but there's somethin about this woman, about this whole deal with death, and the goddamn finality of it all, that gets the blood flowin below deck. But then I remember, this angel's puttin her life on the line for me. And not only does that thought quiet my iguana brain, I start feelin somethin I ain't felt in a long time... for no one. And it's one of those hundred-dollar Les Edley words...

*Gratitude.*

"Thank you," I says.

"For what, Ram?"

"For helpin me. You didn't have to."

"Please. You would have done the same for me."

She says it with this fuckin confidence that makes me question my existence. Mostly 'cause I ain't so sure I would. Least the asshole I was yesterday wouldn't. Today, I find my outlook kinda changin. Must be the loomin idea of my own death. Or maybe it's just Camille. Shit, I dunno, but I don't bother correctin her. Just for a fuckin second, it feels good havin someone in this world think somethin of me.

Barb certainly didn't toward the end. Sam and Olivia neither. Shit, kids got this way of breakin you even when they ain't talked to you for years.

"You got kids, Camille?"

She looks at me with a scared look I ain't seen on her before, like for the first time she's thinkin I could be dangerous. Fuckin took her long enough.

"Why do you ask?"

"Just had mine on my mind is all."

Now she's embarrassed by her fear, which is batshit 'cause that's what brings out our best instinct. Kept me alive more than once when I was in the Corps. That, and fuckin Jonesy. But since Jonesy ain't here to take shrapnel to the gourd for me this time, I'll need that fear to keep the earthworms from findin a new home in my buried skull.

"I have a boy. He's sixteen," she says.

My first thought is she's too goddamn young to have a sixteen-year-old. But then again, I guess Barb was young when she had my boy, Sam. My second thought...

"Now I really don't feel good about you helpin me."

"Because I'm a mother?"

"The boy's more important."

"I won't argue with that."

"Good, 'cause if you're gonna put yourself on the line, it should be for him, not me."

"This is for him, Ram. Everything I do is for him. Including helping you. If Moirai can kill you when it's not your time, why couldn't he kill my son? Or any of us?"

When she's right, she's fuckin right. If Dukes really did cut a deal with Moirai to sell me up the Styx, and Moirai manipulated the Machine, then it's corruptible. The whole infrastructure's beyond fucked. And beyond-fucked things have the tendency to fall apart. Shit, even empires crumble.

"What's your boy's name?" I ask.

She hesitates. Again, I see that fear.

"You don't gotta tell me if you don't want."

"Alston. His name's Alston."

“Never met an Alston.”

“It was my mother’s last name.”

Humans and our obsession with lineage. With ourselves. Namin the livin after the dead, it’s like throwin good cash after bad. But that’s love, I guess. It’s made us do a lotta stupid shit in our history, and it’ll keep makin us do stupid shit til we’re long gone from this earth. But love, the real destroyer of worlds, is a problem for another fuckin day.

Right now, we got company.