Chapter Twenty Six

Outsider voices carried through the corridor, as I slipped into the shadows. Police o icers talking to Crow, Crow fielding police o icers' questions, mumbles, blips of walkie-talkies, reports of their findings.

"Squatters at the old Sunlake. They've been here a while," one of them said on a radio call, as flashlight beams swiveled through the hotel. "Yes, the old sanatorium."

I melted into the shadows, thought of the farthest place I could get without being seen, and dropped into the south stairwell near the dining room toward the sound of rushing water. The basement was flooded. My feet sank through two feet of rainwater, and my flip-flop dislodged and floated away. I held onto the wall.

Great minds think alike, because Mori and Wilky were here, too, huddled halfway inside the body chute. "Are you going to stay or escape?" I asked.

"Wilky is going to check the bottom grate in a minute to see if it's unlocked," Mori said, pointing through the chute. "That goes down, though. It's probably flooded at the end."

"Better than climbing out a window where the cops will see us."

I wasn't concerned about the cops as much as I was about the lower levels of this building, especially a er the vision I'd had down here and the papers I'd found in the storage room. "Where's Fae?"

They both pointed. It was then I realized she was below them, deep in the foundation's crevice, and they were in the body chute waiting for her. "Guys, no. She shouldn't be down there."

"Tell that to Fae," Wilky murmured. "We're just here making sure she's safe."

"But she's not safe." I sloshed through water halfway up my thighs, feeling the ground uneven beneath my bare feet. The room felt o -kilter, as though the walls themselves were angling inward. Water seeped in thin, trickling mini-falls from every corner of the ceiling. I waded up to the platform and climbed up.

"She only needs a minute," Mori id.

I reached Mori and Wilky and peered down Wilky's flashlight beam. The foundation of the basement where it met the platform on which the tunnel was built had ripped apart to expose layers of brick underneath. At the bottom of this spontaneous ravine was Fae opening bags of gold coins in a pool of fetid water.

"Vale, you were right!" she cried, holding up a gold piece-an actual gold doubloon. "Ha! My great-grandfather really was a rumrunner. Holy shit! Behold ye treasure, mateys!"

"Get her out of there," I said, holding onto what was le of the rim of the brick foundation. My earlier vision of Fae deep in the ravine barreled full-force into my head, and I had to forcibly shake my head to dislodge it. "Now!" I screamed. Mori caught the panic in my eyes. "Fae-out. Now, let's go." They splayed on their stomach, reaching down into the crevice which was quickly filling with groundwater. Anything could've been down there, from old sewage to dangerous debris from the building itself.

"Hold on, I'm making sure this is the only one," Fae replied, feeling around with her hands.

"Fae, get up here!" I was fuming. How could she come back to the basement when I specifically warned her not to?

"I'll get her," Wilky said, handing Mori his flashlight. He climbed into the ravine, using the exposed bricks for foot anchors, like an inverted rock-climbing wall. He reached down as far as he could for Fae's hand.

"Okay, I'm coming." Fae wrapped the canvas folds of the bag around her wrist and stretched her skinny arm up to meet Wilky's, Wet strands of long hair plastered to her face, she looked like a trapped cave diver emerging for the first time in days,

I backed away to give them space to hoist her out, still angry that Mori had allowed her to go down there. There was such a thing as too much empathy, Now we had to wait while she climbed out of this godforsaken hole before we could run out to safety.

But then, the basement floor began shaking. It took me two seconds to realize there'd be no way out of this if we didn't act quickly. "Hurry!" I screamed, as the entire tunnel began to crumble, a loud sickening crash filling my ears.

Without much foundation le to support the curved passageway, the center arch began to fall away slowly, brick by brick plummeting to the ravine below. The flashlight fell into the earth's crack. Wilky used his one free arm to protect his head from the falling bricks, while his back and feet pressed against the ravine wall, holding him in place by tension. His other arm continued to reach down. "Come on!" he screamed.

"I'm trying!"

I covered my head, too, and winced when a brick hit me square in the shoulder. Wilky managed to grab Fae's arm with one hand and tugged as she screamed.

"Get her out!" Mori screamed.

Fae's foot slipped from underneath her, however, and she fell a few feet, unable to get a footing on the wall, now slick with cascading water. Wilky couldn't li her out, no matter how di erently he positioned his feet or knees for better leverage. He would have to let go, drop to the bottom to reach her, risk being trapped himself.

I struggled with the idea of leaving them all here to die while I saved myself, but there was no way I could, not even to keep my promise to Macy.

As the bricks continued to fall, Mori screamed and scooted back on the platform, allowing space for the bricks of the death tunnel and its surrounding wall to land around them. The collapse caused the floor to tilt, as all the water that had pooled in the basement rushed into the gorge, filling it to the brim. The floor began to cave.

"Get out!" I screamed and scrambled out of the tunnel, reaching back to o er my hands to Mori and Wilky.

There was nothing we could do for Fae. Though my heart longed to help her, as I was sure Mori longed to die with Fae, she was gone. We knew it. If the bricks hadn't gotten her, the rushing water filling in air spaces would. Her only chance at this point was to swim upwards.

Mori and Wilky made it out of the collapsing tunnel, and we waited a moment in the hopes that Fae had found her way out. But the bricks began to pile atop the ravine break, the ceiling began to cave, and plaster and concrete rained down in chunks.

Mori reluctantly ran toward me, pulling me along, as Wilky ran to catch up, the three of us glancing back to confirm the worst-she wasn't coming out. We reached the stairs and waited another second. When the rest of the tunnel collapsed, my entire soul did, too.

"We have to keep moving," I said.

"Fae, my Fae," Mori cried in the stairwell, their wails consuming them entirely. I felt their pain as if it were my own, deep in my chest where the heart chakra exploded with black, roiling fire. Here, Mori had found someone who so completely accepted them for who they were, and now she was dead.

I tugged them by the hand. "Come on. Please, or the same will happen to us." "No, no, no..." they cried. "Yes, we have to." Between Wilky and me, we managed to get Mori to climb up to the ground floor where the landscape had changed. Because of the collapse in the basement, the dining room had caved as well. I tried to push away the images of Fae being crushed by tons of brick and concrete.

The moment we stepped into the main hall, a beam of flashlight shone into our faces. "Hey," someone said. "Hold it." . In front of us were four police o icers, one of them holding Crow by the arm, and what looked like two county inspectors.

"The basement is collapsing," I breathed

The vein in Crow's temple pulsed with contempt. "Nothing is collapsing."

"No?" I was aghast at the lengths he'd go to deny the inevitable. "You want to go down there and check for yourself? We just watched Fae die." Then I saw his sallow skin in the dim light and knew it wasn't him doing the talking anymore. An o icer used his radio to call an ambulance. In my mind's eye, all I could see was Fae, pathetically clutching her gold coins inside of that gorge, as an avalanche of bricks collapsed on her, head cracked open like a pumpkin.

Mori fell apart against Wilky's shoulder. "No, no..."

"Where? In here?" One of the cops, a female, peered into the depths of the stairwell, as the others began giving orders to evacuate the building.

"Yes, the death tunnel's already gone. That's why this floor is collapsing," I explained.

"Death tunnel?" she asked.

One of the other cops explained. "She means the body chute of the hotel from the hospital days. Alvarez, ambulance and backup."

"When was the last survey on this place?" an o icer asked.

"Last one was filed six years ago," the inspector flipped through his clipboard.

"Wrong. My father completed one just four years ago condemning the hotel," I interjected.

The inspector shook his head. "Last one filed was six."

"He never got to turn it in." I seethed at Crow, taking slow steps up to him. The o icer holding his arm jutted out his hand to keep me at a distance. "He died here. Killed by something who didn't want the report filed. I saw the report myself inside a storage room down the hall."

"Show me," one of the o icers said, leading me away.

"There's no time," I replied. "My father said the building would collapse now."

"I thought you said your father died." Crow laughed, and the cop looked at me sideways, as if I were the liar. "Excuse me." I brushed past them all to leave, but the o icer reached out and told a solid hold of my arm. "Nope. You can't go just yet. None of you. Alvarez?" The cop gave a secretive nod to his partner. "Trespassing."

"For real?" I said. "You're going to detain us for trespassing when we're warning you about the building? This is ridiculous. Let go of me." I yanked my arm, but Alvarez had a firm grip.

"Hey, my guys. Can we answer questions a er we get out of the building?" Wilky pleaded. "You all are making a huge mistake by keeping us standing around."

"Kaspian, we'll be outside," Alvarez said to the rest of the team. He and his partner began leading me, Mori, Wilky, and Crow down the hall when one of their walkie-talkies crackled on.

"Wait in the hall," the woman o icer said. "On our way."

We all had to stop and wait for the rest of the team to catch up, while two o icers held four of our arms. Wilky, busy holding Mori up, gave no resistance, and Crow, towering over all of us, watched my concerned face with amusement. He was shirtless still, and his arms and chest had changed into a deeper blue-green. His face was dry, crackled like alligator skin, and his neck had what looked like flaky scales growing on it.

"Buddy, you okay?" Alvarez said.

"Oh, I'm perfect," he chuckled. Wilky and I exchanged looks. "Let me go," I said quietly to the o icer. "I'd rather resist arrest than die here with all of you. Please."

"Don't let her go." Crow chuckled. "I need her."

"That's enough," Wilky cut Crow o . "I'm tired of your shit."

"Nobody cares about you, Wil," Crow replied. "The only one with any real power here is Valentina. Hers is the gi we need. Hers is the anger-"

"Who the fuck is 'we,' asshole?" Wilky asked, "You, only you."

"Crow and I," Crow replied,

Mori looked at him curiously,

"Hey," a cop tried intervening. "Save it for the station,"

The obvious finally dawned on Mori, Wilky, and me-Crow wasn't himself anymore. I tugged on my cross. Heavenly Father, please help us.

Crow's filmy gaze fell on the cross, as it always did. "God keeps so many secrets from us, doesn't He? For a deity who claims to love His children so much, He's pretty stingy." About me, he told Alvarez, "This one's the most deluded of all. Been driving us insane since she arrived a year ago."

"What?" I yanked on the o icer's arm. He pushed my elbow behind my back and reached for my other wrist, "Crow's the one who's been here a year, working on a stupid portfolio. He thinks he can bring this hotel back to life so his demon girlfriend can give him secrets from the underworld. He's a pet."

Crow laughed to himself.

"Vale, don't," Wilky murmured.

"Crow, you're the one who dragged us here," Mori said in a grief-stricken voice. "Telling us this place needed us. Telling us we would all get something out of it. What this place needed was more death! All so your Lady could grow in strength. Because of you, Fae is dead!"

"Fae is dead, because she was greedy," Crow hissed.

Mori ripped out of the o icer's stronghold and plunged into Crow, knocking him against the wall, pounding their fists into his cracked cheeks. Crow took each punch, but with each strike, Mori grew weaker until they were sobbing, and Alvarez pulled them apart.

"Alright, people, let's finish this outside. Come on." Alvarez gestured us further down the hall. At least he wasn't treating us like criminals anymore.

But Mori collapsed to their knees, face in hands. "I'm staying. I have no one."

"Not true." I o ered my hands. "You have Citana. You have me...."

"You have me," Wilky said, squatting beside them.

As Wilky tried talking Mori o the ledge, and the two o icers met with the rest of the team on their way back from inspecting the damage, Crow shi ed his weight against the wall. A spasm rocked his body, then another, and another. A raving mad look crossed his eyes. He began sweating profusely, agonizing over some unseen force. The haze of purplesilver light I'd seen in the ballroom emanated from his eyes, nostrils, and mouth. Dark cracks formed in his cheeks. His eyes darkened to pure black.

He looked to me for help, but I froze.

How could I help? Crow wasn't Crow anymore.

To my horror, he was growing taller, limbs cracking and stretching, as he writhed in pain. One of the o icers noticed it at the same time Wilky and Mori saw it, too, and watched agape, as Crow's torso thickened. A layer of slime covered him, oozing out of his pores. "Wilky...Mori...time to go," I said.

"We are not...going...anywhere!" Crow screamed, his mouth opening into a wide tunnel. My eyes widened to absorb the horror. Like the Antoni of my nightmares, Crow shrieked out his rage. "I never should've let you in heeeere!"

Hot wind blasted from his elongated throat, li ing flaps of clothing and hair on everyone, his gaping mouth firing squall a er squall of tainted green miasma. Loose papers, fiberglass, even wall sconces detached from the walls and flew around us, as Crow released suppressed rage. Years and years' worth.

The worst part was I understood it.

I could've easily become the monster.

We tried to run, getting as far as the atrium where pieces of ceiling had begun falling, whole panels, fiberglass, and stucco raining down on our heads. My vision blacked momentarily when something hard hit my head. I fell on my back and covered my head with my arms. As I scrambled to find a hiding spot underneath a cypress tree, a dislodged painting fell at my feet-the Lady of the Lake as her mythical, legendary self, her beauty a ruse to earn human sympathy.

His screams-her screams-assaulted us. With each shrieking gust of wind that came out of his mouth, I watched Crow's skin change to a deep aquamarine, as swags of lake grass grew from his head and got caught in the whirlwind. Smooth, scale-covered breasts formed on his torso, his waist cinched into an hourglass shape, and his legs lengthened then fused together to form one.

Two of the cops drew their weapons and fired round a er round at Crow's periphery, a misguided attempt to scare him o without hurting him. It was clear they didn't know what to make of him, having been a young human a moment before. The two inspectors were gone; two other cops ran o in opposite directions,

The one, fused leg of the creature that was no longer Crow had formed a fish tail, the mass of which supported its upper weight, and its lake grass hair had morphed into thin tentacles at the ends, feelers that covered a multitude of square footage at once. Its luminous eyes covered by filmy membranes appeared blind to light. The creature reached out its long arms, quickly stretching into tentacles, and caught each of the two, fleeing o icers in its coils.

They were crushed on capture, their bodies quivering, nerves outplaying their remaining actions. The fine tentacles of hair stretched behind it, into the repressed gloom of the hallway, and plucked out the two remaining police o icers. One slipped from its grip and fell to the ground, where the creature promptly crushed it with its tail, and the other slapped the female o icer with its mermaid tail until her skull smashed into the Sunlake's dissolving walls.

The beast plucked the two county code enforcers from behind the columns of the lobby and raised them to the ceiling. It inspected them casually before popping each one into its maw then ripping the heads o one, then the other. As blood rained down around me, spattering my arms, I winced and tried my best not to breathe, so it wouldn't find me.

At times, the creature looked like Crow, helpless and remorseful. At others, the Lady of the Lake. But it was neither. The creature was something else, something from the depths of the lake we never could've seen coming, something ancient that had lain dormant for centuries, awaiting its perfect moment of rebirth. When it was done devouring the five or six bodies it'd smashed to pulp, it turned its attention to us.

Wilky and Mori scrambled to share my hiding spot. Our arms embraced each other as one. In their touch, I "saw" their fear wind its way through my veins, turn mostly black with flecks of scant specks of light, like tourmaline. The creature turned its rage on us.

Death by evil mermaid, headed this way.

"Run, "I breathed.

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