

## Chapter Twenty Nine

I heard helicopters and sirens. A mélange of voices melded with my dreams of being asleep outdoors. Funny, this dream, it felt real-the warmth, humidity, the chirping birds, the dumped rain I was stewing in.

When I opened my eyes, I was surrounded by shoes.

"You get that side. I'll get her feet." The shoes shu led into awkward positions around me. I felt tugging, pulling, as they jostled me into a sitting posture.

My lashes fluttered, as muted, clouded light brought me to my senses.

"She's waking. Vale? Thank God, you're okay." Familiar voice.

Someone named Mori? Maybe Macy. "Your knee is torn up pretty bad."

Around me, five faces peered into mine-Wilky, Mori, Macy, Macy's mom-what was her name again? Mori's aunt. My father and Lobo were gone. But I was sure I'd seen them. My father had stroked my hair for so long, sang to me, and told me the darkness was gone. The souls were free because of me.

I sat up and stared at everyone smiling and crying. Overnight, I'd been gi ed a new family. My forehead pulsed. I sat on the dirt path, the driveway leading into the resort. Piece by piece, everything came back-the building, the atrium, the battle, a creature as horrible as the kraken of ocean lore but borne of a wretched, dying swamp.

We'd lost Fae and Crow.

We'd lost so much. But these people-they were still here.

"How long have I

been out?" I squinched my eyes against the soreness. Macy raked her fingers through my hair, wiped my face of dirt. "Since last night. A er it happened, we came looking for you, but a crew told us to steer clear of the area."

"When what happened?"

"Don't you remember?" Macy asked.

Images of wide chasms, festering heat, and destruction came barreling into the forefront of my memory. "A sinkhole."

Macy nodded. "They're saying it's the biggest one Florida's ever seen. Five hundred feet wide. They're all arriving now to confirm, but they let us in to look for you. We have to get back."

Wilky's face was covered in bloody scratches. "The whole damn thing, just...swallowed up, Vale."

I know. I saw.

Behind Lucinda was the iron gate to the property, and behind that...the sun coming up on a flat horizon. No looming hotel. No shadows stretched across the land. Just an old landscape, washed away by the rain.

"We should get out of the way, so the crews can do their work," Macy told the others.

"We need to close the portal is what we need to do."

Everyone looked at her-Citana.

"Before the inspectors arrive, and we're not allowed back in. Hurry." Citana rose to her feet with Wilky's help, and they began walking toward the gate, the whole bottom corner of which was submerged in mud. Mori looked like they'd been crying a long time with pu ed eyes and red cheeks, I took their hand and squeezed it. They nodded, biting their bottom lip. With their help, I scrambled first to my good knee, then to a semi-standing position, wincing.

"Ready?" Wilky scooped me up and carried me.

We followed Citana to the gaping sinkhole. I wasn't sure I wanted to see a crushed hotel in its depths. As it was, I'd have nightmares about this for the rest of my life. But I needed to. We had to finish what we started.

"Will it work, Tata?" Mori asked.

"Of course, it will," Citana replied without batting an eye.

Faith was everything.

It took a while to reach the edge of the precipice, as we now had to navigate li ed sections of old pavement and cracks that had formed last night. As Wilky hu ed and pu ed while carrying me, I thought about Lobo. Was he Dad all along? He'd known the area, known the clairs were in danger, known I was protected by his charm, the only explainable reason why he'd send me into a dangerous situation.

The devastation was intense. Not only was there a hole in the earth one-tenth of a mile wide, but the adjacent Sunlake Springs Lake had emptied, rivulets of water seeping from its edges into the chasm like mini waterfalls. No sign of the Devil's Tree either. Silence permeated the air, as if the sinkhole had taken the cries of the resort's souls with it.

We walked as far as we could, several feet away from the actual edge.

"Don't go any further," Wilky said, setting me on my feet.

Even from where we stood, there was no glimpsing the bottom. I was grateful for that. No need to gaze into the final resting place of Fae, Crow, and countless others. It was hard enough knowing their broken bodies were down there.

Mori dropped their chin. I put my arm around them.

"Let's do this quickly," Citana said. "Everybody, hold hands."

"Does it matter that we're six?" Wilky asked.

"Only matters that we love." Citana glanced at Mori, still shaking against my shoulder. She reached out to take their hand.

On the edge of this cli , the six of us stood in a circle. Mori to my le , Wilky to my right. A collective sigh spread over us, as thoughts of sadness assailed my brain. Citana began with a chant in her beautiful, haunting dialect that was as natural to this land as the trees, dirt, birds, and breezes.

"Let us pray," she said, same words uttered in cathedrals, mosques, and temples around the world. So much division when we were the same.

I envisioned royal light surrounding us and the chasm. In my vision, I watched it spread over the land. I sent the light into the ground to surround Fae, Crow, and Lobo, though I was sure they had already ascended. I felt no gloom. No heavy mass of anger breathing down my neck. No lingering resentment tugging at my sleeves, like needy children.

"We close this portal, sending energy back into the universe," Citana proclaimed. "Love into Heaven, Hate to be transmuted. We hereby end the curse that has plagued this land..."

Though I was glad we were doing this, I was sure the entity had already returned to where it came from, weakened like a hurricane split by island mountain peaks. Whether it would reassemble and try again, I didn't know. But for now, it was gone.

"As above, so below," Citana said.

"So mote it be," we finished.

"This place is now unblemished," Citana announced. "Let us go in peace."

During Mass, we all said, "Thanks be to God," said goodbye, and le . We'd worry about getting out of the parking lot on time or whether or not we'd arrive in time for Sunday brunch. Mindless and onto the next thing.

Today, in this place of quietude before the masses arrived, nobody moved. We stood there, arms around each other, welcoming a new day. Mori in tears, Wilky holding down the fort of emotions for us all, the ladies looking melancholy at best. The power of prayer meant nothing without intention.

Without love, words meant nothing.

Without love, we were nothing.

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