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Reanimation (Afterlife Rebellion Book 1)

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REANIMATION (AFTERLIFE REBELLION BOOK 1)

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2019

REANIMATION (AFTERLIFE REBELLION BOOK 1)

by

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Preface

Fifteen years ago, Dr. Nicola Griffith "bullied, wheedled, and browbeat" (Griffith, Reading March 14th) her fellow Hammett Prize judges to acknowledge Michael Gruber's *Tropic Of Night* as worthy of acclaim, despite their aversion to its magic and zombies. Fantasy aficionados of all generations would applaud Griffith's ferocity, given detractors' propensity to disdain occult and therefore overlook central messages, which speak to marginalized groups. A decade later *Wired* could proudly proclaim, "At Long Last, Science Fiction and Fantasy Have Finally Infiltrated The Literary Mainstream" (Kirtley) when best of fantasy was included in the *Best American Series*, granting it a sheen of respectability that allowed its merit to be acknowledged. This stark shift in attitudes coincided with the public's rapid embrace of the science fiction and fantasy genre, but books vanishing off the shelves the moment they are off the presses does not always guarantee they will be easily accessible, or that a new reader can see themselves in the far too often straight, white, male protagonists.

My overarching goal in writing this book was to craft an accessible fantasy, with its characters being unfamiliar with genre conventions so that readers who were as well could have an entry point into the category, and devoted readers could enjoy glimpsing themselves in the familiar canon alongside my new inventions. My goals regarding the novel's themes, aside from the development that must occur with every teenager in even a bildungsroman that has been split into two books, became apparent as I worked for the roughly two years it has taken to complete *Reanimation*. I believe the three most pivotal ideas are gender being incidental to identity, characters being set apart from their archetypes so as to promote the expression of the vivid, often uncomfortable range

of emotions inherent in traumatic experiences, and the nuances of a conflict between good and evil, especially how our perceptions of who is "good" or "evil" shift as more information emerges.

Reanimation (Afterlife Rebellion Book 1) is the first book in a young adult science fiction and fantasy duology about a group of ghosts and a teenage necromancer who must come to terms with a corrupted afterlife. Kendrick is a teenage ghost who refuses to make a life separate from living loved ones, and thus must receive a reanimating purpose that allows for mental and emotional growth. McAvoy, Kendrick's mentor who is slowly becoming a friend, undergoes a similar metamorphosis, as a rule-abiding psychopomp with no qualms with the running of the afterlife, until certain disparities are brought to light. Along with the aforementioned necromancer, Finn, a teenager wishing to trade adolescents for adulthood, also requires an awakening as he is fixated on achieving his goals to the exclusion of considering collateral damage.

During its first iteration, the novel was merely called *Ghost Story*, which I wrote ten pages of as one of my final assignments for a creative writing course during my freshmen year of undergraduate school at the University of Las Vegas Nevada in 2011. I was inspired by a female student's flippant remark about Black Friday sales, which I used back then and have managed to preserve through all subsequent rewrites. I thought someone that had the misfortune to die as a direct result of the fervor caused by this shopping holiday would be as irreverent as this former classmate. I roughly drafted what is now the first two chapters of today's product; back then my ghosts were referred to only by initials, as even then I was committed to portraying the complexities within fomenting debates around gender essentialism.

I have a close friend who copes with gender dysphoria, the condition of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity is opposite to one's biological sex, and as I became more cognizant of the potential for rampant violence perpetrated upon the transgender community I realized my interest in honoring the difficulties of that experience. The Human Rights Campaign estimate that at least 29 deaths committed in 2017 bore some relation to the victims' identities (Campaign). Appalling as these statistics were, and much as I wanted to make some fictional condemnation and use the manuscript to explore the ludicrous horror of harm committed over something as incidental as gender, many readers of initial drafts found the choice to situate characters outside this common identifier unnecessarily confusing.

Furthermore, I was uncertain about how much centrality I wished gender to occupy within the manuscript. Catalytic as the Human Rights Campaign's findings were, I did not wish to risk a divisive, or worse, trite, thesis around gender in what I hoped would become a commercially successful venture.

My political quandaries were finally solved by the short story anthology of Kelley Eskridge, *Dangerous Space*. In this readers encounter the character of Mars as a modern-day female playwright in "And Salome Danced", a male member of a medieval royal guard in "Eye of the Storm", and for the book's titular story, as a female sound engineer for a futuristic rock band, yet always close friends with the female, no matter the setting, Lucky (34, 74, 133). All three iterations of Mars are passionate about their vocation, loyal friends, and get caught up in dangerous situations that do not always end happily. Seeing Eskridge's conviction cemented the decision that it was my responsibility to fill the world with more tales championing that our choices, particularly

the qualities we choose to exhibit, are far more determinative of who we become than gender.

I chose to exemplify this with a focus on both Kendrick and another character, Fortescue. He is a ghost, historian, McAvoy's friend, and identifies as nonbinary. As McAvoy notes, "Kendrick figuratively floated at the other end of the spectrum. They had acclimated with remarkable quickness to being genderless; whereas most usually took at least a week after their deathday to grapple with no longer being able to recall whether they were a man or a woman, the child had accepted the fact in two minutes." (White 17), with their focus remaining squarely on bereft family. They had no affiliation with the trans community in life and would have no particular discontent associated with gender retention, but holding to memories of moments when they overcame their myopia to be a good sibling or friend would be paramount, "There were better memories too, nights when Mike would creep in here after a nightmare because eldest siblings gave the best cuddles. Or that exhausting, giddily nostalgic week of summer they and Dean had spent on this floor playing all the *Kingdom Hearts* games." (White 24). It was this idea that allowed me to explore how many elements, including absent dysphoria, comprise humanity's scope of feeling.

Fortescue epitomizes a dysphoric character and it was crucial that their role in the tale not be reduced to encompass only fears around gender, as this is a mistake often made in fantasy and across all sub-genres of young adult literature that leads to token representation regardless of the portrayed minority, rather than three-dimensional characters with true purpose or agency (Whittemore and Ramzipoor). Thus, while Fortescue's introduction centers on gender, a later admonition to McAvoy to rise above fear in order to fulfill duty is motivated solely by their compassion and intelligence.

Given my and published authors' censure of tokenism, I chose these depictions due to more than the fulfilment of a moral litmus test. Each one aids in the expansion of a genre in which all readers can see themselves mirrored in powerful characters with agency and skill, and that is the genre I wish to inhabit as both author and consumer. This is especially true as I believe that fiction which shifts opinion on complex issues can also shift the world around us, which is the essential definition of Susan Feagin's Simulation Theory, an explanation that can be applied to the empathy of reading and writing all fiction:

simulation of another's psychological states occurs when we adopt the perspective of that individual by using our own mind to model the target's mental activities under certain conditions. To perform a successful simulation, it is not enough for us to experience the same emotions and thoughts as the target experiences; we must come to have these emotions and thoughts through similar processes. We do this by bracketing many... of our current thoughts, beliefs, and sensory inputs and substituting the target's... (Coplan)

The narration of the ten pages I wrote in 2011 was first-person from Kendrick's perspective, which I found curtailed the characters and subjects I wished to discuss. Fortescue's significance to the plot and McAvoy would have been limited to one scene where they are not the main focal point, and the explanation of Finn's personal trials would have required an unrealistic number of monologues for such a proactive character. Also, I found Kendrick's flaws could not be emphasized, due to the lack of self-reflection in what had already proven to be a narrative voice that limited other characters' range of expression.

I decided to write this novel in workshop, and in advising my novel received critiques surrounding its expositional clarity in third person. This was on account of my decision to address ghosts' genderless state through using they/them in place of all other pronouns.

Gender-specific pronouns are as expositionally ubiquitous as in ordinary conversation, and when one excludes them along with the I of first-person narration, one's choice of pronouns swiftly dwindles. Retaining the third person narrative was further complicated by the English definition of they and their as plural rather than singular pronouns. Nearly all scenes in the novel contain more than one character, which necessitated finding avenues to ensure the reader knew precisely who all the "they's" were when sentence structure or a desire for variety required using this as both a singular and plural pronoun.

One of the primary vehicles I used in solving this was by addressing full character surnames, as the initial ten pages had all references to ghosts merely be initials. Since this gave readers a firmer understanding of characters, I incorporated another frequently requested edit and added descriptions to create the possibility of distinct mental images; McAvoy acquired a "beautifully tailored suit", and a character dubbed Quinlan received a "flowing tunic" reminiscent of "Tutor England" (White 4, 9). Such visual elements were one of my most persistent challenges, since I perceive character primarily through narration and conversation; while said perception has netted praise throughout this program for my dialogue, I realized this, too, could use clarifying, and began the liberal use of dialogue indicators when it would not detract from pacing.

All of these factors coalesced into dialogue such as:

"Quinlan," McAvoy breathed, almost reverently.

"You know them?" Kendrick asked, slinging an arm around Will's shoulders as the boy edged closer in uncertainty and ruffling his brown curls.

"I know of them. Rumor—which is apparently true—has it they can make things in the human world solid for brief moments at a time. Humans can actually feel their touch as physical contact if they wish it. If I had to guess, I would say their talent, with lent power from the Council, is being channeled to create this room."

"How did they get that talent?" Kendrick asked, gazing at Quinlan in awe, mind racing with half-formed possibilities." (White 10).

This sequence, and others like it, finally came clear for readers near the end of my fourth rewrite, and with a reduced struggle for understanding, more of their concentration could be devoted to the themes of marginalization, which resonated deeply for me as a blind person.

One of Stephen King's central theses of *On Writing* is the truthfulness of personal experience informing content instead of the aphorism "write what you know". Upon first discussing the hackneyed advice, King states that rather than a literal interpretation, it should be viewed "as broadly and inclusively as possible. If you're a plumber, you know plumbing, but that is far from the extent of your knowledge; the heart also knows things, and so does the imagination" (157). As a blind person, I am intimately familiar with the irritation, anger, resignation, and sadness of encountering people unwilling to look past the trait that sets one apart from the rest of the world, emotions that I am informed also

frequently plague the transgender community, and sought to provide what I hope is more than token validation against apathetic bruising.

Fantasy is brimming with characters who never become much more than manifestations of their archetype—the brooding villain or angry teenager to name a few—and it was my intention to craft characters free to experience the full range of emotions that logically occurred with the seismic shifts they endured. Part of the solution lay in a solid plot seeded firmly enough in genre to engage the reader's attention so more subtle character work could happen beneath the surface.

As Jonathan Gottschall notes in *The Storytelling Animal*:

The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them. In short, the storytelling mind is a factory that churns out true stories when it can, but will manufacture lies when it can't. (102).

I heavily relied on this tenant as a guide in character development, particularly by ensuring that development coincided with significant turning points within the plot.

One of the most notable examples of this is my introduction of a living friend of Kendrick's that likewise seeds groundwork for Finn's aforementioned fixation, having Kendrick drop in on Claire just as Finn is revealing plans to justify her inclusion. In a story entirely true to life, Kendrick would simply have a friend who could serve to heighten Kendrick's emotional turmoil, but a character having that loose a connection to the plot would never be tolerated by the storytelling mind. Grounding the plot in genre

also required close attention to the storytelling mind, ensuring that there were enough touchstones to avert randomness while also not re-treading barren ground.

Having read and watched, but never written, my own take on the ghost story, I thought I would be replicating one of King's assertions, "In terms of genre, it's probably fair to assume that you will begin by writing what you love to read" (157). This proved far easier as aspiration than executable idea; finding a balance between trusting my readers' ability to discern shared genre touchstones and not leaving them to wander confused with too few guiding explanations was daunting.

I owe much of the conundrum's resolution to Jonathan Stroud's *Lockwood and Co* series. Racing through the five middle grade novels (*The Screaming Staircase*, *The Whispering Skull*, *The Hollow Boy*, *The Creeping Shadow*, and *The Empty Grave*) in the summer of 2018, I learned my, at that time, seventy-page partial draft was insulting fantasy readers' intelligence.

Every writer must explain the nuances that define the rules of their fantasy world; however some terminology is exempt from such clarification due to ubiquitous association. Dragons must have wings whether or not an author stipulates how soon they may make the lizard airborne, and witches use spells, regardless of whether magic is conducted through a wand, staff, flick of the fingers, hand gesture, twitch of the nose, or any other method.

Similarly, Stroud never defines the word "ectoplasmic" (Stroud 12) even in the glossary of his first novel, trusting that the word is inherently ghostly, no matter what image it suggests to the individual mind. The reminder that the language of fantasy owes part of its existence to readers' accumulated knowledge, imagination, and trust

allowed the jettisoning of explanations such as what it meant to cross over, and devote more concentration to deepening character instead of whether the phrase "manifestations of ectoplasmic energy and post-human consciousness", said by Finn, would take someone out of the story (White 50).

Once I realized how to accomplish a happy medium in genre conventions, it became clear that much the same techniques—of seeding characters within their archetypal contexts so as to then be free to move beyond them—would be required in characterization. I cut my bibliophilic teeth on J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and therefore have a deep love of Greek mythology as a source and internalized the idea that at least a few names in every manuscript must be clues to a character's personality or role in a story, regardless of how central they may be to the plot.

Some of the characters I considered most in this regard while crafting *Reanimation* were the beloved Hermione Granger, Remus Lupin, and the overlooked Hestia Jones. Hermione is "a form of Hermes, name of the Greek god of communication and eloquence. It fits the talkative Ms. Granger well. Rowling found the name in Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, and makes a fun reference to Shakespeare's character in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Shakespeare's Hermione is turned into a statue, which is what happens to Hermione Granger" (Colbert). Yet the name of Rowling's first werewolf is a double pun, "Lupus is Latin for wolf. The legendary founders of Rome, who as children were suckled by a wolf, were named Romulus and Remus.", and "When Harry first meets Order of the Phoenix member Hestia Jones she is near a toaster. That's a joke about her first name. In Greek mythology, Hestia is the goddess of the hearth (the fireplace where meals are cooked)" (Colbert).

This is why when selecting a name to provide not only an address of convenience but an example of longevity for a character titled the West King, I looked for references to the cardinal direction in myth (*Windows to the Universe*). After discovering the west wind was male however, I changed the name Zephyr to Zephra in order for it to sound more feminine, yet maintain a semblance of its origin. The information that this wind was gentle and associated with spring however, inspired even more of the character, making her the polar opposite of—though just as morally upright as—her brother the South King, providing effervescence and kindness to his sobriety and sternness.

Poetry was another tool I utilized to ground readers firmly within chosen archetypes, as exemplified by my opening Finn's introductory chapter with an excerpt of W.B. Yeats "The Rose Upon the Rood Of Time". The selection had three distinct associations: "But seek alone to hear the strange things said / By God to the bright hearts of those long dead" would alert readers they were encountering a necromancer with the full spectrum of powers they had come to expect, "Learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know." I used as a signal of the remoteness brought about by his supernatural gift. Conversely, "And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass" was an early implication of Finn's status as a Byronic hero. He is a character weighed down by cares and furious at an injustice, but also capable of tremendous affection, which drove said rage.

Once that context anchored many of the ensemble's personalities, I moved to breaking archetypes specific to genre, so as to lay the foundations for richly emotional inner landscapes. *Reanimation* hinges on how the supernatural is always intertwined with the everyday world with consequences as a result, and how the protagonists are

unable to recognize the beats of their story. This is hardly a revolutionary concept in fantasy, yet is the sole purpose of the Urban Fantasy, under which Holly Black, whose works proved invaluable, is classified.

Kendrick and Finn have already spent enough time in their corners of the world to know the rules and general dynamics, thus are not as out of their depth as Kaye, who is unaware for some of the first novel that she was not born human. Despite the benefit of opening in medias res, Kendrick and Finn are permitted equal room to be proactive rather than reactive characters, with Finn going viral to protest injustice prompting Kendrick to be the only character to inquire about his reason for doing so.

Fantasy, and by extension its audience, has a deep and lingering preoccupation with the definition of a hero and what constitutes heroism. Often possessing roots in the Arthurian legends, this through line is unsurprising, but as someone wishing to create characters who mirrored a plurality of the population, it could often prove frustrating. Many of chivalry's components have a profoundly classist undertone, both in noblesse oblige and in the equipping of these heroes for their heroic quests.

When translating items such as swords and shields into modern parlance, one realizes the finest of today's technology would serve as stand-ins. I deliberately wanted to create working-class heroism, therefore Finn possesses a distinctly old, filthy truck and Kendrick's "mission-style" house is distinctly lower-middle-class (White 22). The bulk of fantasy readers not granted prestigious mentors and artifacts deserve to know that whatever circumstance, no matter how perilous or discouraging, they reside in heroism, is within their grasp.

Since these heroes span the socioeconomic spectrum, I did not wish to fall into the trap of gentrifying their personality to fit within fantastic expectations, and for this melding of the fantastic and contemporary I again turned to J. K. Rowling. Having her hero be an everyman, not especially gifted save in particular areas, was revolutionary in the YA fantasy genre. As a character, Harry Potter often juggled ordinary and extraordinary concerns, in my case I wanted Kendrick and Finn to initially divide such matters. Finn wishes to be the best at serving the ghost world and is disdainful of less, while Kendrick cleaves to watching people as this world rests poised for disaster.

Rowling proved that the archetypal boundaries could be significantly expanded, provided certain heroic traits were maintained. In her protagonist, the foremost of these was selflessness, "If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I'll have to go back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there, it's only dying a bit later than I would have, because I'm never going over to the Dark Side!" and an isolating detachment, "There they all were, talking about homework and Quidditch and who knew what other rubbish, and outside these walls ten more Death Eaters had swollen Voldemort's ranks" (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone 270, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix 545). Harry is eleven when he makes the impassioned statement, revealing both an enviable peace with his own possible death, and a desire to do the right thing prompted by nothing but his own moral compass; the thought he has at fifteen, while tinged with cynicism, shows he is fast outstripping the innocence of his schoolmates, more concerned with the threats and dangers that could harm the world, without ever once considering a qualified adult will solve the problem.

While an excellent template, I strove to subvert even these traits of leading character typification. Finn primarily possesses gifts in necromancy and is woefully

inadequate in any interaction with his fellow humans, as exemplified by his time amongst other necromancers, yet unlike Rowling's Harry, Finn lacks innate selflessness. He is glad to place the wishes of those he loves above the safety of everyone around him, and his slow emotional maturing—to care about the world he is impacting, to allow his circle of loved ones to encompass more people, and to utilize his power responsibly—makes up one of the key emotional through lines of the novel.

Displacement was long an element I wanted as the focal point of Kendrick's inner landscape, and the protagonist of Seanan McGuire's *Sparrow Hill Road* provided the initial outline for how this would be accomplished. McGuire's ghost falls under the category of an urban legend from the first page, so that by the time one gets to Rose's own point of view after the fictional introduction and editor's note, it is evident that she is alienated from the living world and much more at ease with McGuire's cast of dead drivers and diner owners. While McGuire's execution was excellent, I wondered what the idea might look like from the opposite end of the spectrum.

Kendrick's affection for a child ghost ensures a role in the world of the dead, however they are afraid of being seduced into crossing over if forced to spend an indeterminable amount of time in the company of people whose job it is to guide spirits to the other side, and wish to retain memories of the role they possessed among the living. By making this zealousness to avoid displacement so central, I made it more of a driving force than a passive commentary. This wish to impact the living world enables Kendrick to take a dangerous chance in aiding Finn, as they empathize with his inability to avert horrific events, "This had been so much simpler when Kendrick could stay uninvolved and unattached, think he was a malicious asshole, not someone as scared and desperate as they were." (White 90).

My writing, particularly my dialogue, has always included humor, as I believe the addition provides more incentive for readers to easily remember climactic or serious scenes, and emulates how often people consciously or unconsciously use humor as a coping mechanism in real life. Banter has been part of my linguistic palate since I was introduced to the work of husband-and-wife television writing and producing team Amy Sherman-Palladino and Daniel Palladino as a teenager, but Sarah Rees Brennan's eight works (the earlier of which I found time to read and reread during my undergraduate education) revealed that bantering did not exclusively belong to writing for the screen.

Brennan's humor is more in narrative voice, as when the protagonist of her novel *In Other Lands* has little patience for the outmoded fantasy world in which he finds himself, "In his first class, Elliot was presented with a quill, which he promptly broke in two and threw against a wall. He'd brought a pencil with him in his pocket: he clung to it as his only hope and insisted on using it to take notes on the parchment provided." (13). However, her frequent veering into witty repartee, and the clear indication with her continuing sales that such bantering narrators and characters could be embraced, gave me the courage for such exchanges as, "And you kept silent about this winning theory at the meeting five days ago because you were afflicted by temporary once in a lifetime shyness?" (White 19).

The final character conundrum I needed to solve was the crafting of long-lived ensemble members. I turned again to Holly Black, as writing immortal characters with relatability while highlighting how their longevity impacts their perspective is a centerpiece of her novels, and she showed me I was not pushing the envelope far enough with my monarchs. The rulers of the Seelie and the Unseelie, or bright and dark

courts, are mercurial and charismatic, powerful and addictively alluring until they do something that reminds the human-raised Kaye and her friends, who must cope with the opposed factions of Faeryland, that they can be "megalomaniacal, amoral fiends" (Black, *Ironside* 16).

Even the denizens of Faeryland can flit from manipulating Kaye into volunteering to take part in the titular tithe, never mentioning that the original plan would have resulted in her death, and the child-like whimsy of tying knots in someone's hair while they sleep (Black 248, 261). I had already written a good portion of this changeable nature in my own characters who did not have to interact with humanity in their everyday lives, but *Tithe* and *Ironside* provided motivation for one of the central, seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between Finn and the South King.

Black was also a primary guide in constructing a plot that provided fresh nuance around what could be staid good versus evil clichés. She excels at revealing new information at pivotal moments that fundamentally shifts readers' perception of who deserves to hold villain and hero sobriquets.

In *Tithe*, the ruler of the dark court is naturally a villain for Black, but the end of the novel and *Ironside* deal with the conflict of the Queen of the light court wanting control over both domains. This departure from traditional science fiction and fantasy plots stayed in the back of my mind as the villain of my manuscript changed. At the end of the ten pages that were my own introduction into this story I believed my then unnamed necromancer would be the antagonist; when Finn's backstory and intentions revealed themselves in the spring of 2018, however, I realized my dead characters and I had been seeing him from a black and white worldview.

It is a core tenant of humanity that we all believe we are doing good from our perspectives. It is why Holly Black's Queen wished to govern more than her allotted subjects and why my characters find themselves at odds as each does what they feel will secure the most positive outcome throughout various parts of the work.

It was of the utmost importance that as these perceptual shifts occurred, it became clear that neither the South King nor Finn were villains, partially to grant my readers ample surprise and provide a suitable hook for book two by upending expectations, but mostly because both gentlemen are dark-skinned.

Fantasy, to its immense detriment, has racism built into its DNA, in large part because of J.R.R. Tolkien's seminal *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. As Dr. Helen Young elucidates: "In Middle Earth, unlike reality, race is objectively real rather than socially constructed. There are species (elves, men, dwarves, etc.), but within those species there are races that conform to 19th-century race theory, in that their physical attributes (hair color, etc.) are associated with non-physical attributes that are both personal and cultural. There is also an explicit racial hierarchy which is, again, real in the world of the story. Middle Earth is literally a racist's fantasy land... And that has an impact on the whole genre of fantasy." (Perry)

Modern fantasy—and so inevitably by extension YA fantasy—have been diligently working to untangle the genre from these deeply dangerous and inauspicious roots; evidence of this can be seen in the works of authors such as Roshani Chokshi, who centers a deeply diverse cast that runs the spectrum from an Indian dancer to a half-Algerian, half-French hotelier in her novel *The Gilded Wolves* (Brown). I hold it as both responsibility and honor to join the ranks of those revitalizing this genre, continuing

to nurture a place where all races can be reflected in the multiplicity of ways they exist around us.

I diverged from authors like Chokshi, who frequently highlights instances of prejudice, in crafting something closer to Dr. Nicola Griffith's focalized heterotopia. First introduced into the literary lexicon in a Ph.D. study of the authorial evolution within five of her novels, she states, "Members of traditionally maligned groups would normally suffer oppressive and its concomitant punishments. However rendering this suffering would likely create an aversive emotional experience which would work in opposition of narrative empathy. Without empathy, the narrative cannot change the reader's standpoint even temporarily to norm the other." (Griffith, *Norming The Other: Narrative Empathy Via Focalized Heterotopia*).

While I have Finn ponder the very real threat of airport security, I consciously never had that threat serve as significant impediment to his goals. Similarly, as in Dr. Griffith's Ph.D. dissertation, racism simply does not exist within necromantic circles; he was never denied mentorship due to pigmentation, nor was he put on a pedestal for being the exceptional black boy who had powers, his exceptional ability rested squarely within the extent of those powers.

Therefore it was crucial to continue that trajectory when crafting the perceptual shift from perceived villain to part of the heroic ensemble. I achieved this by focalizing his emotional landscape, unlike Dr. Griffith, who prefers to center physical experience alongside emotions (Griffith, *Norming The Other: Narrative Empathy Via Focalized Heterotopia*) because the affection for a beloved teacher is such a universal phenomenon that going to extreme means could easily be empathized with. While Finn is the only focalized character, I also wished to ensure my world was one in which the

South King did not fall prey to the traditional black savage trope (Green) hence his immediately "anguished gaze" (White 139) in the moments following a character's death, swiftly followed by a promise to make amends, "Find me if your insurrection requires my expertise. You shall have it..." (140).

In a similar vein to gender, my original conception of the plot did not highlight such political topics prominently for fear of being pigeonholed as a moralizer, but two semesters writing forced me to confront the priorities that will eventually form the cornerstone of my writing career. While commercial success is desirable, if only because it will facilitate my ability to continue crafting the tales I love, facing a tangible publishing future made me realize I agree with Dr. Griffith's opening manifesto: "I write to find out and, in the process, change the world one reader at a time." (Griffith, *Norming The Other: Narrative Empathy Via Focalized Heterotopia*). As a fantasy writer, I want to find out how supernatural or mythological beings relate to us, what threatens their world and personal or emotional safety, and, in the process, understand how these reactions serve as a commentary about the strengths and flaws of our own society and choices.

As with the transgender community, there is pervasive, often state-inflicted, violence against communities of color; unlike with the trans community however, I am firmly situated as a member of these communities. Undoubtedly, prejudice and the stereotyping of the black savage leads to incidents of violence, be it in the description of a domestic dispute between two black individuals as straight from *Gorillas In The Mist* (Green), or the police killing of Philando Castile, which sent ripple effects not only through his family but the 395 students who still grieved him nearly a year later (Klein).

It would be remiss to pretend that anecdotes like that had no effect on the writing, that my poignant wish for a world wherein such violence and stereotyping did not exist had no contribution to the creation of a heterotopia. This was utilized not only to question the “dominant ideologies” (Griffith, *Norming The Other: Narrative Empathy Via Focalized Heterotopia*), but to grant hope and validation to people living beneath the weight of this oppression.

With four extensive rewrites, this novel has proven to be the most daunting but richly rewarding endeavor I have undertaken. I have elaborated on all the lessons on construction—be it of plot or character—I will carry with me into future projects.

Some of King's musings in *On Writing* regarding rewrites have proven deeply resonant throughout this process: "I remember an immense feeling of possibility at the idea, as if I had been ushered into a vast building filled with closed doors and had been given leave to open any I liked. There were more doors than one person could ever open in a lifetime, I thought (and still think)." (28). Due to this program's excellence, I now possess the skills to select between the endless doors and create work which will, I hope, bear up under scrutiny that grapples with some of the existential emotions and trials humanity experiences.

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Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

—"The Second Coming" W B Yeats

Chapter 1

The frequent shopper produced her third credit card. The cashier swiped it through the register, which, yet again, did nothing.

Lather, rinse, repeat. In this Target no one ever thought about checking to see if there was a problem with the machine; that would break the way things had been done as far back as the oldest person in the vicinity could remember. None of the exiting employees stopped, and the pink-haired cashier, with a name tag labeled Becky, didn't seem to expect it as she shook her head at the customer. Then yawned, long and wide.

The customer, a polished-looking woman with a toddler engrossed in sucking its thumb, looked as indifferent as the length of Becky's yawn, but not upset enough to find other places to buy floral print dresses, enough diapers to build a decent-sized model of a castle, and—

"Try this first one again," said the customer, a ruby the size of a goose egg gleaming on her right hand as she stuffed other cards into her wallet.

Becky could have protested, but she took the thrust-out plastic and swiped it with a muttered, "Cut me some slack anytime, ghosts."

Kendrick glanced over at Becky, just in time to see the tightened mouth, the slightly flared nostrils, the waver of her professional smile that accompanied this half-a-second plea. Kendrick guessed Becky wanted to not be late for the woman that picked her up on Fridays. And whether said woman was Becky's partner, sister, cousin, or preferred ride share chauffeur—who knew what small fads had cropped up since Kendrick had last taken an Uber? —it made Kendrick feel bad enough to, with a brusque hand gesture, relinquish their hold over the machine. The register made chirpy

happy beeps, woman and toddler exited the store, Becky breezed off to return her employee headset. And no one ever even glanced at Kendrick, who lounged above the counter, drumming sneaker-clad heels noiselessly through the side.

"You're welcome," Kendrick said into the abrupt silence. No one looked toward the voice. No one ever did. Maybe Einstein had been onto something with his insanity definition, because anyone who hadn't known about Kendrick's little prank would have thought Becky repeating her actions was insane. But anyone who had known Kendrick, at least nowadays, would have won a lot of money betting any sign Kendrick was keeping a human from their loved ones completely derailed a bit of mischief.

There had never been too many accidents, or electrical or technological glitches, over the last year for the local Target to close, or feel a significant drop in customers. There were whispers. Stories of power outages, or, lately, a machine that "had a mind of its own" left people shaking their heads, or keen to hang around the place on Halloween, because the odd things just screamed ghost story. The second group was usually made up of bored teenagers and impressionable tourists.

By and large the staff coexisted with the random glitches too. They needed the money, nothing bad enough to warrant the police had ever happened, and if paranormal shows wanted to film themselves poking around the store at night and increase sales for a few weeks, no one was going to complain. There were always some people who got fed up enough with being randomly plunged into darkness in the middle of the afternoon to quit, but others walked in with a murmured, "Hi ghosts."—usually the kids that had grown up nearby and were now in need of extra cash.

Maybe it was being a tiny town, subsisting on vineyards that produced grape juice sold as wine. In a state known to most outsiders for golden bridges or the thin,

unfairly talented Golden Globe winners all the way down at the opposite edge from this backwater.

It was the town that tourists said was mostly just a place to drive through, stuff your face, give your car a hit of the oil it guzzled and skip right along, forgotten the moment it was passed through.

So maybe it was that the forgotten place drew the forgotten, one liminal space calling to everyone who'd chosen to be liminal. Or maybe it was probabilities—Kendrick's preferred theory, the ground they felt steadiest on—that there'd be more noticeable concentrations of ghosts in places not likely to generate media attention every nanosecond.

Whatever maybe the locals went with, there were enough odd happenings to generate casual—and hell if it wasn't warranted for a change—belief.

Kendrick had been one of them, a kid and casual believer, because what was the harm in a bit of fun akin to throwing pennies in a wishing well if you had pennies to spare? Remembering that past self, human self, grew harder and harder every day, but lucky for Kendrick, the store held plenty of opportunities for distractions.

Every ghost had some talent or skill that was their own unique claim to spooky fame, apart from a spirit's usual bag of tricks, like leaving an icy chill at their passing. Before becoming a ghost, Kendrick had gotten early acceptance into MIT, so machines of any sort obeyed their slightest mental whim.

Kendrick wasn't any horror movie fan's idea of a ghost. Eighteen, with dark hair and dark eyes; they were ordinary, and known to the wider world not for some amazing advancement in technology, but for dying.

On the way home from the late shift at the movie theater during the unlucky, and

they now thought embarrassingly clichéd, hour of midnight, Kendrick had been trampled to death in a Black Friday stampede.

As if it would've killed—bad, bad word choice—the store to open at dawn! The people who planned their holidays around shopping still would've been in line.

Kendrick could have chosen anywhere to haunt, but in revenge for the macabre mania of their departure from the world of the living, for taking advantage of people who think they're getting a good deal when really prices are calculated to make people buy first and ask questions later/never, and for not even doing anything about the mangled body until, in Kendrick's opinion, far too late, Kendrick caused quiet mischief at the scene of their death. Others did too, here and in all manner of public places.

There was only one unwritten rule: never harm the patrons, only workers and managers. The people who should have at least feigned compassion.

"Kendrick?"

The speaker was an older ghost, wearing an infinitely familiar crisp and beautifully tailored suit. They had worn a nearly identical one the first time they'd deigned to be the cause of so much teeth-grinding Kendrick was grateful to never have to reckon with dentistry bills. Their creativity or daring seemed to be exhausted by going much past a spectrum of black and blue and gray, and the somber colors and perfectly starched seams matched the no-nonsense tone in which they always spoke.

Kendrick glared. "I don't have enough energy to deal with you today, McAvoy."

"You do not require sleep, or exercise. None of us do."

Kendrick thought McAvoy had been a lawyer while alive, or a butler for English nobility. It was impossible to pinpoint anyone's time of death, since with a little mental concentration, ghosts could alter their clothes to any style of dress they could imagine.

Or so Kendrick kept being told; clad in the same sweatpants and T-shirt that had been their deathday garb, Kendrick couldn't seem to change out of an outfit that had grown tiresome several months ago, for all the mental concentration in the world.

"But I do require patience, which is a form of energy, to deal with the bane of my er-post-existence. So, go away."

"I need to take—"

Kendrick had leapt from the counter and flown through three rows of shelves without being aware of deciding to do so.

"I haven't decided to go!" Kendrick snapped, whirling in midair to look up into McAvoy's clear, mint-green eyes. It was still irritating that floating could only make up for so much of their difference in height; almost as irritating as how easily McAvoy kept pace.

McAvoy sighed, muttering wryly, "And you do not have patience for me."

"You've got a sterling record, everyone says so." According to fellow ghosts, McAvoy had convinced sixteen ghosts to cross over. Kendrick didn't know if McAvoy was a psychopomp as a result of some kind of drafting or volunteering opportunity, or if their own crossing over was contingent upon convincing a certain number of spirits to do so first, but a promotion to whatever the next rung up the ladder was couldn't come soon enough. "If you don't like me, I'm sure I can be transferred to a different psychopomp, but you can't make me go without my consent, and last I checked that meant you couldn't move me to a different location because—"

Any vestige of satirical mirth in McAvoy's face vanished with the speed of a striking cobra and their voice roughened with irritation. "I am not that petty. This is bigger than your perpetual obstinacy!"

"Bigger? You mean our king? Stupid question, of course you do." There was little else "bigger" could mean, not to McAvoy.

"You mean... have you heard nothing about it?"

Kendrick tried to hide their surprise at McAvoy's scowl. It was surreal not to be the cause of that look.

"That's usually why people ask things, because they don't know the answer."

"I mean the Council of Kings."

"Wow. I mean, I know that can't be good and all, but—wow."

McAvoy chuckled.

The Council of Kings governed the afterlife, each king ruling over a specific part. Kendrick had never been curious as to how these areas were divided, and had never met their king. Gossip said you only did if you were in trouble, crossing over, or a psychopomp.

The Council rarely got involved in the lives of ghosts. Whether they got involved in each other's public affairs was a question no everyday spirit could answer—and now they'd decided ... something. Together.

"They want all ghosts to evacuate their haunts for a meeting. I'm to take you to the designated place. Will's already outside."

The mention of the five-year-old boy would have gotten Kendrick moving even if their curiosity hadn't already been metaphorically soaked in gasoline and set alight. No one remembered their names once they became a ghost.

Gender was also unfixed. Rumor had it ghosts reclaimed both forms of identity upon moving to the other side. As Lawrence, a fellow store ghost, had explained it to Kendrick, in order to try and sever the ties of whatever unfinished business kept spirits

on earth, some all-mighty being decreed ghosts be referred to by their last names. It was like some never-ending Sherlock Holmes story. Infants or children under ten were the exception. Robbed of life, it was apparently too cruel to not call them by their names and gender.

Kendrick had no idea what had drawn Will to a Target of all places, or how the boy had died. Neither did anyone else, though McAvoy was "making inquiries". It was heartbreaking to watch him try to hold an Earth object in his transparent fingers, or motion to open a door before going through it.

And whether he ever came to understand and accept he was a ghost, all spirits in the area, and maybe even the Council would see to whatever happiness was possible for Will in this new existence. And if Kendrick could do that while the parvenus and mighty rulers remained self-absorbed, so much the better.

Chapter 2

Kendrick hovered with McAvoy and Will and at least ten others that Kendrick could see, though they felt the press of ghosts outside their vision, in a large room with high set windows that allowed sunlight to stripe the richly patterned carpet. Exactly where or what this place was seemed to be a question only the Council could answer fully, but no one that looked anything like a king caught Kendrick's eye. This was disconcerting, given that McAvoy had just finished telling someone whatever was going on was big enough to call together the largest concentration of ghosts in non-living memory.

A ghost with a crew cut drifted toward McAvoy, also clad in a fitted suit. The newcomer was grinning, an expression that Kendrick could inwardly admit was made for their broad, open face, even as they simultaneously wondered how anyone would be happy to see McAvoy.

"You haven't missed anything," crew cut told McAvoy. "But none of the Council's showier representatives are here."

"This does not seem to be the time for such displays."

"But you would have hated arriving after East's kittens."

McAvoy laughed, a full-throated guffaw that Kendrick would have sworn a possible butler/lawyer was contractually forbidden from making, and said, "There is a reason the Target group was last on my list."

"Why?" Will asked.

"Because some of you are very much like cats," McAvoy answered, still chuckling.

"I think that means I don't come when I'm called," Kendrick told Will, "but I'm not

sure why that didn't bump us to group one."

"Because I assumed the news would have been on the bulletin board and Lawrence at least would have told you of it by the time I got to you," McAvoy fumed, scowling once more.

"But then people would have spent all their time scribbling questions on it instead of coming here," Fortescue cajoled. "And you can't refresh the boards like with technology."

A ghost floated through a wall and into the exact center of the room. Clearly someone had an eerily good grasp of spatial calculation to judge the dimensions of a room, and a flare for the dramatic.

In life they would have looked beautiful, but as a ghost their high cheekbones, sweeping hair, a nose with just enough of a point to be exotic, and almost regal bearing, were viewed as though through silhouette, or murky water. They wore a flowing tunic and trousers that put Kendrick in mind of stories about knights and the court revels of Tudor England or Arthurian legend.

"Fancy," Kendrick told Will, indicating the new arrival's clothes with a nod.

"Their shoes are pointy," Will announced.

Kendrick grinned a little too fiercely at him. There was something immensely comforting amid all this uncertainty to remember kids of a certain age didn't care the world was going to hell, because every little thing was approached with a boundless, resilient joy.

Mike had been the same way. Never mind that Kendrick had been ready to pull their hair out at an over-full desk and feverish scribbling as they'd dared to beg early admission from one of the best colleges in the world, he'd had to shriek with laughter

about ... Whatever it was, the delight had been comforting then too; even as they'd prayed for his bedtime to please come faster.

They hadn't thought of those moments at their desk in ... how long? A day? A week?

Most around them flicked a dismissive glance at the newcomer, and to Kendrick's satisfaction, a few grumbled about the need for theatrics, until they garnered everyone's attention by floating to the windows and drawing the drapes. The simple action had the effectiveness of tapping a glass with a spoon to make a toast: everyone stopped what they were doing, recognized what was going on, then fixed their gazes on the source of the sound.

"Quinlan," McAvoy breathed, almost reverently.

"You know them?" Kendrick asked, slinging an arm around Will's shoulders as the boy edged closer in uncertainty and ruffling his brown curls.

"I know of them. Rumor—which is apparently true—has it they can make things in the human world solid for brief moments at a time. Humans can actually feel their touch as physical contact if they wish it. If I had to guess, I would say their talent, with lent power from the Council, is being channeled to create this room."

"How did they get that talent?" Kendrick asked, gazing at Quinlan in awe, mind racing with half-formed possibilities.

"I should think you'd know by now that talents cannot be bartered, Kendrick. There are things it is considered prudent for every ghost to learn," McAvoy's eyes flicked to Kendrick's outfit, and they felt suddenly hot about the face and neck, "But no one even knows exactly how Quinlan came by that talent. It must pertain to their" — McAvoy looked at Will and checked themselves—"past."

Quinlan cleared their throat, silencing the pockets of whispers that had broken out.

"I won't beat around the bush. I know this is all highly irregular for you, and the sooner everyone comes to terms with the state of things the sooner we can go about getting everyone... settled." Kendrick stiffened; Quinlan's tone reminded them of the pacifying voice their mother had used before delivering disappointing news.

"For those of you that might be unaware, there are a select few mortals that know of our existence. I don't mean the psychics on television talking to a member of an audience who is the loved one of a departed soul, spouting guesswork and drivel." Quinlan faltered, then asked: "How many of you know what a necromancer is?"

A few people nodded, some raised hands, but most looked unsure or openly confused. Kendrick saw McAvoy's face was impassive.

"Such humans are born with the ability to see and hear us. Each king has a certain number at their command. They are trained by others of their kind in how to use their power, and continue the tradition of message couriers between the living and the dead.

It has come to the Council's attention that one of them has gone rogue. Instead of fulfilling their purpose, a necromancer has decided to use their power over life and death—that is to say, their control over spirits—"

A confused babble broke out: cries of horror, loud protests, voices raised in anger and fear.

"Humans with the power—"

"Why haven't the Council—"

"And the brilliant powers that be decided to stick us all in one place?!"

People latched onto this last with the ferocity of ants swarming to sugar. All around ghosts began to semi-depart.

"If you want to leave yourself open to attack by all means fly off!"

In that moment McAvoy's voice could have cut through the noise of a packed stadium. Even those who looked as though they could audition for the Headless Horseman pulled their heads back through the walls.

McAvoy swept forward to hover beside Quinlan, gaze sweeping the room with the paralyzing intensity of a search light. People flinched or fell silent, and Kendrick would have marveled at the effect if McAvoy's eyes hadn't sought them out with a look of relief. Insulted, Kendrick stuck out their tongue.

"The Council has protected its people since the world began; even those of you who wile away the hours tormenting humans who help those in need of psychiatric assistance." Kendrick smiled grimly as someone in a sunhat dropped a few inches in height, shamed into trying to hide. Not every ghost haunted out of righteous anger; some were jerks. It hadn't been fun learning some spirits were jerks. "Therefore, we can logically assume none of the Council wishes us harm.

I imagine Quinlan has far more to impart, so why don't we all listen? Calmly and rationally." Transparent heads nodded.

"You didn't say Mac was everybody's helper," Will told Kendrick, using his nickname for the older ghost and the word the Target haunters had determined was easier for a five-year-old than psychopomp.

"They're not. McAvoy just helps us and the people at the movie theater, and missed not having power for five minutes."

"Why don't you like Mac?"

"I do. But no one likes being bossed around."

"Darkest hours really do bring out the unexpected," McAvoy smirked, appearing on Will's other side. "To receive even a grudging compliment from you—"

"Shh," Kendrick cut in, wondering exactly how dangerous a rogue necromancer had to be if McAvoy had started teasing them, "teacher's talking—oh, and thanking you."

The crew cut ghost who'd teased McAvoy seemed to be having an impossible coughing fit. It was a laugh at a good joke rather than mockery, and Kendrick briefly wished this ghost was their psychopomp, before Quinlan's next words recalled them to the crisis.

"I witnessed firsthand what a necromancer could do when these people first came to the Council's attention. The most skilled of that group had the power to return us to our bodies and control us once we were trapped inside them, to the point where we were no more than—" Quinlan was suddenly overcome by a memory that had their fingers clenching convulsively in their hair. Kendrick had seen similar behavior with really far gone ghosts, akin to homeless humans who talked to mail boxes, and as had happened then, a few people tentatively held out their arms or a hand, willing to lend a comforting pat or embrace. "—puppets," Quinlan finished briskly, composure back in place with a jarringly militant quickness. "Ghosts were completely at their mercy, unable to even leave our decomposed corpses."

Kendrick chanced a glance at Will, who was engrossed in some kind of pointing game with a little girl to his right. Bless the short attention spans of the young, they thought.

"But necromancers don't get trained to do that kind of stuff now?" someone

asked.

"No," Quinlan assured, "but as I understand it the power to do these things is always there, simply untapped."

"How many ghosts could the necromancers you saw control?" someone else piped up. "Would this one be able to control everyone in this room?"

"The ones I saw could control up to ten of us." The buzzing returned, a little louder this time, like the bees had been replaced by several swarms. "But I have no idea how skilled this particular individual is."

The important thing is that the Council has decided all of you are to be relocated until this rogue is dealt with."

"Are you saying we have to leave?" This from someone in the back of the room. "Sort out our unfinished business, which is impossible for some of us, and cross over? Because that is fucking—"

"No," Quinlan interjected. "Though crossing over would be safer for you all, no one will force you—that has never been the way of things. A kind of... way station between earth and the afterlife is being arranged as we speak. Residing there instead of at your haunts will protect you until this matter is cleared up. I really cannot overstate that as long as you remain among humans, you will be susceptible to a necromancer's power. The evacuations will take place over a matter of days, during which all of you are encouraged to keep your activities to a minimum. If all psychopomps will remain, I can tell you approximately when you and your caseload will be transferred."

Most people either zoomed off or toward Quinlan, but crew cut ghost put a shaking hand on McAvoy's arm. The commingled terror and pain on their face looked wrong.

"Will I have a gender when we cross over?" they asked tremblingly. Here and there a few other psychopomps were being delayed with a similar question from their charges, while other haunters swept out.

"It will not be a true moving on," said McAvoy, placing their own hand over their friend's. "I do not believe it will cause any discomfort. I will ask Quinlan."

Kendrick gaped at McAvoy. The voice they were using was a priest's voice, low and comforting, a friend's voice; a voice that spoke to mind-numbing worries, paralyzing what-ifs, and said: Trust me.

Crew cut sighed, then turned to Kendrick. "You must be young Kendrick." They forced a smile.

"Yeah. I didn't think McAvoy talked about me."

"Oh very often." The smile was inadvertent this time.

"Whatever they've said it's not true."

"But I've wanted to thank you for the longest time for not letting McAvoy get too complacent. They need a reminder of what it's like to be young now and then."

"Um, wow, thank you, I guess," said Kendrick, confused.

McAvoy gave crew cut ghost the fondly exasperated look reserved for old friends, teasing, and inside jokes. Kendrick gaped.

"Time for us to go back, baby," Kendrick murmured to Will when they finally found their voice, "Lawrence promised to tell you a story before nap time, and I'm going to need that much time to wrap my head around the fact that Mac has friends."

Will didn't protest; Kendrick didn't know what made the kid like his naps, but it was one of the few forms of structure his appointed caretakers could provide, and all were grateful for the oddity.

"Be careful," said McAvoy, eyes on Quinlan.

"Clever as a cat and silent as the grave," Kendrick quipped, swinging Will up onto their shoulders.

"Whee," cried the boy, and a corner of McAvoy's mouth twitched while crew cut ghost laughed outright.

"I really should have introduced myself," said Fortescue when boy and teenager vanished, "they'll think your friend has no manners."

The whisper of their suits brushing against one another's as McAvoy pulled Fortescue into a hug was loud in the emptying room. "Stop borrowing worry. We all have rather bigger problems than accidental rudeness."

McAvoy joined the other guides streaming toward Quinlan, pausing to allow a passel of ghosts muttering about grape production to go around them. Funny how in the face of what should be existential terror, the things that impacted people most viscerally became the most terrifying.

Were Fortescue to become the puppet Quinlan described, what tormented them was the possibility of immutable gender, of walking around in the most ill-fitting costume and expecting it to fall off. That expectation never being met wouldn't decrease Fortescue's feeling of wrongness or being balanced on a knife's edge.

Kendrick figuratively floated at the other end of the spectrum. They had acclimated with remarkable quickness to being genderless; whereas most usually took at least a week after their deathday to grapple with no longer being able to recall whether they were a man or a woman, the child had accepted the fact in two minutes. They attributed it to having more of an affinity for machines than people while alive, a theory their talent and holier than thou world-view lent validity too.

But for all that McAvoy's young, obstinate charge viewed gender the way most expected their hair color before it grayed—neither empowering or demeaning—Kendrick's sympathetic look at Fortescue undoubtedly meant they would be fretting over their own terror. As a puppet of a soulless human, they would have even less autonomy than they did now, unable to prevent living loved ones from thinking they were nothing but a meat sack being dragged around in some horrifying prank while they inwardly screamed and fumed at the assault on their friend's and family's vulnerabilities.

"They will have given into the urge to check-in on all their humans by next Tuesday," McAvoy sighed as they joined the line in front of the Council envoy.

Chapter 3

"But how do they even tell us apart from humans if we're dressed right?"

Saunders asked the storeroom at large, eyes darting the way some people's nostrils flared when upset. "And how do we tell them apart from normal humans? Do they glow or something? For an informational meeting it wasn't very informative."

Boxes and crates of stock that had yet to be moved to the main aisles filled the room. Kendrick was the lone teen secluded there with four other Target haunters, all having staked out their own protective, shadowy spaces of the room, natural or object made.

Saunders, a redheaded ghost with perpetually darting eyes who Kendrick thought might have been their neighborhood's crazy cat lady when alive, floated near the uppermost shelves with Jenkins. The latter was a pudgy lined faced fifty-something straight from the 60's, always clad in casual clothes and with hair that looked sculpted and sustained from hairspray. Clarkson, with granite gray eyes and a heavily muscled frame, would have given any human that came through the back door pause until the penny dropped that they were transparent. Beside Kendrick, sharing the hiding place offered by a tower of organic chips, was curly-haired Palmer, who tended to wear sundresses; today's was dark green.

Jenkins snorted. "That's because it was organized by the Council. I don't know if any of you noticed, but Quinlan never said if this rogue necromancer was working on behalf of one of the kings."

"What are you thinking?" Kendrick asked, voice dripping with sarcasm. "That one of the kings is trying to grab more power by using a necromancer against the others."

"Right in one."

"And you kept silent about this winning theory at the meeting five days ago because you were afflicted by temporary once in a lifetime shyness?" Clarkson asked Jenkins.

"Because I'd never hear the end of it from McAvoy. You know they won't hear a word against the Council."

Everyone fell silent and watched as two human men, who looked to be in their mid-thirties, entered the storeroom and pulled boxes off shelves. No one played with the lights or knocked things over, not knowing what could catch a necromancer's attention; Saunders even flattened themselves against the wall—going halfway through it—just in case.

"I'm out," Kendrick said after the workers left, flying to the door. They hadn't been able to put a name to the faces, which lumped a sense of bittersweet in with the irritation and fear every ghost in the room, in the store, in the town, in the city, in the state, was feeling.

The claustrophobia of the trapped wasn't something you ever considered when you could move through walls. Paranormal shows weren't a threat, not when the hunters were so unprepared for the truth, they were more likely to join the dead than exploit it. But being isolated from life, from the greater scope of memories and things taking place in the town, with wicked, clever powers set against them, left everyone on edge.

"What if we're evacuated while you're gone?" asked Palmer worriedly, swooping over to block Kendrick's path.

"You all know where I'll be." Palmer's frown softened into something holding a little too much understanding.

"Did I tell you my first haunting was a hospital? Not because I died there, it was where my husband worked. I never went back to our house in the early years because I liked seeing him busy, and eventually I... forgot how to get there. So when he retired—"

"Another time, Palmer, please. Today might be my last chance to see them."

Palmer squeezed Kendrick's shoulder. "Okay. But don't loiter too long."

"It won't matter if the kings decide they'd rather have a bunch of meat puppets instead—"

"Shut up, Jenkins!" Kendrick snapped.

Palmer watched Kendrick depart, stifling a sigh. The child feared being seduced into crossing once every kind of spirit was stuck in the way station for Melinoe knew how long, feared forgetting. But that would happen no matter the place.

No matter how much love it came from grief was exhausting, and it had been more freeing than a bereavement for Palmer to forget the address of their first house, a friend's preferred shampoo, the store where their husband had bought that awful sweater.

It was that way for everyone, no matter how hard they clung to memories, but there was no point telling poor Kendrick that letting go even just a little could bring happiness. Picking at how someone coped or didn't cope with the amount of time they grieved was an unkindness only people who *hadn't* died inflicted.

Will's laughter drifted to Kendrick from the toy aisle. Surprised when it didn't abruptly cut off after the boy found something untouchable, Kendrick changed direction from the front doors.

They smiled as they rounded a corner and found Lawrence, a spirit decked out in so much jewelry it was still unsettling they didn't rattle whenever they moved, pluck a

bangle from Will's hand. "Kendrick, want to take a turn tossing? This one's tiring me out."

A lie, but Kendrick shook their head with a smile. "I tossed for you last time. I just wanted to see what all the noise was about."

"Lawrence is teaching me trick throws," Will explained. "But I'm not very good. I like catching!"

"Were you always good at catching things?" It wasn't much of a lead as to who Will had been in life, but even the smallest detail might make the mystery of him easier to handle someday.

Will shrugged.

"You're heading out." Lawrence's soothing voice made the statement less of an accusation. "Be careful."

"No!" Will cried, snatching Kendrick's hand. "You're always sad when you come back from going out."

"I'm not sad, I'm wistful. It's like ... wishful but without a star or birthday candles."

"Why?" Will asked, missing Lawrence's thumbs up as they pretended to itch their lip ring.

"Because I go and see people who won't talk to me."

"But you're nice! They should talk to you!"

"Is there someone who doesn't talk to you? Someone who comes in here sometimes?"

Will shook his head and tried to take a Miles Morales action figure off a shelf, looking crestfallen when it fell to the floor. "Mommy wouldn't listen sometimes."

Kendrick swooped as though to pick up Miles, using a gust of air to slide the package

across the floor. "That's a slippery box, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Will said, brightening even as he gave Kendrick's arm a consoling little pat. That was too cute and depressing to tolerate.

"I'll see you later," Kendrick told Will and Lawrence.

"And when they get back you can tell them all about how I beat you at bracelet throwing," Lawrence goaded.

Kendrick turned their back on Will's determined, outraged cry and streaked out into the breezy fall afternoon, across two blocks and into the yard of the vine-covered, mission-style house where they had lived for the full eighteen years of their life. The vines had changed color, several scritchng against the windows. Unlike the last time they'd visited, the rose bush in the small garden was no longer being plucked by little or lovesick boy's fingers—just in time to be killed by Mother Nature—but that one bush's glossy oval leaves had turned pink.

Bracing themselves, they streaked through the living room window before the McAvoy voice that'd recently taken up residence in their head could convince them it was a terrible idea.

Dean was on the couch, looking like the cat that ate the canary as Jasmine nibbled his ear while from the thankfully-still-not-new-TV a laugh track boomed, warding against parental interference.

"Mom and dad are gonna love getting an eyeful of that," Kendrick teased. The lovebirds remained unfazed.

Kendrick turned away, catching a whiff of roast chicken. And sure enough they saw dad at the counter when they sped into the kitchen.

The box of frozen cookie dough also rested on the counter. Mmmm, grandma's

cookies...

Mom sidled in, glasses perched on her head, in a dither about some bit of urban city planning. Kendrick listened to the rant and dad's responses, reveling in the sight of the boys' new graduation photos on the fridge until mom began to get out cutlery and plates. There was still one more family member to check in on. Deliberately flying low over the couch to make the coupling couple take a breather at the sudden draft, Kendrick went to the back of the house, where they found Mike, surrounded by the wreckage of a demolished Lego construction. He was Will's age.

Kendrick ruffled his hair in another draft, squelching the twinge of disappointment at his lack of reaction as he put the plastic building blocks into their box.

"Hey tater tot; you know lunch is almost ready, huh. I missed you on my last visit, I think you were at a play date."

Kendrick drank in each careful move of the little hands, then raced out with little brother and dad to the dining room table, where the rest of the family, including Jasmine, were seated.

From their spot hovering above the table, Kendrick absorbed the scene with a camera's precision. So eager to move on with life, move through it rather than live through it, Kendrick hadn't appreciated nearly enough of the mundane pieces of things when they'd been alive. So they kept up on the little things now, and took note of everything: Dean's adoration of his girlfriend, Mike's grudging consumption of peas, the different laughs, the length of yawns.

Kendrick left the table too when everyone dispersed, zipping into what had once been their bedroom. Here they'd sometimes shut out their family in favor of self-taught and online lessons in coding, virtual conversations with people on the other side of the

world who they'd hoped to learn from in person, and making plans to meet friends. There were better memories too, nights when Mike would creep in here after a nightmare because eldest siblings gave the best cuddles. Or that exhausting, giddily nostalgic week of summer they and Dean had spent on this floor playing all the *Kingdom Hearts* games.

Kendrick blinked back tears. Who the hell decided ghosts didn't need to breathe but would have perfectly functioning tear ducts?

Now it was still empty, purposeless, white-walled, though a stain from the chocolate fight circa Halloween 2007 still discolored a square of carpet. Comforting, to know they still held some place here, that their absence was appreciated even if it was just because Mom and Dad hadn't had the time to move in boxes from the garage. Unlike their next stop.

If the home where Kendrick had lived was a commingling of familiar and slowly evolving, Claire's house, about twenty minutes away by flight, presented change in all its rapid-fire glory. Claire had been a friend of Kendrick's when they were alive, a year younger, also tech savvy and also with her eye on MIT, but who'd wanted that last year of high school.

"Hey, Claire de lune," Kendrick sing songed, sailing through the open window.

"Didn't mean to do that," Claire muttered.

"Do what?"

Claire O'Brien was tall, typically held the mass of her hair back with a carefully placed chopstick, and inclined to talk to herself as she hammered out lines of code. Kendrick's smile held more than a little relief at the sight of their once-friend in front of a computer in her bedroom. Coding language was the only constant thing in Claire's life,

but the woman could code anywhere: in a park, at a pep rally, as she skipped down a road—though that had nearly resulted in a broken laptop and arm. The site Claire was working on was a blog discussing the strange incidents at the local Target.

Claire had created the blog before Kendrick's death, as a bit of color in an otherwise binary life, but Kendrick had seen the teenager on it more often since machines started going haywire, and—though sure there was no way Claire could trace the glitches to Kendrick—felt a rush of pleasure every time.

Kendrick swooped around Claire's bedroom, seeing what had altered since the last time they'd visited. As a byproduct of its owner's spontaneity, the room was constantly shifting; furniture would be moved from one side to another, walls would be painted in Jackson Pollock-esque designs for about half a week then replaced with a neutral shade of beige, even where Claire sat with her laptop wasn't a constant.

Claire was between decorating styles at the moment. The walls were dotted with random pictures of puppies, but none of the furniture had swapped places as far as they could tell.

Kendrick was trying to decide whether a throw pillow on the bed was new or had been relieved from its stint of being crammed into a closet, when there was a ping from the laptop, and Claire muttered, "Dude knows I'm not an expert, right?"

Kendrick zipped over as Claire opened a new window to some sort of message board. Reading over Claire's shoulder, Kendrick saw their friend had been tagged in a thread about seances by someone called Ammonite.

AMMONITE:

@ClaireDeLune how hard is it to hack into a museum's security system?

ClaireDeLune: Why do you think I'd know that?

Out loud Claire fumed, "How socially inept do you have to be to refer to hacking on a message board?"

"Who have you gotten involved with?" Kendrick asked the teenager. Of course there was no response.

AMMONITE: On your blog you break down pros and cons for why some of the Target activity on paranormal shows is true and faked.

"You can't be right," Claire muttered, fingers flying before she scrolled through the blog's archives.

Claire skimmed an entry and returned to the chat with a half disbelieving half impressed chuckle. Even though they knew they weren't the cause, it made Kendrick feel appreciated.

ClaireDeLune: If this is for that ghost project I don't think it'd be right to try a museum first. I know graveyards are cliché, but there's a reason almost every zombie movie has a graveyard scene, and the tech is nonexistent.

Someone else jumped into the conversation, talking to Ammonite about the best date and time to unleash a bunch of newly-made zombies upon an unsuspecting public. No longer interested, Claire sent a quick "good luck" Ammonite's way before returning to her other window, but not before Kendrick finally registered the user's avatar. A man with glowing eyes grinning triumphantly at an overturned grave; the way the image had been fixed, the man's sickening leer appeared to take in the viewer as well.

If they'd had skin it would be covered in goosebumps.

This could be a coincidence. Ammonite could be a budding filmmaker or special effects guy... asking really direct questions with jail time as a direct consequence.

Maybe this was a fad, the latest social media challenge, some new viral rite of

passage. Considering how many challenges cropped up in the relatively short history of the internet, that was actually more plausible than a necromancer asking their former friend about how to get around security. Then again, what better way to hide you could revive the dead than posing under a new challenge; there could be a whole online community of necromancers using video hits as a ranking system in plain sight.

It was something to ponder back at Target anyway; Claire was absorbed in tweaking the blog's layout, and Kendrick wouldn't use their talent on her.

"Bye, Claire. I'll be going a way for a while but I'll see you soon-ish." But they couldn't help wondering what if that wasn't the case. What if time away from earth was tempting and it was nice not having to try so hard to hold to scraps, to be surrounded by people who would talk to them; to fall in line and be praised as the good little ghost who'd fallen into their natural place after a struggle they'd only made harder for themselves.

Back at their family home, Kendrick reentered into their still-empty bedroom.

"Hey, family! I know you can't hear me but I just wanted to—"

Kendrick did a double take at the soft clearing of a throat, pirouetting in midair.

"God, McAvoy, you're like the guard dog from hell! Look, if you're making up for lost time and want to yell at me about my latest bit of trouble with the cash register, I won't stall them anymore. I haven't been stalling them. No one's been doing anything for the last five days."

When McAvoy still looked coolly professional, Kendrick sighed.

"And I'll make sure Becky gets the best candy bar the next time she gets something from the vending machine. Balance out my karma."

McAvoy's mouth quirked at the mention of Kendrick's talent with vending

machines, but only for a second, then the face resumed its usual solemn expression.

"How often would you say you come by here?"

"I don't know."

"And if a rogue necromancer were looking for ghosts, and had done research about sudden deaths occurring this past year—"

"They wouldn't have found me because I was at my friend Claire's house before coming back here, and before you yell at me for that too, she's been chatting online with someone whose interested in graves, ghosts, zombies and how hard it is to get around security."

"If you are suggesting that the Council has misinterpreted a threat that is in reality some teenaged lark," McAvoy began irritably.

"No. I'm suggesting our rogue necromancer may just be trying to get fifty thousand views on the latest necro challenge instead of trying to break the afterlife record for the largest amount of puppets."

McAvoy stared, uncomprehending.

"They don't want to hurt anyone or make us uncomfortable, they just want to be popular."

"The Council would never allow that disobedience," they scoffed.

"They don't have to. There're private Facebook groups now, places where people can talk about their interests without it being seen by the rest of the internet. Throw in E-mail and it's a secret global club's challenge paradise!"

"And is your friend part of these groups?"

"No, but that doesn't rule out the privacy of E-mail."

Kendrick threw themselves at and through the nearest wall, zipping back along

the familiar streets. It was one thing to talk to McAvoy as though they were an overly emotional toddler who didn't understand how four plus four and five plus three could both equal eight. Letting them see their glee over being right for once meant getting a lecture Kendrick didn't want to hear.

After a few moments McAvoy followed with ease. "There is but half a chance your idea is correct. Unless it can be proven as more than conjecture, you cannot afford to keep to a routine. You heard Quinlan say anyone who remained among humans was in danger."

"Which is why we're all being moved."

"Something I think you need to consider making permanent. Others have approached me about crossing over once this business is settled. And your haunting has gone on long enough."

"People will say anything in moments of crisis!"

"Yes, they will. But Kendrick—"

"Soon I'll be acting more on routine than an actual motive, and if I do not have a purpose I might as well do the proper thing and cross over to my eternal reward," Kendrick rattled off.

Back in front of Target, they both slipped unnoticed through the automatic doors and into the popcorn scented air. "I know the speech, McAvoy. I could cover for you on your sick days if you ever had any.

But I'm not ready! I like being able to see what's going on with the people I care about, and I know not everyone needs to be able to do that, and it may have something to do with me growing up with social media and instant gratification, but it's how I feel! And you can't tell me Will's ready to cross over. Someone needs to look after him,

explain what's going on, or at least get him away from the toy section."

"That will be me when the boy's a little more... receptive. He's as much an excuse as he is a substitute for your—"

"Just a tip, this line of conversation is the worst way to convince me of anything except that I need to stay far away from you."

"You're stuck, Kendrick. Being unable to move on does the same things to the dead that it does to the living. And it doesn't help that your family's started coming back here, or did you think I would somehow fail to notice that?"

Kendrick sped upward to the light fixture, gliding along it before dropping on a whim into men's wear. A man was looking at hats; Kendrick hoped he picked the orange one, it'd make a good conversation starter.

"You need to let go." McAvoy's voice had shifted suddenly, becoming gentler than Kendrick had ever heard it. A bit like when they'd calmed crew cut—Kendrick never had gotten a name. "We ensure the wrongfully dead have time to say their piece and do their part, which you have done. Perhaps this relocation will be the best thing for you, give you time to reflect—"

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Time heals all wounds. You know the problem with those clichés for us? No one knows until they've crossed over how much they'll remember of earth. I don't want to forget how many times Claire repainted her walls in four months, or what vegetables my youngest brother tolerates." He'd picked a black hat.

"There's no predetermined amount of time, no matter what all the talk shows dribble. I'll go because I'm not suicidal—or whatever the proper term is for us—but once the danger's over I'm coming back here. I'll know when I've overstayed my welcome if

what people have said about your successes is true.

And what's with this 'we' crap. You're not part of the Council, you're a lackey desperate to climb higher up the ladder."

That had been more than Kendrick had planned to say aloud. Agitated by the fixed stare of those green eyes, they shifted their attention back to the customer. Was he going to a funeral?

"Quinlan gave everyone the bare bones of their story the other day." Kendrick's eyes locked on the psychopomp. "They've agreed to be more candid with me about the... questions their account brought to light."

"Like whether rogue necromancers are free agents or working for the Council?"

"We've arranged to meet now. I was looking for you so that you could accompany me."

McAvoy held out their arm. Kendrick blinked at the courtly, formal gesture.

"I will need to guide our progress if you come," McAvoy clarified.

"Why me?"

"You are my greatest investment."

Kendrick looped their arm through McAvoy's. "You are unbelievable, and lucky I'm a sucker for a mystery."

Chapter 4
Three Weeks Earlier

And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass;
But seek alone to hear the strange things said
By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,
And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.

—"To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" W B Yeats

The bing of the seatbelt sign going on made Finn tense against the scratchy cloth of the plane seat.

Beside him, Ms. Landry opened her eyes and intoned, "Middle C."
"That's creepy," Finn told her with all the non-malicious scorn he could muster. But he'd relaxed the second she'd calmly opened her eyes. And they both knew it.

"You who have no musical ability disdain those who do."

"Says the woman who can't carry a tune in a bucket."

His teacher shrugged. "I never said my musical ability wasn't a cool party trick."

"You expect me to believe the Council of Kings throws parties."

"Oh yeah. Didn't I tell you? The first thing we're going to do in Ohio is buy you a tux and get you a dance instructor from one of those period drama—"

"Geez, you ask a simple question," Finn muttered, truly irked now, and Ms. Landry laughed.

Then she said, more seriously, "It's fine to be afraid of dying in a plane crash. Just because we talk to ghosts doesn't mean necromancers want to die any earlier than we're supposed to."

Finn nodded. "But the last thing I need is the South King thinking I'm afraid of flying."

"It's your first time on a plane, your first time out of northern California," But she broke off, hazel eyes narrowing in disapproval. "Hey, there are three other kings you could serve. Don't go making choices before you've even met them!"

"He's the king you serve, screw me for wanting to make a good impression on the guy."

"This. Is. Your. Shopping. Week." Ms. Landry punctuated each word with a wag of her finger, thrusting her shiny opal ring dangerously close to his nostrils. "You are going to meet each king of the Council and let them show off without any predetermined plans before deciding which one you want to serve, ideally, for life."

"I know," Finn said earnestly. The finger withdrew.

"Why is it in Ohio? And in the summer?"

"Because it always is. The South King sends everyone birthday cakes," she went on abruptly. "I wonder if he'll make some if a recruit's birthday's this week."

"Does anyone else make cakes?" Finn asked.

"The West King implied it during my shopping week. The last thing she said to me after I made my choice was that she was sad she wouldn't get to write my name in green icing."

"She? But they're kings."

"Who says a king has to be a man," Ms. Landry muttered, picking up the in-flight magazine and smiling at the cover image of some pretty boy actor Finn knew people would expect someone his age to know.

In the eight years they'd known each other, she'd never told Finn or his parents

that half of the rulers of the afterlife were female. He'd pass it, and whatever else he learned, on when they got home, when he'd have their undivided attention after a week away.

Finn's parents had met in college through their shared obsession with paranormal research. Their respective springboards to this work were her love of the myths that helped spawn *Wonder Woman* and his curiosity over people's centuries-old fascination with the occult, and it engrossed them in each other as much as their studies. Nine years, a wedding, and a baby—product, he bitterly surmised, of the haze of drunken despair fostered by another academic disappointment—later, they'd narrowed their field of study from demonology and folklore to ghosts, merging both backgrounds.

Finn had started seeing ghosts when he was five. The first one was an old woman called Nel. She liked hearing about what Finn had done that day in Kindergarten, and told him when Mom had misplaced her car keys, or where Dad had left his glasses. A year into their new line of inquiry, hungry to lay claim to metaphorical miles of uncharted territory, his parents had told him outright that the floating lady was a ghost. And finally saw their son as the genius most parents thought their kids were at his age for learning to read—though he hadn't realized that at five.

Dizzy with the onslaught of attention, Finn answered his parents' questions on what Nel looked and sounded like (solid, not transparent or white, and she talked like a country singer), how she moved, what she could and couldn't do.

He'd been sad and a little worried when he could no longer find Nel, then mad at the random ghost who'd told him Nel would never come back because she had "crossed over" and wouldn't be lonely anymore. Finn had helped her not be lonely!

Losing your sense of purpose at five, something most people didn't experience until a midlife crisis, had left him listless. But that disappointment had been eclipsed by his parents' reaction.

When Finn had been in contact with Nel there'd been trips to the toy store and ice-cream shop, readings of Good Night Moon at bedtime and tuck-ins from both Mom and Dad, breakfasts of pancakes, bacon, eggs, or blueberry muffins. Once Finn reverted to a regular five-year-old he was left to play on his own while his parents pored over books, and ate breakfasts of cold pizza and cereal he poured in a bowl himself; the stove was off-limits. These morning meals lacked the fascination of Mom or Dad serving up food while the other read their favorite sections of the paper aloud, smiling kindly at his confusion and good-naturedly explaining what he didn't understand.

The toys and trips stopped too.

And to add insult to injury, his next few interactions with spirits after Nel became less pleasant. There were ghosts who thought it was fun to make him cry, whispering in his ear as he slept that Mom and Dad would never love him as much as work. Ghosts that knocked toys off the shelves until they broke.

All of that stopped when he met Erin Landry.

She'd been a substitute in his third-grade art class. Preoccupied with waiting for the right moment to escape to the bathroom and cower as the ghost of a teenaged girl reenacted his most recent nightmare, Finn hadn't gotten excited like his classmates. She was a sub, shiny dark hair pulled into a bun, gunk under her fingernails. A ring with a huge colorful stone on it on her right hand that looked like something out of a girl's dress up box, because art subs were weird. But when he'd entered the art room the ghost was not only unable to follow but completely disappeared from his sight.

It was too wonderful to worry him, and then the substitute art teacher had asked him to stay behind after class.

"Would it be all right if I came by your house this afternoon? Will your parents be home?"

"Am I in trouble?"

"No, but I know that look of relief when I see it. There's a ghost that's been bothering you and my banishing herbs have kept them away. Put these leaves in your pocket, and give me an answer at the end of the day if they work."

They had.

Finn's parents had been more than willing to set aside some time for another person like their son. She'd come to their house. On the couch, its cushions wafting the scent of fresh laundry to wipe away years of meals eaten like marathons, she'd begun to explain.

She was a necromancer. A person who helped ghosts resolve their unfinished business, and once Finn was older, she would train him to be one. But in the meantime, she had all sorts of useful tricks for how to get rid of the "bully ghosts", as she called them, and would be happy to arrange visits or phone calls to help Finn with any questions or problems before he was "teachable".

"I can help with his sightings in a few days if we've got a bargain?"

The bargain—his parents getting to carry on as they always had while someone else solved Finn's problems and gave them more research material—was irresistible. Looking back, Finn often thought how lucky they were that Ms. Landry hadn't turned out to be a con artist or worse.

He pulled out a book of mythology from the backpack by his feet, flipping to an

illustration of the four rulers of the underworld. How accurate was it—or inaccurate, since Irish myth had already gotten the genders wrong. Ms. Landry had told them all that first day that when it came to ghosts things were a little Irish, a little Greek—which had set Mom off into questions about Amazons. Finn's face flamed at the memory even now. Ms. Landry had shrugged it off, saying all her folklore knowledge came secondhand from her stepsister and, "Let's just say everyone got a bit of everything right and at the same time everyone never imagined some of it, but I really can't tell you more until Finn's older."

On Ms. Landry's advice, Finn put sprigs of rosemary in the corners of his bedroom and closet. That put a stop to nighttime ghost visits.

One day she'd brought over protective talismans, anointed jewelry that would make him unable to see or hear ghosts when worn. "Eventually, those bullies get bored of not riling us up," she'd said, handing him a chain with a shell on it that, like her ring, looked like well-made costume jewelry.

"It's called ammonite. Someone was telling me the other day that if you touch talismans to a ghost you can, uh, you-you will learn that when you're ... twenty-one, because I don't need to *scar* you. Um, if you ever lose it, don't worry; they're easy to find at least in the South King's region. I thought this would work better for you than wearing a ring like I have, you being so young. According to my colleagues you're actually the youngest on record to have our powers, you know."

That memory made him think of something. Finn tapped Ms. Landry's arm. "How much do they know about what I've done. I know you told people about me when I was a kid, but what do the kings know?"

"It's not like I can text them, but they have their own ways of knowing what we're

up to when they decide to pay attention to the living. They know you've shadowed me for a year, but only on the weekends."

Finn clenched his jaw, smothering a scowl. Erin Landry was the only person in his life who cared about school.

Despite this he'd worked hard to make his own unchaperoned weekday trips to graveyards and memorials, where he followed her example of their lessons. He went through the motions of summoning ("Being near the grave of a stubborn spirit can sometimes give your power that boost so they'll come to you."). And he developed his own tricks of the trade, insurance that he'd live up to his possibly hyped reputation when he met the kings; most unorthodox was his taking notes on the newly dead and buried—how, when, and where they died, what mourners left, what people said about them in unguarded moments to that nice student or neighbor kid paying their respects.

Not that she knew, which would've made him feel guilty for withholding help after everything she'd given him, but he suspected she wouldn't approve. Even though she agreed there needed to be better ways, since sometimes being near the grave didn't manage the trick.

"Everyone knows you know how to not draw attention to yourself speaking with a ghost. I left out what you're doing with social media, facilitating last requests."

She flashed him a proud smile. "Ten years ago I don't think anyone would've thought something called Twitter could be useful for us, but thanks to you reaching into those dark corners of the web to find the grieving, cross overs have been up. People are going to want to hear tips, which sites get the most traffic, maybe bounce off ideas; that can be a good icebreaker for you."

Guilt prickled up his spine. It was one thing if he'd stumbled across posts after

typing the right words into a search box, but lately he'd found himself using some of the most especially bereft notes he'd taken, making his services known online, after the funeral, and a few weeks of posts indicated the grief was still going strong.

A bereft person meant a high, high likelihood of a discontented ghost and therefore a cross over opportunity. Practical, and straddling the line of bullying and manipulation.

"Oh yeah, Martha Kenzington will think that's"—he put on a high-pitched girlish voice—"ever so sweet."

"Until you've spent five hours sitting in a graveyard with Martha, you cannot mock her."

"How does someone that sweet end up helping ghosts. She should be teaching little kids how to color or playing Snow White."

"She does both actually. Yes, get all your eye rolling over with now."

A week before they'd left he got a call from the older necro, who said she'd be lending Finn, her "dear old friend Erin", and the three others who'd be flying out house room, as a courtesy to her king.

"Did you, um, have any say in that?" Finn had asked, wanting some idea what one of the four was like.

"Of course, sweetie," Martha Kenzington had chirped in the tone adults use when they saw everyone under twenty-four as a six-year-old. "I'm ever so delighted. I'm busy when you're flight gets in, but my boyfriend Karl will pick you up from the airport.

"Now, the other necromancers staying here will be older than you. The youngest is twenty-one, but I want your parents to know I keep an alcohol-free home. They're not to be ever so worried."

Smirking, Finn had promised to relay the message as he unloaded wineglasses from the dishwasher before hanging up and putting the address she'd given him into Google Maps and Google Earth. The pictures weren't the best, but he already had a vague idea of which bedroom he'd take, where he'd do his summoning, and what restaurants were nearby.

The shrinking distance between him and those images made Finn even more taciturn as the plane taxied, and he and Ms. Landry found Karl in the airport. He wasn't nervous, merely focused to the point of ignoring any distractions, which Karl was.

There were few people Finn wasted time talking to in his daily life anyway.

Plus, he'd be staying in a large farmhouse filled with people who either saw him as competition to be crushed, or a kid needing to be kept away from the bad, intoxicating drink. There was no point in treating it like summer camp.

He needn't have bothered scoping out the farmhouse. It was a place with soft things to collapse on after absorbing information and exhibiting his skills literally from dusk till dawn. The other necromancers seemed constantly thrown by his age. Interesting anecdotes aside, they weren't the sort of people he wanted to model his life on.

With a cornucopia of front-line experience, he couldn't imagine doing anything but soaking up the slightest trade secret. But the other shopping adults—and to his shock Ms. Landry, who he'd've thought wanted to hone her skills at any opportunity—treated the surrounding country like a plague-zone.

They seemed more interested in hiking to shelf caves, hanging around lake Erie ("There's gotta be at least one ghost trying to make it eerie." and similar childish puns got aggravating within an hour), attending the largest annual Civil War Reenactment in

the state, shopping, and ziplining—treating this more like a vacation than a rite of passage. But they were being wooed by non-human guardians, something everyone was bound to process differently. And the adult necromancers treated him with slightly less condescension than the adults at his high school, which made them already more tolerable colleagues.

Finn thrived where he'd expected to, in the fields out back among the golden sheaths of corn and the kings. Fortunately he was used to seeing California tourists dress in layers and adopted the practice for the weather here.

"None of them look like *The Wizard of Oz* characters," Finn teased Ms. Landry his first day.

"I used that explanation when you were eight and didn't even know about ghost's talents Mr. Smart Alec. And look more surprised that two of them are women! If trainers come we have to preserve the integrity and mystery of the seven days. All the kings are big on not deviating from the rules."

She frowned slightly, then shook her head with a forced smile and squeezed his shoulder.

He knew what she was going to say, and said it with her, "Knock 'em dead."

East and North explained that each king would showcase a selection of spirits from the regions they oversaw, and answer any questions the necromancers posed.

"Why are we meeting in the summer, and not—"

"On Halloween?" The West King finished Finn's question kindly, her rosebud mouth dimpling as she smiled. "Because the end of your trial week will be August seventeenth."

When all but one necromancer looked confused, the South King stepped

forward. He had an aura of power that clung to him, making you take notice, be respectful, or if you weren't the focus of his attention, give him a wide berth. With his close-cropped hair, perfect features, and almost black eyes, he made Finn feel small.

In a voice that made the hair stand up on inexperienced necks, he rumbled: "You have all heard cats have nine lives? It is from an Irish legend about witches who turned themselves into cats and back into people eight times. On the ninth time, what is now the seventeenth of August, they could not turn back.

Similarly, once you choose which one of us to serve, there will be no turning back."

"Symbolically," the East King corrected sharply, tossing a glare at her co-ruler. "If you find yourself discontented after nine years of service with one of us, you may serve another. And if we cannot persuade you by the seventeenth, you may leave without consequence."

After that, Finn met Tinker Bell-like friendly balls of light that were enticements from the North King. A surprisingly angelic-voiced ghostly children's choir that somehow talked every human into playing—and not always losing, since they covered their eyes so they wouldn't see a necromancer's tell-tale glow—hide-and-peek, from the South King. The East King brought cats who were ordinary adorable kittens by day, but shifted into small tigers who would let you see glimpses of your future in their eyes at night.

Ms. Landry joined him in playing with the kittens. "I'll be out for the night when they transform. They never show you anything you can make sense of, and if you try to ask them questions they'll ignore you, or hide behind their king."

"That's too specific for you not to know that firsthand."

"I annoyed one by asking it questions, and the East King as a result."

"That explains why she always looks ticked with you."

"And why I got the smallest guest bedroom."

"For something you did, what, fourteen years ago?"

She nodded. "Lucky for you this litter seems more relaxed than the one in my summer."

"So it's always the same presentations?"

"I don't think so," said Ms. Landry. "She has to have something on standby if someone's allergic. But don't ask her about it, or she might think you disapprove and that's a surefire way to annoy her."

Finn let the tigers slink off when all he saw was himself in his truck talking to thin air. At least he was still a necromancer sometime in the future.

On the last day see-through women in old-fashioned long dresses who helped necromancers find troubled ghosts were representatives of the West King.

"Not as good as the kitties or the kiddies, I know," the West King told Finn conspiratorially as they stood in the field.

"They're, er, nice," said Finn awkwardly, staring at the play of pale orange light on their dresses.

"They only appear at midnight and sunset. Erin Elizabeth Landry assured me you could be a gentleman toward them, so I thought I'd let them preen."

Finn straightened under her approving smile. It was the first time anyone important had mentioned his mentor.

The West King took a swig from a coffee mug and shuddered.

"Can you taste that?" Finn asked.

"No, it just makes me feel warm."

"As little else will do," said the South King, seeming to materialize from the darkness.

The woman eyed her fellow ruler coolly, and said with all the dignity of a queen, "This is a private conversation."

His answering chuckle made Finn's stomach drop. "But the boy is beloved of one of my own. Naturally I am desirous of communication. And he does not appear smitten with your envoys."

"Good, because that would be disturbing, and Erin Elizabeth Landry would not speak so highly of a skirt-chasing pup."

"I think I see Erin, uh, Ms. Landry," Finn began, but the West King patted his shoulder.

"Don't mind us, dear. You're something of a catch with this on the line network of yours—did I say that right, on the line?"

"No, ma'm. It's online."

She pursed her lips. "Mmm, if its creators end up in my territory we will have to chat about that name. But your initiative, unparalleled by anything in your trainer's generation I might add, is bringing out my brother and I's competitive streaks. We're twins, you know."

"I didn't."

Which was stupid; the woman's hair was also a rich black, just rippling midway down her back, and they each had the same almost black eyes. Hers sparked with a teasing glint that increased his chagrin.

"Must you always tell one of our selection of our relation every year, sister mine?"

"I'll leave you to it, brother dear," she said, sauntering away with a wink.

"Has anyone told you what is truly exceptional about serving whomever you choose, boy?" the South King asked, leaning forward and seeming to make the shadows move with him.

"I don't think so, sir."

"The moment you pledge your service, even if you someday wish to serve another of us, you shall never die. If you produce descendants, they may also be given longevity, in matters of plague, war, or illness that your apothecaries require more time to eradicate.

And what your people consider madness: the scars of tragedy or the hallucinations of a brain out of balance, will touch them lightly. While they must be kept away from boundaries mortal flesh must not cross, they will never be followed by your people's narrow-minded scorn, or imprisoned behind madhouse doors."

"That's amazing! And, er, we call them doctors now."

"Ah, thank you. I am glad you are more perceptive than your trainer. She has not been best pleased that I will not alter a rule as fixed as sunlight to aid an alliance made by marriage."

It took Finn a moment to work out what the king meant.

"Her stepsister, Kara, has—"

"Has no necromantic blood in her veins. We are not angels of mercy, creatures of myth who grant altruistic fancies."

"So you're immortal beings who rule over other eternal beings made like that 'cause they're pissed to be away from their loved ones before they wanted?" He was sure he'd understood, but in case the South King was as hot-tempered as the East, he made it a question. After the King's approving smile and about a minute of silence in

which Finn pondered what he'd just learned, he asked, "Shouldn't you be magnanimous? Encourage more crossing over and less chaos in the afterlife, set an example by not being petty enough to find loopholes about descendants 'cause laws change about who's family every few hundred years."

"There are some abysses human minds should not need to comprehend." His tone was surprisingly sincere. "One of your philosophers knew it well: stare into the abyss, he said, and it will stare back at you. We already were forced to make exception for our fractious charges; why do you think we first deigned to breed with mortals?"

There was a long enough pause to rule out it being a rhetorical question. "Are you saying you *meant* for there to be necros because of ghosts?"

A quick nod, as though that was a minor detail of the story. "There were those who felt a call to that untouchable, unfathomable abyss after that, pup. Strong enough to comprehend without their understanding fracturing and shattering; the first necromancers, who they alone it was our duty to teach and grant purpose to. As humans taught us when we extended our hand in benediction before you were born.

"Perhaps this person beloved of one of my strongest-willed folk would have the strength to endure, though I would cause unneeded pain if she did not. But the others, who heard of her miracle and wished to understand it? Tell me, would they kindly walk away, or work themselves into a fury when learning a guardian of the dead, unwilling to become a saint to the living, gave a very select form of sucker."

Despite the harshness of the South King's words, his black eyes held a flicker of warmth as he continued, "You were born with a poor deck, humans would say. A messenger molded from dire need to keep our charges supping on enough mortal contact they do not smash the barrier. And whether your children share your hand or a

better, they will have an echo of our strength. Do not drag others into games with your rigged deck. Powerful as you are, best you vow that now, boy, or you will find service with any of us most unpleasant to your moral intentions."

"I already do. Just playing devil's advocate; have to live up to the reputation," said Finn, without a hint of cockiness, thinking of his parents.

Petty as it was, he'd always been jealous of the time Ms. Landry spent with her stepsister. The two were close, she'd often used Kara as an example for why he needed to start rekindling his friendships with normal kids, but coming from her, of all people, the moments of unintentional neglect always felt worse than what he endured from his parents.

In the end he chose the South King for his power, brutally scalding honesty, and because he wasn't ready to cut all ties with his teacher. The night before everyone's departing flights, Ms. Landry and Martha Kenzington handed around cups of steaming tea, hairpins, pens, and forms as they gathered outside before the kings.

"Just sign your name and the king you wish to serve in the spaces provided," the East King said, "then tear off the bottom left corner of the last page, bloody it by pricking your finger, and hand it over with your forms to either lovely lady before drinking the tea. The turning over of your blood allows us to help grant you longevity, and the tea is made with pomegranate peel."

Someone chuckled as Finn bent over his form. He massaged a few drops of blood from his thumb after using the hairpin, passing the papers to his solemn teacher before choking down the scalding brew.

Nothing about it was how he'd imagined, and yet he felt a surge of pride as he lowered the pink, porcelain cup.

"I hope you're not serving him because of me, or because your family wouldn't have to move," said Ms. Landry as they peered at the arrival times in the bustling airport. "I know I've shown my bias and preference over the years, but I've tried to give you time and space to make up your own mind.

Was it what I said about birthday cakes?"

"Yeah, I made the most important decision of my life because of sugar," Finn deadpanned.

She sighed. "It's not that I'm not glad to be working with you, maybe partnered with you even, since we've done so well together. I just don't want you getting attached to anything. It's bad for the job."

"Hey, I figured out when I was five that getting attached to manifestations of ectoplasmic energy and post-human consciousness was a waste of time. Give me some credit now that I'm older."

"So you're planning to drop out of school, forgive me if I feel you need basic reminders on how the world works. For us, anyway."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've seen you heading to school and then going off to look at art galleries or whatever."

"Oh, damn, I never went to that art museum."

"First of all, Ohio has three art museums. And second, even if you'd made plans to go to all of them, the only place that might keep a museum open at two o'clock in the morning is Vegas."

The look in her eyes was fiercer than her words, but Finn's chin jutted. "I already know what I'm going to do with my life. And you dropped out of high school."

"So that's it. I tell you about one bad life decision and you have no choice but to follow in my footsteps. The part where I got my GED and became a horticulturist, so I could be self-employed and have a flexible schedule was supposed to be the takeaway from that story."

"While I'd love to stand here and listen to more lectures, we still have to get to our gate."

"You go ahead. I'm heading to the bathroom."

He'd already moved toward security when she said, more kindly, "We'll have dinner to celebrate soon, since food's the only way to make you be on time."

He made a scoffing noise, although they'd both noticed after his first two days in Ohio that mealtimes had been put in prominent display on the fridge. "Make it lunch? My parents are taking me out to dinner tonight, Mom's even springing for the expensive bakery cake."

"They called, good!"

"No, I called to remind them I was coming home."

Security looked his ID over, checking that the photo of the stocky, dark-skinned, blond, slightly pockmarked sixteen-year-old matched the kid in front of him. "Finn Davis."

"Yes."

"Off you go."

He'd never thought traveling as a necromancer, even a newly minted one, would be a risk until today. You never knew what security might decide to take a closer look at. He'd decided the rosemary was safe to put in a carry-on, but the bag with the shovel had to be loaded onto the plane. And then there was his chain.

It was the only thing he was nervous about on this return flight. He worried about being asked to take it off while waiting in line and going through the metal detector.

He didn't want to know how many ghosts haunted airports after dying in plane crashes or on their way out of town. He wouldn't be able to mask his reactions to all of them.

The thought of going for any time without it around normal people made him hyperventilate. Being able to have it and slip the aventurine—a talisman that let ghosts approach him among people—on and off should've felt even more essential now he was bound by his new duty to the Council to hear them out, but with his extracurricular pursuits, it was more like old hat with some added solemnity for spice.

Once at his gate, Finn slouched into a seat by the window. A dead bird lay on the street outside, its ghost circling above it—probably in confusion.

Ms. Landry didn't know why animals became ghosts; not being any kind of animal person she never bothered to look into it.

The twenty-one-year-old necro who'd been one of his housemates, and ended up going into service with the East King, was a vet in his working hours. As far as he could tell, pets appeared to stay on Earth out of loyalty or affection for their owners or a still living pet, which is why the vet sometimes saw an animal's ghost more than once.

Eventually it stopped following its owner and living pet into the hospital, but that didn't explain wild animals, and this bedraggled thing was no pampered songbird.

The bird's ghost turned toward Finn, and began flying toward the airport. Leaning closer to the window on the pretense of looking at something, Finn touched the ammonite under his shirt, clenching his fingers around fabric and shell. The damn aventurine was in his shovel bag; the bird shouldn't be anywhere near him without invitation.

The stupid bird kept coming, unperturbed, drawn to the glow all necromancers gave off like a magnet to gold.

Finn stood, making a beeline for the nearest bathroom as he took out his phone and sent a text to Ms. Landry.

Finn: Got a problem.

Landry: What's up?

Finn: Ghost bird.

He checked behind him to see the thing a few feet away. Of course it could fly through walls.

He tacked the words following me to the end of the message.

Landry: Is it a parrot?

Finn: What?

Landry: I don't know what 2 ask when you're being hounded by a bird. Maybe get your phone 2 make cat sounds?

Finn: It's red.

Landry: Facetime me so I can see this?

With a humorless laugh, he entered the nearest stall.

Finn: You can't help me, can you?

Landry: You're on the job now kid, serving the South King. Figure it out. If u want me 2 join you I need to get back in line.

Shoving his phone away in disgust after a panicked look at the time—fifteen minutes till boarding—he turned his attention to the bird, now hovering in front of his face, dirty and bedraggled, and cheeping plaintively.

What the hell was he supposed to do? No one had ever told him it was

necessary to go around carrying... transparent bird seed or something. And someone was bound to hear the repeated cat sounds echoing in a bathroom, or pretty much anywhere in this building.

Mom and Dad would forgive any excuse that involved ghosts—he'd made up a few when he'd missed curfew—but it would ruin a night that was supposed to be, for once, all about him. That didn't even happen on his stupid birthday.

Stop, he half mouthed, half hissed at it in desperation, go back, go back to your body.

And to Finn's utter amazement the bird revolved on the spot and glided back through the door. There was something oddly mechanical about the movement, as though he was suddenly seeing a remote-controlled bird, rather than the manic flapping thing of moments ago.

With a shocked grin he returned to his gate. Only to find the clearly dead bird tapping at the window beside the chair where he'd left his carry-on bag.

From the row behind him came the shrillness of a terrified scream.

Chapter 5

"Okay, what did you do then," Ms. Landry asked, unconsciously rubbing her opal.

"Well, I could see the ghost... like inside the bird's body, and I-I sort of pushed it out with my mind, and told it to leave... God that sounds even more stupid out loud."

"Which is why everyone in this Starbucks will think we're talking about science fiction. And it's far from stupid. Since I've seen nothing about this on the news, I'm guessing the people who saw it managed to convince themselves it was a trick of the light. That it fell, already dead, on the windowsill."

Finn nodded, picking indifferently at his doughnut.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You told me to deal with it. No one cared by the time you got to the gate. I thought I did what I was supposed to. And then I thought about it on the way home." His face burned.

"And you remembered the golden rule," she prompted.

One of the things Ms. Landry'd drilled into him in their very first lesson was the need for secrecy. Enlightened as the world might have become with each new generation, saying, or worse, demonstrating, you heard and saw ghosts would only get you a psychiatrist appointment.

It had happened to some necros holding a seance in Times Square, and one who'd filmed themselves talking to a ghost in a haunted house in L.A. At the time, Landry'd said the Council chose not to help people using work for fifteen minutes of fame, and having met them, Finn could believe all four would happily let those idiots cool their heels by talking about their feelings.

"But you were gone—"

"I already apologized for that!"

Finn had planned to confess everything during their celebration lunch, but the morning after his parents' welcome home dinner she'd had to leave on what he guessed was either their king's, or family business for a few days.

"Yeah, I know. I'm not biting your head off. I'm just freaking out here!"

"Finn, what you did... you can never do it again."

"Don't think I could repeat it if I wanted to."

Ms. Landry drummed her fingers on the tabletop. "No. It's forbidden by the Council for us to reanimate the dead. That's what it's called. It's an abuse, a corruption, of our purpose."

She glanced at her phone, mouth pinching in worry.

"Expecting the sorta sibling?" Finn asked, the words coming out as cruel as a ghost bully's taunt, but Ms. Landry only nodded distractedly.

"I know you didn't know what you were doing, but," her whisper dropped another notch so Finn had to read her lips, "you're powerful, Finn, more powerful than any necro to date—"

"Yeah, I go to Ohio and suddenly I'm hearing I'm some damn necromantic wonderkind, but somehow my mentor of eight years forgot to mention that."

"Because it's normal for our powers to start out strong as kids and through puberty, then lose potency after that. And you already devoted so much time to this, built too much of your self-worth around being good at this." Now she spoke at a normal volume. "You were abandoning other possibilities, running away from school, and I didn't want you using more things I said as an excuse for bad choices."

"And we're back on the school merry-go-round."

"No, we're on the in hindsight I made a bad call carousel. And I don't know that the Council would believe that you didn't reanimate on purpose. Look at the reaction I got for upsetting a ghost tiger. Your rarity is going to make everyone either want to kiss you or kill you, so to speak."

"Your love for Elizabeth Banks is disturbing."

"Just stay away from animals for a while, no parks, no pet stores."

She twisted her ring around her finger, then blurted, "Pinky swear."

She hadn't asked him to do that since, at nine, he'd called her about a kid ghost who kept wanting to know where their mommy was. He'd sworn to let her deal with it, and an older ghost had taken the kid away.

Her eyes had been shadowed for a long time after that whenever she glanced at him, and her hugs had become wonderfully fierce. When he'd been old enough to ponder, he'd supposed it was pity for the little boy and his terrible experience, but he wasn't looking gift-hugs in the mouth.

Now though, it occurred to him for the first time he hadn't been anywhere close to having his aventurine, the ghost never should've come within a hundred feet of him, and Erin Landry'd known it.

A little unnerved, Finn held out his pinky.

He'd let her talk him into going to a movie after that, needing the reality break as much as she seemed to.

Finn came back to that moment a lot in the days after he reported Erin Landry was missing. The things he should have done and said, and that she hadn't mentioned anything about work, ghost or horticultural.

Mom and Dad said their platitudes, but for all their talk over the years that Ms.

Landry had become part of the family, they did nothing more than that. She'd stopped being a new resource to mine years ago.

He made phone calls, or scoured social media to find the newly grieving, and consequently some fresh ghosts, eager to make a good impression on their only form of help by doing something as bizarre as watching her apartment when he couldn't, without question. It was a lame way to keep tabs, but more than the police, who seemed to have no clue what he was talking about when he checked up on them, were doing.

Then, exactly twelve days after he'd last seen Ms. Landry, five days after he'd gone to the police, the South King showed up on his doorstep.

"I don't typically make house calls," he said in his dark, deep, rich chocolatey voice, "but I need to speak to you in private, and waiting for you to come to me the living way takes too long."

"Yes, sir."

"Erin Landry is not missing, so slipping Lethe water to your law enforcement was added to my schedule this week."

"I don't know what that is, but I'm sorry?"

"Yes, you are. It's the reason why they seemed unaware of your report the last time you spoke with them, and then I had to make them forget that conversation! Now that I've got your attention, let me take you somewhere a bit more secure to elucidate."

Finn followed the South King's pointing finger to a luxury Tesla parked outside his house.

"I didn't think you'd drive something so... advanced," Finn ventured, once they'd both settled in the front seats.

"You thought correctly, it's an illusion. There are some secrets even your kind

must only learn upon crossing over." Finn felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

"And if the location isn't as secure as I would like, this transport will suffice as a place to talk."

Finn smiled. If his king had thought all that through, then he'd have a reasonable explanation for what had happened to Ms. Landry. And Finn could help, since it had to be work related; he relaxed into the faux leather as the car raced down the street.

Chapter 6

Kendrick took in the seven floating black doors eddying gently around them, the nameplates affixed to each that pulsed with some unknown inner light, and the dim shapes of more doors that seemed to stretch out into infinity, with a stoic appreciation.

"Welcome to the partly constructed area that will house us all until the danger has passed," said McAvoy.

"Okay, but does it have a name, 'cause that description would be the longest acronym ever, and I'm not sure anyone could say it in one breath."

"There's talk about calling it some kind of zone."

"Like in comics and cartoons?"

"I would not know."

"There are these things called TV's" Kendrick sighed. "Boxes with lights and pretty moving pictures?"

"I am partial to the idea that it be called the Other Place," McAvoy relented, almost conspiratorially.

"That sounds mysterious, vague, and prone to drive people batty. I can see why you're pulling for it."

McAvoy ignored this and rapped on the door bearing their own name. It swung inward.

The quarters were bedecked in every shade of purple conceivable, with two small alcoves branching off the main sitting room that presumably led to a bedroom and kitchen. The warm air that engulfed them as they glided inside smelled of chocolate. The source emanated from a large platter—veering on the side of obscene in McAvoy's opinion—containing a spread of chocolate chip cookies that obscured whatever surface

it rested upon.

"This doesn't exactly scream you," Kendrick smirked as the door swung closed.

"That would be because I had to entertain myself before you arrived," said Quinlan, emerging from one of the alcoves and waving the door shut with a flourishing sweep of their arm before settling on a lilac settee. They motioned with a graceful hand to the platter. "Please eat as many as you like."

McAvoy drifted over to a lone window with a demurring smile, biting back a chuckle as Kendrick gaped.

"You haven't eaten since you died," Quinlan guessed correctly.

"Yeah, I mean, no. It's not like we need to eat, but... I like cookies, and I just saw my family eating my grandma's—"

They turned a by now-familiar glare on McAvoy.

"You set this up, didn't you! Why not use what's going on with this necromancer as the stick to move the stubborn mule toward the carrot. Or cookie, I guess."

"Think about why we are here, then think about that accusation, and you will undoubtedly arrive at the correct answer. Besides, I assure you, I had no idea Quinlan possessed any gift for baking."

"You're looking out a window onto a landscape of revolving doors, but sure, I'll be the only weird one here." If a ghost could develop from refusing to cross over to acceptance and moving on, McAvoy prayed someday Kendrick would grow out of masking embarrassment with bravado.

"Should I not have made cookies?" Quinlan asked, looking between the two of them, a smile playing about the corners of their mouth. Well, at least Kendrick was ensuring McAvoy would make an impression. Not precisely in the way they had hoped,

but Kendrick's tactless mouth was always a risk.

"I'm sorry" the adolescent told Quinlan, "this necromancer thing's making me more suspicious of McAvoy than usual. And I'm used to being around the Target ghosts, who either also despise our psychopomp, or find me oddly charming."

Quinlan waved a hand, sending a cookie, fat and soft-looking, with enough chocolate chips that chocolate was dripping and hardening around the edges, into the air and spiraling toward Kendrick, who caught it and took a bite, grinning around their mouthful.

McAvoy pondered the expression. Quinlan's cookies must be very reminiscent of Kendrick's grandmother's. How incredible that Quinlan, so settled in their ghosthood, also found this token of humanity so comforting.

For all they told Kendrick about not knowing how talents were acquired, whatever sparked Quinlan's must have been an astonishingly strong connection with the human world, which perhaps meant that talents could mutate with the right emotional upheaval.

If so, it was a sharp contrast to Kendrick's talent; technology seemed very impersonal for someone whose reasons for not moving on were the living. It had always been preached that an attachment to humanity was anathema. It was stark and a little terrifying to watch this high-powered envoy and their stubborn charge both taking such pleasure in human things without terrible things happening.

Were they not certain the Council held the world's best interests uppermost, it would make their proscriptions feel shaky and mutable. It was one thing to bring Kendrick here knowing their insights about humanity might be mined, but to see an envoy of the Council encouraging their connection was a very different proposition.

"With the way you're disdaining them, I would say I shouldn't have made cookies,

but your charge certainly is taking full advantage, which is beyond gratifying as baker."

While they'd been woolgathering, Kendrick had almost emptied the platter. "The cookies are lovely."

"Lovely," McAvoy echoed in astonishment. "You are incapable of thinking anything is lovely."

"I see why you want... is it Kendrick? To cross over so badly, McAvoy. Someone to keep us on our toes."

"How far does your skill go?" Kendrick asked. "You make cookies, you can move cookies..."

"It's a side effect of my talent. Here the objects are solid, so I'm something of a magician."

"That explains the door," said Kendrick.

"Yes. But that's far from the matter at hand. I believe our rogue is very old, and very practiced in the ability to control us. I know I said I did not know how skilled this individual was at the meeting, but there's no other conclusion based on the evidence of their defection, and I was there in a selling capacity, you understand."

"We do," said McAvoy.

"I liked it better when your we didn't include me," Kendrick muttered, setting a cookie back on the platter.

"No, please..." Quinlan's fingers clamped in their hair, the same convulsive tell from the meeting. The sympathetic widening of their brown eyes told McAvoy Kendrick had noticed it too. "Keep devouring my cookies, Kendrick. I have not talked about this since I recounted my story to the Council, and believed that would be the last time."

The young ghost complied, but with notably dampened enthusiasm, as Quinlan

turned toward McAvoy.

"As the voice of the Council, I request your aid. Your successes are unparalleled. We need information only available from Earth to end this threat."

"Sixteen is unparalleled?" Kendrick asked.

"Sixteen since your deathday perhaps, but McAvoy's record stands at six thousand nine hundred and eighty-seven."

"Oh. I'm gonna just ... think about how staying here means eating cookies without gaining weight or getting a stomach ache now." McAvoy stifled a sigh at yet more bravado.

"What no one but the Council knows about my brush with a rogue necromancer is that I'm the only one who survived."

There was silence.

"Um, what do you mean by that exactly?" Kendrick asked. "I mean, isn't surviving kind of what we're good at since we can't die again?"

"That's true only if we are left to the natural way of things. My friends and family felt pain for the first time since dying when forced into their corpses. They had to walk on legs that were nothing but bits of bone, hold weapons with decaying hands."

Quinlan's voice wavered on the word, and providing what privacy they could, McAvoy quietly told Kendrick, "To find oneself with a body, with a reminder of the confines of gender, and the ability, but not the free will to do things that impact the world—"

Kendrick held up a hand, and McAvoy's feeling of guilt ebbed when the child's expression shifted from commingled pity, terror, and revulsion to their usual inquisitiveness.

"How do you know?" Kendrick began.

"I have had the honor of working with necromancers who value their responsibility. When upholding it, necromancers provide closure and fulfilled purpose. It is not difficult to deduce what the opposite of that would be like!"

"And you know because of your friend... who didn't want to cross over," Kendrick said slowly, agitation ebbing somewhat as their gaze grew thoughtful.

"When the rogue I encountered had finished with my friends and family, I do not know why I was overlooked," Quinlan started, finding their tongue once more. "I think the shock of being tethered for weeks to a body that they had no control over was too much. After being released from the hold of that monster, each one's essence faded and drifted away like smoke. I was the last out of seven, we all died within days of one another, and each king assured me my friends and family were nowhere to be found in their domains."

Commingled fury and determination hardened Quinlan's features, while their fist crashed so forcefully on an arm of the settee that the upholstery flew across the room. "But this rogue can't be laying low, from what McAvoy says the living world has apparently changed too much even if they wish for anonymity. You have the Council's word your involvement will be rewarded with crossing over; it will more than fill your quota. And you will have my help as envoy, although Earth is taxing."

"I accept."

The Council were desperate if crossing over was on the table. McAvoy was of course aware of their friends and charges theories that the Council could conceivably be behind this ordeal, but it was the work of overstimulated minds, trapped by boredom and being confined to haunts.

No, what was to be done with Kendrick was the true conundrum. The thought of their charge evaporating into... It could not be contemplated.

It was one thing bringing Kendrick to an informational meeting, where in truth the teenager could provide more information than Quinlan or themselves. Riveted as Kendrick was to their family and friend, quick and observant as McAvoy suspected they'd been even in life, Kendrick was the only one of the three with any true knowledge of the human world's rapidity. And if McAvoy had the misfortune to be felled by this necromancer, the burden Quinlan carried would still be shared. But McAvoy had not anticipated Quinlan would make a call to action.

Kendrick would balk at remaining with Quinlan, edible dessert or no. Perhaps if their beloved technology could be useful—

Letting out a ghostly wail, Kendrick doubled over.

"It's all right," said McAvoy as they gripped one of their charge's quaking shoulders, ignoring the string of curses.

"The sensation of a multitude of red-hot pincers tugging at your insides is normal, Kendrick. A human is trying to call you. All you have to do is follow the call. "

"Least-ouch-helpful thing you've ever said."

"Yes, well, never having been called myself, hearsay is the best I can give you," McAvoy snapped. "I will accompany you if you relax."

"I need to inform the Council about reinforcing this place's defenses," said Quinlan, opening the door. "Hiding here does no one any good if they can be called."

As Quinlan took flight, McAvoy tucked the thinner arm securely through theirs. "Relax and the pull will stop. What if it's your family."

The child went almost limp and they were dragged backward at what on Earth

would have been a break-neck speed. So, their talent for persuasive arguments only worked on Kendrick when the latter was in duress. Splendid.

They juttered to a halt before a headstone.

"Two for one. Isn't this a day of surprises," said a young male voice. McAvoy pivoted themselves and Kendrick into the gaze of the stocky blond necromancer, aglow with one's telltale color of a shifting yellow/orange/red, an aura of living flame. Though McAvoy could not recollect one ever burning bright as noontday sun before.

"I don't know you," Kendrick heatedly informed the necromancer.

"I'm Finn Davis. Now you do."

Chapter 7

Kendrick only liked good surprises, like the afternoon they and Will had spent playing with a ghost dog while it waited for its family to get out of the movie theater. The urge to move closer to some necromancer—because what else could this boy be; he didn't have a Ouija board (his phone, clearly in view, showed an aerial map of the cemetery), he was looking straight at Kendrick and McAvoy, and normal human hair didn't shine like flames! —ranked right up with their death for a bad surprise. The graveyard in question wasn't helping things either: marred with scattered headstones that had been moved away from dug up graves, which only drew attention to the open coffins, and trails of zigzagging footprints leading away from them.

They'd known the town groundskeeper and de facto grave-digger would gleefully tell tourists the wine made here was better than anything discovered at Australia's wine research institute. But it was really stooping to an obscene level to let a kid bribe you with whatever bottle he could get his hands on. And all to turn a blind eye to part of your job becoming a sloppy lab for some Frankenstein fantasy.

Kendrick didn't remember being religious enough to get fussed either way on grave desecration, though they knew McAvoy wouldn't be the only one crossing themselves at this place's decimation. But the mess? The mess Kendrick found plenty vile.

Before they'd found their passion in machine innards, Kendrick'd had a crack at human anatomy. They'd never been idealist enough to think every scientist working with a cadaver found it sacred, but this kid was so high on his own power and glory he couldn't be bothered for basic decency, much less sacrament. Nothing could be done about the coffins sticking out of the ground, the bodies had to be easily accessible, but

the overturned headstones; the carefully lain flowers trampled to pieces?

This was some asshole tossing around toys knowing he could get more if they broke. No different than a corporation so bent on profit they'd practically invited people to step over Kendrick's prone form.

"Care to try that introduction again?" Kendrick snapped, arms crossed to inconspicuously pinch one. It didn't hurt, which was usually the norm for ghosts, but since no one had ever mentioned being summoned was the first time a ghost would experience agony since no longer living, they weren't sure what rules this experience fell into.

"No, thanks."

"Then what do you want?"

"To disrupt the natural way of things," McAvoy cut in sternly.

"I meant with me," Kendrick muttered as the necromancer—Finn—eyed the older ghost, then smirked.

"Well, since you figured it out, the least I can do is tell you you're almost right. But calling it natural is a bit much."

"You'll have to excuse my guard dog here," Kendrick babbled, antsy at not being in the loop, "you're kind of messing up a possible promotion thing. And I don't know if you know... what's your name again?" It was a petty, obvious kind of needling, but the kid's eagerness to chat was almost unnerving.

"Finn."

He wasn't baited, but his hands started fidgeting. Years of being an older sibling made Kendrick pretty sure that meant the kid was thrown a little, and they'd take the small victory.

"Finn. I don't know if you know this, Finn, but being summoned is excruciating, particularly since—"

"Ghosts don't feel pain, I know," he said dismissively. "And I gotta say I'm surprised that didn't make you answer my call quicker. From your old social media accounts, it didn't seem like you'd put up much resistance to a sudden onslaught of pain. But then, you can't drop dead under pressure again, so..."

It was a good taunt. Almost scripted to get under Kendrick's skin, and if they hadn't spent days on end interacting with McAvoy, it might have worked. But something about the way it was delivered was like hearing someone sing a song you loved with technical perfection but no emotion, after you'd been putting heart into every syllable.

"If you're the rogue necromancer, we'll have to cut this tête-à-tête short so I can tell the Council it just needs to let your parents know you're mega grounded. You're what, fourteen?"

"Sixteen," the boy grunted. Clearly his shortness was a sore spot.

"Ooo, scary."

"Kendrick," McAvoy practically growled in warning, as the noon bright light around Finn suddenly blazed, making Kendrick throw up an arm. Something shoved them, and they pitched face-first toward one of the dismantled graves.

Kendrick tried to fling themselves backward, but felt nothing. Their vision flickered, then became abruptly blurry.

"What," Kendrick started to say, when an odd gurgling noise sounded so close they jumped.

Kendrick tried to call out, a hello, or an it's all right, but their throat/mouth/jaw wasn't working. Something smelled awful, and there was the weirdest... feeling...

It took Kendrick some time to recognize and categorize it all. That sharpness around their stomach was pain. The whimpering, moaning keen was coming from them. The odd vibration in their chest (her, those were definitely breasts) that made the sound hitch in places was her breathing.

The sickly-sweet smell was also coming from them—their body.

"You can't stand," came Finn's voice from somewhere above. "Not that you'll care if I keep you in your body for too much longer. You won't feel pain, or even understand what I make you do. What I would make you do, I should say."

He made a little come-on gesture, a small twitch of two of his fingers. As if an invisible string between his fingers and Kendrick's body had pulled taut, Kendrick's muscles seized, and she/they were floating again: Sweet, glorious, painless floating!

"Are you all right?!" McAvoy demanded, arms outstretched as though planning to catch Kendrick if they fell. But that wasn't right, was it? Kendrick was only half of a name and the first part was... Already what little they had regained about who they had once been was trickling away, like trying to hold water in your hands as it poured from a faucet. They felt somewhere between slap happy or punch drunk, and fatigued.

"I don't know. I feel lighter than I did a few seconds ago. Would that qualify as all right?"

McAvoy nodded, drawing themselves to their full height and dropping their arms to their sides before the full force of that fixed, mint-green-eyed stare settled on the sixteen-year-old budding psychopath to their right. "I sincerely hope that you enjoy the remainder of your time among the living, because whether you are a ghost or not, I will ensure that your post-existence is an unadulterated misery."

"Sounds fair. I won't make you complicit in my dastardly plans, I just needed

Kendrick to understand them.

"No offense, dude, but it would take too long to find your body even if I knew who you are or where your body was buried, and she looks too much like a kid skipping school, or a homeless person to be taken seriously when reanimated."

Kendrick reached out for control of the nearby phone. The boy's gaze dropped to it as the screen cycled through a list of what looked like contacts, then went black.

"Accepted to MIT," said Kendrick smugly at the boy's look of consternation. "So my talent's over various machines and technology. Put me back in my body again or do that to anyone I care," a glance at McAvoy, "scratch that, anyone around me, and I will figure out some way to haunt you, and make sure you can never use any tech until you die. I've stalled four cash registers and a vending machine at the same time; personal tech's easy.

And if I'm back in my corpse, and the only way for me to be let out of that hell is after you're dead? Well," Kendrick felt their lip curl, "then I'll just be part of your welcoming committee."

"I told you I wasn't planning on reanimating you again," the boy grumbled. "but it's good you brought up MIT."

And with that, he strode off toward a mausoleum, the door of which, Kendrick noted absently as their mind raced to make sense of that parting shot, was propped open slightly with a stone.

Chapter 8

The door was flung wide, and as if on cue, a group of corpses glided out, not with the shuffling awkward zombie-like gait Kendrick and the other Target hunters had envisioned, but with a sort of calculated grace. As if all of them were on wheels or being manipulated by a skilled puppeteer. Were the sets of footprints the only evidence of how long it had taken this kid to work out how to make hundreds of poor ghosts move so fluidly?

And if so, why leave all that mess out in the open?

Men, women, and children moved in along the rows of meticulously spaced resting places. Long since decayed and newly buried, of every race and age. Some with missing limbs and protruding bones, others who could pass for living if their tongues and teeth weren't dangling to their chins.

"You need to leave. I'll see if I can speak to Quinlan or our king."

"And tell them what? That we found the rogue necromancer, but have no idea where he is now?"

"Do you think he'll be difficult to locate once people take notice of his entourage?"

"Then go, but I'm not leaving them alone. Being shoved into my body was terrible," to Kendrick's embarrassment, their voice hitched a little on the word, "and someone should be there when or if they're all let out."

McAvoy settled a tentative hand on Kendrick's shoulder, rubbing it gently with their thumb the way Kendrick did when Will was upset.

"You are my responsibility, Kendrick. I am not abandoning you here."

Out of the corner of their eye, Kendrick could see the moment when said entourage's movement changed from a weirdly choreographed ballet of a stroll to

implacable purpose. A child, only recognizable as one by the fact that they were shorter than the people to its right, lunged forward to the head of the procession, skull tilted back so that the light now breaking through the day's scattered cloud cover glinted on the tiny bones.

Dragging Kendrick in their wake, McAvoy swooped over to the body of a middle-aged woman with all its limbs intact and bones unseen. "Miss, stop walking if you can hear me."

Unfazed, the woman walked through McAvoy, and her face remained blank and slack as Kendrick zipped forward to send a chill down the back of her neck.

"Can you operate the phone?" McAvoy asked. "Make it call the authorities?"

"To quote you, 'think about that accusation, and you will undoubtedly arrive at the correct answer'. I can play with the settings, and give him hell if he uses certain things, but if I could make phone calls, don't you think I'd tell my parents and my brothers—"

"Indeed. I should not have said that; it was tactless."

"You're forgiven only because the corpses are moving." As the bodies of birds (one-winged pigeons, a skeletal robin), cats, a couple of mice, dogs, and what Kendrick thought was a chinchilla slipped into the streaming crowd as the cemetery entrance loomed nearer, they added, "And the show's no longer exclusive to humans. Goody."

"If this child is manipulating other ghosts within a nearby radius, I'm sorry, Kendrick, but I must insist that we no longer remain as spectators," McAvoy said, as they both flew above the crowd. Seemingly spotting them, the child in question shook his head, then deliberately inclined it to each of them. A mockery of a formal welcome.

"Sorry, Mac, but I think we're the only non-imprisoned ghosts invited to the party."

"Splendid."

As the horde of the dead emerged out into the glare of traffic and electronic eyes of CCTV'S, there were a few seconds before the humans in the midst of their daily lives comprehended exactly what they were seeing. And then a few more seconds to realize the sight wasn't a group of film extras and animatronics, or a flash mob.

"What ... is," a woman began shakily, but never got the question out before retching into the gutter. Screams erupted everywhere.

A boy with a mohawk fled, letting his bike thud to the pavement. A man in overalls covered his mouth with a hand and edged backward, not caring that the Sloppy Jo he'd been holding splattered into the street.

"This is crazy!" a man yelled, "Call 911!"

"Call the police," corrected a bespectacled woman, running shoes thumping as she launched into a sprint away from the road before seeing whether anyone did.

A bare-headed man on a motorcycle sent his bike roaring into motion only to screech to a halt as a black woman in a Tesla blocked him, flung open her passenger door, and let him throw his bike in the trunk before rocketing off. A girl scooped up a howling dog and bolted into traffic, nearly slipping on the remains of guy-in-overalls' lunch, and giving drivers who weren't already laying on their horns in panic a reason to add to the din.

Others stood immobile on the sidewalk, or slumped in the seats of cars and buses, either hiding or unconscious. Some had phones flung out to capture the horror.

Arms swinging like a conductor with an invisible baton, smiling triumphantly, the boy negotiated his charges down the street and around the chaos, then calmly marched them back the way they had come.

Kendrick gaped at McAvoy, who stared back, equally astonished.

"That was rather anticlimactic," said the psychopomp.

"Yeah," sighed Kendrick, turning back to watch the bodies, only to have their attention held by the still panicking commuters. The eyes of frozen, filming spectators were still glazed over, their mouths still agape. A man ran by with a wailing baby, abandoning a cumbersome stroller, and Kendrick was pretty sure that bus had had a driver before the walking dead had reversed course.

They looked up to find McAvoy watching them with a confused, almost imploring look. "But... I think we're the only ones who see it that way."

Chapter 9

"Just tell me one more time."

"Go away, Jenkins."

"But it doesn't make sense! Why go to all that work, make his parents pay for any damages to the place—though let's face it, they can't be death-respecting people if they raised the monster who may or may not be in league with a possibly corrupt king—"

"And *my* idea doesn't make sense," Kendrick muttered.

"For a publicity stunt." Jenkins said the words like they were foreign. "Sorry Kendrick, but sometimes you can't explain the deranged."

"Just because you and every other ghost in Target don't understand it doesn't mean it's crazy," said Kendrick, flaring from disinterested to exasperated, "like I already told you, I think all he wanted was for people to take notice. He was making a scene because people talk, and re-watch what they don't understand. They show it to other people, and..." Jenkins eyes glazed over.

"But you don't get computers, or how people view things in the information age." Kendrick spoke the words with all the condescension of their eighteen years. McAvoy would be equally uncomprehending, but at least the psychopomp wouldn't pick over Kendrick's theory details like a circling vulture, then turn their noses up at it like everyone else had done.

Kendrick and McAvoy hadn't stuck around to watch the crowd give statements to the police, trying instead to track down the rogue necromancer. But Finn, Waker of the Walking Dead, had vanished, or more accurately, according to McAvoy, dimmed the ways in which he was accessible to spirits.

They'd both been dead—bad, bad word choice—quiet on the flight back, McAvoy

taking off to find Quinlan or seek an audience with the Council after doing a head count of every ghost in Target and the surrounding area.

Contradictory data hounded Kendrick. He wasn't the victim of social media gone awry like they'd supposed, but neither did he seem the heartless rogue of Quinlan's, either. Heading there real fast, but not there yet; too easily rattled, too new. But there just wasn't enough data to hypothesize on stopping or saving him; hell, even to theorize what'd driven him here or how far along the becoming-a-supervillain-path he was.

Over the next three days, Kendrick had been forced to recount the story over and over again. The only thing the rumor mill, working overtime with everyone cooped up, had gotten right was that they and McAvoy had been the only ghosts not corpse-bound in a roiling human mob.

Exhausting as being a dismissed pseudo celebrity was, it was hard to blame them all. Aside from the rumors that certain places had been evacuated like the movie theater, the library, the autobody shop, the Dairy Queen, the mattress store—although Kendrick was still fuzzy on what made you haunt a mattress store—what else was there to talk about until something changed.

And being pressed to relive it had crystallized Kendrick's flashes of rage and curiosity into an actual theory. If Jenkins hadn't died at a time when conspiracy theories ran rampant (the only tidbit of their life they could recollect consistently) instead of closer to YouTube's inception, perhaps Kendrick would have had one person to support it.

But once the local crackpot theorist found you implausible, Kendrick was willing to bet their tombstone that no ghost they knew would see the sense in it.

Jenkins drifted away through a clothes rack, and Kendrick raced off at the sight

of a cooing couple, bittersweet smile fading as they got closer and saw it wasn't Dean and Jasmine after all.

"It's fake," the girl was saying, looking up from a phone.

Finally, someone was thinking something similar to them, though if they could add their two cents, they'd have to burst the oddly on-point kid's "it was a photoshop" bubble. Which didn't make it any less bitter a pill that they'd never be able to bounce ideas off the cleverest person they'd encountered in days. Especially when shoppers and staff insisted the corpse parade, as Kendrick had taken to calling it in their head, had been some sort of sick, elaborate prank, particularly those that had only seen the videos. Those less vocal were a bit more reserved in the greetings usually so casually, happily given to the vicinity's ghosts.

Kendrick suspected joking about the dead felt a little hollow when footage of what most were calling zombies was being streamed by the masses.

Kendrick hurtled through a few shelves, spinning like a top until they came to a stop above a woman holding a Pekingese. It barked, fur on end, a menacing puff ball, and they drew back.

"It won't bite you," Will announced cheerily, dropping down from Melinoe knew where. "It tried to bite me and missed."

"That's because you're younger than me and quicker."

"The lady said she had more doggies. Can we see them, Kendrick?"

"Not today, baby. We're supposed to stay inside, remember?"

"What's a cemetery?"

"Why?"

"Everyone says it. It sounds... not nice."

"It isn't... wasn't nice. And I don't like telling you about not nice things."

"If I'm quicker than you, we should race."

To emphasize the point, he flew circles around Kendrick, who caught him up in a hug. "You're my favorite person in this entire store. Do you know that?"

"Uh-huh! I think Mommy would like you!"

And didn't that raise a hundred questions for the millionth time. Who were Will's parents? Were they still grieving him? Why, out of all the places Will could have ended up, had it been here? Kendrick liked to think Will had some part to play in that; it was a ghost's choice where they haunted, but were the rules really that simple for someone so young and innocent?

Will wriggled out of the hug, with a shrieked, "Race!" then took off. Kendrick counted to ten, then streaked after him.

Later, they hovered on either side of the same shopping cart in the indoor storing area, looking idly out into the world beyond the automatic doors.

"Pretty," Will murmured, eyes half open as his memory told him it was time for the nap his body didn't need.

"That lady's hair? Yeah, the purple streaks are pretty."

"No! The light!"

They looked in the direction of Will's pointing finger toward a truck in desperate need of washing, idling off to the side of the parking lot. Their gaze snagged on Finn in the driver's seat, shoulders hunched and eyes fixed on something in his hand—probably his phone.

As Kendrick stared, the glow they'd seen before flashed—annoyingly entrancing, even for someone who knew what to expect this time—then vanished with the

suddenness of a power outage. More spirit dimming.

One eye on the truck, Kendrick half-turned, telling Will, "It is pretty, but I don't think that boy wants us looking at him. It's rude."

"But what is it?"

"It's a truck, and a—"

"No. The light." And it blazed again as a Mercedes honked its horn, then went around the truck. "You know," Will pressed, not angry, but a little annoyed.

"Know what? I'm not sure I do. Tell me."

Will frowned, jaw working as if searching for words. As he shifted around in frustration, Kendrick realized he didn't know.

Somehow he understood there was a difference between Finn and everyone else outside, maybe even that Finn couldn't be trusted, in that way all little kids had that weird sixth sense. Maybe it was nothing more than the odd pretty light, or that only the two of them could see it. But not knowing what he and Kendrick were, or what Finn was, he couldn't put it into words.

Watching him struggle, Kendrick felt like they were betraying him. Was there a right time to tell a kid he was dead?

"He can help," Will said finally, frown furrows still puckering his forehead with unhappiness at the communication.

So for all his wonderful qualities, Will was not the possessor of a child trustworthiness sensor.

"No, he can't," The voice was Lawrence's, deep and soothing as ever. "Anyone who drives something so dirty you can't tell what color it is can't help with anything important."

As Finn's truck moved toward the exit, Kendrick made a split-second decision. "Storyteller extraordinaire, Will's ready for his nap. Will, I'm going to set a really bad example you are not allowed to copy." Rising into the air and pressing a swift kiss to the top of his head, Kendrick streaked after the faint beguiling glow.

Chapter 10

"Recalculating."

Finn's groan turned into a curse as the GPS showed him the same route of bush-lined back roads he'd been traveling for the past hour. Zipping by the window to see that with their own eyes was a risk, but Kendrick reasoned that if the kid hadn't pegged that his GPS was being tampered with by ghosts after this long, they were as safe as they reasonably could be. They accelerated to the roof of the truck, mind reaching out to make a slight adjustment to their current course.

The truck made a right, followed by two more in the span of a few minutes. When it had gone around in a circle, Kendrick passed through the door to hover cross-legged above the front passenger seat.

Something pushed them back out onto the road, and they had to struggle to keep hold of the GPS, which droned that it was recalculating again. Whatever force had been behind that push felt a little different, less intense, than the thing that had pushed Kendrick into their grave.

The truck pulled off to the side, such as it was—the road was too narrow to have a shoulder—and Kendrick saw Finn yank something out from under his shirt, then slip a sparkly thing onto the chain he wore.

The window whirred down, and annoyed dark eyes searched the area. Kendrick made it easy for him and waved.

"You can stop anytime now!"

"I told you my talent was machines, and that Dead under pressure' crack suggested you knew where and how I died. It's not my fault you didn't put two and two together for sixty minutes.

Speaking of which," Kendrick made a show of waving their fingers, making Finn jump when the GPS intoned, "You are on the fastest route to your destination. You should arrive in forty-eight hours."

"Where the hell—"

"I have no idea where I'm sending you. But as you've probably noticed by now, I have the power here. I'm not afraid of you, and going off that MIT comment before your corpse parade—"

"Corpse parade?" He choked on a bark of sardonic laughter.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm speaking. Judging by that comment you were hoping for someone not to be afraid. You got your wish. So, talk. What was that corpse parade about?"

"Getting people's attention. Showing the Council times have changed."

"Score one for MIT!" cried Kendrick, pumping a triumphant fist in the air.

Finn appeared to take advantage of their two seconds of pride to fiddle with his phone, before his eyes locked on Kendrick's again.

"Yeah, you're brilliant. Now can you lay off my phone for a bit so I can use it to look like I'm on a call."

"Why?"

"So I don't look like an idiot talking to thin air."

"How do I know you're not trying to get away from me."

"Because I came by your haunt hoping you'd come out, then you let you drive once I realized you were heading for a good, remote place for a chat."

Kendrick slackened their mental grip on the phone. "Okay, save your sanity. Assuming anyone you know, or anyone important even sees you out here. Which either

way makes you look a little full of yourself."

Kendrick waited till an earpiece was looped over his ear to ask, "So what do you want out of all this?"

"To expose the—"

Kendrick cut across him with a buzzer sound. "I'm the oldest of three siblings. I want the non-sanitized-for-adults-who-don't-get-it answer. I'm the only ghost not working for the Council whose figured out what you were doing. So either you're honest with me, or you find another ghost with a link to MIT that doesn't think you ought to be put down like a rabid dog."

"And why don't you think that? Because you're young at heart or something."

"Okay, first of all, that may work on adults, but you suck at needling anyone in your own age bracket. And more importantly, I don't want to be shipped off to some ghost utopia even if I can eat cookies there to my heart's content."

"What?"

"It'll give McAvoy more time to convince me to cross over, and I can't let that be a possibility."

Finn's expression softened a little. "You hang around your family, right? You know, I bet if you remembered more about yourself it would help you stick around. What if you talk to the Council for me, prove I mean business—this McAvoy can help you, even if he is the one you were with the other day—and I can give you information you can actually use."

Kendrick shook their head, but the boy went on, undeterred. "Your name was Kira Kendrick. You died when you were eighteen. You used to figure out code for-what the—"

The truck lurched forward and his chin collided with the dashboard hard enough to draw blood.

Kendrick expected another surly or frustrated look but Finn's gaze had turned briefly inward.

"Huh." Kendrick hoped the sound would snap the kid out of it—they couldn't have hurt him? —and was relieved to see Finn wipe his chin on his sleeve as they glided inside the car to float cross-legged above the front passenger seat. "I've never controlled something that big before. Cool."

"I bet your brothers hated you most days."

"Hey, if I have to quit using tech against you, you can't use social media searches against me. And you're actually what my sweet youngest brother could be in ten years with the wrong influences."

"My necromancy teacher, Erin Landry, would have said that served me right. She always calls me on my crap."

"I like her already."

"The biggest thing I learned from watching her work was it was always kindest, if at all... credible, I guess, to pretend you didn't know anything about a ghost's past, politest to let them tell what they could or wanted to of their own story."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but given the last time we met, I never would have expected you to say something that pretty."

"I'm sorry. From everything you said that day, and your non-self-interest just now... I shouldn't have forced you to hear things you—"

"You're sounding like a grief counselor," Kendrick blurted, trying to make him stop. If this kid thought slamming him into the steering wheel signaled an altruistic

desire not to give the Council more trouble as a message-runner, he was worse at reading people than McAvoy.

To be that bad... did he not get how bad the mess he'd made at the graveyard looked? How scared it made Kendrick that he'd treat their memories like as many toys to be broken, like an overgrown kid from that movie about the talking toys they hadn't remembered in ages. And if he didn't get that, did he understand just how bad things were for him right now?

"Isn't that my job? Ghosts grieve too, in their own way."

"Does your teacher live around here? Well, not here here," Kendrick gestured with an arm, taking in the bushes to either side, "but nearby?"

Finn glared. So much for using the teacher as a combination olive branch and barrier.

"She's been detained."

"Why don't I think that's code for something a normal human would experience?"

"I want the Council to help Erin Landry. Her stepsister's sick... Lyme disease... and... we don't die, it's part of the job contract. Our family can be given longevity too, for special circumstances, and Kara Landry's young and sick enough to qualify, but the Council's not exactly up to date on how the definition of family has changed over the millennia."

"Family only means blood related. Nice."

Finn nodded. "And the king we serve's locked her up, because she decided to take matters into her own hands when he was an ass worrying about things that'll never happen! So I'm making sure they let her out, and give her what she needs."

"You have more plans than just the corpse parade?"

"Obviously. It's not hard to figure out where a ghost's body is if you know how they died. I figure a few more incidents like the cemetery, a hospital or two, maybe a museum—I'm actually better at reanimating animals—and they should get the message."

The destruction of the graveyard was starting to look a lot less like malice or stupidity, and more like their old room just before their application had gone through. Soda cans and snacks and dirty laundry piled everywhere, because the deadline was too big and meant too much to let clean-up be a distraction. Maybe there wasn't an actual deadline—some kind of necromantic execution for defiance he was trying to prevent—but any time without family was too much time.

"But even if they'll agree to help her and her stepsister, it doesn't mean you'll be off the hook. You got the Council's attention before you went viral."

"So I'll live a normal life span. All I ever wanted to do since Ms. Landry got ghosts to stop bullying me was be a necromancer. No college, I'd live where I lived, I'd work when I needed money, and I'd see where I ended up."

"So screw the consequences," said Kendrick, lips curving despite themselves, "Yeah, no way I can relate to that."

This had been so much simpler when Kendrick could stay uninvolved and unattached, think he was a malicious asshole, not someone as scared and desperate as they were.

"So, anything specific you want me to tell the go-betweens and rulers of the afterlife?"

"What's in it for you?" Finn asked, more pleased than suspicious.

"Let's say I'm a sucker for families."

Chapter 11

Trying to find another ghost without a phone, or any of the devices humans carted around, really made Kendrick appreciate what people in the days of kings and queens had to go through. Still, they weren't without resources.

To facilitate ghosts needing to get ahold of their psychopomps or each other, someone had decided every town or city center needed a transparent bulletin board, complete with markers to write with. These markers only worked on the board— to Kendrick's dismay when they'd tried using them to write to their family—, but anything written with them appeared on other boards in nearby haunts. Whatever sense made psychopomps aware of new ghosts alerted them to the messages, but everyone else gathered around their boards daily, searching for their names or descriptions.

Messages couldn't be erased until an answer to the request was given: a date or time with a meeting, the address of a location, even "I think I'm the one you want, but could you be more specific?" was an acceptable response. This meant conversations could drag on for days.

It felt a bit like standing in line for a concert or celebrity, or, Kendrick guessed, waiting for your name to be called in a presentation meeting.

After leaving Finn at his house, only five blocks from where their own family lived, Kendrick went to the nearest bulletin board, taller than anything made by humans, and wrote: McAvoy, I didn't break the lockdown for this, but we need to talk. Kendrick

Then they waited.

The dead—ha, ha—silence in a place that always had someone hovering nearby sent Kendrick whirling at every shadow. Finally away from Finn, the fear and jumpiness they should have felt around him surfaced without the emotional dam of anger, bravado,

and true sorrow for his teacher to dampen it.

"Are you and Mac going to help the glowing boy?" asked a child's voice.

Kendrick rocketed upward on a burst of nerves, shock, and failure. They knew that voice.

Sure enough, when Kendrick returned to the height of their message on the board, Will was smiling. He was also wearing new clothes, patterned in the dark green of the bushes lining the roads Finn had wasted gas on.

"Will? How—what—I thought you were napping! Lawrence was supposed to tell you a story."

Will nodded, unperturbed. "I listened to the story, but I pretended to nap. Then I left the way you did— I could see a little glow, so I followed it, even when it kept going in circles— and stayed next to the truck in some bushes. I didn't come in, so I wasn't copying you all the way. When I didn't want you to see me I thought really hard and was invisible until I moved, so I wished really really hard and my clothes look like this now."

Great, Kendrick thought, even the kid can change outfits.

"Why do you think Mac and I are going to help Finn?"

"I couldn't hear anything, but he looked like he was having a bad day, and you always make me feel better."

If there was a hell, Kendrick wondered even as their heart melted, was it possible to go there for being a bad influence in the afterlife?

"You look unharmed. Why did you bring the boy with you?" McAvoy's fingertips skimmed across Kendrick's right shoulder, the gentle gesture at odds with the psychopomp's infuriated look and tone.

"I didn't, he came on his own. I need to see Quinlan. We've got the kid, Finn, all

wrong. Basically the only thing we got right is that he's crazy powerful, but he's trying to help his teacher and..."

Kendrick relayed everything they'd learned in the truck and the theory they'd been working on before chasing down the necro.

"Let me understand this. You want to help a truant—"

"A what?" Will asked.

"Today is a school day, I believe. The necromancer has clearly stopped attending."

Will's nod of acceptance was quicker than Kendrick's. They were losing track of time, letting months and their significance fade. The look McAvoy slid Kendrick's way was too knowing.

Irritated, Kendrick shrugged with feigned nonchalance. "So Finn's not a model citizen. I knew that when I decided to take him on a joyride. Well, a joyride for me."

"You call the boy Finn now?" McAvoy asked.

"You're missing the big picture here! Can you take me to Quinlan again or not? And for the love of... cross over cookies don't bring up the lockdown. You broke that yourself earlier, so my bad behavior, and Will's bad behavior, is your fault."

McAvoy goggled at Kendrick.

"What's the harm in following my plan unless you've gotten a higher up to listen to you?"

McAvoy sighed with a shake of their head. "I have not been as successful as I would like."

"Meaning?"

"Our king is indisposed. And before you ask I do not know what that means! Why

are you smiling, Kendrick?"

"That's the second time you've snapped, but not at me. It's refreshing."

"*You* are missing the big picture."

McAvoy picked up a blue and red marker and scribbled something in a clockwise spiral on the board that blurred when Kendrick tried to read it.

"That's not the alphabet," Will observed.

"No." McAvoy stared hard at the place where the... thing had been. "It is a code that moves faster through the portal." By the time they'd finished speaking, another spiral pattern materialized in streaks of dry marker, this time in red and black.

Kendrick thought they saw a square, a turtle, and something with pointed ears before it vanished too. It must have made sense to McAvoy though, who nodded decisively and held out a hand to both of them. "Come."

"We're taking Will?" Kendrick failed to keep the surprised pleasure from their voice.

"If neither you nor the most powerful necromancer of his generation registered his presence, and the Target residents have clearly failed to notice his absence, Will is safer doing what he likes with those of us who have full knowledge of it."

A torrent of wind and a rush of color and light later—Will shrieking delightedly all the way—the three of them floated in front of Quinlan—now swathed in a silk kimono—who blocked the door with McAvoy's nameplate, miles of purple fabric cradled in their arms. Something in the envoy's gaze tightened at the sight of Will, but to Kendrick's relief the expression they turned on the boy was a friendly smile.

"McAvoy, this really isn't the best time."

As if to illustrate Quinlan's point, there was a loud crash and a sickening

splintering sound somewhere in the depths of the swirling void. Kendrick's arm went protectively around Will's shoulders. Harm could actually be a possibility here.

"You know what I tried to speak to the South King of," McAvoy said calmly.

"All too well."

"Why are you moving now?" Kendrick asked, gesturing at the mound of purple.

"You've had a few days to be given your own room."

"We're trying to evacuate those who are willing. Things have been—" They flinched as the air around them was suddenly filled with ghosts of all ages, "chaotic."

Quinlan flung out a hand and the door behind them burst open.

"All of you please go inside," they yelled to the crowd, "someone will take you to your quarters momentarily."

The mob obeyed, and just when Kendrick was wondering how what looked like thirty people were going to fit inside the spacious hotel suite they remembered, there was another crunching splintering sound. What Kendrick could see of the room lengthened before their eyes, growing two stories in about three seconds.

If the room had feelings and a voice, Kendrick thought it would be screaming in agony as it writhed into its new shape.

"As you see, we are having to make patchwork accommodations," Quinlan murmured, raking fingers through their hair. "The area is taking some time to adjust to such a rapid process. The Council has never built anything like this before, and it isn't as easy as they thought."

"Will all those people be okay?" Will asked. "What if the room makes itself back to the way it was and crushes them?"

"It won't," said Quinlan and McAvoy, the latter again using that soothing voice

Kendrick heard them use with their crew cut friend. Absurdly, Kendrick felt a surge of annoyance. Why didn't McAvoy ever talk to them like that?

"Look, you don't have anything to worry about. No one needs to move," Kendrick gushed. "Mac and I had it wrong, or rather we played right into Finn Davis's hands. He's causing chaos because he wants the Council to release his mentor, who got understandably carried away trying to help their terminally ill stepsister, which our ruling body disapproves, because no one told them the world's moved on. The Council's not even listening to Mac's story of what we thought was a hormonal, power-hungry crazy person, which doesn't hold up with what you told everyone at the meeting."

Quinlan slowly shook their head. "If you think that I've been lying—"

"Kendrick knows what it's like to be overly caught up in one's past," McAvoy interjected.

"And we'll talk about privacy and boundaries later," Kendrick told them with a glare before turning back to Quinlan. "I think the five of us can get to the bottom of what's going on. You and McAvoy have enough clout combined to get through to someone closer to the Council—you can't be the only envoy—if not a king." Quinlan nodded. "Will is cute, and given the rules about them people on our side of the afterlife will bend over backwards for a kid."

"What do you mean the *five* of us?" McAvoy asked.

"Well, we can't leave Finn out of his own suicide mission. That would be inconsiderate."

It took two circuitous arguments, three more herds of new arrivals being relocated through other doors, and a plate of cookies—mostly for Will's benefit—before Kendrick led them all through the living room wall of Finn's home.

A clock on the wall showed it was nearing seven, but a quick flight through the two-story building revealed only the necro was at home, lounging on his bed with what looked like a map. Quinlan stayed close to McAvoy, whose gaze bore into Kendrick and Will as they said, "The boy's glow is dimmed, I do not think he can see us."

"Right," said Kendrick, zipping over to a familiar-looking, unattended phone on a nightstand. A little concentration as the layers of the device's capabilities fanned out in their mind like playing cards, and Kendrick grinned as the ringtone blared some pop song about how the girl some guy was dating was "spooky".

A little cliché, but clearly something the necro wouldn't have chosen, because he jolted off the bed and tried to stop the music.

Kendrick let him, before playing the song "Grim Grinning Ghosts".

"How did humans learn the word for a group of ghosts was a grim?" McAvoy asked Kendrick, while Quinlan did an excellent imitation of a human who'd just seen a specter.

"It is? Cool! It's from the Haunted Mansion ride at Disney... and I might as well be speaking gibberish."

"I've heard good things from the Council about someone named Disney," said Quinlan approvingly, flashing a smile at the still-singing phone.

"Took you long enough," Kendrick teased when Finn took off the chain.

The teen's eyebrows arched as he blinked at the quartet. Will glided forward and ran his fingers through the light emanating from the boy.

"That tickles," he laughed.

Finn shuddered. "Well, for me, it's like I've got my own personal icy air conditioner. Get away."

"We wanna help you help the lady with the sick sister," Will informed him earnestly, unoffended, zipping back to Kendrick's side.

"This is Will, he's mildly incorrigible but truly wants to help you, and you need a reminder of sweetness in your life. These are the go-betweens," Kendrick indicated the others, "Quinlan, esteemed envoy of the Council with the talent of manipulating physical objects, and having humans feel their touch. And you've met McAvoy."

"You work for the South King?" Finn asked Quinlan, somehow making the question eager and snide.

"I speak with the Council's voice in matters of urgency," Quinlan said, voice barely above a whisper but thrumming with ferocity. It had to be hard, Kendrick thought admiringly, confronting someone with the obvious ability to reenact the worst moment of Quinlan's afterlife.

"You wanted my help not too long ago, remember?" Kendrick asked Finn pointedly.

McAvoy's expression was openly doubtful, an unusual enough sight that Kendrick was wondering if this had been a bad idea.

"I work for all and none of the kings," Quinlan continued.

"Which cannot be said of you," McAvoy interjected. "If you have found fault with your king, I believe you may serve another? Why not switch and plead your case to a new monarch?"

"Because I have to wait nine years before I can switch. And why would another one believe me?"

"There is such a thing as common decency, particularly toward the people that one is choosing to employ. I am sympathetic to your concerns and that of your

instructor, boy, but there are other avenues that do not require the actions of any person but yourself."

"Wow. Kira Kendrick said you were in line for a promotion at the cemetery. I just didn't think you were so desperate for it you'd try to duck out of helping me without putting any effort into it." Finn's lip curled in disdain.

"I will not be spoken to like that by an insolent pup whose hubris outweighs common sense," McAvoy snapped.

Finn was unfazed. "So you want us to trust in the innate goodness of people who are centuries old because based only on your experience, and the stars in your eyes, they're decent god-like entities. Either you're disturbingly naive, or you really don't give a f—"

Kendrick launched themselves into Finn, slamming a hand down on his arm. It went through him, but he satisfyingly looked like it had been dunked in ice and stopped talking.

"There's a child present," Kendrick hissed.

Which hadn't been the only reason they'd moved. McAvoy's gaze was fixed and narrowed in anger and... a flash of something else that Kendrick didn't like. Or maybe that was Kendrick's own unease, because Finn had a point, damn him.

"Do you know if the other three kings agree with yours?" Quinlan asked, voice at a normal volume now. They looked calmer too, Kendrick thought, as they picked up a crumpled shirt from the floor, smoothed it, and hung it on the back of a chair.

Finn's surprise at the action was written across his face, but his voice was also calm as he said, "I don't have direct access to them. I've asked necros who were at my shopping week about their kings' stances on family, and they've all said the same thing."

"Did you go into specifics about your teacher's—of course not," Quinlan said, smiling as Finn's jaw clenched. "Are all beings their age so moody, McAvoy?"

"On occasion," said McAvoy tersely. "Though I take this irritation to mean he did not wish to advertise Ms. Landry's? circumstances."

Finn nodded.

"But you could be wrong, one of the other kings may feel differently if the circumstances were explained. Do I have your permission to explain in full to the others?"

"How long will that take?" Finn countered. "According to her credit card company, Ms. Landry's missed a payment, so I doubt anyone's trying to make it look like she's gone on vacation."

"How could you possibly know that?" Kendrick asked.

"You never hacked a system when you were alive," said Finn.

"Sometimes, but—" A memory swam into Kendrick's mind. "You were the kid talking to Claire! You're Ammonite."

"You're in a lot of her old photos online. Well, not you—"

"I get it. Could you tell..." Kendrick trailed off with a shrug, realizing there was no good way to finish that request. Inquisitive as Claire was, no one would take a hello from a dead person well.

"I don't know," Quinlan told Finn. "But I'll do my best to convey the urgency of the situation."

Finn frowned.

"Just say thank you," Kendrick told him. "While we're waiting, you can do more research with Claire, and I can keep an eye on you two to make sure you don't get my

friend arrested."

"Or go to school and stop being truant," Will piped up.

Everyone laughed, even Finn.

"You'll have to go about your days as normal," Quinlan said solemnly to Kendrick and the five-year-old.

"That's fine," Kendrick told them. "No one believed me anyway."

"If your group is moved to the way station before I have any information, stay close to McAvoy."

Kendrick nodded. Will beamed at the representative, and Finn looked resigned to more waiting, but a little less surly. McAvoy's face was impassive.

Not the way Kendrick had expected their group to look after how swiftly they'd come up with a plan. But if death and everything after it hadn't gone according to plan, why should what felt like a crossroads.

Still, they made themselves sound chipper as they asked, "So we'll all meet either back here or in Target once Quinlan gets something?"

"Yeah, but if I'm with someone don't mess with my phone," Finn said, eyeing Kendrick. "Just wait for me to come to you."

"How will I know if you notice me?"

"Just mess around with a machine that isn't mine and I'll get the gist."

As Kendrick nodded, McAvoy turned resolutely to Quinlan. "My faith in your abilities notwithstanding, this feels like a very flimsy operation."

Chapter 12

McAvoy glided through the sea of bookshelves, smiling or shaking their head at members of the grim that haunted the library. Lately, most days the reason they were at a location would have been to convey new residence to the safe place, but today was a social call.

"Fortescue's probably in—"

"The usual place." McAvoy smiled. "I know. Thank you, Grant."

McAvoy spotted the back of Fortescue's crew cut head in the history section, floating beside a top shelf and gazing sadly at the spine of a book that from thickness alone could be used to bludgeon an intruder. "And what precisely is the significance of that book? Aside from the fact that you have not yet finished reading it over an unsuspecting human's shoulder."

"It was written and researched by a brilliant married couple who devoted their lives to the preservation of some rare aspects of Chinese culture."

"I appreciate your restraint in not rhapsodizing about said culture, or the companies that produced this physical book." McAvoy was making light deliberately. A historian in life, Fortescue's talent was rather like the Ghost of Christmas Past in the Dickens tale; they could look at anyone or anything on earth, and with a bit of concentration have the entire history of said thing or person spread out in their mind's eye.

It was difficult for them not to relay an encyclopedic knowledge of whatever was caught in their talent. When they were newly dead, McAvoy had endured eight hours on the origins of the concrete used to make the library.

"And the young man who's taken an interest in it arrives at three thirty sharp."

The smile that would have sprung so readily to their lips any other day faltered before reaching Fortescue's eyes.

Like McAvoy, Fortescue had embraced their afterlife, haunting a library not for revenge, but to gain the knowledge they hadn't uncovered while alive. The friends had become so because Fortescue had been one of the first spirits McAvoy had attempted to help cross over. And the only failure McAvoy would proudly own to.

Their friend had grown up in a time when the world was not so accepting of people who felt out of place in their own skin, and had refused to cross over for fear of being trapped forever in a shape they found limiting.

"I told you before this is not a true crossing. You will not have a gender."

"But no one knows how long we'll remain there. What can the Council really do to punish this rogue, kill them? Then they will be rightly displeased at having their life cut short, become a ghost, and who knows what talent a late necromancer will have!"

"We are not leaving today. I came to see you because," McAvoy lowered their voice, though no other ghosts were near, as Fortescue's smile blossomed outright, "The necromancer may potentially be the wronged party in this instance. Possibly two necromancers in fact. I do not know what is classified information or if there will ever be a time that Quinlan or their superiors feel it can be released, but discovering if this is more than conjecture is Kendrick's latest passion project. They are actually certain it's true."

"Are they all right?" Fortescue asked, genuinely concerned, since their talent was ineffective on ghosts.

"They and young Will are at Target."

"Well, you did bring Kendrick to your talk with Quinlan. You can't be bad-

tempered when they use their knowledge to pursue *their* own projects."

"Neither Kendrick nor Will's generations have any respect for their elders." It was a fact, not an excuse.

"The speed at which humans communicate online and the range it reaches can make deference a rather unique quality," Fortescue agreed, with more authority than McAvoy would ever have on the subject.

"I can tell you Kendrick is convinced this boy who reanimated corpses is trying to get the Council to take him seriously, not create an army. It has something to do with clicks and views and people thinking... things." The psychopomp had long given up trying to understand the strange boundless ether where humans appeared to spend so much time. But Fortescue had, over the last few years, been intrigued by the unfolding history of how a new technology was shaping human civilization.

A puzzle with this new delight would distract Fortescue from their own anxiety while they waited to depart. And getting to the bottom of whether Kendrick's sudden flurry of kindness was directed to something with true merit sooner rather than later would be wise.

McAvoy had always valued the opinion of this ghost who knew themselves so intimately. And therefore was unflappable enough for McAvoy to let their guard down around.

"What are you afraid Quinlan's digging on behalf of Kendrick's impulsivity could unearth?" Fortescue asked.

"One if not all of the Council being... in some way... corrupted by power."

The unbending mercilessness, even with the fear of exposure, of all the monarchs to Landry's situation was not the benevolence they remembered during their

orientation.

Had the increasing threat of exposure to humans made them rigid, even... afraid? The insolent boy was probably merely leaping to conclusions, just as Kendrick was likely lured to kindness by having some person in the living world to aid and influence the way they could never do with their family again. But the first possibility had to at least be... considered, and the quicker it was put to bed the better.

"The Council is quite old and set in their ways. Look at the madness King Henry VIII inflicted upon England as he aged. Though admittedly there were other factors at play there." They looked thoughtful for a moment, then continued. "As a psychopomp, do your loyalties lie with the Council or with the dead?"

"The latter, of course, but—"

"What would you do if you crossed over?"

"Whatever it is one does in paradise."

"But does the idea of endless leisure make you happy?"

McAvoy blinked, thrown by the abrupt shift in topic. "It does not matter what is or is not appealing. When the requisite number of ghosts aided is reached, we too must cross over. We cannot be stubborn and resist when we have spent so much time reminding our charges to accept the inevitability of moving on."

"You remind me of professors I used to have, when they made retirement from universities mandatory, you know. They would praise all the time for research to the heavens, but you could see the grief in their eyes when they thought of not standing at a lectern." They held up a hand to stem the protest McAvoy was biting back. "I'm not quarreling and I've no hope of convincing you today. But if you insist on crossing over, wouldn't you rather cross over in full knowledge that ghosts like Kendrick and I will be in

good hands? You are the one psychopomp I've ever encountered who believes my wishing to remain here is something worthy of further understanding. I never expect to have another with your vocation for aiding the dead. But even one blinded ruler, whether they're blinded by self-interest or fear, makes it impossible for any psychopomp to truly serve ghosts. When they put their wishes above our well-being, what incentive is there for a psychopomp to not do the same? To leave the unorthodox cases to their own pursuits the moment things become difficult?"

"You should take leisure time away from the philosophy section." The obfuscation slipped out before McAvoy thought better of it.

Fortescue laughed. "Aren't you being as obstinate as you say Kendrick is then? You will serve until the threat of the necromancer is dealt with—I suspect they offered to shave the rest of your quota for all your good service. Do you only want to cling to what you know out of complacency and fear when you could be doing something that allows you to fully embrace the best of you. I've seen you with the newly dead and people who want to move on. You were meant to serve to the best of your ability."

"Your words are kind and poetic, and as it happens I came here in an attempt to break my complacency. I would like a favor; it will mean getting out of the library."

"Will we be back by three thirty?"

A nearby clock showed noon.

"I believe so," said McAvoy, linking an arm through the historian's.

After the conversation in the necromancer's bedroom two days ago, McAvoy had made inquiries of the other psychopomps about Erin Landry, and gotten her home address. Technically, since only psychopomps were allowed some freedom of movement on earth these days, they were not disobeying the Council's instructions by

taking Fortescue through an outer wall the color of cardboard left out in the rain.

"What am I looking for?" Fortescue asked, gazing around the living room of the small apartment.

"Recent history. Any sign that means this woman could be in some kind of trouble in the present."

"Then nothing here will do." Fortescue floated into the kitchen and through a cupboard door. They popped out again almost immediately with a muttered, "She's kind to her cookware."

They went through the refrigerator and pantry doors, spending more time in each than when they'd investigated the cupboard.

"You found something," McAvoy demanded when their friend returned to the living room.

"She hasn't been here in a while. The food's gone bad. Though she doesn't keep her banishing herbs in the pantry. And the cookware's dusty."

"Is that important?"

Fortescue shrugged. "It was secondary to my primary objective. An unclean pot isn't necessarily indicative of anything, and I was learning more about the makers than the owner. But when taken together, especially if her necromantic supplies are here..."

"She could be on vacation."

"Without some protection against unwanted ghosts? Necromancers can't wear their talismans all the time."

Fortescue's hazel eyes swept over the couch behind where McAvoy floated, trying to be unobtrusive, then lingered on the piece. The sharp, steady gaze grew inward and slightly unfocused. "This couch is not usually flush with the wall."

"She could have redecorated."

"You brought me here for a reason, stop undermining it!" The snap in their voice was more fondly exasperated than angry. "There was a struggle. The couch was moved."

They stared at a patch of the white carpet, frowned, then scrutinized another swath before saying in a far-off, almost hypnotic voice, "The attacker wore shoes." Wanting to help, McAvoy eyed the walls, which were painted a cheery yellow. "There are marks here," they said, gesturing to a round, shallow scratch in the paint near the door.

"Fingernail," Fortescue replied, after some time gazing fixedly at the spot. "She tried to resist being taken from her home. No information from the wall about who kidnapped her..."

"Surely the door would hold more information?"

McAvoy hadn't even finished the question when Fortescue passed through the door. McAvoy followed and watched as Fortescue's gaze bore into the doorknob.

"It's easier than focusing on the entire thing," Fortescue explained once their eyes became focused again. "Less data to sift through, since not everyone who uses the doorknob would be registered by the rest of the metal."

"And what did the doorknob tell you?"

"That the last person to use it was our king. He did not knock before entering."

Before McAvoy could respond, the ghost zipped inside. They found Fortescue in the closet of a back room—the bedroom—whirling away from the hangers.

"I know what clothes aren't here, but that tells us nothing. Although her herbs are under a loose floorboard."

This was the side of academics, of the scientists all historians were when one considered their pursuit of facts, that people rarely registered, but McAvoy felt their lips curve at the eager gleam in their friend's eyes. What answers could be found in this space were close, and McAvoy was glad to have become invisible as they glimmered just out of reach for their oldest companion.

A path only one of them could make sense of was traced; out of the closet to rake over the dresser, the bed, the little table beside it holding a lamp and a paperback, and whatever lay inside its lone drawer. A great deal of time was spent hovering over gardening tools, and then it was back into the kitchen to pore over the garbage, of all things.

Finally, Fortescue blinked, rubbed their eyes, and sighed as they found McAvoy hovering in the threshold of the bedroom. "I don't know where Erin Landry was taken, there's nothing here to tell me. But her talisman is in her bedside drawer, and that's not where she keeps it. Our king placed it there, just to get it out of the way judging, by the careless way he was handling it."

"You cannot talk about our king," McAvoy began, but Fortescue glared.

"He is NOT your priority! And I'm only reporting what I saw. He looked at the ring like it was a minor irritation he couldn't believe he was having to lower himself to deal with, then shoved it in the drawer. It's usually in the jewelry box on the dresser, Ms. Landry was nowhere in sight, and that's the last time anyone of human appearance was in this flat."

McAvoy frowned. "So the South King at least will have to be involved."

"Or the Council if it was a group decision. Anything seems possible these days."

"Indeed." Not a comforting thought. "Why were you looking through the

garbage?"

"To see who handled it. The last person to do so was our missing necromancer; she didn't ask anyone to see to it for her. And before you say some people let garbage pile up when they're away, the can's history proves she wasn't that sort. Every Wednesday evening at five-thirty, sometimes five-forty, or every Friday evening at the same time two years ago when the schedule for the area changed—"

McAvoy held up a hand. "You're upset about this. You haven't babbled facts at me in centuries."

Fortescue nodded. Their shoulders trembled with the weight of their sigh.

"If I need further help with whatever this ends up becoming—"

"You can count on me." There was silence, then Fortescue's eyes drifted to a clock. "Have I been at this for two hours?"

"Unless you want to see something else, I should get you back to the library before your reader arrives. They're very unknowingly kind not to just check out the book and leave you in suspense."

Fortescue grinned. "Keep teasing me and I may start charging for my services."

"How?" The two rose into the air, soaring away from the neighborhood. "May I remind you I'm the one with a job."

"Then I'll withhold, not charge. I'll withhold my talent unless we're the last to move to this safe place." They sobered. "Although frankly, with one of the kings kidnapping a servant, I'm beginning to question how safe it is."

"Well, unless something changes—and all you've done is assure me something is not right—eventually I will have to take you to the other place."

"Is that its name?"

"I will honestly not be surprised if no one ever reaches a consensus about its name."

"Eventually" turned out to be three days after this excursion. McAvoy led the grim along the flight path they had first taken with Kendrick what felt like years ago. With all the trips since then without their young charge, it had become such a familiar route that McAvoy didn't fear accidentally taking the group off course by looking back to where they knew Fortescue dangled, straggling as much as one could at the end of the line without slowing the forward momentum.

Treason was not a certainty yet. Perhaps would never be. But the waiting and lack of information that would make sense of this unking-like behavior, a thing McAvoy had never been able to withstand gracefully in life or death, made them yearn to be able to use their persuasive talent on themselves (if only to quell the anxiety that roiled anew with every day that passed).

Quinlan waited for them in the land of eddying doors, but another ghost, in a pearly white evening gown, escorted the library haunters off into the void as they took McAvoy's arm.

"Nice to see you have help," McAvoy ventured by way of inane small talk, as Quinlan brought them both to hover before an alcove where a board stood displaying names. "And this is so people can find—"

"People from their haunts, yes," Quinlan cut in. "McAvoy... the West King wants to speak to everyone."

"Then I require the assistance of one of my friend-charges."

Chapter 13

We who are old, old and gay,
O so old!
Thousands of years, thousands of years,
If all were told:
Give to these children, new from the world,
Silence and love;
And the long dew-dropping hours of the night,
And the stars above:
Give to these children, new from the world,
Rest far from men.
Is anything better, anything better?
Tell us it then:
Us who are old, old and gay,
O so old!
Thousands of years, thousands of years,
If all were told.

—"A Faery Song" W B Yeats

It'd been ten days since the meeting in Finn's bedroom, and Kendrick thought if they didn't hear from someone—anyone—soon, messing with the popcorn maker was the best way to relieve their tension. They'd have to make sure Finn and Claire were spared from being buried under popcorn—a simple enough fiasco to manufacture.

The day after he'd met Quinlan, Finn had gotten a job at Target, taking an

afternoon class to get a forklift operating license. Kendrick tried to help him out with the machine after he'd gotten the job, pushing the acceleration just a hair faster, until it had started drawing strange looks. It was easier to make any of the food machines give him two of what he wanted anyway.

Today Finn was off, and as had been his routine, hanging with Claire. Kendrick was glad; the kid needed normal socialization. They'd started seeing each other in "RL" five days ago—after a series of messages Kendrick had been tersely informed about but not permitted to see—and Finn still jumped when Claire approached.

The teenagers often loitered in the electronics section if they came into the store. Sometimes Kendrick saw them through a window, perhaps as a concession on Finn's part to the fact that Claire had once been their friend.

Kendrick floated above and a little ways behind Claire, who leaned against an empty shopping cart, so that Finn would have to focus on his peripheral vision to get distracted by a ghost. He'd taken to not wearing his talisman in Target, but Kendrick and Will were the only specters that approached him.

"It just doesn't make sense," Claire was saying. "Things falling over and random tech glitches going back ten years from what I can remember, in almost every public business. And lately—nothing. Chronicling this was supposed to be the inventive endearingly quirky thing that put my application over the top."

"So make the lack of accidents work for you. Say things calm down every x number of years or so, corresponding with graduations. No one can say you're wrong, and while I've thought your blog's helpful, you gotta admit it's a little dry."

"Spice it up with sentiment. Perhaps ghost indulging some kids in one last carefree summer, because of *their* lost youth" Claire's smirk eased into a thoughtful

stare. "Maybe. Hey, about your project ... you might want to talk to the director of this new paranormal show that's supposed to be coming here soon. I haven't put it on the blog yet because I wanted to give you more of a shot."

Kendrick knew by "project", Finn meant "proof on earth that someone on the Council of Kings was corrupt, or something about Ms. Landry", and Claire meant "that thing you're working on that could maybe help you get a college scholarship".

"Isn't that favoritism?" Finn asked.

"Your parents study ghosts for a living, people would be surprised if you didn't have a leg up. But—"

Finn held up a hand. "No, my parents haven't told me. They kind of forget they have a son sometimes. Now who's this director?"

"Tom Southerly. He found the message board we were talking on and extended the chat. He wanted to know about the town and here." She waved an arm, encompassing the store. "I gave him some links to the shows—he really doesn't seem very tech savvy, probably has an intern do all that—and he said he'd better be careful with the opportunity he'd been given to see the dead for himself."

"What makes you think he's not tech savvy?"

Claire shrugged. "His avatar was a picture of this really creepy tiger; its eyes were magnified to like twice the normal eyes of any cat I've seen. Anyway, I need to make a dent on actually putting things in this cart."

"Thanks for the tip," Finn called as Claire strode down the aisle.

Finn brought his phone to his ear and arched a brow at Kendrick—their cue to talk. "If only you were a filmmaker," Kendrick told him, then lowered to his eye level as the boy turned white. "Hey, why do you look like what people would expect you to look

like if you'd seen a ghost."

"Because I don't believe in coincidences. Southern's the South King—my king. And Tom ... like tomcat. He told us about August seventeenth being the day the cats couldn't go back to being witches." And then to himself. "But he doesn't work with the tigers."

"Okay, I have no idea what you're talking about, but you sound crazy and paranoid, and I think you need to maybe verify this before you swear off cats."

"And how would I verify that. The last time I spoke to the South King, he drove me around in a Tesla and told me Ms. Landry needed to remember her place!" He was almost screaming in terror or frustration.

"Ignoring, possibly forever, how a deity-like person knows nothing about the internet but has a really nice environment friendly car, you have to calm down. And you have to be able to contact him on your own, for ... emergencies, right? So just—" But before Kendrick could improvise some kind of solution, two things happened at once: McAvoy, Quinlan, and McAvoy's crew cut friend appeared to their right, and Finn's phone rang.

McAvoy motioned to Quinlan that it would be a moment, and muttered, "Humans will not pay attention to those around them until they have finished doing things with these devices.", as Finn answered.

"Hello? Uh, yeah, I remember you, ma'am. If you don't mind me asking, how did you get... Martha Kenzington? I assumed she served the South," Finn started, then stopped as the speaker overrode him. He ended with a, "Yes, ma'm," before fixing his eyes on the apparitions.

"Was that the West King?" Quinlan asked. "She said she'd try to contact you."

Finn strode out of the store, something that seemed to please McAvoy, Quinlan, and crew cut, who flew alongside him, leaving Kendrick to bring up the rear. "It was. She was calling from a necromancer's house in Ohio, but she's on her way to a meeting place she says you've arranged, and she'll be there faster than human air travel." Quinlan nodded. "Good. We'll hitch a ride with you so I can give you directions. She wants to talk to all of us, and McAvoy insists on bringing Fortescue along."

"Then we're missing someone," said Kendrick, trying to keep up. "I know Will doesn't have a stake in this, but he'll be crushed if he thought we were leaving him out."

"Palmer said he was playing hide-and-seek with another child," McAvoy assured. "All the children are going a little stir crazy being hold up in their haunts, and the boy is someone Will has never met before, who does not seem to mind that Will has," McAvoy looked at Fortescue.

"Home court advantage," they supplied.

"If Will doesn't know this kid, then I don't know this kid," Kendrick snapped.

Finn glared at Kendrick as he unlocked his car door. "Don't we have bigger things to worry about? It's not like Will's going to get stuck in something."

Telling themselves they were silly to feel foreboding, but unwilling to dignify Finn's flippancy, Kendrick followed the others into the truck.

Leaving the back to the others, Quinlan settled into the front passenger seat, using their talent to solidify it. Kendrick smiled at how strange this would look to a normal human temporarily given the power to see ghosts; a boy and possibly his aunt in the front, and three other floating people taking up cabin space, on a mini road trip, but soon found their mind wandering.

It was rare that Claire and Finn talked about things Kendrick understood. If Finn

knew Kendrick was eavesdropping, he'd try to switch the conversation to some old ghostly activity in Target, or ask questions on Kendrick's behalf. There was only so much an online acquaintance slowly (because Claire was wonderfully good about just taking people at face value and bringing out their best qualities with as much patience as sprucing up a fiddly site) turning into a friend in real life could be expected to know without arousing suspicion.

Too many names of songs and artists sounded like a foreign language, and recalling homework and tests produced a hazy, detached discomfort, like the nightmare of a nightmare.

And like with their brothers and parents, the things Kendrick could understand and observe were one-sided; Claire had no idea which of her blog posts Kendrick liked, or that Kendrick thought the way she'd taken to leaning on shopping carts made her look sketchy. And Kendrick didn't care.

No. That wasn't right. Kendrick would always care about the people they'd never been able to say goodbye to.

But somewhere a woman was being held against her will, possibly being threatened or hurt, and her sister could be dying, and wondering why Erin was missing in action. What if other people who'd tried tweaking the status quo were also in trouble? What if every king had some sort of dungeon where they kept wayward humans ... and the ghosts who tried confronting them about it?

These questions plagued Kendrick far more than whether the latest superhero movie would be good. That felt right, if bittersweet.

The scenery outside the window was a fracas of speeding cars and blurred buildings, pockmarked with the occasional stop sign or traffic light as they drove steadily

south.

"Where are we going?" Kendrick asked, breaking into a conversation between the rest of the group about floors and rooms.

"An art gallery," Finn replied, still facing forward.

"And why are we going to an art gallery?"

Everyone shot Kendrick a look this time. Ghosts couldn't blush, but they knew from seeing others' embarrassed reactions their cheeks had become more opaque. McAvoy's was the first face to shift from surprise to concern. "Will is—"

"I'm not worried! —I mean I ... stop looking at me like that!" Mostly Kendrick was used to the difference between person and ghosthood, but pausing when you didn't have to take a breath to collect yourself was sometimes a sucky tradeoff for no longer having to breathe at all. "I wasn't listening, but I'm not going to be acting like a mom with kid separation anxiety."

"The West King wishes to convene this meeting in an art gallery. Why is uncertain, but the gallery has changed somewhat since she was last there, and we do not entirely know in what room we are supposed to find her."

Kendrick nodded.

"I should be able to help with that," the ghost named Fortescue piped up. "It may take some time to find if the West King handled anything in certain rooms. I don't want to examine the floors—they'll take forever—but if she's arrived before us that will save even more time."

"That would be excellent if necessary, Fortescue," Quinlan answered. Crew cut didn't look like a Fortescue, but then, Kendrick mused, nobody ever *looked* like their surname.

"You're friends with a ghost forensics program?" Kendrick asked, impressed, shooting an appraising look between Fortescue and their handler.

"It's the historians' talent; although I don't do very well with what's on a computer," Fortescue said with a small, almost wicked smile. "Perhaps if McAvoy needs to search a home unit again, you could come and assist with that side of things?"

McAvoy frowned at Fortescue. "I highly doubt I will need to do any such thing in the near future."

"Okay, I have so many questions," Kendrick gushed. "Whose apartment was this? Does Mac have you do this often? When—"

"Perhaps we should discuss something else," McAvoy cut in with all the dignity of an affronted cat.

Fortescue glanced at McAvoy and pursed their lips. A moue of irritation about something Kendrick couldn't put a name to. Watching these two was fascinating.

"I will answer all your questions another time, Kendrick," the historian said finally.

"McAvoy is correct that our, what would be termed breaking and entering if we were alive, may not be the best subject while we travel to neutral territory for the Council."

"So no one's allowed to travel to another king's territory? Not even all of you with titles?"

Kendrick asked the truck at large.

"Not without permission," said Quinlan. "The room where we met to discuss the rogue—Finn was a neutral area, albeit one that had to be created for such a rare event."

The envoy slanted a look at Finn, who seemed to shrink under the weight of that arctic stare.

"I guess I caused some panic for you guys," he muttered.

Quinlan nodded. "And brought back memories of the worst day of my life, living or dead."

The last people I cared about in the world vanished from existence after being reanimated."

Finn narrowly avoided rear-ending a Sedan. "That wasn't part of your introduction, Kendrick," he said in a low voice.

"It wasn't mine to tell. Do you need to pull over?"

Finn shook his head as he stopped at a red light, fixing Quinlan with a sober gaze that aged him twenty years. "I'm really sorry. I can't imagine what that must've been like, and I don't think I've said that to any of you yet, which I'm also sorry for."

"Apology accepted," said Fortescue, at the same time McAvoy and Quinlan replied, "You haven't."

"This is going to be a fun ride," Kendrick said into the strained silence, willing the light to turn green.

An interminable time later, the view outside the window changed to grand, gleaming displays of architecture meant to catch and hold the attention of tourists. It was living up to its design; the streets and sidewalks were clogged with pedestrians. Finn circled a parking lot three times, then cursed when a Mustang cut him off. He slid crookedly into a space near the back, and the grim followed him across the pavement and through a pair of double doors beneath a banner emblazoned with the information that inside was a showing of pieces dubbed "Nocturne series".

Kendrick wondered if that was a good or bad coincidence.

Out of the corner of his eye, Finn saw the adult ghosts' clothes change. For McAvoy, it only meant changing from one tailored suit to another, a black number that made him look more like a ghost lawyer than ever—confident, grim and reassuring if he'd bothered to try a smile.

Quinlan swapped the kimono for a pair of scarlet silk trousers trimmed in gold braid over an ivory top, also made of silk, and fancy gold slippers taken right out of the original “Cinderella”. “Yes, I am not as bound to purple as my decorating taste would have one believe,” she said primly in response to Kendrick’s raised brows.

“Oh, no, it works for you. I was wondering about the shoes.”

“There’s a chance I may have to stand on a surface I need to make solid, so I have to stand out.” She smiled. “Besides, they match the braid and I’ve always preferred gold to glass slippers.”

Kendrick looked thoughtfully at the other woman, then sadly down at her own sweatpants and sneakers. “I miss wearing other shoes. Other anything.”

“You’ll be able to change clothes when you have a real need.”

Finn gaped at Fortescue’s new wardrobe. He’d expected the ghost to look like a well-off academic, someone whose idea of dressing up was wearing the regalia they’d graduated in. But instead of a scholar’s robe and hood, the historian was swathed in different shades of cream linen, including a vest and coat but, like McAvoy, wore unremarkable dress shoes.

“What time period is that from?” McAvoy asked his friend.

Finn missed the answer in a wash of inferiority. It was bad enough feeling like a small, scrawny kid most days without getting outshone by dead adults.

That feeling lasted until they entered the gallery, where it struck Finn, amid the sudden racing of his heart, that on any other day this show would be the sort of place he’d drive to for a break from school. The sharp gazes of bird, cat, and wolf eyes that blazed from leafless trees or through the gloom of dreary, rain-soaked landscapes as he walked toward the back room—trying to blend in with the art students clutching their

sketch pads—were compelling in the way only blunt representation could be.

He'd look for the artist's name when this was over. Moving was the only way to keep from crumbling under the weight of uncertainty and responsibility.

Having ghosts at his back was nothing like leading the group of reanimated corpses. Bodies, even ones without heat, had a kind of presence when manipulated by his power, like the prickle at the back of your neck when someone was watching you. He hadn't liked the sensation, hadn't liked the person he'd been in the cemetery, though it had seemed like the only option at the time.

Would the West King see that; understand that?

For all the years Finn had wanted to help the dead, he'd never had to trust them, and just because these four ghosts agreed with him enough to investigate didn't stop him from filing away the wariness in McAvoy's posture as he eyed the face of a painted unicorn with confusion.

He watched Quinlan out of the corner of his eye too as she glided through a wall, then back again with a shake of her head. When not speaking directly to him, she looked at him like he was a rabid dog, even if she had upheld her end of the agreement by speaking to someone higher up.

Fortescue seemed all right ... for someone who was even more of a stranger to him than the others. And Kendrick, the only ghost who hadn't changed clothes, reminded him of Ms. Landry ... who he couldn't afford to think of now if he wanted to come out on top in whatever he was heading into.

If he wasn't being paranoid, the South King seemed to be losing patience. Although if that were true, Finn didn't understand why the guy didn't just show up at his house again, and the likelihood of him showing up here was ... He had no idea.

Everyone's either going to want to kiss you or kill you; Finn recalled with a pang of worry and fear.

Fortescue drifted ahead of him as Finn approached a hall lined with back rooms.

"I can check a few with my talent if you'd like?"

Finn nodded, seemingly to himself, before striding across from the scholar to another door.

"Oh no, dear," said a sultry voice farther down the hall.

Finn spun. A girl in a flowing, diaphanous floor-length gown glided over with a sweet smile.

"My mistress thought you could use a guide. Auntie West is just up those stairs at the end of the hall. She wasn't going to shut herself in some back room and risk drawing attention, or getting some unpleasant reputation that could mar any future returns here." One of the ghosts in his party, Kendrick if he had to guess, snorted. "One flight up and you'll have privacy, dears."

As Finn walked off in the direction of the woman's pointing finger, he heard Kendrick say, "Thank you." and the West King's servant retort, "You and the human will be fine, my mistress has never been adverse to those in humble attire."

Kendrick looked grumpy, and her cheeks were once again opaque when she caught up to the rest of them at the foot of the stairs.

"You first," Finn told Quinlan. "You arranged this. She'll be expecting you."

"But you are the reason we are all here," McAvoy pointed out with a pompous look, even as his voice quavered a little.

Unable to come up with an argument, Finn took a breath, then climbed. At the top he found rows of couches and chairs arranged around small tables that could hold a

glass and a plate or two of food. The West King sat in a high-backed squashy armchair, too worn and brightly colored to match the rest of the over-polished, uncomfortable-looking furniture, in the exact center of the sitting area.

She stood when she saw them. The move shouldn't have been impressive with her average height and build, but as she gave all five a once-over with those eyes that were the exact shade and shape as her brother's, Finn was bitterly wishing he'd thought to stop and change into something other than jeans, a Killers T-shirt, and scuffed Doc Martens.

She crossed to the head of the stairs and called, "Stand guard in case anyone comes up here, Patience. We don't want to be disturbed."

"Yes, Auntie," came the faint reply.

The West King smiled. "I am so glad she convinced fellow ghosts in my service to use that endearment after she came."

"Your ... Majesty," McAvoy fumbled. "Not that this ... place isn't ... ah—"

"Lovely," Kendrick supplied with a grin.

McAvoy nodded, a corner of his mouth quirking. "But it feels a bit exposed for the matter at hand—"

"Which is why we're using the room this place sets aside for meetings and chatting with rich people who like to help painters," the West King interjected, eyes dancing. "I just didn't want you all to have to get even more nervous heading down there without me. Carry this chair—"

Quinlan darted forward, but the king held up a hand. "—Finn Liam Davis. Thank you, Quinlan, but we don't need to risk someone coming out of the bathroom and seeing a floating chair. I've protected where we'll be talking against eavesdroppers and those

silly cameras. I even turned the lights on." She said the last with a look of such supreme smugness Finn had to bite back a laugh; if only everyone could be so blasé about being overheard.

By the time they filed into the large board room—Finn dragging the squashy armchair to where it turned out all its fellows were arranged—and the king closed its door, he thought there might be a slight chance he could relax. Until one of the rulers of the afterlife locked her eyes on him and surged forward looking like she would start breathing fire at any moment.

Finn backpedaled until he slammed against the wall. Still in his face, the West King poked him in the chest. The weight of her index finger pinned him in place, he couldn't even turn his head, and he felt a grinding pain as though a boot heel or spike was the cause of his immobility.

"You have caused a great deal of unnecessary trouble for a great many ghosts that it is your job to aid, Necromancer Davis." The way she said Necromancer made Finn picture it with a capital letter.

"I know. And I'm sorry about that, but the South King made it sound like you all agreed about Ms. Landry, and so did everyone that was at my shopping week."

He was babbling. Why did she always make him uncomfortable?

"That you haven't tried whipping this grim into a frenzy against me speaks well to that," she turned her head to eye the ghosts hovering uncertainly at her back.

"Hang on! He'd have to get our permission first for that, right?" Kendrick demanded. "It's not like when we're shoved into our bodies."

Finn found he could squirm under the pressure, and made a mental note to tell Ms. Landry she'd ticked off the kinder female sovereign. "Uh, no. I'm guessing that has

something to do with the intensity of my glow, so theoretically it would be just as easy as reanimation. But I wouldn't do that to any of you," he rushed, as Kendrick gaped.

"Not that it matters, since I wouldn't be at all unsettled or overpowered," said the West King, the tone of her voice pleasant. "It also speaks well of you that you've been lying low. And we aren't ones for change."

She looked at the ceiling. "We're old, very old, and set in our ways. But from what the living people who serve us say, we've been delightful employers."

"Yeah, but you can make them immortal, that's guaranteed job satisfaction for anyone who doesn't bother to think beyond the next five years!" Kendrick had actually gained height in her indignation.

"Please excuse Kendrick's impertinence," said McAvoy. Kendrick shot her handler an ugly look, but the older ghost seemed to be wrestling with some inner pain. Fortescue seemed to have realized what Finn had, because he reached out and patted McAvoy's shoulder before saying reassuringly, "I'll take it from here." and swooping forward to float in front of Finn and the king. "I need to be far more impertinent and research you, madam. I was a historian in life."

The rosebud mouth curved into a surprised smile. "East's kitties said I'd have an interesting week. Can your talent work on me—on us? Have you tried it?"

"You aren't a ghost, ma'am. They're the only ones whose pasts I can't see. It's why McAvoy thought I'd be useful."

"Fascinating. Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained." She spread her arms wide, finally removing her finger from Finn's chest, in invitation. Fortescue's hazel eyes went unfocused.

For a few moments, Finn heard nothing but the sound of his own breathing, huge

lungfuls of air evening out into a natural, quiet rhythm. Then one of the rulers of the afterlife giggled.

"That tickles," she choked, shoulders shaking. "No, don't stop, you're only in my sixteenth century."

Sometime later, Fortescue floated away from her, weaving to McAvoy, who held out an encircling arm for the now even paler ghost to slump into. "She's trustworthy, fair," the ghost's voice was perfectly steady in disturbing contrast with his look of exhaustion. "She had no idea about your Ms. Landry until Quinlan spoke with her, Mr. Davis. And if I may say so, Madam—"

"Oh, call me ... Zephra—it's been a few centuries since I used that name. Titles will just make things complicated, and I think we have enough of that already."

"Well, um, Zephra, you and your twin certainly have been competitive over the millennia."

"Yes, but we each got our necromancers, and I'll always be proud that Arista is in my care," the West King said with a smug little bow.

"Fascinating as a childhood fight about whoever this Arista is," said Finn, and the tone of his voice was suddenly pleasant, deeper, more mature.

"They weren't children, and Arista is a pony," Fortescue corrected.

He waved away the explanation, eyes still fixed on the king. "You'll get Ms. Landry out of wherever she is? And help her stepsister?"

"Well, I don't know where she is, so I can't promise that straight away. And it's not only up to me. My co-rulers and I have been ensuring our subjects on earth have been moved somewhere safe. Everyone needs to be made aware the danger has passed."

"Can't you just not tell the South King?" Finn demanded, voice cracking. "Then

he can keep evacuating his people—"

"Some of us would rather he didn't," said Fortescue, voice quiet but eyes over-bright with worry, self-loathing, and pleading.

"Okay, something that works for everyone and doesn't make any of us feel like we're headed for hell," Finn amended. Then feeling it was only polite, he asked Fortescue, "What do you like to be called?"

"They or them, please."

"Since this seems to be an open forum, I have a suggestion," sneered a cold voice as the door opened.

The South King strode into the room holding the hand of one of the kids—a boy—Finn had heard sing in August, who in turn dragged Will by the arm twisted behind his back.

The hold was just for show. A thin chain, so delicate and blindingly white it wouldn't have been surprising to learn it was woven from unicorn hair, its dangling pendant wrapped to excess in tissue paper, looped around the singer's elbow and down to one of Will's wrists, securing the two.

Finn felt as though he'd received a huge electric shock, Kendrick's eyes traveled from Will to his captor with a look very reminiscent of an enraged mamma bear, Quinlan backed up until she pressed against a wall she must have made solid, and Fortescue's jaw sagged in horror.

The West King looked calm as she crossed to the still-open door, but expressed whatever she was feeling by slamming it shut so forcefully the walls rattled.

"You are wondering perhaps how I knew you were here," the South King said, eyes glittering with suppressed triumph. "I thought you might need an incentive not to

rock the boat, boy, especially since you saw fit to try my patience thrice over, with your antics and by bringing other spirits into your displeasure with me. I thought having this child in the company of a stranger would recall at least one of you to status quo, and we'd be having this conversation in a familiar place for some of you."

Kendrick glared at McAvoy, who had the grace to look ashamed; Quinlan's eyes dropped to her slippers. Finn watched helplessly, guiltily; most of them were familiar enough with Will's hiding-places that stopping to look for him wouldn't have wasted significant time, but he'd overrode Kendrick and the rest hadn't spared a thought.

Almost as an afterthought, the South King let go of his envoy's hand and patted him on the head. "He lost hide-and-seek," the boy gloated. "That's why he's chained."

"You cheated!" Will burst out, kicking and connecting with the other boy's shin.

The kid leapt atop Will, sending them both into the air. They rolled about for a few seconds, each grappling to be on top, before Kendrick launched herself at them and tried to break up the scuffle.

"Take care," the South King drawled. "You could make things worse."

"We don't feel pain!" Kendrick shouted. "So they're fighting for no reason and you're just letting it happen because you're pissed at everyone except a kid you bribed with ... candy or something!"

She'd succeeded in pulling the kids as far away from one another as the chain would permit, but held the choir kid by the back of his uniform jacket. Some of the wrapping around the pendant had torn during the tumbling, revealing a flash of iridescent color.

"Is that," Finn began, but with a snap of the South King's fingers the chain yanked both ghost children back to his side, making it harder to get a good view of the

thing. Kendrick, who'd been pulled along with them, darted up to the ceiling to maintain the best vantage point, every muscle tensed to drop.

"I would prefer not to be rushed. Now, I knew about young William here because I make it a habit to know where all my psychopomps spend time with their little friends, as well as where all the children are. We were waiting for you to be concerned, decent people and come looking for him once you heard some random child had been breaking the rules." He squeezed Will's arm, who reflexively jerked it away, then flinched as the king raised the partially wrapped pendant to hover above Will's shoulder.

"It hurts," he said.

A frisson went around the room at the inexplicable, everyone would have said impossible, sight of a ghost in pain. Quinlan went through the wall, Fortescue clapped a hand to their mouth—Finn might as well start using their preferred pronoun even to himself—and McAvoy's mint-green eyes blazed.

Finn shivered. Then shivered again, hard enough to make his teeth chatter. He looked up at Kendrick, just in time for her to send another cold gust of air onto him. She pointed at Will, who kept peeking up at her with an expression of such unwavering trust that Finn couldn't look at it for long, then back to Finn, then blinked rapidly.

"But then I had a flash of a memory I'd long forgotten," the South King went on in a level voice, "of a fight with my sister regarding which of us was allowed to keep a pony."

Fortescue lowered their hand. "I only looked at memories pertaining to your relationship," they told the twins, "It was the quickest way to determine trustworthiness."

"You see, as fair trade for not being immune to your talent, Fortescue, the Council can tell when it is being used on us. I thank you," said the man, voice mocking.

"Had you not decided to examine my relationship with my twin, I would not have any idea she had gone—what is the phrase? 'Off the grid' and received a glimpse of where she was when you resurfaced to the present. But onto the matter of one of my newest servants."

Fortescue pivoted to the West King. "Make humans be able to hear us, Zephra. Or undo whatever you did to the cameras! He'll let the kids go if it means exposure."

"None of my precautions will break unless I leave, which is exactly what my twin wants. I won't leave you at his mercy when I'm the reason you're here."

The South King laughed. "Don't be so melodramatic, Zephra. No harm will come to anyone you or I have brought into this room."

And still Kendrick continued to point from Will to Finn then blink her eyes, flicking her fingers in a shooing gesture when it was clear Finn wasn't catching on.

And suddenly Finn understood. He bobbed a nod, and Kendrick ceased, returning to glaring daggers at the kid singer, who was pinching Will, apparently out of boredom.

He wasn't as confident as she was that he could help, but Finn squared his shoulders and looked into his King's eyes. The gaze pierced him as physically as his twin's finger had, but instead of an outer pressure, he felt the air roiling over his face. It felt like a solid thing, clogging his mouth with every inhalation as though he were drowning in the very thing that was supposed to afford him life. He choked.

The West King smacked his arm. Finn looked at her and gulped non-constricting air. "Stop toying," she told her brother coldly. "Where is Patience?"

"Your creature is at her post. We entered this disgrace of a structure using its fire exit. I will never understand why humans got rid of palaces and monoliths for these

wastes."

"What do you want?" Finn asked the South King, careful to look between his eyes instead of directly into them.

"For this tantrum of yours to cease. And before you answer, remember what I have done already. If I can make your law enforcement forget things, boy, forget about people whose job it is for them to locate, what makes you think that I cannot enhance their memories and that of your common folk? From what Erin Landry says about the world today—oh yes, she is quite talkative when under duress—you are a solitary child, and for some reason being dark-skinned will mean people are likely to be agitated by you when they learn of your cemetery escapade."

Finn glowered.

"All four of us can use Lethe water," the West King snarled.

"But then the imbalance of what and how much people are forgetting will be on Finn Liam Davis's conscience. You would not place such anguish on one of your own, sister, do not ask me to endure such a thing for one of mine solely to see your sense of fair play soothed."

"You had four options! Why did you and Landry choose to work for *this* guy?" Kendrick asked, tone more panicked than heated, eyes still locked on the kids.

"You, young soul," his gaze swept over Kendrick, lips curving in a beatific smile at odds with his earlier annoyance, "should be pleased that these necromancers made what choices they did. I gather a friend of yours tends to be in your vicinity lately; that couldn't have occurred if the boy wasn't in my territory."

Kendrick gaped as Quinlan floated through the wall. She walked toward the South King, striking in her clothes, footsteps making no sound, every inch of fear locked

beneath a regal bearing.

"Are rules and appearances all that matter to you?" Quinlan's tone was as cold and unexpectedly sharp as putting a hand into an ice maker filled with equal parts glass and frozen water. "Is power over a schoolboy worth the loss of your envoys, or your psychopomps that're one assignment away from crossing over? Because McAvoy and I will tell our colleagues what transpired here. And I think the nine-year limit will be lifted once your necromancers learn how you treat people looking for compassion."

He looked at Quinlan as if she were posing a philosophical question. "Special treatment is another way to look at Finn Davis's championing of Erin Landry's request. Everyone dies, everyone loses people they love before they would desire to. Why should one woman, however highly valued, be singled out of an experience that, I might point out, isn't even a certainty. Her Kara could live."

The little singer tugged at the sleeve of his duster. "Can I go, Uncle South?" "Oh, yes Vlad, you must be bored. Let me uncha—" But Will's tormentor yanked free of the chain, speeding through the nearest wall with a laugh so high and shrill it sounded like demented windchimes.

The chain swung wildly back and forth, the rest of the tissue paper sloughing away to reveal Ms. Landry's ring in full, before it smacked against Will's hip where, defying all laws of gravity, it stuck. He let out a long, dreadful, piercing scream.

No marks mottled or discolored his skin, nothing could outwardly harm the dead, but bits of his shirt, gray with a picture of a puppy on it—the puppy more defined than the color—turned to mist and faded away.

"Talismans keep ghosts away," said Finn, horrified in spite of what he and Kendrick had put together. "So find a way to put one on a ghost and it—"

"Stop!" McAvoy boomed as Will writhed, twisted and flailed, still screaming. "It's not his fault! He has nothing to do with this!"

The West King held out a hand to Will, but he curled into a ball, sobbing now, pearly tears shining briefly in midair before dissipating.

Kendrick dived to hover behind him, trying to cradle him as her fingers scrabbled at the chain. All she managed to do was spin it so that the talisman caught the light.

The kings snapped their fingers, but the chain twitched in a shrug, refusing to move.

"Remove it!" Zephra snapped at her brother.

"I didn't affix it to the chain in case I was harmed for falling somewhere between living and dead." There was no more triumph in his eyes, and a hint of tears in his tones.

The West King gave an angry toss of her head. "You think you're so superior. Never mind—"

There was a hiss of pain and Finn turned away from the squabbling siblings. Kendrick had let go of Will, who continued to flail in midair, and was staring in shock at her burned fingers.

"Quinlan, try and get the ring off," but Finn trailed off, swearing softly. Quinlan had sunk to the floor, head on her raised knees as she rocked back and forth, hands over her ears. McAvoy and Fortescue had joined Kendrick in pulling at the white chain, but under their combined strength it only stretched like taffy, revealing no clasp.

He ran forward, wrenched Ms. Landry's opal off Will and cupped it in his fist; as the others let go of the chain, he eased the ring off the colorless links and curled his chain around it, shoving everything into a pocket. Secure enough for now.

"Will, it's my fault you were left with that brat, Kendrick wanted to bring you, but I was... no!— No!"

Nothing of the little ghost remained from the shoulders down. Somehow his arms and hands were still there, both wrapped around Kendrick's neck, stroking her hair.

"You're going to be all right, baby," Kendrick told him, rubbing circles on one of Will's shoulders with her thumb and determinedly not looking at his missing ectoplasmic energy. Though that was probably because her eyes had filled with unshed tears.

"You'll help the lady and her sister?" Will's voice was still strong even as his features blurred.

"Of course, that's why I came here. But-but you need to stay and..." Kendrick's voice broke as Will's grip gave out, and she clutched his tiny hands in hers.

"I never had a sister, so no one played with me before when Mommy was gone. I wished for one once, but I'm glad she never came 'cause you're—"

What was left of Will dissolved into smaller and smaller droplets of mist. The white chain clinked to the floor.

When he was gone, Kendrick cried without a sound.

Chapter 14

There was the sliding sound of metal being moved. A feather-light touch settled on their hair, and they leaned into it without thought. "Mac, I—"

"It was never my intent for Will to vanish," said the South King. Kendrick slapped the hand away, spinning to meet the ruler's anguished gaze with a raised fist.

"Don't touch me. And save your crap! No one believes you. You wanted to scare us all straight—"

"Which is why I brought a chain"—he tapped a coat pocket—"that can only be compelled for a short period of time. I give you my word Vlad Will be punished for haring off—"

"I don't care!" Kendrick yelled. "I don't care what you've got to say!"

They swung their fist, lips pulling back in a rictus as the South King dodged the punch. They looked around at the feel of an arm about their shoulders. This time it was McAvoy, and anger disappearing under a wave of fresh grief, they collapsed into the psychopomp's embrace.

"And the chain was here to protect you," Finn barked. "So was the wrapping. You never touched the opal."

The king turned beseeching eyes on the glowering teenager. "I understand how my actions must appear, but I had a different reason to exercise caution. Talismans are respected by me and my co-rulers as much as they are protected by necromancers." When Finn only frowned, he sighed. "I did not take Erin Elizabeth Landry's opal from her, and while touching it might have meant committing harm to myself, contact from a being that is neither dead nor alive might have damaged it." His rich voice lowered to a thoughtful purr. "Knowing it is in your possession will please her, I think."

Zephra went over to her twin, pretty rosebud mouth an implacable line. "Brother

dear, none of these people want to hear your entreaties right now, and to be frank, I'd appreciate you going. This gallery has always held pleasant memories for me even when it was a chandlery, and you've unintentionally provided the first unpleasant one."

"Find me if your insurrection requires my expertise. You shall have it for the child's sake." Head bowed, the South King left as abruptly as he'd come.

"You believe him?" Fortescue asked in a voice that sounded like they had a bad head cold.

"You're helping us?" Kendrick asked, wiping their eyes on a corner of their t-shirt and pulling out of McAvoy's hold.

"My twin is a stickler, he uses any solution to achieve his goals, but if he had sunk to thinking murdering a child was a valid solution I'd challenge him for his territory."

"So why aren't you?" Kendrick demanded.

"Because she thinks someone else is behind Erin Landry's kidnapping," said McAvoy. "Fortescue saw the South King was the last human-like presence to enter her apartment, but that doesn't rule out her being in someone else's custody. Or that same someone manipulating the South King's love of rules to make all of us retreat." Their eyes were alight with a fervor Kendrick had never seen before, shocking them out of their stupor.

"You're using contractions," Kendrick said. "You must be pissed."

The West King nodded at McAvoy. "Exactly what I think. Also Finn, you said you spoke to everyone in your shopping week, but no one that August entered my domain. I never would have suspected East or North of creating rifts after all this time, but after two hundred years since the last one, I guess I'm due for a surprise."

"What does that mean for the evacuation?" asked McAvoy.

"It has to stop. Finn's name was never given to a wide range of ghosts, and if that tips off one of my fellow Council members someone's dogging their path," her dark eyes flashed as she smiled without showing her teeth, "I wouldn't mind them feeling a little wrong-footed for a while."

"So once everything's cleared up for the general ghost public, where does that leave us?" Finn asked as Kendrick nodded.

"After Will's death is acknowledged as well," McAvoy put in as the king's lips parted.

"Would anyone mind if he were a casualty of taking our rogue necromancer to task?" she asked, downcast.

Kendrick broke the beat of silence. "It's true enough." Their voice dripped self-recrimination, but no one contradicted.

"I could touch the opal to try and learn who handled it between Ms. Landry and her king," the historian warbled, "but—"

"Making you relive something none of us want to think about right now should be a last resort," said Quinlan clearly, rising to hover with the rest of them, eyes still looking rather wet.

"Then I will give you a direct answer when all of that has occurred. For now, grieve; that is the least we can all do."

A week after Will's death, Kendrick watched from a distance as their mom and little brother Mike headed for Target's nearest register, Mike proudly pushing the cart.

The desperate, almost senseless urge to observe felt like it belonged to someone in another life, but seeing them doing well felt good.

According to the majority of the haunters, the rogue necromancer had been

caught and stripped of his tools. No one knew what that meant, but coming up with theories was too much fun, and being able to have free reign of the town again too much of a relief, for anyone to really protest how little information was being sent out.

Saunders and Clarkson had a few complaints, and nothing would stop Jenkins crowing about the necromancer biding his or her time until they were all enslaved, but the reminder that whatever had happened resulted in a child ghost vanishing forever shut everyone up.

Lawrence was dealing with their grief by telling stories to other ghost kids.

Kendrick saw them around the neighborhood.

When left to their own devices, time stretched endlessly. It wasn't filled with memories of Will, the way they might have expected; it wasn't filled with much of anything.

The best word to describe it when they'd been alive would have been lethargic. But whatever the proper term was for a ghost, the guilt was so heavy it felt horrific to laugh or smile; it was easier to drift, to try to not think, to just be with the weight of what their own empathy had caused.

Kendrick had been seeing a lot of McAvoy and Fortescue these days, as both seemed bent on helping Kendrick move on—emotionally this time—and cope with their own grief. The historian relayed a frenzy of new library titles, providing a distraction, while McAvoy badgered and forcibly led them to check the bulletin board once a day.

And then there was Finn, who still claimed half the blame, rarely removed his aventurine so no ghost would escape his notice, and hadn't quit working with the forklift.

"Your brother might like a treat," McAvoy's voice coaxed from out of nowhere. Kendrick glared. "I got him and Mom candy bars when they came in. And I'm putting a

bell on you; I'll get everyone you serve to back me in a vote."

"You haven't been out to the bulletin board today."

"You haven't come to get me," Kendrick retorted petulantly, watching Becky ring up groceries.

"If you had checked you would know Fortescue and I were asked by a Z to be here today."

For the first time, Kendrick met McAvoy's gaze. "Let's we find Finn? He should be in the back."

"Fortescue—" But as they spoke, the ghost in question appeared on the other side of the aisle, gesturing emphatically toward the door some employees used for a smoke break.

They found Finn out by the dumpsters with his phone to his ear. He smiled at the sight of them all, lowering the screen so they could read the two sentences over his shoulder:

Ms. Landry is a very smart woman who bought her apartment. Quinlan and I will meet the four of you there. —Zephra

For all the corners of their mouth felt painfully stiff and the expression rested awkwardly, Kendrick smiled for the first time in weeks. There was no relish in treason, but McAvoy's shoulders stiffened with resolve as they stared somberly ahead, missing the small, proud smile Fortescue sent their way. Finn, meanwhile, teeth bared in a wolfish grin, beckoned irritably over his shoulder as he sprinted across the parking lot.

Vita

Nicole Anne White is the author of the article *Balanced on a Proverbial Cliffhanger: the methods, pros, and current tribulations of how blind readers obtain books for leisure reading*, found in *Popular Culture Review* Volume 27, Number 1, Winter 2016. Under the name Niki White she has had a fiction short story, "How Is It You Sing", published in the 2018 spring edition of the University of Texas at El Paso's *Río Grande Review*.

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