

Guardian

Autumn's feet haven't touched the floor of a church in two decades, but after last call at Ruby's Bar, she's at the little chapel at the end of the block. Unsteady, she gazes at the spire shrouded in early spring fog. In another life, she loved this church. She loved dressing up and holding Dad's hand as they found their pew at the sanctuary's heart. She loved the organ's throaty voice, the blushing stained-glass windows, the meadow of wildflowers circling the building. They bloomed everywhere, even in shadow.

Christmas Eve. Autumn was 9 years old. The faithful and not-so-faithful warmed the sanctuary forested with fake Christmas trees as censers spun clouds of incense. At the end of the service, when strains of "Silent Night" rose from the pews, Autumn cupped the candle in her hands. Honey ham and presents waited at home, but Autumn wished she could stay in the holy calm of the chapel forever.

As the congregation began the second verse, the cloth on the altar moved. Autumn frowned. Was there a draft coming from an open window somewhere? She didn't feel cold. The priest kept singing, his back to the altar. White vestments brushed the top of his shiny dress shoes. Autumn lowered her candle, squinting.

A hand snaked around the bottom of the altar. Autumn couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. The fingers were as thin as sticks, the skin smoke-gray against the pale cloth. Then, it pulled back and vanished behind the altar. Autumn clawed at the sleeve of Dad's suit, almost knocking his candle down.

"Did you see?" she gasped as he shushed her. "Did you see it?"

All these years later, earthy darkness drenches the chapel. With no sunshine to illuminate them, the stained glass looks dirty, the fragmented saints drained of life. Services haven't been held here since the larger parish opened across town, but the doors are unlocked. Autumn walks up the aisle armed with a phone flashlight. Toward the hanging Christ she goes, panic pounding in her ears.

Dust furs the floor and the top of the altar. There's nothing here. She's alone. Twenty years flash before Autumn's eyes. She's carried out of church screaming in Dad's arms. She's screaming again when nightmares invade the night. She's tasting pills. Sitting through therapy. Quitting therapy. Quitting the pills, at least most of them. Dad keeps asking her to stay with him, but she can't rip the roots of this place from her soul.

As she stands where it all began, doubt worms into her brain. Is Dad right? Was it all in her head? Autumn's flashlight pans the pews. That's where they used to sit. It had always been them against the world. Then, Christmas Eve happened, and she's drifting, a source of pain and confusion instead of pride. And why? Because she can't get over a childish hallucination? Autumn wipes stinging tears with her jacket sleeve. She shouldn't have come. There's nothing here.

Autumn starts down the aisle, but her flashlight beam snags movement beneath a pew. She pauses. Goosebumps prick her arms. A rat? Outside, a car's brakes squeak. Someone honks their horn. The noise is muffled, like a gauzy film blocks the chapel from the outside world. Sweat slides down Autumn's back.

"Hello?" she croaks.

A pew groans. Autumn whips her light toward the sound, but it finds only dust and shadows. Her breath shortens.

Get out. Get out now.

She takes a step, but a shadow slides beneath a pew. Something's moving toward the front of the church, toward the altar, toward her. Her phone scatters light in every direction as something pulls itself through the last pew. Bamboo-thin arms stretch, fingers scrape at the floor. Its whole body is free now, bare except for shorts around its bony waist. Shredded wings shed flakes like ash. Autumn holds the light still as a bald head lifts into the beam. Stitches pinch its eyes and mouth shut. It can't see her. It can't speak.

Autumn slaps a hand over her mouth, but not before a gasp escapes. Hearing her, the figure curls into itself and rocks, arms clutching the blades of its knees. A constellation of scars bleach its skin. Bruises darken its pointed face. Human or not, it's in pain.

Seconds crawl by. The creature is in no state to stop her, but Autumn can't leave. Pity clouds her judgment. How long has it been here? And why? She exhales a breath and the creature flinches, realizing she's still here.

"It's okay," Autumn whispers. "I won't hurt you."

After a moment, the creature points a quivering finger to its stitched mouth, to its eyes. Autumn hesitates. With this thing blind, she's in control. If that changes...the creature moans and covers its face with ragged hands. It sounds so broken.

Like me, Autumn thinks.

She finds her knife. Carbon steel blade, aluminum handle. Dad gave it to her before he moved. "Just in case," he'd said. A horrifying gift. Mercifully, she's never had to use it, but touching its engraved surface has calmed her on more than one nightmare-crowded night. Autumn flips the blade open. The creature lowers its hands. Holding her breath, Autumn angles

her phone on a pew to create a weak spotlight. She cradles the creature's head. It's rough, like fish scales. The stitches resist, but with a twist of the blade, they split. The creature's eye opens.

Autumn darts back, heart racing, the knife's handle digging into her palm. The eye is blue. No iris or pupil. Pure blue. It shifts to a cross-legged position. Waiting. Autumn cuts the other eye free and then moves to the mouth. When oven-hot breath brushes her skin, Autumn leaps back and trips over her own feet. She hits the seat of the pew hard, knocking her phone down. The light swivels to the ceiling, and in the darkness, the creature moves. Fast. Its wings sweep against her. She curls into a ball as regret pumps through her blood.

The song is echo-faint at first. More a mumble than a melody. Autumn uncurls just enough to see the creature climb the altar like a gargoyle. It raises its arms, its voice holding light and darkness in the same note. Autumn's hands hover over her ears, but she can't cover them. The music drowns every thought. The room tips, glows, as heat thrums the air. When the creature's song reaches its climax, a dozen more wings burst from its skin, the tips nearly touching the walls. In the haze, muscles bloom and harden into gold. Through a fiery blur, it turns its blazing gaze on her.

Go.

Autumn sprints through the chapel doors and tumbles down the stairs. Behind her, flames roar through the building. She doesn't look back, so she doesn't see the smoky figure spiraling into the fog. She keeps running. Later, she won't watch the news report covering the fire that leveled the chapel. She won't learn about the priest found dead in his house two streets away. Instead, Autumn buys a one-way bus ticket to Tampa. When her father opens the door to his condo, his eyes widen at her white hair.

"What happened?" he asks as she collapses into his arms.

She doesn't speak. She writes. Dad reads late into the night, kneading his forehead, as he tries to process the story Autumn tells over and over again. Should he call someone? He doesn't want to make things worse, but something is wrong with his daughter.

Months later, from her nest on the couch, Autumn raises a shaking finger toward a corner of the living room. As Dad straightens in his armchair, a joint in his back pops. "Autumn? Honey?"

She looks at him, a desperate question in her tear-glazed eyes.

"There's nothing there," Dad says, shaking his head. As he stares at the corner, the hairs on his arms stiffen. He rubs them flat.

As he crosses the room to start dinner, something shifts in the corner of his eye. He freezes, and for a second, he spots midnight-blue eyes peering through a blur of wings. Fire glows against his flesh. Then, nothing. Florida sunshine brushes the carpet. Dad shakes his head again, like he's clearing a cobweb.

"Is mac and cheese okay?" he asks.

Autumn doesn't reply.

"Coming right up."

As he turns, a sweet stream of music flows after him. Autumn is humming again. She does it a lot. Her father smiles. He doesn't recognize the melody, but it's beautiful.