

### Dancing With Smoke

I'll never forget that night in the abandoned ballroom. I would go there when I needed time alone to think, to escape from the chaos of the world. But when I went there that night, my chaos was waiting for me. Since the place hadn't been used in years, the inside was just as chilling as the winter evening air. By the time I arrived there, my fingers were numb, and I was considering just turning around and going home. But upon opening the door, the chilling feeling dissipated. It wasn't just the cold that left me, I noticed; it was everything. Although I could see the pale clouds of mist as I exhaled, I could not feel the air rushing through my nose nor the rising and falling of my chest. If my heart were racing, I could not feel it. I almost felt like Death himself. That was impossible, of course, for he was standing in the middle of the ballroom floor.

"Beautiful place, isn't it?" He hummed, his skin still draped in darkness. I wasn't too sure how to answer. For a moment, I thought that maybe I had lost my voice as well as the feeling in my lips. "I understand that didn't expect to see me here, but this place seemed to call to me. Like humans do when their time has come."

"You sensed death?" I asked, drawn towards him as if I had gotten caught in his orbit.

"Not death; life." Behind the screen of smoke that covered his eyes, I could see a glimmer of light looking in my direction.

"How could you feel life here? You were alone before I arrived." Azrael just shook his head and smiled at my words.

"I can sense the energy of what once was." Fine blades of smoke danced across his lips as he spoke. "The joy of the audience, the passion of the dancers; I can feel it all."

"I can't feel anything." Looking back on it now, I don't know why I thought I would be able to.

"It's not as simple as that. I'm not just feeling it; it's like I'm living it." I took a moment to smile at the irony of that sentence.

"I wonder what it's like," I mumbled, staring at the beam of pale moonlight that shone from a large hole in the roof.

"I could show you if you'd like." At the time, I wasn't entirely sure what he was suggesting, but it seems rather obvious now. As I nodded cautiously, he reached out a ghostly black hand towards me. I eagerly went to take it, but he flinched away. "We cannot touch."

"Then how are we supposed to dance?" I asked; surely he could not be suggesting a dance without touch.

"My dear Vida," I still wasn't sure why he called me that. "Dance is not about the touch; it is about the movement." He must have seen the confusion on my face as he then continued, "Just

go with it and let the music carry you.” He waved a hand at the dusty record player that stood in the place of an orchestra, and to my surprise, it started to play. It was an eerie tune, cold yet beautiful. I wish I could hear it again, but the past has claimed it for its own. Those captivating notes were played in a way so perfect that I didn’t believe a human could compose it. Then again, maybe they didn’t. Suddenly, I was swept off my feet. Unless my eyes were betraying me, it looked like I was still standing firmly on the ground. Yet, it felt like I was floating. I could feel a pressure at my waist as if someone was holding me. However, Azrael’s hands were resting inches away from my skin. Even though we made no contact, I felt fully supported. He smiled down at me, and his earlier words echoed in my mind. Let the music carry you. And I did.

We glided across the ballroom floor, leaving wisps of black smoke behind us. I couldn’t help but grin as he carried me through the air. He created fantastic light shows on the floor as he pulled me through the rays of moonlight. It was hard to see his smile through the smokescreen, but it was definitely there. It made him seem so... alive. For a moment, I thought I could just reach out and touch his face. I wondered what it would feel like. Would he have skin? Or would my hand go straight through him like a ghost? As curious as I was, I resisted the urge. Through a hazy gaze, I watched his eyes. They seemed to glow with a sombre curiosity. I felt myself being gently tipped backwards, and his face leaned in close to mine. So close that I could feel the cold smoke on my cheeks. Allowing my eyes to close, part of me hoped to feel his lips touch mine. I wondered what death’s kiss would feel like. The reality seemed to hit both of us at the same time. In a moment, he released me, and my feet felt the hardness of the ground once more.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered, slinking away from the moonlight. I watched a pale white smoke dancing with the black of his lips. Looking down, I saw the same white drifting across my own. It couldn’t have possibly come from me, could it? It reminded me of the ghostly cloud that engulfed my mother that day in the hospital. He said it was her soul; could this be mine? Then I understood. Understood why we could not touch. His touch would mean death, and yet, I still found myself reaching out to him.

“The music is still playing; let’s finish our dance.” Azrael looked up at me. I could tell that he was holding back. “Please.” Slowly, he approached me once more. As his dark hands brushed mere millimetres away from my skin, the same white smoke from earlier formed beneath his fingers. Death’s touch was gentle. It was hard to believe that he could take my life essence, yet I watched his fingers entwine and play with it like a silk ribbon.

Once again, he took me flying around the room, holding me closer than last time. I wondered if it was due to a lack of fear or a flourish of passion. Perhaps it was both. Streams of black and white smoke danced behind us like candles. Balls of ghostly Yin and Yang bounced around our feet and exploded into grey clouds. In an instant, it was like the whole room came alive. Candles burst into life on the walls, along with a great glass chandelier that hung from the ceiling. I felt an eery presence of other people in the room.

“You see them,” Azrael said, pulling me closer. “The shadows of the past.” For a moment, I was confused. That was until I saw them, dark figures standing against the walls and sprawled

across the floors. They were not physical beings, merely shapes of black against the light. As he said, shadows.

“Can they see us?” I asked, trying to see how they reacted when we glided past. They paid no attention to us, their outlined faces looking in another direction.

“No, watch the floor.” I did as he said but saw only our shadows. However, they didn’t move like us. The silhouettes seemed to be having their own dance until they twirled away, dragging the attention of the shadow audience along with them. It was only then that I realised they weren’t our shadows at all. I looked at Azrael in amazement, but he just grinned and lifted my arm. I felt the cold air rush past me as he twirled me around as the shadows had just done. Instead of going across the floor, we went up. As the room spun around me, I could see the ground becoming more and more distant. I thought I was going to fall, but I should have known that he’d never let that happen. Then there he was, that black smoke engulfing me and filling my lungs. His body drowned me in darkness, but his eyes shone through like spotlights. Those gorgeous eyes were like specks of gold in a pile of coal. Maybe it was his eyes that I fell in love with first. Who knows? But then I felt his arms around me and watched as tendrils of my soul slithered up his skin.

The world around me went blurry as he spun me once again, only to catch me seconds later. As I spun through the air once more, he took me by my hands and twisted with me as I spiralled towards the floor. I could not contain a small squeal as we stopped right before we hit the floor. Then up we went again, soaring way above the lights to the cracks in the ceiling where the moonlight was split into small beams that lit up the chandelier. He danced me through the lights, and I watched in amusement as they seemed to illuminate his entire body. I thought they would just go straight through him, but buried deep within the smoke, I could see the tall and muscular body of a man. He pulled me away from the light all too soon, and I was once again robbed of a glimpse of his face. He lowered me to the ground in silence. As we descended, the lights around the room were doused one by one. The shadows faded into the darkness, and I could hear the record player crackling into silence. We landed in a cloud of grey smoke. I searched desperately for those golden eyes, but I couldn’t find them. I couldn’t find anything. For when the smoke cleared, he was gone. My senses slowly returned to me, along with the bitter cold. I went over to the record player to retrieve that beautiful tune, but when I picked it up, the whole thing turned into fine black dust and crumbled beneath my fingertips.

I never found out why he left me there. He nearly took my soul that night, and I would have let him.