

Chapter 1

As usual a strange kind of instinct guided Seb. It always began as a gnawing tingle at the back of his mind, like an internal sat nav that drew him to another seemingly random location. He must've easily covered twenty miles that night, starting at the Pleasure Beach, where the masses knocked back a mixture of cheap rides and greasy food with abandon, right down to the promenade, before finally ending up here, at what had once been a church, but where now stood a ruined shell plastered in rotting boards.

Taking a moment, ignoring the cold rain on his skin, he turned to admire the view. The church stood on the crest of a hill at the bottom of which a road curved up and away from the sea. The buildings that stood on either side of the church were either abandoned - gagged and blindfolded by wooden boards - or inhabited by the kind of folks he had no intention of spending quality time with.

Some might say it was dangerous out here, at this time, and past experience had told him that it wasn't an unwise assertion. But for him, it was home, his haven. He didn't belong in the day, not that he knew why, he'd given up asking that question many years ago. Under the sun he felt dulled, slowed even, but by night, he felt alive.

Chapter 2

He didn't remember falling asleep, not that it was a surprise at all. His mindless treks always took their toll, and tonight's near marathon was easily up there as a personal best. He never felt it at the time, but god did he feel it in the morning. Often he would sleep it off where he fell, but this time his rest had been interrupted. He woke up with a start, heart thudding in his chest.

It came again. What was it? A scream? Something else? He stood up and stretched tired limbs. He glanced at his watch. Four in the morning. Great. Another shriek came, this time from somewhere near the promenade. It wasn't a happy scream, like those of the drunk zigzagging their way home. He knew those well. This was different. Someone terrified.

It came again. Nearer this time. He pressed himself into the alcove, seeking solace in the shadows. As he watched, a young woman came hurtling round the corner at the bottom of the street. She fell once, knees scraping the pavement. She tried scrambling up but her legs kept slipping underneath her. Her breath puffed out clouds of cold mist as she dragged herself up the hill towards the church.

'Almost there...almost there.'

Her panicked mutterings drifted up the hill. She was halfway up already, not fifty yards from where he crouched. She fell again, her face hitting the ground with a sick thud.

Blood splattered the pavement. Something small and white clattered onto the road.

Screw this.

He dashed out of the alcove and raced across the road. Somehow the woman had managed to stumble to her feet again by the time he reached her. Standing upright, her gait unsteady, she took jerky, random steps forwards. A glazed look crossed her eyes, tiny pupils fixed at something beyond him. He slowed to a halt a few feet in front of her, eyes drawn to the vicious wound that stretched across her stomach, almost the width of her body. One hand covered the seeping lacerations, the other reached out before her, towards him, but focused on somewhere beyond. He swallowed down a hot gush of bile. How the hell was she still standing?

'Wait!'

Seb waved his arms to get her attention. She slowed, her head turning towards him. She blinked once before collapsing into his open arms, the impact making him stagger backwards. Her eyes found his, pupils darting in multiple directions, taking him in. Something seemed to register in her mind and she squirmed, arching her back in an attempt to escape his grasp.

'Let me go!' She hissed, trying to push him away but collapsing back with a wince.

'No way. You need a paramedic or something. What the hell happened?'

She didn't respond. For a moment her eyes froze like a frightened animal. Then she blinked. Some semblance of awareness returned. Angry eyes locked on him.

'Lemme go!' she screamed, 'Lemme-fucking-go!'

She lashed out, the palm of her hand smashing into the side of his skull. He staggered, stunned, clutching his head as she stumbled past him towards the church.

'What the hell was that?' He followed her up the road, shaking his head, 'Miss, you need...'

If dread could be manifested as a force, he felt it then. A wave of *something* washed over him, as cold as death, stopping him in his tracks. His skin erupted in goose pimples, the air temperature dropping like a stone. Breath condensed in front of his face. The street lamps flickered. The woman obviously felt it too. They both turned to face the base of the hill.

'No. He's found me! He's found me!' she whimpered, her voice barely audible.

It didn't so much as walk out of the gloom, it oozed. Its form coalesced from the gloom, a slight shimmering in the air, a shifting of shadows, before condensing into something resembling a human that now stood, unmoving, just at the periphery of the streetlight.

Yet this was no human.

Unnaturally tall, easily touching seven foot, the thing wore a pin-striped suit that hung loosely off a pencil-thin

frame. Its head was dipped, face hidden beneath a black fedora with a single silver band. As he watched, the creature's head rose. Black eyes met his. Something cold trickled down his spine.

It began to move forwards, its step light, almost a jaunt. Its mouth opened into a wide grin, jaw distending to almost impossible proportions, baring a set of dagger-like incisors.

'You see it, don't you?'

He'd forgotten she was even there. He looked back at the woman, managing the barest of nods. She reached out to him, her hand shaking.

'Come with me.'

'What?' He mumbled, not able to take his eyes off the thing before him.

'Come on!'

She yanked his arm, jerking him back with a strength that belied the extent of her injuries.

'Oh Sarah, why do you run so?' the voice, like steel scraping steel, drifted up the hill.

'You should have known better than to run,' it continued, the distance closing.

Seb stumbled backwards and fell. He'd never believed it when people said they'd been frozen with fear, but the phrase didn't do it justice. He was beyond paralyzed. His limbs simply absent passengers. The creature's gaze shifted to him

then:

'And I see you've brought a friend?'

Shit.

The woman pulled at him again. Adrenalin filled numbed legs and he forced himself off the ground. They staggered towards the church, two strangers bound by fear. She collapsed against the door and slid down, her eyes rolling up in her head.

'No! No!' he said, shaking her by the shoulders. With his eyes off the creature it felt like some of the hold it had on him, like a predator on its prey, had been lifted. He caught her head as it rolled forward, her eyes staring beyond him, unfocused.

'Go...' she slurred, 'He doesn't...want...you.'

'Now, now, Sarah, you know I don't like it when you run.' The voice carried around the building, dancing in the air, taunting them.

Seb pushed against the door. It gave a bit but didn't open. The wood was rotten, the building abandoned for years. He stepped back and kicked. Something cracked inside the door frame.

'Just give up, Sarah, you know you can't escape.'

Footsteps scraped against tarmac. It was only feet away. He felt his mind squirming, trying to go somewhere safe, to lock itself away from the encroaching horror. He shook his head and kicked again. The door buckled. The lock shattered

and the wooden barrier swung open with a painful creak. Sarah fell, hitting the floor with a thud. A groan escaped her lips.

Seb gripped her under her arms and dragged her inside. Slamming the door shut, he scanned the nave, spotting a handful of upturned pews stacked against the wall. He grabbed at the nearest by the edge but his palms were slick with sweat and the pew slipped free, crashing back onto the stone floor.

Footsteps on the path. A cheery whistle.

Come on! Come on!

He took a better grip this time and dragged it backwards. He manoeuvred it until the end pressed firmly against the flat of the door. He lurched back, arms screaming, flipping the other end so that the base was wedged against the font. It would have to do. He turned and hoisted Sarah up and dragged her towards the back of the church. They collapsed at the altar, her head on his chest. Her breathing was slow, irregular. His own heart crashed against his ribs.

'Knock, Knock'.

He pulled his knees up and buried his head in his hands. He was going to die here, he knew that. He didn't know what this *thing* was. It looked like a man. Spoke the words of a man, but it was as inhuman as could be. He had never considered himself religious, but at that moment he resorted to the only thing he could think of, which was pretty apt, considering the location.

'Our Father...'

The chuckle from beyond the door sliced through him like blades.

'Your Father...'

The air shimmered again, by the door.

The shadows swirled like Chinese dragons, the creature reforming on their side of the door. '...died a long time ago.'

Seb let out a wail and his chest began to heave in stricken sobs.

'No, no. Please, don't be sad.' It said.

It didn't walk. It simply drifted down the aisle towards them. It stopped not six foot away, head cocked to one side.

Sarah stirred. Her eyes flickered open.

The horror drifted closer. It loomed over them now. Seb looked down, staring at a pair of polished black loafers.

'Look at me.'

He didn't move. He forced his gaze towards the floor.

'Look. At. Me.'

Something in that voice compelled him. He tried with all his strength, the tendons in his neck straining. His temple throbbed, but it was of no use. He felt his chin rising.

Those black eyes grinned down. Its teeth were bared, a sickening smell of rotten meat washing over him. A warm tear trickled down his cheek.

'Oh, is the little protector afraid?' the thing said, cocking its head to one side, a thin, tapered finger pressed against its black lips in mock concern.

'Fuck you,' Seb said.

The thing stopped in its tracks. It blinked, the lids coming from the sides, not top and bottom, causing Seb's stomach to heave. The creature's mouth formed a perfect 'o' as it took a mocking step backwards.

'My, my,' it whispered, the shock only momentary, that grin returning. 'We do have some spunk, don't we?'

Its hand delved into its sleeve, withdrawing a slender dagger. The blade was maroon, caked in dried blood. The creature *flowed* forwards again, fingers outstretched, the blade inverted, pointing down.

Here it comes. He pressed his head hard into his chest, eyes scrunched shut, wishing it would be over quickly. The smell of rot was overpowering, the stench washing over him in waves.

A sudden movement. Sarah. It was between her and himself, out of sight of the fiend. Something, a blade of some kind, glinted as she pulled it from her sleeve. Her eyes met his, lucid this time. She gave a barely perceptible nod.

He leaned to one side as she lunged past him at speed. Her wrist flicked out, he heard a thunk, followed by a surprised gasp. He dared to open his eyes.

The creature had staggered back. Its black eyes wide, focused on the knife embedded in its chest. A brief feeling of elation flared as the thing gently touched the hilt, its finger tracing the blade up to where the metal vanished into its chest and a thick, viscous ooze had begun to seep out.

Soundlessly, the creature toppled over.

'Your name.' Sarah whispered.

She didn't look good. Dark, almost black blood trickled from the side of her mouth.

'Your name!' she gasped.

'Seb.'

'Come closer, there isn't much time. The blade isn't runed. You know what we have to do.'

He shook his head. 'Runed? What? Sorry, I don't know what you mean.'

In the aisle, the thing twitched. A leg jerked.

'You weren't there by accident.' It wasn't a question.

'Yes. No. I mean. I don't know why I was there.'

'You were drawn. I can see it. You are Latent.'

'Listen, I don't -'

She grabbed him by the shirt, pulling him closer. Her breath smelled of copper.

'You must take what I've found,' her eyes rolled, her body sagging, he caught her just before she slumped back onto the stone. Her eyes refocused. 'Look at me.'

He forced himself to look at her. Her eyes were like pools of crystal, drawing him in. He felt the world drifting away.

Movement behind him. He glanced back. The thing's leg jerked again. One foot drew back, a knee rising, leather scraping on the floor.

No way! No fucking way!

It sat upright, the blade still stuck in its chest.

'Seb!'

Trembling, he forced his gaze away from the thing. He found her eyes again. Cold hands rose and gripped the sides of his face.

'See.' She whispered.

A searing light lanced through his mind. His brain burned as energy *poured* from her, a pure white blast of light that enveloped him completely.

As quickly as it started, it was over. He found himself sat on his backside, a jolt in his palms as he hit the floor. His head throbbed. White stars danced in his vision. He glanced down. Sarah stared past him, at peace.

From somewhere distant a siren shrieked, the increase in pitch telling him that help was coming. Never before had he been so relieved to hear the sound of officialdom. He staggered to his feet, unsure of what Sarah had done, but acutely aware that he once again had control of his limbs. He turned and froze.

In the aisle, the thing took hold of the blade in its chest, and with a slick, smooth manoeuvre that made Seb's stomach lurch, pulled it out without so much as a flinch. It wafted the blade under its nose, seemingly lost in the intricacy of the design.

Seb didn't need a second chance. He darted from the altar

and vaulted over the upturned pews to the right of the fiend, where it still appeared rapt by the weapon in its grasp.

The door loomed before him. He cracked his knee on a pew and fell sprawling to the ground, his bottom teeth slicing into his top lip. Blood filled his mouth. He scrambled to his feet and threw himself against the door.

It didn't yield. His shoulder throbbed.

Behind him, he felt, rather than heard, the creature as its attention returned to him. Daring a look behind, he saw as it glanced at Sarah then back at him. Confusion passed across its face.

'What did she do?' it hissed, the sound nearly pinning him to the wall.

Move Seb! Move! He kicked the door again. Nothing. Then it hit him. The pew! He squatted, took the pew by the base where it was still wedged by the font, and hurled it to one side.

Movement behind him. A gap being closed.

The door opened to an explosion of blue flashing lights. A cacophony of commanding voices ordered him to do something, but they sounded far away, muffled.

He stepped out into the light, into freedom.

The pain that seared his back at that moment was unlike nothing he'd ever felt. A bone-cold presence pressed against him, that smell of death on his neck.

'Give me what is mine!' the voice muttered.

He looked down at his hip, where the tip of the blade now protruded. A growing spread of blood bloomed on his shirt. His knees began to give way.

'Step out of the church!'

The voice pierced the fugue, his conscious mind returning for one last hurrah.

It was a last, desperate action. The fiend pulled him backwards, into the church. The end was nigh, and part of him yearned for the release from this horror, but something, some last reserve he didn't know he had, did not give in so easily. Energy coursed through him, fight or flight, one last act of defiance before succumbing to the void.

Seb bent forwards, the blade slicing upwards further into his side. Fiery pain screamed. He tumbled forwards and fell into the light. He hit the ground and rolled onto his back. He saw the thing then, half merged with the shadows in the doorway. Its face fixed in a look of pure rage, its teeth bared, jaw distended. Then footsteps behind him. Shouts of alarm. Authority. The thing shrieked, but did not follow. It melted back into the shadows, the shriek burning his ears as the world faded into darkness.

The figure stood, watching silently from his vantage point on a nearby roof as the emergency services converged upon the young man that lay collapsed on the floor in the church doorway. He absently noted the shimmering mist that fled out

of the back of the church, the daemon's mission failed.

Turning back to the frenzy at the church, he cast out his limited *sense*, frowning at what he received.

'What is it?' Another man, clad in the same black attire, appeared at his side.

'I don't know. Maybe nothing.' He glanced up at the night, feeling the stirring of reality. It wasn't a good time to hang around. He nodded downwards, his men obeying without question. With one last look at the church, at the human survivor with the strange aura, Cade turned, and leapt off the building.

Chapter 3

Sylph bit back a curse as the van hit another speed bump that cracked her head against the roof of the cramped vehicle. The others smirked but didn't dare comment. They knew better than that.

'How long?' She said.

Luchar checked his watch. 'Five minutes.'

She nodded and began checking the weapons hidden about her person for the fifth time.

'You going to tell us then?'

She stopped what she was doing and levelled her gaze at the speaker. Uroc, the biggest of the group, six foot five of muscle, stared back at her. Dumb eyes on a dumb face.

'Tell you what, Uroc?' She noticed and ignored Luchar's attempts to silence the brute. She placed a hand on the commander's arm, silencing him in an instant.

'What we're doin' 'ere, that's what.'

'You're here at the will of Master Marek, surely that's enough?' She said, her voice laced with steel.

'That lunatic? That makes me feel so much better.'

The van fell into a tense silence. The only noise the clatter as the vehicle trundled up the narrow road that led to their destination.

She had to act. Luchar was their commander, but he wouldn't bat an eyelid should one of his men get the wrong idea. *She died bravely, Master*, would be his report, after dumping her body in a layby somewhere. This was the problem with hired help. It was a no win. Either the mindless brutes of the sheol or paid thugs from the street. Neither was up to Balor's standards.

'I suggest, Uroc, that you get your mouth in order. Balor doesn't react kindly to those who disrespect his chosen.'

'Screw Balor! Screw your *cause*! I'm here for the money, nothing else. What's the deal with this Marek, anyway? Who the hell does he think he is? And what the hell is he doing with all those poor bast -'

Uroc's head snapped back as his nose exploded against his face. His eyes watered, wide with surprise as blood poured from the pulpy mess. Sylph stood before him, the torch she'd

used to strike him held in one hand above his head.

'What the hell have you do -'

She struck him again, and again. His head cracked back against the inside of the van, bouncing back into another hit. A third and a fourth followed, until all the lights went out. Sylph sat back down and wiped the blood off the torch with a rag, ignoring the eyes that burned into her. When the impromptu weapon was clean, and the sick feeling in her gut had subsided, she raised her head and looked each of the team in the eye.

'Uroc is guilty of blasphemy against the Lord Balor and has paid the price for that.'

Silence. Some of them openly brimmed with fury, but thankfully none dared act. Not yet anyway.

'Luchar, you will be my eyes and ears on the outside. Give me ten minutes. If I'm not out by then you have permission to go back to Haven. Clear?'

'Crystal.'

'Good,' she said, already doubting they'd wait ten seconds after she left the van.

The van began to slow. The slat dividing the front with the passengers slid back and Moss peered through.

'We're here - what the hell!'

'Uroc has had a bit of an accident, Moss,' Sylph said, 'He may need medical attention, if it's not too late already.'

'Yes, Ma'am,' Moss stammered, a mix of confusion and fear

on his face.

The van stopped. Paul jumped out of the passenger side and trudged round the back of the vehicle. The lock clicked and the rear door slid open. Sylph hopped out. A welcome breeze washed over her, removing the cloying scent of sweat that had filled the van.

'Test, Luchar.' She said.

Luchar, ever the professional, placed the earpiece in his ear. 'One two, one two.'

'I hear you.'

She checked her gear one last time. Ideally she would've taken more; the small blades strapped against her wrists the only protection she could conceal in the loose outfit she wore. She checked the iron rods sewn into her sleeves, a last deterrent if a feral sheol made it through. She shook her head. It would have to do. Luchar leaned over and passed her the small rucksack that contained the essential items should things go belly up. He held the grip as she took hold, forcing her to look at him.

'What is it you're going to do, Sylph? Dead people don't talk.'

'You wouldn't understand.' She snapped the bag off him and slung it over her back. 'Remember,' she said.

'Ten minutes.'

'No more.'