

Chapter Twenty Seven

Mori and Wilky took o , slipping past the creature undetected, as it let out another wail. I'd started out as well, but then the walls of the Sunlake reverberated, releasing tatters of wallpaper, Mediterranean light fixtures, and artwork, the hotel's remaining shreds of dignity. I sank back again.

The creature narrowed its sightless eyes in my general vicinity and screamed with words I couldn't hear. I've waited centuries...

Every warning I'd ever heard from my family, church, or friends echoed through my ears. Don't mess with the spirit world. You'll be sorry I tried again to run, managing to get a few feet into the hall, when the subterranean siren's tail came thrashing toward me, a rush of sulfurous air preceding it, powering its muscled flesh against me. I retreated at what felt like hundreds of miles an hour against one of the atrium's outer walls, heard a crack, and tumbled. My bones screamed in agony.

Along the glass, a fissure spiked upward, spitting sharp fragments raining toward the ground, as my vision wavered in and out of darkness. Vaguely, I heard Wilky's voice imploring me to reach out and hold onto him, but then that massive whooshing tail swept the floor once more, slamming Wilky into one of the great columns.

He slumped with a thud, writhing in pain.

"Wilky!" Mori ran to him. "Vale, let's go!" they screamed across the hall, but there was no way I could span the distance without getting scooped up.

"Just go!" I screamed.

Mori kept shouting, but I couldn't focus on their words. A roaring boom from the creature's depths groaned in a voice that didn't translate as human, but I understood just the same. It needed one more.

One more what?

One more soul to make the transformation complete. Then it would rise from this forsaken nest where it'd spawned and seek eternal life in the natural world.

I would've liked to reply. Like hell you willbut I was only one tiny life. If the beast was going to take anybody, it'd be me, not Wilky, not Mori, who had already su ered enough for one lifetime. I'd lived a good life, despite the lies. They were just lies, not physical pain, not harassment, not abandonment, not hate.

I had a family.

I measured the distance between the spot where I lay hurt and the auxiliary door or even the closest broken window. I'd rather cut the hell out of my skin jumping through one than provide the last soul the creature needed. If I couldn't make it, so be it. I'd already done what I'd come to do-save the others.

Give yourselfthe creature told me, its tentacles curling and whipping.

"You won't survive out there," I replied.

Yes. There is enough hate to sustain me,

"There's more love than hate,"

In the distance, I heard the ambulances navigating toward the Sunlake. They wouldn't make it past the gate, I knew. But who would? Macy, I could hear her voice calling for me from the back of the building, The veranda, She'd found the same path I'd used to first come here,

"Vale!" she cried.

I could see her and Citana pounding on the atrium glass. "I'm alright! Go home! Get out!"

"It's a sinkhole!" Macy screamed. "Vale, did you hear me?"

Yes, I could hear her, but there was nothing I co the creature was my captor, could do. The atrium I'd feared for weeks had become my terrarium, and

The stress cracks, the squashed columns, the gate that had shi ed on its axis, the sunken foundation, the ravine in the basement, the fissure through which the lake water poured... It wasn't only a crumbling, decrepit building, but a literal pit of death opening beneath us. An eroded limestone foundation about to suck the dying and unstable into its earthy depths.

Through the glass, I could see Macy's mouth open when she saw what I faced. All the creature needed was one more soul. It could easily break out of the crumbling building and take Macy, Citana, or Lucinda, too.

Macy, pleaseI tried telling her. GO

But sisters don't leave when sisters need help, and so she remained at the glass, pounding and searching for a way in. When the creature shi ed its attention to Macy, I jumped from the foliage, leaping over rocks and fallen palm fronds to distract it. It coiled a tentacle underneath me, li ed my flailing body to its scaly face. Its mouth was an explosion of teeth. Its eyes, no pupils, no soul, just two gaping holes of blindness.

When I looked into them, I saw reflected back at me the woman who'd crashed through the atrium, whose dead flesh the creature had used as a starter to its new form. It was Crow, purple hair sprouting from its massive, shiny shoulders. It was the woman holding her womb, furious at what had been done without her consent. It was the priest with the dire warning. It was Wilky's grand-uncle and the other men in cages. It was Fae, clutching her gold. It was the little boy who'd witnessed his mother's death.

It was no one and everyone at the same time, every soul who had passed without dignity in this cursed place.

The creature wheezed open its jaws. What if...a er I died, there was nothing on the other side?

No Heaven, no Hell, no in-between, no duality.

What if "spirit communication," the gi of sixth sense, the psychic ability to "see" another dimension was all natural brain phenomenon that would end a er we drew our last breaths?

This was my ultimate fear.

Macy kept pounding and pounding at the glass, and the creature, distracted, loosened its grip on my torso. I wriggled out of its grasp and fell twenty feet to the soil below, rolling into the bushes behind the tree. I watched it thrash with anger, searching for me in the plants. It upended trees le and right, slapped its tail, and toppled the fountain. The mermaid fell on her stone head and cracked at the neck. Her eyes gazed at the creature.

As more debris rained into the hallway from the floors above, the creature blocked the entrance to the atrium considering its next move, while I prayed for a way out. Closing my eyes, I imagined the purple light washing over me. Nothing existed but now, this moment. I imagined running past the beast and spilling out the front of the hotel. Nothing else. I could do it. And if I couldn't, I'd die in peace knowing I'd tried.

The creature slowed, its tentacles curling beautifully around it. I pitied its need for fury. It would not survive in a world overdue for healing. Though plenty of anger remained, the old establishment was on its way out. The new establishment was about love, joy, and acceptance.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Old habits died hard. I sucked in a breath, stood, rubbing the tips of my fingers together-and ran.

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed the fruit of thy womb, Jesus...

Straight towards the creature, ducking through plants, aiming for the right side of the hall where it hopefully wouldn't see me. I leapt through small spaces, flew through the air, landed on the other side of the beast. But the lobby column with the fishtail began crumbling, its crown molding raining down in chunks, and one hit me square on the temple.

I cried out.

The mercreature heard me. It shi ed, swept its tail along the lobby floor, and curled around my body, squeezing tight. I punched against its slimy, giant scales with my fists, but it li ed me to its mouth, sni ed me once, then to my shock, catapulted me across the air back into the atrium.

As I flew, I reached out and caught the tangled mess of the loose chandelier's old wiring. Why had it let go of me? Was it playing with its food before it ate me? As the creature spotted my dangling limbs, it slithered toward me and peered into my face with iridescent blind orbs. Someone was inside,

"Crow?"

The ground began to shake. It rumbled so furiously, I knew this was the end of my human experience on Earth. I wasn't afraid anymore, but the creature was. It howled at what was happening, just as I heard another howl from down below.

My lupine familiar stalked the atrium, searching for a way to reach me.

"Lobo, no,"

Every few seconds, I caught his beautiful golden eyes looking up worriedly, saw his silky black fur reflecting dim light. He stepped over rocks and wooden planks. He was solid, as solid as any animal that roamed.

From underneath us, the atrium floors began to crumble into the inky fathoms below. The creature looked at me. Why wasn't it crying anymore? For one split second, the creature's iridescent eyes turned luminous blue. It cast a glance at the cross around my neck.

Crow always looked at the cross around my neck.

"Crow, it's okay," I said. "I forgive you."

None of it had been his fault. He was just a kid when it happened.

"It's over," I told the entity controlling him. "This place is coming down, and you're coming down with it."

I'll be reborn, it spat and hissed.

"You won't. You'll be trapped here."

Hold your charmI heard Crow say.

"My what?"

Your father's protection charm.

I could barely hang onto the chandelier, how could I hold onto my charm?

I switched to my other hand and hung with renewed determination. With the little energy I had le, I pressed my palm, not against my charm, but against the creature's cheek. Closing my eyes, I "saw" its pain, a hurt older than this hotel, a deep hole in the earth, the passage through which it'd been born. I saw its fall from grace, the moment it was cast into hiding by the universe.

Consumed by hate.
Helpless and hurting.

I opened my eyes. "I'm so sorry," I told Crow, trapped inside it.
Its blind eyes blinked once.

And then, it opened its mouth.