



THE QUEEN'S MEDITATION CHAMBERS are large. The ceilings are high enough you can't see them if you don't crane your neck. Looking up is a lot like falling; Nathan avoids it out of habit. The dead don't fall—even when that's what they want. They can jump off a cliff or the roof of a building and hang there, ignored by gravity. They've got no weight.

The Queen is not dead. She burns with life. She is luminous, beautiful; if the dead aren't careful, they are struck dumb at the sight of her. She doesn't know what she looks like in the eyes of the dead; she can't see herself the way the dead do. She's therefore incredibly impatient. She takes a dim view of disobedience.

She is the only law the dead know.

The Queen walks to the center of the round chamber. Elaborate chairs dot the circumference of the smooth, rising walls; there are cabinets with cut-glass doors that catch light and reflect it. Books line the shelves; books lie face-up across the various tables situated between the chairs. She touches none of them. Instead, she positions herself in the center of a large engraved circle. The perimeter of that circle

contains runes or glyphs that Nathan would have found fascinating while alive. He barely sees them, now.

The Queen is not wearing her full court dress. She doesn't need it. If she wore sweats and sneakers, it wouldn't matter. People here aren't bowing or scraping at her dress. Nathan understands that bowing and scraping—when too obsequious—annoys the Queen. He doesn't do it.

But he doesn't speak, either, unless spoken to. He doesn't crack a joke. He doesn't ask her how her day went. Mostly, he doesn't want to know. And there are reasons for that.

She gestures. She doesn't speak. Or rather, she doesn't speak to Nathan; she can choose who, among the dead, hear her voice.

Four of the dead do.

They come to her as she stands, flowing through the walls as if the chamber were a vast, unmarked clock face; they trace the path from the quarter marks of time—twelve, three, six, nine—as they approach. Nathan closes his eyes, but it doesn't help. He can still see their faces. He can see their expressions.

There are two girls and two boys. They are all Nathan's age—or they were, when they died. Left to themselves, the dead tend to wear the clothing they spent their last living minutes in. But the dead in the citadel are not left to their own devices. They wear what the Queen dictates. Today—or tonight—they are wearing loose, flowing robes. The robes are a pale, luminescent gray, as is everything else about them.

They walk with a quiet, hopeless dignity. One of the girls struggles; he can see the strain in the lines of her mouth, the narrowing of her eyes. But he can't see it in the steps she is forced to take. She understands what is going to happen to her here. He wonders if the other three do. He can't ask. Literally. His mouth doesn't move.

That's probably for the best. Nathan is not a screamer. He's not a cryer. But the urge—the sudden, visceral urge—to do both is strong.

He understood, as he followed the Queen to this chamber, that she meant to “clothe you in life”, a fancy way of saying “build you a body.”

He understood that all of the Queen's power is derived from the dead—and that the city itself is home to many of them. More come every day; overpopulation isn't an issue when your citizens can't eat, can't work, and don't particularly need a place to live.

He did not put the three things together. The building of a body. The power necessary. The source of that power.

She means to honor him. He knows this. He knows that this is how she sees what she is doing as she waits implacably for the drifting dead to reach her until she is the heart of their formation. Nathan can see her through the transparency of their bodies. No surprise, there; he can see her through the solid stone of her citadel's many walls.

She knows. She turns to him, smiling, her expression radiant. She looks—for just that moment—like a sixteen-year-old girl, not the ancient ruler of a dead city. The four surround her now. They reach out—to each other—and clasp hands.

They are already dead. So is Nathan. But he feels their fear; it's like a mirror of his own. He doesn't need to breathe—but even if he did, he wouldn't. She raises her arm, then raises her face, exposing the perfect line of a throat that clearly never sees sunlight. Her hair, loose, trails down her back, straight and unconfined. It is the only thing about her that reminds him of Emma.

No, that's not true. The Queen of the Dead reminds Nathan of Emma because she is, at this moment, everything that Emma *isn't*. Emma would never surround herself with unwilling victims. Emma would never reach out with her graceful, slender hands and *bury* them in the chests of the two young women, reaching for the hearts that they don't actually have anymore.

Nathan wants to scream. He wants to shout. He wants to beg the Queen to *stop*. To tell her that he'll take being dead—being invisibly, unreachably dead—because no form of life, no form of actual body, could be worth the cost.

The dead girls throw back their heads, just as the Queen did, but for

vastly different reasons. Nathan can see only their profiles; their mouths are open in the silent scream that Nathan is certain shapes his own. When the Queen retracts her hands, the girls come with them, as if their bodies were made of cloth and she has yanked them out of shape. That cloth is like silk or satin; it has a sheen that catches light, implies color.

It doesn't look human anymore. But Nathan knows, watching, that it is. The Queen is radiant with color as she shifts in place. She turns to face Nathan, and as she does, she reaches out again for the center of two hearts. The two boys. They're braced for it; unlike the one girl, they don't struggle at all. Their eyes are wide, rounded; they watch the Queen—just as Nathan does. Like moths to flame.

She unravels them as well. Her arms are cocooned with glowing light; it's almost painful to look at. Nathan understands that the dead are there, exposed, rendered both helpless and potent; she has taken whatever they have left to give.

And she uses it now, as he watches. She works those strands of colored, brilliant light, as if weaving a basket or a wire dummy. He can almost hear the voices of the four as she does; they are weeping. They are so close to her, so close to the warmth of the light she sheds—and it makes no difference. Nathan wonders, then, if she can hear them at all.

But she must, because she can hear him. She looks at him now, as she shuffles threads, joining them, binding them, making their weave tighter and tighter until they seem solid to the eye. She then looks at her work with the critical eye of an artist. Her gaze pins Nathan and leaves him, over and over again.

Nathan has no idea how much time passes. No one comes to these chambers but the Queen. No one interrupts her when she works here. And she works now. She works, her brow furrowed, her eyes narrowed; she works until sweat beads her forehead and small strands of pale hair cling to it.

All the while, the voices of the four thrum; they have a pulse and a

beat, an ebb and a flow, that are synchronized almost exactly with the work she does. It is the chamber music of hell.

Nathan, like anyone else alive—or, rather, anyone who was once alive—has no memory of being born. He has dim memories of childhood, and he believes some of them occurred when he was three—but he’s aware that he might be wrong, even if they *are* his memories. He tries to sort through them now, as the Queen continues to sculpt: to shear off pale flesh from cheekbones, to elongate neck, to narrow the lines of chest, arms, hands.

When she is finished, it is the hands of her masterpiece she holds. “Nathan,” she says, her voice softer than he has ever heard it, “come to me.”

Like the single girl, he hesitates. He knows the hesitation could be deadly, but at this point, he almost welcomes it. He can *still* hear dim, attenuated voices, and he understands that they are part of the finished form.

It looks like Nathan, to his own eyes: like Nathan, but stark naked. He can’t see the flaws. He knows they’re there, but he can’t see them for the light she still radiates. If he could plug his ears, he might even feel awe or gratitude. He can’t.

Oh, he can lift hands to ears, but it does no good. His ears aren’t actual, physical ears. His hands block no sound.

“Nathan.”

He walks. He walks toward where the Queen clasps the hands of her empty, shining creation. He notes that the eyes—the body’s eyes—are closed and wonders whether his eyelashes were ever that long. It’s an absurd thought.

Absurd is better than horror.

He is not terrified of the Queen as he approaches her; horror and terror are different. But he understands, as she waits, why someone would run away from her no matter how much she loved them.

Nathan doesn't love her. If he had a choice, there is almost nowhere else he wouldn't be.

"Give me your hand," the Queen says.

He doesn't think; his hand is in hers before the echoes of her words die. Her palm is warm. It reminds him of Emma.

Emma is a Necromancer.

He didn't understand why Chase was so angry at Emma. He couldn't understand what Chase feared. No one who knew Emma could be afraid of her. They might be afraid of losing her—and the love she offers so steadily—but that was never Chase's concern.

He understands now. Emma glows with the same interior fire that burns at the heart of the Queen. Emma has as much power as the Queen of the Dead. Emma could—if she knew how—do exactly what the Queen has done today.

Emma would never do it. He knows. But he wonders what anyone could do to stop her if she did.

"Close your eyes, Nathan."

He does. He doesn't tell her that it makes no difference. She doesn't plunge her hand into his chest. She doesn't yank his heart out and stretch it into filaments. She doesn't destroy him for the raw materials she needs to create anything else. But he wonders, now, whether everything in her world—the citadel, the streets, the buildings that line them—was made the same way.

The warmth of her hand becomes heat, and the heat becomes pain. It is not a pain he associates with burning—he's burned himself before. It's not a pain he associates with physical injury. It's not localized. It's not confined to the hand she grips.

It travels through him. It curls up inside of him, as if he had swallowed it whole. It has no way to escape him; he has no way to set it free. Some small part of him thinks: It's better than feeling nothing.

He expects to be swallowed in a similar way; he's not. She attaches

herself to him in a hundred little ways—in a thousand. As she does, the cold recedes. There's nothing sexual about her touch. Nothing predatory. She is alarmingly gentle.

It's the gentleness that almost does him in. If he couldn't hear the dim, distant voices of the others, he would surrender himself entirely into this woman's keeping. He is *so* tired. And he is warm. He almost believes he has finally come to a place of rest.

But the voices don't stop. They're quiet. They're dim. But they're inside him now. Or he's inside them. He opens his eyes. He blinks. The Queen withdraws the hands that held his—and they are his hands, now. The voices weep to let her go; they can't cling. Nathan could—but he doesn't. He has that choice.

He is standing before her. He's naked. He should feel embarrassed, but he doesn't; she recreated his entire body. There's no part of it she hasn't seen and no part of it she hasn't already touched.

"There is a robe on the far wall," the Queen says. "Take it and leave. Someone will be waiting to lead you to your rooms. You will require rooms, now; you will require food."

He doesn't ask her about sleep. He doesn't ask her about anything. He knows he should make some show of gratitude, but he can't quite force his knees to bend because he doesn't feel any. If he works—and he does—he can keep the horror from his expression. More than that isn't in him.

And he knows that there will be a bill for this, down the road. The Queen's generosity is never a gift. He is afraid that the bill won't be presented to him.

He puts on the robe and turns, once again, to face the Queen; she is standing, arms wrapped around her upper body, in the center of the circle. He looks away immediately. It is not—it is never—safe to see the Queen's pain, and it is evident now; she is a confused, lost girl, her fragility both her armor and her weapon. If he were a different man, he would go to her; he would slide an awkward arm around her shoulder; he would offer her comfort.

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He doesn't. He knows there's no comfort she'll take from him. There is only one person she wants.

And that person has devoted himself to her death.

Nathan doesn't remember being born. He will never forget being re-born.



REYNA LIVES WITH THE DEAD.
This wasn't always true.

As a child, living on the edge of villages, and once or twice, larger towns, she spent her days helping her mother in her various gardens, and helping her uncles when they went on errands for her mother. When she was eight, she took care of Helmi, her squalling, infant sister. From time to time, she played with other children, but in truth, not often; strangers always made her mother nervous.

Reyna has lived with the dead since she was just shy of thirteen. The dead don't frighten her. They can't do anything on their own. The scariest person Reyna knows is alive.

Reyna's mother is frowning at her over a circle etched in chalk. Reyna drew that circle. It's not good enough for her mother. Nothing is ever good enough for her mother. But the floors are rough here; it's hard to draw straight lines—or solid, curved lines—with chunks of chalk. Chalk is *not* to be wasted. Nothing is to be wasted. Reyna understands why.

She makes no excuses because she's learned, with time, that no excuse satisfies her mother and the attempt to offer one darkens a mood

that is never bright to begin with. The circles are anchors. Without anchors, searching for the dead is not safe.

If she's to leave this house before sunset, these circles have to be exact. Her mother will settle for nothing less. Reyna works with deliberate care, even if her hands are shaking. If she makes mistakes, she will have to do it all over again—and that will take too long, always too long.

While she works, her mother talks about the only thing that matters to her: the dead. The dead who are lost. "It's cold," her mother says. "It's cold, where she is."

Reyna doesn't ask who. She knows. Somewhere—nowhere close to the village in which they've lived for almost a full year—someone died. Death didn't free her. She is trapped somewhere cold. She's afraid. The dead are almost always afraid.

"Did you see her?" she asks her mother.

Her mother shakes her head.

Reyna is surprised.

"She's not close enough for me. You're going to have to do it." It's said so grudgingly, it stings. Reyna swallows backtalk. Beneath her mother's words is the acknowledgment of the uncomfortable truth between them: Reyna's gift is more powerful than her mother's. Of course her mother's not happy about it.

But she has to be worthy of that power. "Can't you use the lantern?" she asks.

Her mother snorts. "We don't use it unless we have no other choice."

Daring more, Reyna says, "If you let me use it—"

"No. Not yet. You're not old enough yet."

But she *is* old enough to sit in a circle for hours, walking a path toward a stranger who died somewhere cold. Reyna doesn't say this. She tries not to resent it. Instead, she draws and redraws and tries to do it quickly.

Reyna has a secret.

It's never wise to keep secrets from her mother or the rest of her

family—and it's *always* hard to keep them when Helmi is underfoot. But more than half of Reyna's life is a secret now; she's had practice. She knows when to speak, and she knows how to say very little. She knows how to let people fill in the silences and the spaces between words on their own.

And *this* secret is not a guilty secret. This is not a secret she keeps primarily out of fear, the way her mother keeps secrets from every stranger, every neighbor, everyone who might—just might—become a friend, otherwise. She keeps it because it is *hers* and it has nothing to do with the dead, nothing to do with the life the magar forces her family to lead.

This secret is about life. It's about living. It fills all the spaces that have existed as empty gaps and insecurities for as long as Reyna can remember. It is about love. Reyna's love. And the fact that Reyna is loved.

She feels she has never been loved before now. She has certainly never loved this way before. When she is with Eric, she never thinks about the dead. When she is with Eric, she isn't confined by circles of chalk and stories of death and loss. She barely thinks about the future. She wants every minute in his company she can get—because every minute is precious, and they seem to fly by, hours becoming minutes and minutes, seconds, until it's time to return to the darkness and the secrecy.

Reyna lives with the dead—but she's not dead yet, and she wants, she desperately wants, to *live*.

Reyna knows when Eric became so important to her.

She doesn't understand how it happened—but she thinks about it because it gives her joy. She thinks about every moment, from the first meeting to the last, every awkward word; she thinks about the fear of speaking, and the fear of touching, and the fear of being sent away. All of it—the anticipation, the insecurity, the hesitance—is part of the perfect story, because she knows how it ends. She loves the ending, so she has to love the beginning.

They talk about it in snatches at the end of the day or before the day

starts; they have only stolen moments. Eric is the smith's son, and he is expected to work. They talk about the first time they met. They talk about how they saw each other. Reyna could listen to Eric talk about it all day, every day.

But she knows the important moment, for her, was his laughter. It was so open, so loud, so low, so instant—and so unguarded. He was laughing *at* her. That should have ended things right there. It had before. But his voice was so—so *joyful*. As though he had swallowed life and her part in it, and he had to let the happiness out somehow. There was no laughter like that in Reyna's life.

There was barely any *life* in her life.

Shade dappled Eric's face and hid the color of hers; even the birds fell silent. She can close her eyes and see Eric so clearly she could spend all day with her eyes closed. She can remember her own laughter, welling up in response to his, as if the sheer sound of him had opened a dialogue in a language she didn't know, until that moment, was her mother tongue.

“Reyna, *pay attention*.”

Reyna opens her eyes. This is the wrong thing to do. She can see the crimped, weathered lines of her mother's face—her mother, who is just past forty and looks as though she's already at the end of her life. Age has withered her skin, and the pinched frown lines around her lips, eyes, and forehead are so different from the lines that transform Eric's face when he laughs.

If there is joy in this room, her mother will hunt it down and kill it.

“What are you *thinking*?” her mother demands.

Reyna doesn't tell. She grabs her joy and she holds it close and tight in the cage of her body, because if her mother finds it, she will take it away. She exhales and tries to wipe the vestiges of a smile from her own face. She is not supposed to be thinking of Eric, or of life with Eric.

She is not supposed to be thinking of life at all.



Reyna's mother only has eyes for dead people. Reyna remembers wishing, as a child, that she were dead—because then, her mother would come for *her*. Then, she would be the only person her mother could see. She would have all of her mother's attention.

The closest she ever comes is during lessons like these, but there's nothing unconditional about her mother's attention. She sits in judgment. She waits to criticize. Nothing Reyna says will be a good enough reason to wait. Reyna says nothing. She tries to focus. If she does what her mother wants done *quickly*, she will be able to see Eric.

Reyna listens. Eric's constant presence doesn't make her deaf; the reminder of life doesn't inure her to death. She understands the desire for home, for a place to belong. The dead trapped here don't have that, because no matter what they were in life, life has moved past them. The only people they can talk to are people like Reyna and her mother. Reyna doesn't understand why she can see the dead. She doesn't understand why her mother can. She knows it's a gift.

But tonight, it feels like a burden or a curse. Tonight, Eric will be waiting. If she could *explain*, it would help. She can't. If her mother is wrong about Eric—and her mother absolutely is—she's not wrong about villagers. People fear what they don't understand.

Then let me tell them. Let me explain it.

What will you tell them? That you can speak with the dead? That there are dead who are trapped here? They already have ghost stories, girl. Stories of the vengeful dead are not going to make us welcome.

But the dead aren't vengeful. Mostly.

No. The dead are people who have become invisible. But the invisibility is necessary. No one wants to let go.

Reyna thinks of the lingering dead who were killed in anger, or for greed.

Even hatred is a form of attachment, her mother said. She tries to remember this, but it's hard. She is not full of hatred, now; she is

overwhelmed by love, and yes—she wants to hold on to it. There is so much that is hard and difficult and fearful, holding on to things that give joy makes sense. It makes all the sense in the world.

In the distance, Reyna hears weeping. She opens her eyes; her mother's are closed, her mother's brow furrowed in the etched lines of concentration.

Reyna has always been powerful. It is her mother's pride—but also, Reyna knows, her mother's fear. The only thing her mother has is her role as *magar*. Take that away, and what defines her? Nothing. When Reyna was younger, she attempted to hide her power, to ease her mother's fear. It didn't work, and her mother didn't appreciate it. Reyna's power has only served to increase her mother's expectations and the harshness of her mother's lessons.

Helmi, Reyna's surviving youngest sister, takes lessons that are far less harsh, far kinder. Helmi, however, is too young to show even the traces of the power that came to Reyna when she was twelve or thirteen. Reyna can't remember her mother ever being as kind to her oldest daughter as she is to her youngest.

It's not a gift, Reyna thinks. She wants to tell her sister that. It's *not* a gift. It's just another way to fail. But maybe Helmi will be free of the curse. Helmi will be allowed to have friends, or maybe even fall in love. Helmi won't have to be *magar*.

Helmi won't hear the weeping.

It draws Reyna; it pulls at her while she sits in the confines of the circle she etched in such broad strokes. Safe in the circle, Reyna lets herself be pulled into the pit of another person's pain. Walking this path is hard. It's not like the first dead girl she met; that had been an accident.

She'd been working in the new field. The sky had been blue and the earth, brown; in the distance, trees blurred the horizon. Talking to the stranger had been natural, a part of the day.

Talking to this stranger is not. The circle defines the landscape, as

Reyna sits at its center. There is no natural sky, no natural gardens, no trees; there are no people and no possibility of people. Reyna goes to the dead girl, but she walks the magar's road to do it.

She thinks the weeping voice belongs to a girl, possibly a young woman. The road takes the shape of the dead girl's memory. Reyna looks for some sign of her mother, but her mother is not present; Reyna is walking the narrow road alone.

There are trees in the distance, shadowed and gray. The magar has warned Reyna, many, many times, not to add color or substance to the world she sees while she sits in the heart of the circle. The circle is supposed to be both guide and anchor. It is a reminder of the life that exists outside the world of the dead. But it's hard not to add traces of color to what she sees, to give strength to the echoes of another's memories. She does it without thinking, as she walks. It's easier not to do it when it's night, because at night, there is very little color.

The path is familiar; Reyna realizes this only as she draws close to the voice itself. It's the path Reyna walks to see Eric. She is glad her mother has not yet found the girl; it gives Reyna time to let the natural landscape of the dead reassert itself. She stands very still until she no longer recognizes the turn of the road, the rise and the fall of the gently sloped land, the shape of the trees. She no longer hears the brook passing yards from her closed eyes.

She no longer feels the touch of Eric's lips or hands.

Instead, she feels cold. It is bone-numbing. She no longer sees earth, but something that looks whiter and softer. It covers branches, flecks bark, hides the rounded gnarl of tree roots entirely. It is hard to see past it. It is not hard to listen.

She walks across the ground, leaving no tracks; this is not reality. It once was, for the girl who is now dead. The cabin, such as it is, is covered in white. There are shutters; she can see their shape in outline. They're closed. So is the door. Neither matters. Reyna was no part of the girl's death. No part of death at all. Memories don't, and can't, contain her.

The girl is huddled in the corner of the room farthest from the shuttered windows. She is sitting in the dark—and it is dark here. There is a fireplace; it contains ash. There's no wood beside it. It is so cold in this room, breath is visible. She died here. She died alone.

There is a table in this room. Three chairs. A fireplace. There are plates on the table. Cups that look like tin. There is a door that leads to another room. Reyna skirts around the weeping girl and looks in. One large bed. One fire grate. One small table that contains shut drawers and the remnants of a melted candle.

This is where the girl died, but she didn't live alone. Reyna drifts back through the door and comes to stand a few yards away from the girl herself. This has always been the hardest part of the job for Reyna. The dead don't always pay attention to the living because they're so caught up in their own final moments. If she knew the girl's name, it would be easier. The dead often respond to their names.

She doesn't. The girl—and probably her family—died on the outskirts of an entirely different village.

Reyna tries anyway. But the girl can't hear her because her own pain, her own fear, is too loud. It has to be. If it weren't, she wouldn't be trapped here.

Reyna exhales. She then reaches out to touch the girl's shoulder.

In the heart of the circle in a distant, darkened room, Reyna flinches. The cold eats sensation in her palms, but not quickly enough: It *hurts*. She has to push past the cold—and quickly—or her arm will be numb for a day.

The dead are not meant to speak with the living. It's a natural law. The cold is a reminder, a sign that means: Stay out. But it's a thin sheet of ice. When one knows how to stand on it, it breaks. Beneath that ice, beneath the overwhelming cold, there is heat and warmth, a reminder that the dead come from the living.

The girl's eyes widen. She lifts her head, tightening her arms around

her knees as she meets Reyna's eyes. Reyna doesn't know what the girl sees; what Reyna sees is a gaunt face, hollow eyes, pale, sunless skin. A threadbare dress, too large for the girl who inhabits it. The girl died when she wasn't much younger than Reyna. Or older. With the dead, it's hard to tell.

They don't age when dead.

"Who are you?" The girl asks. She lets go of her knees and rises. To Reyna's surprise, the girl is—was—taller.

Reyna doesn't give her name to strangers, even dead ones. "I've come to find you."

"Have you found my father? Is my father—"

"Your father," Reyna replies, "is waiting for you."

"How did you get here? With all the snow—" The girl shakes her head. "It's been snowing so long. You can always hear the wind screaming, just outside. We ran out of firewood."

And food, Reyna thinks, but doesn't say it out loud. She holds onto the girl, and the girl doesn't seem to notice; she walks, quickly, to the door. It opens for her, because it is not a door in a real house; it is the memory of a house. Just as the girl herself is the memory of a life.

The door opens into a howling snarl of wind and ice and snow. The girl struggles to close it. Reyna feels the undercurrents of her fear; it is so strong, it pulls her under. If the door is left open, they'll both die.

She shakes the fear out, almost literally. This death is *not* her death. She is not dead. The girl is—and doesn't realize it. She's caught in the moment of fear; it's all she can see. That and Reyna. Reyna takes shallow breaths. Her mother still hasn't found them, but she's closer, now.

There's only one certain way to break the dead out of the trap they've built for themselves—and it does take power. But it takes the power they carry within them. Reyna looks at the door. She looks at the room, and the empty fireplace, the empty table. To lead the girl out of this nightmare, she will have to alter what the girl perceives.

Fear is hard to shift. Reyna thinks, again, of Eric. She wants to be in

his arms; instead, she is holding the remnants of a terrified girl, and she knows, looking at her, that there will be no time for Eric this evening. There might be no time in the morning, either, before the day's chores truly start. She swallows.

She swallows and accepts it. Yes, her mother could—and will—find this girl. She won't find her as quickly as Reyna because she's never been as sensitive. But even if she does find her, Reyna's not certain her mother could do what needs to be done. The winter and the isolation are both so strong it's hard to think of the circle and the summer that she left hours ago. And it has been hours.

"The snow will stop soon," she tells the girl. She takes a chair—an empty chair. "I brought food—it's cold, I'm sorry."

"The snow will never stop."

"The snow stopped long enough for me to make my way here," Reyna points out.

"Did—did my father send you?"

"Your father wasn't in any shape to travel," she replies, completely truthfully. If the girl's father left the house during this storm, he didn't survive it. Reyna's certain he couldn't see three feet in front of his face. He might have gone out, turned back, and been unable to find his way home. "I came instead."

Lying to the dead is tricky. Reyna thinks of it as telling them a story. It's a story they need to hear. It has to be believable, because if they believe it, they can step outside of the fear. Fear is a story, like any other story. Change the story a bit, and the ending shifts with it. The ending the girl faced was death—either by freezing or starvation. Reyna can't tell which, and it doesn't matter. She needs to shift the ending enough that the girl can leave the house. If she leaves the house, she should be able to see where she has to go.

That's the way it always works. It's no wonder her mother's not as good at it—comfort has never been one of her mother's strengths.

“If you’re not hungry, I’ll take the food with us. You’ll need a coat,” she adds.

The girl stares at the food; it’s dried meat, hard cheese. There’s nothing fresher than that. Her hesitation wars with her hunger—she doesn’t get many visitors, and she’s wary of strangers, here. But she’s desperate. Sometimes that helps Reyna break people free of the spaces they create for themselves—and sometimes it makes things almost impossible.

The girl shakes her head; Reyna puts the food away. She does so deliberately, carefully; she takes no short-cuts. To be here at all, she’s lost the evening with Eric, and if she’s lost that, she might as well do *something* right. As she carefully slides meat and cheese back into the pack she’s carrying, she concentrates on the weather. The howl of wind recedes; again, it’s slow. She sits it out, waiting. She almost offers to build a fire, but she thinks that would be too much.

It’s enough to still the storm. It’s enough to stop the snow.

The minute her mother arrives, she knows; her mother remains invisible, watching. Reyna feels her fists clench; she feels her throat dry. It is always this way. She tries to focus on the poor, trapped girl, instead. When it’s been quiet for long enough, she rises and walks to the door; the girl follows.

The wind begins to howl again, and Reyna says, “It’s quieter, but we’re not clear yet.” She goes back to the table, knowing that this will happen again. No matter how quiet the cabin is, approaching the door brings the storm. Opening the door is death.

She doesn’t tell the girl that leaving it shut was death, anyway. She works, and she waits. She offers the girl food each time they retreat from the door. The third time, the girl’s shoulders slump, and she nods. She handles the plates; she tries to be host to a guest. When she begins to eat, Reyna thinks it is almost over.

She’s wrong.

* * *

Five hours later—five actual hours—Reyna has fought the wind to a standstill. The girl has eaten. She has eaten everything. The fabric of her hunger is woven from memory, but when she has finished, she lets it go. She knows she is no longer hungry, because when she was alive, she wouldn't have been. It's enough of a change that she can—barely—believe that the storm that consumed her family will end.

She lets Reyna open the door. She has dressed, now, for a long trek in the bitter cold; she is prepared to step outside of her home. This should be enough.

It isn't. They can barely get the door open. It's almost as if the house itself has been buried. Reyna doesn't understand snow very well; she half suspects that the monstrous amount of it is also part of the girl's fear. She could make the snow vanish; she suspects she's skilled enough to do that. But the snow is just another wall, and if the wall isn't carefully deconstructed, the girl might never see beyond it; she'll build it again and again and again.

And so Reyna spends hours digging a path through the snow. It makes her arms and shoulders ache; she is so tired by the end of it she wants to crawl back into the imaginary house, into the imaginary bed—there's room enough for three—and sleep. There's a danger in that. Reyna almost made that mistake once.

She has never repeated it.

The girl, on the other hand, doesn't tire. She digs, and the memory of desperation lends her a strength the living don't possess. This could be another trap—a different one—if Reyna weren't by her side; the girl might spend eternity digging and never look up to see sky. It was evening when Reyna arrived; it is not evening now. She knows it is not night in the world beyond her circle. She can hear bird song and argument in the distance; she can hear crickets and the buzzing of dragonflies and other insects. She can hear the sounds of Helmi.

Helmi knows better than to interrupt Reyna or the magar when they stand, or sit in their circles.

Mother, she thinks, *where are you?* There is no answer, of course. This is a test. Another test. And Reyna knows what she must do to pass it. She must dig, as the girl is digging. She must become part of the girl's cage, the girl's fantasy. She must become enough a part of it that she can find the door and open it.

Find it too soon, open it too soon, and the girl will slip free of Reyna, not the cage; she will retreat, restructuring memory, and cloak herself once again in her uninterrupted fear. There *must* be another way. But if Reyna tries to make one today, she will fail.

So she talks while she digs. She talks about Eric.

The girl actually smiles. It's a shy smile, as if she's not quite used to talking to other people—and given the situation, she might not be. But she asks about Eric, about his father, about the village, as if she's hungry for news. And as Reyna is just digging, and she's tired, and she wants to stop and rest, she answers. Talking about Eric gives her energy. Talking about love makes the cold seem warmer, as if it could melt the snow just by existing.

Hearing the girl's tentative questions makes her seem like a real girl to Reyna. A living girl. Someone who has known loneliness and the fear of rejection, someone who can appreciate the gift that love *is*. Answering them—answering makes her seem almost like a friend. Reyna doesn't have a lot of friends. Living the life she lives, and moving from year to year, makes friendship impossible. She can't talk about what she does. She can't share it. She knew, before she could talk, that she was, and would remain, an outsider.

But the truth is, she doesn't want that. She's never wanted that.

What she wants is Eric. She wants to be loved, not feared. She wants to be understood. She wants to stand up and shout the truth to the world: She is here to *help people*. She is here to help the people that most people can't even *see*. She almost says as much to the girl, who is one of those people.

But the girl is talking about her father, now. He hunts and traps. She

is talking about her mother, who died when she was very young, in a winter like this one. She is talking about her own dreams—of love and freedom and, most of all, summer. Summer, when the snow melts and the world is warm, and standing outside of four walls won't kill.

Her dreams are smaller than Reyna's, but she glows with them, and as she speaks, the tunnel through the snow expands; the digging quickens. She works—as all the dead do—without being aware of the work itself; by speaking of the things that she anticipates, the girl is pulling herself out of the hard shell of her fear. As she does, the tunnel lengthens.

The color of the sky shifts. The snow doesn't so much melt as vanish. The girl stops, midsentence, her mouth hanging open as if she's forgotten she was speaking. And she has. She is staring ahead of her, her eyes wide and unblinking. There is a look on her face that is almost painful; Reyna can't describe it. She struggles to find words for it, but the ones she comes up with don't work: love, desire, peace.

Reyna's mother says the dead don't cry.

She's wrong.

"What do you see?" Reyna asks. Her mother will be angry about it later—and her mother's anger never goes away—but she feels the sudden, visceral need to know.

The girl doesn't hear her. Reyna is holding her, and Reyna's hands tighten—just as they once did around her mother's skirts. "What do you see?" she asks again.

The girl whispers a word in a language Reyna doesn't understand. She's never had that happen to her before. She has always understood the dead, no matter where she finds them. They speak the same language. "I don't understand."

The girl then looks away from whatever it is she sees. "You can't see it?" she asks.

Reyna shakes her head.

The girl's tears fall again; she looks—with pity—at Reyna. As if it is

Reyna who is trapped, or Reyna who is blind. “It is everything I ever needed.”

“*What* is?”

The girl lifts her arm. Points. Frowns. “You helped me to come here. My father is waiting. And my mother. My mother.” She looks down at her hand; Reyna is holding it. Reyna has been holding onto the girl for the entire, long night. “Close your eyes,” the dead girl whispers.

Reyna does.

Eyes closed, for one long minute, she can see what waits for the dead. It is . . . like light. But not visual light; it’s the essence of what light offers: illumination, vision, beauty. It is *home*. It is *warmth*. It is a place—at last, after so much struggle and fear and resentment—to *belong*. She cannot describe it because it isn’t something that can be seen, even if she sees something; it is something that is felt. Here, all anger, all rage, all fear, all ambition, can and must at last be set aside.

She understands, then, why it is forbidden to look. If it did not remind her so much of what she feels for Eric, she is certain she would walk by the girl’s side until there was no turning back.

And that she wouldn’t regret it.

“There’s no rain coming,” her mother says, as Reyna works.

Reyna knows. The stream is so low in the bed beside the ring tree. This is not the first year the rains have been sparse. There is water, of course, for their own gardens. There will always be water for their gardens. But her mother doesn’t like to use their gifts that way, even if it keeps them fed.

The villagers will notice.

The villagers, who know that there’s been so little rain. Rumors will start. And eventually, someone will say, “They’re stealing the rain!” It’s not true, of course. It’s never been true. If Reyna’s mother weren’t so afraid of people, she could make it rain for the whole village, and then, they’d be welcome. They’d be heroes.

But she doesn't. The only time Reyna was foolish enough to ask *why*, her mother slapped her. Her mother, bent and wiry, has a temper, but she almost never *hits* her children, not with her hands; she uses words for that.

"The power does not come out of nowhere!"

No, of course not. It comes from the dead. "If we're finding them *anyway*," Reyna countered, "they don't *need* that power. The only reason they have it at all is to help us search for them and free them. Once they're free of this world and their pain, why *shouldn't* we use that power to help the living?"

"Because that is where it would start," her mother replied grimly. "And it would not end there. It never does."

"And how would it end?" Reyna demands. "If we only want to help people—living or dead—why is that bad?"

"Why do you want to help the living?"

"What?"

"Why do you want to help them?"

"Because then *we* won't be hated. Then we can *stay!*"

And her mother shook her head and said, again, No.



SNOW CLUNG RANDOMLY to highway signs along the 401, obscuring letters or numbers designed to mark the way. White borders absorbed white clumps; no one unfamiliar with the signs could be expected to read them.

No one tried, anyway. Amy was driving, and Amy knew where they were going. It was a comfort, to leave the driving to Amy—the only comfort in this small space.

Michael was on the right-hand side of the SUV's bench, head pressed against the window, chin tucked toward his chest. His eyes were closed, but he wasn't sleeping; his hand was running rhythmically across Petal's head. Petal, in theory seated in the middle of the bench, was actually sprawled across both it and the two passengers on either side of him.

Allison had his back end, which meant the stub of his tail as well as his damp paws. She didn't lean against the window; her head was tilted back, her neck almost rounding as she rested the weight of her head against the top of the seat. Her eyes were closed. It was dark in the car. Dark enough that her pallor shouldn't have been visible—but her expression suggested the absence of color; her lips were almost as pale as the rest of her skin. Her glasses, flecked first with snow and then with

the water snow became, rested at a slight tilt across the bridge of her nose.

Emma was certain she was thinking about Toby, her baby brother. Toby, who was in the hospital, in the ICU, hooked up to god only knows how many machines, courtesy of a gun; it had been hours. Toby had been fine at dinner. He'd been his usual, annoying younger brother self until people broke into the house, looking for Allison.

Allison had escaped. Chase had made her leave.

Emma didn't know what to say to her. Allison hadn't shot her brother. But it was Ally the attackers had been after. Had there been no Necromancers—and no necromantic best friend—there would have been no break-in and no guns. Had Allison refused to get caught up in the lives of the dead, she'd be doing her homework or reading her latest amazing book.

Instead, she was on the run, trapped in a car with Amy Snitman, who had always made her feel uncomfortable, driving away from a brother who might die at any minute, instead of running in a frenzy of worry and fear toward him.

Ally couldn't phone. She couldn't ask how her brother was doing. She couldn't go home; if she did, it was only a matter of time before Necromancers once again descended on her home and family.

The only person who could feed Emma and her friends information about Toby was Emma's father, who happened to be dead. He'd promised to keep an eye out, to report any changes in Toby's condition. Emma didn't know if his absence—so far—was a good sign.

She wanted to believe it was, but she couldn't force those words out of her mouth. She wanted to comfort her best friend, but she didn't have anything to offer. If it weren't for Emma, if it weren't for that friendship, there would have been no home invasion. Toby would never have been shot.

Emma wondered if this awkwardness, this desire to help mixed with the certainty that *nothing* would be helpful, was natural; she felt like a

failure of a friend. Was this how Ally had felt in the months after Nathan's death? Wanting to help, but awkward with uncertainty about how?

And the truth was, nothing had been certain to help Emma, then. Minute to minute, what Emma wanted or needed from her friends had changed. What she'd wanted was to have Nathan back. She couldn't have that. Some days, she'd wanted to go to the places she and Nathan had gone together, and some—she wanted to avoid them because all she could *see* there was loss and absence.

What had kept her sane? What had kept her *here*, as far as grief's gravity allowed that? The answer was contained in this car. Michael. Allison. Petal. Even, in her fashion, Amy. Amy could understand the theory of grief and loss, but Amy had never been big on sympathy—she considered it too close to pity, and no one who liked having a social life, however stunted, pitied Amy Snitman.

Had she cried on their shoulders?

No. Because she was a Hall, and Halls don't cry. Even at funerals.

What, then? She glanced out the window at snow that was almost horizontal, turning the question over and over in the terrible silence of the car. She almost asked Amy about her current rival in school, just to have that silence filled. But she realized that Amy, tight-lipped and active, wasn't in that much better a place than any of the rest of them, which was unsettling.

What had these friends given her, when she thought there was nothing of value that the universe could, anymore? She thought, although it was uncomfortable. Emma had always been taught, in subtle ways, that every request for help—or time, or attention—put pressure on another person. Asking was forcing someone else to say No, and given how much Emma hated saying No herself, asking for things became, as she grew up, a social crime.

She glanced at Amy's grim profile.

Amy asked—if by “ask” one meant demanded—for things all the

time, but Emma didn't hate it, or her, most days. On the other hand, hating Amy would almost be like hating rain or snow. Amy didn't need anything to be Amy. Or rather, she didn't need anything from anyone else.

And that was beside the point. Emma looked at the rest of her friends in the mirror and understood what they had given her, in lieu of obvious, superhuman comfort. They had needed her. Even when she was at her worst, when she'd felt so empty she thought she'd crumble into dust and ash just trying to take a step forward, they'd needed her. They reminded her that she was necessary, even without Nathan. There was still an Emma-shaped space in the universe that had to be filled.

She would have said they'd asked for nothing. And, in words, they hadn't. Words weren't necessary to walk Michael to school. Words weren't necessary to walk and feed her dog. Words were definitely superfluous when listening to Allison talk about the most amazing book she had just read.

They hadn't asked.

They had assumed. No—that was the wrong word. They had *trusted* her. She had needed that silent trust. She still needed it. It didn't make her happy the way Nathan's presence—and silence, and speech, and actions—had. It merely reminded her, constantly, that she was still Emma Hall, even without Nathan. That even when she felt, when she utterly believed, that she would face the rest of the future alone, she was not, in fact, alone.

Emma Hall had been raised to ask for nothing; to be independent, to take care of her own needs without expecting anyone else to leap in and do it for her. She inhaled.

“Problem?” Amy asked.

Exhaled. This was not a discussion she wanted to have with Amy in the car. But Amy was in the car, regardless; if it weren't for Amy, they might still be huddling in Eric's house, numb with terror or grief. Silence was cowardice.

"I'm grateful," she forced herself to say. "I'm grateful that I have friends like you."

Amy had that "water is wet" expression. Allison, however, opened her eyes and lifted her head, meeting Emma's gaze in the mirror.

"Don't start apologizing," Ally said. "I won't be able to deal with it tonight."

"Emma always apologizes," Michael pointed out. His eyes were still closed, his cheek still pressed against the cold glass window.

"I didn't apologize to Nick after I dropped a book on his head."

"I would cut you from all my social circles if you did," Amy said. Michael did not respond. "But Allison is right—it takes a *lot* of patience to listen to you apologize for everything, and my patience is nonexistent right now. You were saying?"

Allison grimaced in the mirror, although it was brief.

"Even when things are crazy—or disastrous—you've always reminded me that I—I have something to give. Something of value." She hesitated.

Allison didn't. "You always did."

Emma shook her head, lifting one hand, a gesture that meant she had to continue now, or she would lose the thin thread of courage that kept the words coming. "When Nathan died, I thought the world had ended. Or that it *should*."

Michael opened his eyes; he was watchful now, although he could enter a conversation with his eyes closed.

"The world didn't end, of course. What I feel—what I felt—didn't change the rest of the world. Only me. I forgot. I forgot what it was like to be Emma Hall, on her own. And I didn't really want to remember. If I couldn't *feel* Nathan's loss, I felt as if I'd be saying he never mattered.

"But you needed me to be what I'd been. You knew me before Nathan. You knew me during. And you knew me after." She exhaled again. "I'm not sure I can do this without you. I know it's selfish. I know—"

"No apologies, remember?" Amy cut in.

Emma swallowed. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I’m grateful that you’re here to face it with me. I don’t think I could do it without you.”

“Do what?” Michael asked.

“Find the Queen of the Dead,” she replied, after a long pause.

“How are we going to find her?”

Allison said nothing, but she met Emma’s steady gaze in the mirror. She even smiled, although as smiles went, it was terrible.

“That’s the question,” Amy said. “I’m personally less concerned with the question of finding her and more concerned with the question of how we handle her once we do. I don’t suppose any of your invisible dead people have wandered into my car?”

“Without your permission?”

That dragged a brief laugh out of Amy. “We need to ask them what the odds of being discovered are. There are five or six places we can run to, if we have to—but that’s not going to last if they’re smart.”

More silence. It was Allison who said, “We can ask Merrick Longland.”

“I wouldn’t trust a *word* that fell out of his mouth,” was Amy’s heated reply. She had not forgotten Longland’s actions at her party. She had not forgotten what he’d done to her brother, Skip. “Even if we could, I’d just as soon not owe him anything.”

“I don’t have that luxury,” Allison said, her voice thin and slightly shaky. “He saved my life.”

“I haven’t noticed that fact softening Chase’s attitude toward him.”

“Allison isn’t Chase,” Michael said.

“Thank god.”

The snow let up forty-five minutes from Amy’s destination, but by that point, it was irrelevant. Plows had come through what passed for main roads; they had also carved ditches out of the smaller side roads. The sides of those ditches were taller than Amy’s SUV in places.

The moon was out, the sky was clear, and the snow reflected enough light that the sparsely placed street lights were enough to see by. Amy's winterized cottage was not so much a cottage as a very large, modernized house; they had their own generator somewhere on the property. They clearly had someone who maintained at least the drives. Driving to the garage was almost easier here than it was after a snow dump in the city.

"What?" Amy said, as they exited the car. "I phoned ahead and asked Bronte to take the snow blower for a spin."

That wasn't all she'd asked the unknown person to do; there was food in the fridge, and the wood stove was both full and burning. Also, coffee, which Amy decided she needed. One glance at Michael, and she added hot chocolate to the impromptu menu while they waited for the second car to arrive.

Amy wanted to place bets on how many people would be in it when it did.

Eric, Chase, Ernest, and Longland were in the other car. Although he'd been cleaned up, Chase looked as though he'd been at the bottom of a game-deciding Hollywood tackle, where all the other players had also been given knives. He had not killed Longland. Longland had not killed him. Both of these statements hung in the air like unfinished sentences.

Longland, however, had saved Allison's life. For his own reasons, of course, which were almost entirely selfish—but they didn't matter. In the end, without his intervention, Ally would be dead. The thought made Emma forget to breathe for one long minute; when she exhaled, she exhaled white mist. Allison, shivering, was on the steps waiting for Amy to fish a key out of her purse.

Michael was tromping in circles in snow, one of which was rottweiler shaped, when the second car pulled up. Eric was behind the wheel. Ernest was beside him. Chase and Longland occupied the back seat, and both still appeared to be in one piece; neither looked best-pleased with

the company, and they exited the car, putting anyone still standing outside between them.

Longland stayed close to Emma. Amy opened the door and ushered everyone inside; Longland, as he entered, was pale. He stared at Emma in a way that made her distinctly uncomfortable. He knew it and attempted to look elsewhere, but his gaze kept returning to her, and it stayed anchored there until she glanced in his direction.

Chase, for his part, went to Allison as if to ascertain that she was still breathing. He kept himself between Allison and pretty much everyone else, the exception being Michael and Petal. He didn't particularly care if Longland attached himself to Emma, because he didn't particularly care if Emma survived.

Emma, the Necromancer.

Amy immediately continued her stage directions once coats, boots, and other outerwear had been removed. She had already chosen the rooms in which her guests would stay and led them there, catching Michael's arm when he failed to follow immediately. She deposited Longland in the room between Ernest's and Eric's; Chase was, she told Eric, his problem. She commandeered the room her parents occupied when they were here and let Allison and Emma share a room across the hall; Michael was one door to their right. Petal, like Chase, was not Amy's problem.

Chase sourly noted the parallels between the designations.

"I should probably apologize," Amy told him, no hint of regret in her voice. "Petal actually *listens*. I am going to make coffee. I will also make hot chocolate for those who don't drink coffee." She then turned and marched down the hall to the stairs.

Chase, Eric, and Ernest did not join them in the kitchen. They risked the wrath of Amy by poking around the rooms in the house, and Emma privately thought Amy was right: there was no possible way Necromancers had come *here* first. Chase, between clenched teeth, pointed out that

they were not attempting to destroy Necromantic foci, but Ernest cleared his throat. Loudly.

“With your permission,” he said, “we would like to be more proactive in rudimentary defenses on the perimeter of your property. Or,” he added, as Amy opened her mouth, “your house and the road that leads to it.”

Amy nodded.

Chase said nothing, loudly. He could be sarcastic without saying a word.

“How likely is it we’ll be followed?” She didn’t ask Ernest. She asked Longland.

“The Necromancers with whom I arrived are dead.” He hesitated. “It is possible—probable—that they were not the only knights sent. Emma is powerful.”

“You didn’t consider her a power the first time you met her.”

“I did not see her then as I see her now.”

“Neither will the Queen.”

Longland nodded. “But the Queen’s knights are not her only servants. She can, on occasion, send the dead to do her bidding; they are not capable of interacting with the mortal world—but they can observe and report directly to her almost instantly. None of the dead could fail to see the power Emma has.”

“She could always use a phone.” Amy folded her arms.

“She is not conversant with modern amenities, by her own choice. It is the only advantage the hunters have. Change, when it has come to the court, comes slowly through the knights. Had you joined us, your knowledge of things modern would inform both you and the service you offered; had your service—in pursuit of the Queen’s goals, of course—been successful, she would review the mechanisms behind that success.”

“Emma would not have survived to join the court,” a new voice said. Emma turned toward Margaret Henney, who entered the conversation in a way that made the air cold. She was dead. She had been dead the

first time Emma had laid eyes on her. She could make herself visible to the living, with Emma's help.

With Emma's unconscious help.

"Oh?" Amy said.

"She is too powerful. Had she been willing to learn what the Queen could teach, the Queen would have discovered this. Merrick is right: The dead see her just as clearly as they see the Queen; to our eyes, she looks almost the same. The Queen would have come to understand this within a handful of years—perhaps less. She would not have suffered Emma to live."

"How, exactly, do you know all of this?"

Margaret frowned and turned to Emma. Emma said nothing, but she clasped cold hands behind her back.

"I was a Necromancer, of course."

"Not a terribly impressive one," Longland added, with cool derision.

"Not terribly impressive to the Queen, no. It was only very briefly my life's ambition to be so. What I know of the Queen's court is not current, but the Queen was conservative, in her fashion. She did not value change for its own sake. Between my death and yours, how much did the composition of her inner court change?" The question was clearly rhetorical.

Merrick did not appreciate it. He glanced once at Emma.

Emma, however, nodded.

"I am no longer her servant."

"No. Are you mine?"

Everyone but Petal fell silent.

Watching his expression, Emma wondered if Longland had truly served anyone but himself. She had seen similar expressions in Grade Seven and Grade Eight. Fear, humiliation, desperation, the need to be seen as belonging. She'd often envied adults like her parents who didn't seem to have any of the same emotions.

". . . Yes," he finally replied.

“Then please answer Margaret’s questions.”

“Is Margaret yours?”

Emma started to say no.

Margaret, however, said, “Yes. Until the door opens and I can leave this place, I serve Emma.”

“Just in case there’s any doubt,” Chase said, “no one else here is bending a knee. We don’t serve Necromancers.”

Longland ignored Chase. Margaret apparently ignored him as well; she turned a severe glare on Ernest, who was leaning against the nearest wall looking even older than he usually did.

“Chase,” he said, “we’re doing a perimeter sweep.” When Chase opened his mouth, he added, “Now.”

Longland, however, continued to speak to Margaret—as if the rest of the living were of no concern. “Two of the Queen’s knights—from your era—have died. Three, if you count me.”

“And the citadel?” the older woman asked.

“There is one new wing, a small one.”

“The city?”

“It has not changed.”

Emma cleared her throat. “What is the city of the dead like?”

“It is not a city as you would understand it. None of the living occupy its buildings, although there are completed buildings. At some point, we believe the Queen intended her city to be occupied. The logistics were difficult. Food, in particular. She did not complete the city she had planned. Half of the streets are bare outlines formed of cobbles and forgotten intent. The dead wander there in numbers.”

At the tightening of Emma’s expression, Longland shrugged and looked away. “They have no power. Those that remain are not worth harvesting; the novices practice binding on them. You would not enjoy the city of the dead.”

Amy glanced at the door. “We don’t have our hunters. I think we should try to get some sleep; we can make plans over breakfast.” No one

in the hall mistook the suggestion as anything other than it was: a command. Amy was the closest thing they had to a queen, here.

“I want to know why you kissed me.” Allison Simner squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and spoke as forcefully as she could, given the subject matter. If the statement—which had started life as a shaky, confused question—sounded well-practiced, it’s because it was.

“That was better,” Emma told her best friend. “But you dropped the last two syllables.”

Allison’s shoulders were already bunched up so tightly they were practically at the level of her ears.

“Are you sure you have to ask? I mean—the answer seems pretty obvious.”

Allison turned from the mirror, in which she’d been practicing the “right” expression. It was a small mirror, given that it belonged in Amy’s family’s cottage. “Why do you think Chase kissed me?”

Emma shook her head. “Because he *wanted* to?” When Allison failed to reply, she added, “He’s Chase. He pretty much does what he wants. There is no way he would kiss Amy.”

“But kissing Amy at least makes *sense*.”

“If you’re Chase?”

That pulled a smile out of Allison. “I guess it would be suicidal.”

“Good point. Now it makes me wonder why he hasn’t. It’s Chase, after all.”

Allison’s smile became a laugh—the first of the day. The first, Emma thought, of two days.

Petal chose that moment to push the bedroom door open. It wasn’t completely closed. He headed straight to where Emma sat, cross-legged, on the bed, jumped up, and made himself at home. But the blankets were wrong, the bedsprings were wrong, the bed was the wrong shape; the only thing that was right about this particular room, in dog terms, was that Emma was somehow in it.

For a rottweiler, he could make himself appear smaller and vastly more pathetic without apparent effort. He did have his leash attached by the mouth—at least until he dropped it in Emma’s lap.

“Not now, Petal,” she told him, setting the leash to one side before he dropped his head on it. “Sorry,” she added, to her best friend.

Allison had been in Emma’s life since before Petal came to join it. She shrugged off the interruption. “He wants to go for a walk.”

“And I want to avoid a lecture.” Emma scratched behind Petal’s ears. “Eric’s so tense the air is practically bouncing off him. I can pretty much imagine what he’d say if I told him I wanted to take the dog for a walk.”

“The dog has to pee sometime.” Allison glanced at Petal, and added, in a more dire tone, “Or *somewhere*.”

This was absolutely true.

“I’ll come with you.”

Emma’s face remained expressionless. If her first impulse was to avoid a lecture—and, sadly, it was—it was only because she’d refused to think about Chase and his possible reaction to Petal’s needs. Chase wasn’t tense the way Eric was—but he had a much shorter fuse and a much blacker temper. He had kissed her best friend. He clearly—to anyone whose first name wasn’t Allison and whose last name wasn’t Simner—loved her. And his love came with a stack of resentment for Emma, whose existence endangered her.

It had endangered them all.

Chase confused Allison. Emma had spent an hour listening to that confusion and the worry it caused; she offered advice only when Ally specifically requested it. Allison never talked romantically about boys; romantic boys were exotic creatures that other people had to deal with. They existed between the covers of books and on various screens. If she daydreamed about them, she kept it secret from even her best friend. Boys seldom gave Allison a second glance.

Confused or not, there were certain things that Allison was never going to willingly accept.

Emma knew that on any other day, in any other place, Allison would have kept her confusion to herself. But sharing it was better than the only other alternatives. She could talk about what had happened when she and Chase had faced off against two Necromancers without immediate backup. She could talk about the fact that she had escaped Toronto without talking to her parents, and her parents were probably frozen with terror. Or she could talk about her younger brother, Toby. Toby, who'd been shot, and now lay hooked up to hospital machinery of various types, in a city they had fled. They had no idea whether or not Toby would survive.

He might already be dead.

Emma and her best friend had grabbed onto Chase as a safe subject. Safe, in this case, was still dicey. Emma looked out the window. Allison's face was pale in reflection.

"If," Allison said, proving that all the work to remain expressionless was pointless, "you're worried about what Chase will say, don't."

Petal liked snow. He liked going for walks. Being outdoors while Emma carried her end of the lead had pulled out his internal puppy. Allison's presence confirmed for the rottweiler that *some* things were still normal.

Emma avoided the ravine in the winter, at least while walking her dog; he therefore bounded from tree to tree, practically dragging his tongue behind him. Given the utter absence of cars or pedestrians, she was tempted to let him off the lead. Instead, she gave it its maximum play.

She looked, as she always did, for her father; he wasn't here.

Neither was Nathan.

Nathan's death had been—until this past week—the worst thing that had ever happened to Emma. Worse—and she thought it with guilt—than her father's death half a lifetime ago. She cut one sharp, cold breath. Her eight-year-old self would never have agreed.

But her seventeen-year-old self had had time and distance. She had had her mother, her friends, school life, and her dog. Life's friction had dulled the edges of that pain until it no longer cut her anytime she returned to it. She could think of her dad now and remember the *good* things. The funny parts. The comforting bits. She could even remember the anger she sometimes felt.

Thinking about Nathan was still too painful.

For a brief couple of weeks, it hadn't been—because he'd been beside her. He'd been dead, yes—but death hadn't been the impersonal, silent wall at which she grieved. He had come back. He'd come back to her.

He'd come back to her at the command of the Queen of the Dead—and he'd left the same way. If he'd been like Longland—dead, but in possession of a body—he'd still be here. He might hear the Queen screaming orders at him in the distance, but he wouldn't have to obey.

“Em?”

Emma forced herself to smile.

Allison's exhale was just this side of a snort. “You know I hate the fake smile.”

Emma shrugged. “Sometimes I'm better at making it look like a real one.” She shook her head. “Look at the two of us—we're both having boyfriend trouble.”

“Only one of us is having boyfriend trouble,” Allison replied. “I don't *have* a boyfriend.”

“That's harsh,” the non-boyfriend said, as he stepped around the trunk of a not particularly large tree.