

Archived thesis/research paper/faculty publication from the University of North Carolina at Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository: <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/>

Accidental Necromancer

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2018

By *Kinsey Danzis*

Thesis Director
Lori Horvitz

Thesis Advisor
Mildred Barya

Accidental Necromancer

A Novel by

Kinsey Danzis

Accidental Necromancer

The following chapters constitute the beginning of a high fantasy novel. When protagonist Nycosa Maren accidentally raises a mangled corpse named Asif from the dead—which is highly illegal and nearly impossible, especially since she has no idea how she did it—she finds him glued to her side for fear of dying again. Traveling exclusively by night, the pair look for a healer able to restore Asif's missing body parts, eventually arriving in Windfall, a decrepit town plagued by an absurd number of inexplicable disappearances. Their suspicious appearance draws the attention of a woman named Rhione, who pursues them and eventually discovers that Asif is technically a dead man. The duo are forced to kidnap her in order to keep their secret under wraps. Rhione proceeds to blackmail them, claiming that she will run away and start a manhunt against them if they do not help her find her parents. These chapters set the stage for the trio's companionship throughout the novel; when they find Rhione's parents, as well as the other missing people, they will also find a necromantic danger greater than they could have anticipated, as well as the secret behind Nycosa's mysterious abilities.

For Lilly, the writing partner

I'm lucky enough to marry

For my parents, who

always believed in me

Chapter 1

Nycosa had heard how the man had died. Everybody had, really, regardless of which discipline they were at Va'Skailte to study. It had spread through the halls of the entire university as a whisper, darting from conversation to conversation like flies.

Did you hear about the new cadaver?

I heard he's the worst they've had in years.

Nobody knew for sure what had happened to him—but on the same token, everybody knew. They had reached their conclusion as people do when faced with a self-evident situation—uniformly, as a single body passing along rumors as truth with no one bothering to question what was so obviously correct. That happened a lot, regardless of plausibility; the student mages at Va'Skailte lived and worked as a single rippling, thrumming mass that passed news like contagion—across a discipline in a day, and across the whole campus in a week.

I heard somebody in the novice class is going to get him.

What's left of him.

Everybody knew he was going to Vitalist Hall. It was the only discipline of magic with a morgue, for one thing, and with all the student healers there they went through cadavers like bread and butter. Their dissection was nothing new; it was common knowledge that a healer must first have a comprehensive knowledge of the human body in order to heal it, and dissection came with the territory. The introductory anatomy class knew it was only a matter of time.

“It was a tragedy,” their instructor had said, making the arrival of the most recent set of cadavers official long after every student had already found out, “a real dreadful coincidence. An accident, at the end of it all.”

It was nothing so glorious. He had been found at the bottom of the sewer, in a circle of sunlight leaking through the access hole that somebody had left open—neck snapped, eyes wide, limbs splayed out in the muck and slime.

That wasn’t the outlandish part, the part that had everybody talking. The outlandish part was the rats.

They’re calling it a study in trauma.

I feel for the poor sap who gets that one.

Nycosa had been warned when she’d been assigned the body for study, of course—that the body had been there a while before being found, that the sewer rats had had a go at him before he was dragged out of the shit, that it might be jarring—but necessary—to study such postmortem trauma. It hadn’t fazed her much. She had never been exposed to death, never so much as spoken about it with her family, but it was just death. Everyone died. Surely, she reasoned, the cadaver couldn’t have been *that* bad; the whispers surrounding the body only fed into its mystique, fueled the speculation. It simply couldn’t have been that strange.

Then it came time for her to actually see it.

The novice vitality mages were not allowed to mess with the cold storage by themselves—the elemental magic that kept it cold had given students frostbite in the past—so she had entered the morgue at her assigned examination time to see the supine body already out on the table. Her instructor stood over it, blocking most of it from her view, but she saw a white flash of bone and immediately looked away.

“Ah, Nycosa.” The instructor turned around. He sounded apologetic. “He’s all set for you. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Nycosa said, looking at her shoes.

There was a pause, and then the clacking of boots against polished wood as he made his way over to her.

“You have one hour of independent examination time,” he said. “I’ll come back to help you put him back in cold storage at the end. You remember the rules from class: don’t mess with the cold storage, keep your tools either on your tray or in your hand, properly contain any body parts you may remove to study.”

“Are there even any left to remove?” she asked.

He hesitated—a red flag. She had never heard him hesitate before.

“This batch of cadavers was limited,” he said. “Somebody had to get this one.”

She stepped aside to let him pass. With a sigh he did so, pausing once again by the door with his hand resting on the knob.

“Focus on the fatal break in the neck,” he said. “It’s still intact. And if you can glean anything interesting about his...postmortem trauma, please remember to share it in class.”

And then, with the click of the door, he was gone, his only remnant the muffled tapping of his shoes receding down the hallway until there was silence.

Nycosa took in a great, shuddering breath. The sound was far too loud in the quiet morgue, and it left her gagging from the bitter, sharp scent of rot and ice. Nobody had thought to warn her of the smell. Perhaps they thought that she knew it was part and parcel with being a healer, that she wouldn't *need* to be warned of something so obvious.

The body lay on the farthest table from the door. It was already uncovered—the instructor had taken care of everything save for the examination itself—but Nycosa couldn't bring herself to look at it. She'd been almost apathetic before. Far from the morgue, it had been too easy to think that she could be objective and detached from the situation. She would go in, study the body and take notes, and leave no worse for wear.

Now, she cast her gaze about the room with almost desperation, looking for anything and everything she could possibly do before laying hands on the cadaver. Her instructor really had done everything. When she looked to see if the three vacant tables needed cleaning, she saw only deep-set stains in the wood and nothing else, nothing fresh or messy. The trays of medical instruments were organized and orderly. The canvas aprons on the shelf across the room could not have been more neatly folded. Even the floor was spotless, freshly swept.

There was nothing more about it, then. She had to do it.

Nycosa lifted her head slowly, as if the weight of the world rested atop it, to look at the body straight on for the first time. As soon as she did, her stomach lurched; she wasn't sure if her knees gave out or if she had dropped to the floor intentionally, but either way she ended up hunched over the waste bucket in the corner, retching, hands gripping either side of the rim.

Saying the rats had done a number on the cadaver didn't even come close to describing his condition. Where his chest had once been, there was now a gaping hole, carved out of his flesh by hundreds of tiny teeth and framed by the gnawed-down nubs of bone that had once been

his ribcage. Nothing remained within but smears of the organs that had once been there, strands of sinew and flesh long since dead. Even that hadn't been enough for the rats; his left arm and right leg—below the knee, at least—had been eaten down to the bone, and left almost nothing but tiny bite marks peppered across the white surface.

Nycosa remained bent over the bucket, chest heaving and head bowed, long after she had actually stopped gagging. Her throat burned hot and raw. Sweat crept into the roots of her hair, weighing down the springy curls just above her forehead.

“Fuck,” she gasped, and spat into the bucket. It did nothing to get rid of the taste of bile.

It was nothing like she had expected, and far worse than she had been led to believe even by the rampant rumors. She'd expected a few holes. Maybe a glimpse of bone here and there. This was something else entirely.

Finally, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and rose on trembling legs. The distance between her and the body seemed both indomitably long and uncomfortably short at the same time.

“Gods,” she said, voice hoarse, and swallowed. The sensation of bile rising in her throat wouldn't go away, though she knew she had no more left to throw up. “Okay. Okay.”

She took a step. For some reason, the impact of her foot against the floor—as the vibrations traveled up her leg—felt like someone had hit her forehead with a blunt mallet.

“This is fine,” she whispered. Thinking it wasn't enough to convince her. She had to hear the words spoken, rippling through the air from her mouth to her ears, for it to help even a little. “Just an intro class.”

It took mammoth effort for her to approach the body. Though the room itself remained still and empty, the air seemed to thicken around her; it felt like wading more so than walking.

When she reached the table, she felt like anxiety was squeezing her from all sides, compressing her into a smaller, even less confident version of herself.

“Okay,” she whispered again. She shook her hands in the air on either side of her body, rolled her shoulders until they popped, and cracked her neck from side to side. “This is fine. This is fine.”

Nothing had changed as she neared. No ghastly smell overtook her that she hadn’t smelled in the doorway. No stray rat clambered out of the empty cavern of the body’s torso. No maggots writhed in his flesh. He was completely still—and that was perhaps the worst part of it for her. She wanted so desperately to be able to believe, if push came to shove, that he was alive—merely unconscious in a clinic somewhere, awaiting healing. But he didn’t breathe. His open eyes stared sightlessly, clouded over, at the low ceiling of the morgue. Horrible dark pockets of blood had pooled just under the skin beneath his eyes. A congealed gash split the left side of his head. His neck was bent at a nauseating angle, and she could see where it had snapped; the nub of bone pressed against the inside of his skin, but had not broken through.

And still. Far too still.

A swell of nausea overtook Nycosa again, though this time she managed to suppress the retching. Her chest constricted.

“Why did it have to be you?” she muttered to the corpse, fingers interlaced over her mouth. “Why couldn’t it have been old age or something?”

The corpse, predictably, did not answer.

She could not speak to him again. Her question had stolen the last of her breath, and she could barely take in more with all the force that was compressing her chest. Her heartbeat echoed

through her skull, compounding with her headache in a staccato symphony of pain. Every time she thought about opening her mouth, her stomach turned over—almost a warning not to speak.

Right, she thought, steeling herself with what little will she had left. *In an hour or two I'll be done, and I'll never have to see this guy again.*

She reached out toward the smaller table next to her, on which a tray of tools lay prepped and ready for her to use. Before she touched metal, she faltered—first, because she had forgotten an apron, but knew that she would never get up the nerve again should she turn away to get one, and then, because she remembered his eyes. They still stared upward. Blank and unseeing, to be sure, but it was the very fact that they were open that unnerved her. They gave him a sort of life that made her even more uncomfortable to reach into his body.

Sorry, she thought, and reached up to drag his eyelids closed.

As soon as her fingertips touched his cold skin, her heart stopped.

It didn't falter, didn't skip a beat. It came to a full stop; she could feel its stillness in her chest. It was a strange sensation, one that stretched on for well over five seconds—which, in that period of stasis, felt like an eternity. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe—physically couldn't make the effort to inhale. She could feel the panic bleeding into her system, but could do nothing to respond to it. And the sound of her heartbeat, so loud before, had fallen completely silent.

But there she was, still conscious, still standing there, dead on her feet.

What?

And then the pain struck.

It overcame her in an instant, crackling upward through her veins like lightning from her fingertips, which still rested frozen on his eyelids. Her vision went white. She could no longer

feel where her limbs were, nor if they were moving again. She could only feel the pain barely contained within her skin, providing her with a vague outline of where she ended and the world began.

Through it all, everything was silent. As she felt all the warmth in her body siphoned out through her fingers, as she felt the pain grow icier with each passing second, there was no sound; she existed in the pounding, crushing emptiness of a vacuum, where not even a cry for help could escape.

But her heart remained still. It was the one thing she could feel clearly. Even in the midst of the swirling, muddled, overwhelming pain, she could feel its absence in her chest.

And then it beat once—a single, thundering beat.

The next thing she knew, she was crumpled in a heap on the floor. The abrupt absence of pain was overwhelming in and of itself, like she had suddenly been sucked dry of something that had filled her to the brim seconds before, something that had kept her body from collapsing inward on its own emptiness. Every muscle in her body felt weak and drained. She couldn't stop shivering. Her heart raced a thousand miles a minute as if to make up for lost time, each beat jarring and reverberating through her entire body like an echo chamber.

The emotions that she had neither the time nor the energy to feel before—apprehension, bewilderment, fear—came crashing down around her limp form.

What just happened?

Without the energy to so much as gasp for air, she lay there, trying to process what she had just felt, what had just transpired, until she heard something.

A shuffle. A creak. The cracking and popping of bones long unused.

And it was coming from the examination table.

She would have scrambled away had she the strength. The table towered above her, and she couldn't see what lay atop it, nor what was happening. She could only lie there in petrified terror as a groan gurgled upward and outward from the table.

Gods.

The shifting sounds came again. Another groan, this one less choked. And slowly, jerkily, as if it weighed a hundred more pounds than it actually did, the cadaver sat upright—head still hanging to one side, but atop a neck that no longer appeared broken.

Gods, no.

The body swung its head back and forth like a grotesque puppet. Its jaw hung slack, its eyes wide, blank, and unblinking. Dead, but alive. Its face began to contort—randomly, with chaotic spasms that conveyed no expression in particular. Indistinct sounds gurgled up from its throat. With each passing second, it moved a bit more, seeming more human, more alive, more aware of its surroundings as if it had never died in the first place—

And then it saw Nycosa.

Chapter 2

Six Months Later

What few honest folk remained in the town of Windfall always closed their shutters well before nightfall. They were well within reason to do so; existing on the edge of the negligent kingdom of Trivynte, the town had fallen by the wayside, with no inside industry or support from the king to keep it afloat. It attracted people who had nowhere else to go, who had things to hide, who didn't want to be bothered—or who had already lived there, but had no money to leave when things started to go south. It wasn't a traveler's town. Who would travel through Windfall when any of the other border towns would have done fine? A faint, yet perpetual, odor of sewage and sweat hung over the whole place like smog. The buildings slanted and leaned into each other—houses of wood and hand-packed brick, storefronts long since boarded up—and the shoddy patch jobs were barely enough to keep the walls standing. Even the streets were a hazard, packed with dips and divots and ankle-twisting holes.

It hadn't always been that way. The town had done well, once upon a time. It had been a thoroughfare for border-crossers and fishermen, seeking to take advantage of the permission they

had to fish on the plentiful coast of Redmynn, their neighboring kingdom. But then the king had taken his late father's throne and officially halted trade with Redmynn, and the border towns—Windfall in particular—had dried up. There was no money for maintenance or infrastructure, and so the apathetic king left the town to rot.

The chill of the night air seemed to bite deeper that night. The rain didn't help; it had been going for hours, a steady cold mist soaking the streets. Most of those who normally loitered after dark—the fences with their illegal goods, or the streetwalkers with no option but to sell their bodies—had been driven indoors, content to sacrifice a night's earnings to keep from falling ill from the cold. Stragglers still hung about here and there, usually in pairs or trios, but never alone.

The only person wandering the streets alone was Nycosa.

The grimy, crumbling streets of Windfall posed no challenge for her, even in the shadows. They were unfamiliar—she had never been there before—but she had a great deal of practice making her way through nighttime streets. It had become almost second nature to glance at the ground as she walked, to avoid splashing through the puddles left by the rain, to skirt loose cobblestones in the uneven roads—to make as little noise, and draw as little attention to herself, as possible.

She pulled her cloak tighter around herself. The cold still prickled at her cheeks and bit through the threadbare fabric. Windfall didn't have braziers lining the streets like other cities and towns she had passed through, and the sconces riveted to the buildings—houses, they looked like on that street—held torches that were dead and cold, snuffed out for the night. Up ahead, though, firelight flickered and glistened off the damp street. It drew her closer, inviting her with its warm orange light, before she even got close enough to see what it was.

The faint smell of cooked meat had seemed too good to be true, but as she neared she realized that the light was in fact coming from a serving counter. It still had its shutters open, a torch crackling and burning away on either side. A man worked with, his back turned to the dark street; he looked to be packing supplies away from the night, but Nycosa was willing to overlook that—driven primarily by her growling stomach.

“Finally,” she muttered, and approached the counter.

She hadn't made any distinct sound while approaching the window. When she slid two silver coins across the counter, the thin scrape of metal against wood seemed to reverberate in the small room beyond. The vendor jumped; it was almost funny seeing a man like him so easily spooked, all tattoos and muscle and sweat. She might have laughed if, like so many others she had accidentally startled, he brushed it off sheepishly and moved on. But strangely enough, he didn't. He remained tense, stiff even, muscles coiled up like a snake ready to strike.

“I'm closing,” he said. He didn't so much as turn around to face her. His voice was even, but Nycosa could see his chest heaving under the loose folds of his shirt.

“No, you're not,” she said, and placed a third silver on the counter.

He turned then—slowly, like he was afraid any sudden movements might cause her to lunge at him. In all her months of traveling, she had never seen a reaction like his, even from those she had inadvertently snuck up on in a similar manner. He seemed to study her far more intently than normal. She traced his eyes as they moved; he saw first, the three fingers perched on top of the three silvers, and then second, the cloaked woman to which they were attached, the dark wool nearly blending in with the darkening street behind. His gaze traveled up her arm and alighted on her face—the sallowness of her dark complexion, the swollen bags beneath her eyes, the dehydrated roughness of her lips.

“You look a sight,” he said after a moment of deliberation.

“I just woke up.”

“It’s nighttime.”

“I didn’t know this was judgment hour.” Nycosa withdrew her hand from the counter and crossed her arms beneath her cloak. “What are you serving?”

“Nothing. I’m closing.” The vendor cast a glance downward, behind the counter. When he looked back up, suspicion clouded his eyes, but there was something strange about it. She had seen suspicion before, in the expressions of those she had approached after dark for food, for water, even for directions. This was stronger. “Come back tomorrow.”

Before she could say anything, he reached over to where the left shutter hung, sagging from its rusted hinges, and swung it over the serving window. He went for the right shutter too, attempting to barricade himself for the night, but Nycosa planted her elbow down to block it before he could close it.

“Listen,” she said. “I’m starving. You’re the only place we saw on our way in that still has its torches burning, and I can *see* the leftovers there.” She pointed at the cutting board set on the counter behind him. Her stomach felt empty enough to float away, and she could see the day’s leftovers laid out there—not much, only about three skewers’ worth of mystery meat and seared vegetables, but it was more than she’d had all day. It could have been grilled rat for all she knew, but she didn’t care. Her mouth watered. “Let’s make something happen.”

The man stepped backward, eyeing Nycosa’s bent arm as if she would raise it to strike him. He opened his mouth, but the words seemed to die in his throat, and he craned his neck to look behind her. After a long moment he simply repeated, “We?”

“We?” she repeated.

“You said we.”

“Oh. Yeah.” She lifted her elbow, but immediately slammed her hand down in its place when she saw the vendor start for the shutter again. He winced at the sound. “I have a friend. Is that so hard to believe?”

“I don’t see any friend,” the vendor said. His eyes narrowed and flicked downward again; Nycosa would have bet three gold coins that he had a dagger stuck back there somewhere.

“Looks like you’re alone to me.”

“He’s not here right now,” she said, but couldn’t keep her lips from twitching upward in a snarl. “You’re nosy.”

“And you’re up to something,” the vendor retorted. “Comin’ around as night falls, keeping yourself hidden like that, all mysterious-like, with everything goin’ on.”

“Everything going on,” Nycosa repeated, and then shook her head. A dark coil of hair came loose from behind her ear and dangled in front of her eyes. “Look, I don’t care. I just need a few skewers.”

“You need to step away from my window, is what you need,” he said.

Nycosa pointed a stiff finger at her silvers, still sitting on the counter, and glared.

“Use your money somewhere else,” the vendor said, and leaned forward slightly. An expression of confusion crossed his face—slightly exaggerated, Nycosa would realize in hindsight, especially in light of his wariness before—as he squinted into the darkness. “I thought you said your friend wasn’t here.”

“I did,” she said.

“Looks to me like someone’s waiting for you there.” He pointed at something behind her and shrugged, the motion again more dramatized than it should have been. “That him?”

The anxiety that spiked through Nycosa—*no, no, he wouldn't be that stupid, he can't be out here*—completely smothered her capacity for rational thought. She whirled around, already sputtering, “Asif, I *told* you to wait in the—”

As soon as she looked away, the second shutter slammed shut behind her.

Nycosa stood there, the torches burning hot at her back and the sound of rattling hinges still ringing in her ears, as she took a moment to register that she was, in fact, alone. The only people she saw in the dim moonlight were a few strangers, regarding her warily from farther down the street; there was nobody nearby that the vendor could have possibly thought was in her company.

She might have believed him, might have thought that there was truly someone lurking there—whether or not it had really been Asif—had she not retroactively realized the man's suspicious behavior and sudden interest in her affairs. Even so, it took her a few moments more to realize that he had intentionally duped her, and that the mysterious person was nothing more than a ploy to get her to turn away from the window.

“Fucker,” she muttered, and then louder, “Give me back my silvers at least!”

The only reply was the jingle of coins behind the shutters, and then silence.

“Fine,” she muttered, jamming her hands into her trouser pockets and walking away. Her cloak fell open, but she didn't care about the rush of cool air. “Fine.”

The dark shadows from the alleyways seemed to bleed outward the farther she drew from the torchlight, almost consuming the moonlight glinting off of the slick cobblestones. The buildings on either side of the street were closed and lifeless, and the only people she saw out and about—milling about in small groups, never alone—drew closer together, whispering, as she passed.

The darkness, Nycosa was used to. But the people here were strange.

“Steal my silvers, why don’t you,” she said, kicking a small stone that she saw wedged in a crack on the road. Normally she wouldn’t have made a sound—and such a loud one at that, as the rock clattered across the ground before coming to rest in a fetid puddle—but she found herself following its path just so she could kick it again. “Didn’t need to eat anyway.”

She didn’t know what to make of it all. She was no stranger to wariness given the way she acted—her efforts to be inconspicuous were ironically condemning—but people didn’t usually assume that she was *dangerous*. The people in Windfall acted like prey, like she was the predator, when in reality she wanted nothing more than to get out as soon as she could and blend back into the shadows.

But she couldn’t. Not yet. She had something to do first.

The heart of the town had once been beautiful, paved in a large circle with elaborate patterns in the stonework and surrounded by two, even three-story buildings. Now, though, it was a graveyard. Grass grew tall from between the cracked flagstones. Some of the derelict buildings had collapsed inward, their occupants unable to pay to fix the wood beams as they rotted. Many others were boarded up, their owners having fled what they knew would become a hopeless town. They had been the smart ones, the ones with the foresight to get out before their money dried up along with the town’s livelihood and vitality.

It was to one of these boarded-up buildings that Nycosa made her way. The walls of the third story had crumbled, but the lower two stories still stood, a silent guardian of the town, looming over the ruins next to it. The front door was still nailed shut, and the windows were covered in boards; mold spots peppered the siding and splinters jutted out from the beams.

She headed for the left side of the building, but paused with a hand on the corner of the wall. She looked first left, then right, and upon determining that there was nobody within eyeshot she stepped into the darkness.

“Asif,” she hissed.

A hole had been smashed into the wall, likely by looters—not recently, judging from the settles rubble and the coat of rain-spattered dust upon it—and beyond it, inside, was blackness.

“Asif, she repeated into the hole, a bit louder. “Come on.”

She heard him moving before she actually saw him. A rustling sound came from the darkness, followed by a set of uneven footsteps and a lot grunt. If she squinted, she could see a silhouette through the dense shadows of the unlit interior, but not enough to distinguish any features.

Eventually, though, a man appeared, framed by the ragged hole. He wore a cloak heavier and longer than Nycosa’s, but he had allowed it to fall open around his body. His grime-smearred shirt hung loose and baggy around his torso, almost as if somebody had draped a sheet of linen about him without bothering to measure him. He might have looked unkempt and uncaring had it not been for his sleeves and right trouser leg; with meticulous care, he had tucked his sleeves into his gloves, and his trouser hem into his tightly-cuffed boot. Equally carefully, he had rolled up his left trouser leg to just above the knee, almost proudly brandishing a calf peppered with dozens of tiny scars.

With another grunt and a series of clumsy movements, he clambered out of the hole and landed with a thud next to her.

“What did you get?” he asked. His voice always sent shivers down Nycosa’s spine no matter how much she heard it, which was frequently given the six months they had known each

other; it was coarse, rattling, like sandpaper against sandpaper, or like he'd just come out of a month-long battle with influenza.

“Robbed,” she grumbled, jerking her head back the way she had come. “Come on. I’ll find something in the morning.”

Asif reached up and pushed his hood back slightly, enough to make eye contact. There were blood bruises under his eyes, pockets of dull russet, that had been there as long as they’d known each other, and showed no signs of fading. The eyes themselves were hauntingly dark.

“You still need dinner,” he said, concerned.

Nycosa waved a hand in the air as if to dispel his words, and without an actual reply she turned and walked to the mouth of the alley. Asif hung back, lingering at the very edge of the darkest shadows, waiting for the all-clear from his companion. She took a moment, performing a small ritual she had done dozens of times before—crouching down, peeking around the corner, looking both ways, then standing up and doing the same thing again. He waited, patient and silent, until she finished her check, and only moved to join her when she motioned him forward. Nothing need have been spoken. It was understood between the two of them that she was not to be interrupted.

It hadn’t always been like that. Six months before, when Nycosa would have rather slit her own throat than travel with Asif, their cooperation was clunky at best, rife with arguments and near-misses—many of them Nycosa’s fault, loath though she was to admit it. It was a partnership of necessity and nothing more; get Asif to a healer who could help him, and he would be out of her hair forever. He had expressed that it was the only thing that would even make him *think* about leaving her side, no matter how much she had tried—and failed—to give him the slip. He had never given her a choice.

Somewhere along the line, something had changed—gradually, to be sure, but it had still changed. The forced company had made her walls crumble. Perhaps she was sympathetic to his condition now. Perhaps they were even friends. But the fact remained that she would rather have never been put in his company in the first place.

Together, the two of them slipped out of the alley. They kept close to the buildings—far enough so they would not draw more undue suspicion by crouching inches from the walls, but close enough so that they were not blots of darkness, stark and obvious against the moon-soaked paving stones. It was imperative that they were seen as little as possible, and acknowledged even less. Nycosa could talk her way out of a situation if need be. Asif would arouse suspicion immediately by virtue of his voice alone.

Then again, she supposed, the people here were already abnormally suspicious, so it was dangerous either way.

The smell of rotting wood and mold seemed to cling to their cloaks even as they left the more decrepit buildings behind them. They moved slowly, carefully; Asif lingered a couple steps behind Nycosa to watch and see where she put her feet. He always followed her.

“Did you find him?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she said. “Got a little distracted by the food situation, but we’ll see when we go back.”

She heard a soft sigh from behind her, but the man didn’t offer an actual reply. She couldn’t blame him for his frustration. For months they had been at this, traveling from town to shady town in search of healers and clinicians with both skill and questionable ethics, but all that time had been met with disappointment and grating dead ends. Those who hadn’t turned them

away in fear and revulsion had turned them away in sympathy; they couldn't help Asif, couldn't repair the damage to his body. They couldn't even explain how he existed.

She hadn't told him that the healer in Windfall was her last lead. If this one didn't pan out, then her knowledge of under-the-table healers was exhausted, and he would have nowhere left to turn for help.

It better pan out, she thought, drawing her cloak tightly around herself. Goosebumps had risen on her arms again, though the chill had not grown any harsher.

"Shit," came Asif's voice suddenly, farther behind her than she expected. "That's a lot."

Nycosa turned on her heel to see that somehow, without her noticing, her companion had stopped walking about fifty feet back, and was staring at a wall. It was hard to tell from her angle, but as she backtracked—much to her frustration—she saw that it was some sort of bulletin board on the side of the building, with numerous papers nailed to it. Nothing abnormal there; lots of towns had a center and an announcement board. But the building to which it was affixed was also one of the few completely intact buildings in the circle, with a dim light burning behind closed, thin curtains.

"Let's go," she whispered as she neared. "I think somebody lives here."

Asif nodded at the board. "Did you see this?"

"No, and I don't care," she said. "We're in the open."

When she reached forward to tug at his cloak, he didn't move. His feet seemed rooted to the stones. As explanation, he simply pointed; the expression upon his shadowed face was unreadable.

All too ready to write it off as a mere distraction, Nycosa's complaint died in her throat when she actually looked at the papers tacked to the board. There were far more of them than her

cursory glance had revealed; the board seemed to glow white for all the fliers on it, even though it was beneath the shadows cast by the building's eaves. The empty space on the board was so limited that the papers had been layered, new ones nailed on top of older, more weathered ones.

And they all bore the word "MISSING" scrawled in huge capital letters at the top.

If only temporarily, Nycosa's paranoid desperation to keep Asif concealed was forgotten in the face of what stared back at them. She lifted a numb finger and counted, the digit drifting through the air as she tallied flier after flier, name after name, until she lost count at twenty-three. There could have easily been upwards of sixty.

"They're all for different people," Asif said quietly.

Nycosa blinked in surprise and looked closer. Sure enough, out of the names and descriptions on each poster, none of them repeated.

"Oh," she said.

That's not normal. That's...really not normal.

Suddenly, she understood why her presence had been regarded with such unusual suspicion. She understood why the vendor had acted like she was going to attack him. She understood why people muttered and shifted away from her when she passed, and why they avoided eye contact at all costs. They were being preyed upon, and prey could never trust strangers.

And they thought she and Asif were the predators.

Chapter 3

Nycosa knew that Asif was having trouble matching her brisk pace with his limp. It seemed to act up in damp weather; she could hear him splashing through the puddles she skirted, his uneven pace punctuated by the huffing and puffing of his breath. She might have felt bad had her mind not been so preoccupied. But the dozens of names on those dozens of missing posters lingered with her even though they had long since left the bulletin board behind, prickling at her skin, and she wanted nothing more than to never see the papers again.

Which was difficult, because Asif had not shut up about them.

“We’ve only got until midnight,” she said, her voice stiff. “Can you *please* focus?”

“Can I *focus*?” Asif’s voice was louder than Nycosa felt comfortable with, especially since they were currently navigating the residential back streets of the city. “On what? The six million missing people, or the fact that you don’t seem to care?”

“On finding Tabral,” she hissed.

She didn’t personally know the clinician that they were trying to find. Nobody did, really. He was just one of a web of names and locations that the impoverished of Trivynte shared with one another: healers willing to work for free, willing to work under the table, willing to work

with problems that would get the patient thrown in prison if revealed. With a king that viewed charity healers as criminal tax evaders, these secret practitioners were often the only choice for those who couldn't afford on-the-books healing. This loose union—whether they were vitality mages or non-mage alchemists and apothecaries—often owned clinics or shops of their own during the day, but for a few hours each night opened their doors to those who needed them.

They had a symbol that they all shared, their only common connection. A strikethrough, they called it—a vertical line with another slanted line crossing through its midpoint. They carved it into doorways and windowsills and any place that it might be seen by those who were looking for it, but go unnoticed by those who didn't know what to look for.

Nycosa could have sworn that she'd seen the symbol earlier that evening; her family had once been one of many who couldn't afford medicine or healing, and had consequently memorized the strikethrough network. But in her desperation to get away from the bulletin board in the center of town, she'd gone the wrong way, and couldn't find her way back to the right street.

She couldn't get the names out of her head. She wondered how many of them were related to those who still stood out on the streets, watching her with fear and suspicion scrawled across their faces. Even now, as the two of them walked the narrow back streets with barely a soul still out and about, she could feel their stares lingering hot against the back of her head.

So many missing people...

“It's not normal,” Asif said in between puffs. He hadn't let the matter go since they'd seen it. “You know that—you know that's not normal.”

“It's none of our business,” she returned. “That many of them, they're probably dead.”

“Oh, that's nice of you. I'm sure their families *love* that way of looking at it.”

Nycosa didn't know what snapped in her. The rage came out of nowhere, bubbling up within her and overflowing in seconds. She wheeled around to face Asif, who very clearly hadn't expected her to stop walking; he nearly collided with her, and almost tripped over his own feet avoiding the impact.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" she hissed. "I don't know them. I don't know their families. It's none of my business."

"It's basic human decency, first of all," Asif said, taken aback—a comment to which Nycosa scoffed, but he ignored it. "You really don't care?"

"It's not about caring and you know it." Nycosa realized that her voice was getting louder, and she instinctively cast a glance around her to see if anyone was nearby. "We're out of here by tomorrow morning. Unless you'd rather linger and, I don't know, risk getting caught."

Asif opened his mouth, revealing a single missing canine, before closing it and pursing his lips together. Myriad emotions flickered across his shadowed face—concern, anger, anxiety. He too looked around, drawing his cloak more tightly about his body.

"Yeah. That's what I thought." Nycosa looked around again, though they had both been reduced to whispers once again. She saw nobody. "We're here for you, in case you forgot. If you suddenly want to throw it all away for something you have no stake in, why are we even here?"

"It's not that," Asif said, and despite his imposing voice he suddenly seemed very small. Like a child. It was all too easy for Nycosa to forget that he was, at twenty, just a year younger than herself. "I just can't...tell myself that it's okay to walk away from people who need help." And, after a pause, "You didn't walk away from me."

"You didn't *let* me," Nycosa said, and turned around. "I'm done talking about this. We need to find Tabral."

“Nycosa.”

Nycosa froze even before she felt his hand clamp down on her shoulder. Asif rarely said her name, and there was something about the way it sounded in his mouth that gave her pause. Like he was remembering something.

“I know you care,” he said, and pulled her back around to face him. She could just barely see his eyes under the hood. “Stop acting like these people are nothing to you.”

Nycosa jerked out of his grip and wheeled around. This time, he didn’t try to stop her, but remained stationary for a moment before she heard his footsteps begin to pad after her again.

He’s right.

They weren’t nothing to her. They hit closer to home than she would have liked to admit—both those who had gone missing, and those loved ones who remained, completely unknowing of their loved ones’ fates.

What am I going to do?

She couldn’t help it. No matter how hard she tried to focus on the world before her—on the damp roads, on the shadows, on where she was putting her feet—she found her thoughts drifting back almost six months, to the day when she had put her own family in the same state of unknowing.

“What are you going to do?” Asif asked.

Nycosa didn’t answer. She couldn’t. She hadn’t expected her mother to notice so soon, or to spread the word so openly. The only thing she could do for a long moment was shrink back into her cloak, pulling the folds of her hood tight around her face until she could barely see out.

From the board in front of them, a missing persons poster glared out, with a crude sketch of her own face and her name printed in hasty letters below it.

The memory was eerily familiar, though it faded in and out. It had never sat well with her, the choice she had made that day, and seeing the bulletin board in Windfall had dredged that moment back up. Six months' difference, as well as half a continent, had done little to dilute the pain of reliving it.

Her foot landed in the edge of a puddle. Though the ensuing splash was small and quiet, she still winced at the sudden sound, and how it seemed to echo throughout the streets.

Of course it had been her mother who was behind it. Her father had never been so overbearing, so hypervigilant, not only to commission a missing persons poster but to have it spread across kingdom lines within days of hearing of her daughter's disappearance.

But the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Her mother had always watched her like a hawk, up until the day she left for university.

"You can't just ignore this." Asif placed a hand on her shoulder, but withdrew when she flinched as if she'd been struck.

"I..." She swallowed. "I don't know what..."

A moment of thick silence passed between them. Her shoulders began to hitch, but she wasn't crying; her eyes were dry, and her head throbbed with dehydration. So many thoughts sprinted through her head, too fast to be deciphered, that it seemed blank and unresponsive.

She didn't know what to do. Every bone in her body screamed to go, to run, to see Tabral and then get the hell away from Windfall. But the posters—though they bore only names, no faces or eyes with which to see—wouldn't stop staring at her in her own mind. You are one of us, they seemed to say. You are one of us, and you leave anyway?

Of course, she had *chosen* to run away. She highly doubted they had chosen the same.

"You can't run away from this," Asif said eventually. His voice was hesitant, testing the waters, but Nycosa still couldn't stand it. It made her skin crawl. "It won't go away."

"You're the reason I have to run in the first place." Bitterness dripped from her voice, but it was diluted. Hoarse. Quiet. "This is your fault."

A breeze whistled between the buildings, worming its way into the gaps of Nycosa's cloak as she walked. She shivered.

None of the numerous posters in Windfall had been hers. How could they have been, so long after Nycosa had run away? But they might as well have been, for all they reminded her of the day she first saw her own.

"But your family," Asif protested. "They'd want to—"

"I can't tell them," she cut across. "They can't know what happened. They can't know that you exist."

She could tell that the words had hurt him even though she couldn't see him. The words that she didn't say would have hurt him even more; he knew, anyways. They both did.

Because if they do, we could both be killed.

The silence from beside her was palpable, even though the thoughts inside her own head deafened her. The only thing she could focus on was her own face, framed by wild coils of black hair that sprang out in every direction—the artist had taken some liberties with its volume—staring back at her from the crisp paper. The notice had been posted recently, maybe even that day; it wasn't weathered and tattered like the ones that had been there longer, untouched.

She wondered briefly what they all looked like, the dozens of faceless names tacked to the bulletin board. But she couldn't linger on the thought for more than a moment without feeling nauseous. The distance she put between herself and the board didn't seem to matter. They were always there.

Her mother's face flashed through her mind, twisted with fear and concern. She had no idea how her mother could have possibly found out so quickly that she had left, only that it wasn't surprising in the least that she had. She had almost never taken her eyes off Nycosa for all the years of her childhood. Nycosa had been foolish, she supposed, to presume that going to the university in Va'Skailte would allow her a life outside of her mother's supervision; of course she would have established a contact at the school without her daughter's knowledge, just to "keep an eye on her," and that she would be notified at the slightest abnormality. It was always just to "keep an eye on her." It had been a nightmare to even convince her that it was a good idea for her to go to the university and leave Trivynte entirely.

And here she was now, forced to throw all those efforts away because Asif refused to leave her side and let her live as if she hadn't done something terrible.

She gritted her teeth. She didn't know where she was going anymore; she couldn't focus, her thoughts torn between the memories clouding her vision and the dark road underfoot. It was getting harder to breathe, like the souls of the missing people—because she doubted they were still alive—were crowding around her and pressing her chest inward with cold, dead palms.

Nycosa didn't want to think about what it would do to her mother, not knowing where her daughter was, or if she was even alive—or worse, if she ever found out what her daughter had done.

"They can't know," she repeated, barely whispering. "I can't go back."

Biting her lip, she reached out and tore the poster down, crumpling her own face into a ball beneath her cloak.

"Don't turn around," Asif whispered.

Nycosa might not have heard him, her memory so vivid that it seemed to swallow reality, had it not been for the low urgency in his tone. It cleaved to the center of her mind like an axe, sudden and irrational fear bleeding out from where it struck.

Don't turn around?

Instinct took hold of her with a cold hand, and she turned around anyway.

For a second, she saw what might have been a silhouette a hundred feet behind them before it vanished into the shadows of an alley.

Shit.

Her heart seized up. Panic enveloped her body, trapping her movements within its iron influence. She turned back around quickly—too quickly—and continued walking. Her

movements were too jerky and overcontrolled to pass as casual. She kept her gaze fixed rigidly ahead anyway, as if she could somehow retract the fact that she had noticed their pursuer.

It might have been more than one someone, for the instant she had seen it. She didn't dare turn around to look again. She felt as if they would be right behind her if she did, breathing down her neck and tiptoeing in her footsteps with a dagger at her back. She might have been able to convince herself that it was a harmless misunderstanding, that the silhouette was just a lurking fence or a streetwalker.

But fences and streetwalkers didn't hide like that. Not so quickly.

"We might be in for it," she said, voice just above a whisper. Any louder, and the tremor would have come through.

"Maybe if you hadn't been so obvious about it," Asif muttered, but his annoyance very poorly masked his own unease.

"Shut up," she whispered.

She made as if to walk straight past the next alley, but ducked into it at the last moment, grabbing a fistful of Asif's cloak and dragging him in after her. He nearly tripped over himself with the sudden offset.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I don't know." Nycosa's reply was clipped. She started walking faster, her strides stiff and long. "Hopefully they won't, either."

The alley let out onto another parallel street. By the time Nycosa thought to stop and check if the coast was clear, her feet had already carried her past the mouth of the alley into plain view. She might have cared any other day. As it was, all thought of caution was replaced by gnawing, biting anxiety, and the burning need to sink back into anonymity. Every other breath

was accompanied by a glance over her shoulder. Her fists clenched and unclenched again and again under her cloak.

One of the shadows to their left moved.

“Shit,” Nycosa whispered, and yanked Asif around the next corner they came to. This time he did trip, colliding with a wall with a wet slapping sound. He came away smeared with damp grime.

“Watch it!” he hissed.

Before he could even regain his balance, Nycosa took hold of his wrist and pulled him into motion again. Her throat convulsed and tightened, trapping any words she might have said deep within her chest.

We've been found out.

It was all she could do not to break into a dead sprint.

This is it.

Every time she thought that they might be safe—that they might have finally ducked into enough shadows, taken enough turns—she heard something. An errant footstep, a splash of water, a scraping of cloth against wood and brick. One at a time, but in all directions. She couldn't track it.

What if they kill us?

A ragged breath billowed out from the darkness not thirty feet behind them.

Nycosa didn't look behind her anymore. She ran. Asif's wrist slipped from her grasp, but she could still hear his footsteps pounding along just behind her. She didn't dare stop—not when her panic swelled up to swallow her whole, not when her air-starved chest burned like lava, not when her heartbeat threatened to choke her. The buildings blurred together; there were so many,

the crumbling alleys between them like black veins, or a spiderweb that the two of them were frantically, blindly weaving.

And then she tripped.

She had just swung around a corner; she had no way of noticing the upward-jutting stone until her boot had already struck it. Vibrations skittered up her bones as her own momentum threw her bodily to the ground. She hit face-first, hard, and skidded when she did; she could feel the rough paving grating the skin away from her forehead and nose, embedding small shards of rock in the raw flesh beneath.

The pain was immediate; she was barely cognizant enough to recognize the sensation of someone tripping over her shin, and a familiar grunt as Asif hit the ground next to her. Her vision went dark. Explosions of colorful pain burst against the black background, the shrapnel ricocheting throughout her body—from her pulsing head to her stinging palms to her aching chest.

Even through the pain, she registered the sound of running footsteps in the sudden absence of her own.

The shock of the impact had left her stunned; adrenaline sent every nerve of her body haywire, but she could barely control her limbs to respond, to get up, to scramble away from whoever or whatever was so horrifically close. Her legs had dissolved to throbbing, burning putty. Her arms refused to cooperate. The footsteps grew louder.

She had only just managed to roll over when someone hurtled around the corner.

Whoever it was threw their entire weight on top of her before she could so much as open her eyes, knocking every last bit of air from her lungs. Her head had knocked against the stone paving with the impact; the pain came late this time, smothered by that which was already

present. She couldn't distinguish the flurry of movement atop her, only that it was heavy and bony and it *hurt*; all she could make sense of was the weight crushing her chest, a hand gripping her neck, and something cold against her cheek.

"Tell me where they are," came a breathless voice from above her, a woman's voice, "and I won't stab you."

Nycosa opened her mouth, but all that came out was a choked and stifled gasp for air. The fingers around her throat were iron. Forcing her eyes open took more concentration than it ever had before. When she managed it, she could barely see; everything was fuzzy and patchy, and blood had begun to drip into her eyes from her forehead.

"You," the person snapped. "Tell me, or she dies."

Just before the edge of her vision, Nycosa could see Asif start. He had stood; when had he stood? His arm hung suspended in midair like a string puppet, frozen mid-lunge. In his face shone the pure, unmitigated fear of somebody caught off-guard, and trapped in a moment of indecision.

The cold thing bit into Nycosa's cheek, followed by the warmth of blood, and with a strangled cry of pain she realized it was a knife.

"Answer!" the woman cried. A frenzied edge crept into her tone. Her grip kept shifting and adjusting. Even the blade seemed to shake against Nycosa's skin. "I swear she'll get it!"

"We don't know what you're talking about," Asif said, the words riding the tail of a trembling breath. "Let her go."

The woman's reaction to the sound of his unearthly voice was obvious and unmitigated. She shrank back, drawing a sharp breath, and after the barest moment of hesitation her hold on

Nycosa's throat tightened—a noose of flesh and bone. What little breath she could draw before was cut off.

“You're lying,” she hissed, her voice taut enough to snap. “I know you took them.”

Asif took a step forward; the dagger dipped back into Nycosa's cheek, and she cried out in pain.

“You're hurting her!” he said. “Let her go!”

Nycosa had been too dazed and terrified to raise her hands to fight back—one wrong move and the slice on her cheek would turn into a gash—but by the time she finally regained control over her limbs, she was too weak to do anything. Her windpipe ached under the breaking pressure. The dark edges of her vision crept inward.

“You're going to kill her!”

Suddenly, the weight vanished from atop her.

With a great rattling gasp she rolled over, coughing and spluttering and clutching at her bruised neck. The sudden return of oxygen was overwhelming, and seemed to scratch at the sides of her throat as it went in. Vaguely, she registered the sounds of a struggle nearby, could feel the vibrations through the ground, but she was blind—completely dominated by the primal need for air, and rendered sightless by blood.

It wasn't the sound of grunts and yelps that jerked her out of her daze. It wasn't the dull thuds of punches landing, wasn't the rattle of loose cobblestones under moving bodies. It was the distinct sound of ripping fabric that rose above the haze of sound—and without even looking, Nycosa knew.

No.

She managed to wipe the worst of the blood from her eyes in time to see the woman scramble backward away from Asif, panic scrawled across her face. The man sat stunned on the ground, looking dumbly down at his own shirt—which, torn straight down the middle, hung wide open to reveal the gaping, hollowed cavern of his chest beneath.

Gods, no.

“You’re...” The woman swallowed. All traces of her bravery, her ferocity, had dissipated. Terror squatted on her features. Blonde strands of hair had come loose from her long braid in the scuffle, sticking out every which way as if to emphasize her frenzy. “Dead...you’re dead...”

Nausea swept into Nycosa’s gut.

She knows.

She could see the exact moment when the woman connected the dots. Her already unhinged expression twisted with renewed, intensified horror, and she turned to Nycosa.

“Then *you*,” she spat, and Nycosa couldn’t find the words to stop her. “Y-you’re with him.”

She staggered to her feet and lifted her dagger with shaking hands, brandishing it before her with both hands like a broadsword. The blood had drained from her concave cheeks.

“You’re a necromancer!”

Nycosa felt like her body had grown roots. The woman’s attention was fixated solely on her now, and she couldn’t escape it; Asif was all but forgotten. It burned to see the disgust in her eyes.

“What did you do with my parents?” she asked, voice trembling. The point of the weapon shook back and forth in her unsure hands. For all the surety with which she had held it to Nycosa’s face before, she seemed like a child now.

“I didn’t—” Nycosa tried, her voice rasping past her lips, but the woman had already taken a step toward the mouth of the alley. Then another. Her footsteps echoed between the narrow walls like an executioner’s axe against the block.

She’s going to run.

“*What did you do with my parents?*” she cried, her voice swelling to a wail.

We can’t let her run.

Nycosa threw her arm out, fueled entirely by sheer panic and instinct, just as the woman began to run. Her hand latched around the woman’s ankle; she couldn’t keep her grip, but it was enough to trip her and send her sprawling onto the pavement. The knife went flying. The woman cried out. But before the sound had even finished passing her lips, before she had even finished rolling over, Asif was on top of her, the fingers of both hands wrapped around her neck.

The terror embedded in the woman’s gurgling cry was nothing short of chilling. It was pure, unadulterated fear—because of *them*.

Nycosa, spent, didn’t move. There was no need. The woman fought back, but her movements were erratic and clumsy; she swung at his head, yanked at his hands, but he was resolute. His face had turned to stone.

She closed her eyes. She didn’t want to watch as the woman’s flailing lessened and weakened beneath his suffocating grip. Hearing the noise fade was enough.

When she opened them, Asif was looking straight at her. The silence was suffocating, awash in the dread of exposure. Everything that they couldn’t say passed through their eye contact—all the fear, unease, and uncertainty that came with having their secret finally stripped bare. After six months of near-misses and hard-won evasions, it had all crumbled with the woman who lay limp before them. She could expose them. She could call for their deaths.

“She’s alive,” Asif said, voice dark, in response to the question in her gaze. He stood and walked over to Nycosa with an outstretched hand.

She took it, and he pulled her to her feet. Her wobbling legs could barely support her weight, but the strength of his grip on her made up for the weakness of her own. It was strange; she had never realized that such strength could accompany arms of just bone.

“What,” she said, sucking in a painful breath before continuing, “the *fuck*,” and then another breath, “was that about?”

Chapter 4

Six Months Ago

The corpse was trying to speak.

Nycosa could only watch as its mouth worked, opening and closing over and over again as if on rusty hinges. It didn't matter how desperately she wanted to get up and run, to lock the door to the morgue behind her and put as much distance between it and herself as she could. She was frozen to the spot—less so from exhaustion now and more from panic, the adrenaline had seen to that.

It made a sound. It might have been a word, might have been another grunt. Whatever it was, it oozed up from deep in its chest, grating and rasping as if the inside of its throat had been cut to ribbons.

The notion of finding her instructor flitted across Nycosa's mind, as fleeting as only a panicked thought could be, but she knew she didn't have the strength. And even if she *could* somehow haul herself to her feet, out of the morgue, and up three flights of stairs to her

instructor's office, what would happen then? He would let her off with a slap on the wrist? For something like this?

No. She was alone.

"You," the corpse rasped.

Its voice was barely human, almost indistinguishable from a mangled groan. The word was barely coherent. Nycosa swallowed. It hadn't stopped looking at her, but now it actually seemed to *see* her. There was something about its eyes that seemed less blank than before.

"You," it repeated, and leaned out to her.

Nycosa shrank back. A shiver rattled her spine; prickling, icy cold crept across her exposed skin.

The corpse leaned too far. With the rough sliding of wood against skin it fell, crumpling to the floor in an ungraceful heap of limbs and bone not a foot away from Nycosa. She yelped and scrambled backward until her elbows gave out beneath her. Nausea twirled together with her fear, tying her stomach into knots and shoving it upward into her constricting chest. The very edges of reality seemed to blur as her head swam, drifted, grew faint.

"Hell."

She couldn't breathe.

It lifted its head and reached out to her with a twitching, skeletal hand. The beginnings of an expression flickered across its half-paralyzed face. Fear.

"Hell," it repeated, and then, more slowly, dragging out the single syllable, "Hell-m."

It seemed to be distracted by its own hand for a moment. The left was nearly entirely eaten to the bone, with only a few chunks and sinews connecting the segments—but somehow, there were joints made solely of bone that still held together and moved on command. It stared at

the place where its ring finger should have been. Then it twisted its wrist and forearm. Clenched its finger bones into a fist. Studied itself.

When it looked back at Nycosa, who was still struggling to breathe, the fear was much more pronounced.

“Help,” it said.

It was close, still. Too close. With all the strength she had, Nycosa used the rim of the empty table above her to pull herself into a sitting position. Her head spun and her breath grew shorter with the lost energy, but nothing gave way this time. It watched her, following her every movement with its frighteningly alive eyes.

He was dead. He was dead and now he's alive.

It was a he, she knew that, but he had been *dead*. Inanimate. Lifeless. For it—him—to suddenly jerk to life was to sacrifice the humanity he had retained even in death, and to become something entirely other. For him to move as if pulled by invisible strings, for him to control bones that he most certainly should not have been able to control, for him to even exist with the great gaping hole in his torso was entirely impossible. And yet there he was.

Was this...me?

She couldn't see any other option. Nothing had happened until she had touched him, but it should have been impossible. *Was* impossible. She hadn't *done* anything. She had just touched him. That was it.

I did this?

Her hands dropped to her lap, and her eyes in turn dropped to her hands—the first time she had looked away from the corpse. Her own fingers seemed foreign now, almost detached from the rest of her, like they would not move again if she bade them to.

I...

She started shaking. Full-body shaking. The tremors began somewhere in her shoulders and quickly spread to the rest of her, consuming her body in violent tremors. Her breath came quicker. Shallower. Her heart beat a rapid staccato.

Necromancy?

It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. It took immense control over the healing arts, mastery over the tightly-entwined energies of life and death, for a vitality mage to even *begin* to practice necromancy—not to mention how dedicated one had to be to breaking one of the most staunch taboos of any school of magic. To reanimate a corpse as mangled as this, and for it to possess the ability of independent movement, speech, and maybe even thought, was unheard of—even for a master necromancer, one who had spent their life in seclusion practicing the forbidden arts. It wasn't just illegal. It wasn't just hard. It was nigh impossible.

And Nycosa was no master. She was barely even a mage.

“Are.”

Nycosa flinched. The corpse had moved slightly without her noticing; it—he—was a few inches closer, one hand half-outstretched toward her and lying on the floor. His dark eyes pierced her.

“You,” he said. The word didn't sound quite right, and he seemed to realize this judging by the way his brow twitched upon saying it. It might have been a frown.

She stared at his hand. The fingers kept twitching and half-closing into a fist.

“Neck,” he said. “Row.”

Before he even said the last two syllables—he had to pause and work his jaw for a moment—Nycosa knew.

Are you a necromancer?

“No,” she whispered. Her words felt weak in her mouth. “I’m not.”

Arduously slowly, he rolled over onto his side. His gaze dropped to his own torso; his intact hand lifted to his chest cavity, and after a moment of hesitation his fingers quested inside. He was tentative at first, but then more confidently, poking and prodding at the interior of his own body, exploring the ragged edges of the hole. Bile rose in Nycosa’s throat.

“This can’t be happening,” she breathed. Her arms snaked around herself. “Gods...”

The corpse reached out for her, the movement much more controlled this time, and she flinched. That time, when he saw the reaction, he withdrew his hand.

She hadn’t expected that. He seemed to be waiting for her—and, though the fear and confusion was still evident etched in the lines of his face, he looked almost expectant.

Anticipatory. Far calmer than Nycosa was.

“How?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

I’m talking to him. I’m talking to him?

“I don’t know,” she repeated—pitiful, scared. “I’m not a necromancer.” And then again, as if she hadn’t been audible the first time, “I’m not a necromancer.”

But there the corpse was nonetheless, watching her, and her words didn’t made him lay back down and die again.

Chapter 5

Present Day

If Nycosa knew one thing about Asif and one thing only, it was that he had a crippling fear of death.

From the moment he had found his footing in the morgue—it took Nycosa longer to regain her strength, with her inexplicable weakness—he had refused to leave her side. She had tried running, tried hiding, but on unsteady footing neither of them could get very far. But he had kept shuffling after her in plain view, calling for her to slow down, begging for her to listen.

“I don’t want to die again,” he had kept saying, over and over again. “You can keep me from dying again.”

Discovery would have meant expulsion for sure. Almost certainly the death penalty if she was tried by the king afterwards. So lest he reveal both of them—and, by proxy, what Nycosa had just done—with his clumsy movements and shameless cries, she had no choice but to comply.

She had never been sure how much merit there was to that, the notion that she could save him from death again. In theory it was possible, but so far as she knew—which wasn't very far, given how little thought she had ever devoted to necromancy—it had never successfully been attempted. Either way, her presence was the only way to shut Asif up and conceal him, which was a desperate necessity in order to save both of their asses. He had always seemed perfectly coherent and reasonable otherwise; it was just that singular matter on which he always refused to budge.

It led to arguments. Frequent arguments, as it would happen. Forced company would have done that to anybody. Even after Nycosa stopped viewing him as the villain, the one who had forced this upon her—instead being forced to accept the reality that neither of them knew what had happened, and that their fates were intertwined—they still bickered, still argued, still fought.

“I didn't see you offering any suggestions!” Asif said.

“I'm sorry, I was too busy being choked to death!”

It was a hissed argument, the words passing between them like venom spat from snakes. Too loud, and they would alert somebody else to their presence, and the problem would begin anew. It was a problem they had encountered time and time again.

“We had to get her!” Asif snapped. “She would have told somebody if we just ran!”

Nycosa gritted her teeth. “But if we ran, we could have been a mile away by now!”

“We don't even know why she wanted us!”

“All the more reason to get the hell away!”

Their captive lay a few feet away, still unconscious. Her spindly wrists were bound behind her back with one strip of cloth torn from the bottom of Nycosa's cloak, and another strip

gagged her. She had been dumped there in the corner rather unceremoniously, and would undoubtedly have more than a few cramps and aches when she woke up.

As much as Nycosa didn't want to admit it, Asif was right. They *could* have left the woman's unconscious body sprawled in the alley and booked it out of Windfall, but she would have woken up eventually. The only way that they could ensure that she didn't spill their secret was to do exactly what Asif had chosen to do in the heat of the moment, and then drag her into a nearby abandoned house to gather their thoughts. It was kidnap under a different name. But she preferred not to think of that.

However, Asif's plan did not include the crucial detail of what to do *after* they had kidnapped her, so they were stuck in their current hidey-hole of a building for the time being.

It wasn't a terrible building, to be fair. It had been a house once, before it was abandoned and subsequently raided. Most of the furniture was gone, leaving only scuffs on the wood floor on their place, but an old threadbare rug still remained in the center of what had been the living room, as well as a couple rickety chairs that might have once been paired with a dining table. The only light in the room came from the moon shining in through the front window, which they had reluctantly opened after realizing that they could see absolutely nothing otherwise.

"We can't very well drag her along with us everywhere we go, can we?" Nycosa pointed at her unconscious body. "What do you plan to do when she wakes up?"

"Talk to her," Asif said.

"Oh, great plan, we let *you* do the talking." She threw her hands up in the air. "That always works, with the way you sound."

"That's unnecessary—"

“But it’s true!” A jolt of pain pierced her already-aching head at the outburst, and she winced. “Maybe if you could actually pass as human we wouldn’t have to stalk around at night all the time!”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. She couldn’t see the nuances of his expression, but the silence from that side of the room was enough to tell her that it had stung.

With a groan, she dropped down into the other chair. The wood squeaked and complained under her weight. Her head fell into her hands.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

Asif still didn’t say anything. It wasn’t like he had *forgotten* how he appeared; it had been the entire reason for their quest across the continent, searching for healers who might have enough of a grasp on necromancy to perhaps graft some skin onto him, or repair his voice, or anything that might have allowed him to pass as more human. Even if Nycosa had known how to accomplish such a thing, she wouldn’t have wanted to try; she was scared to even mess with her own vitality magic after that night in the morgue, let alone anything with the actual body she had literally raised from the dead.

“Sorry,” she repeated, quieter this time.

He sighed and shifted. The joints of his chair squeaked. “If I could, I would. You know that.”

“I do,” she said. She didn’t try to hide the shame that edged into her tone. “I just wish...”

She didn’t know what she meant to say, what she actually wished. Did she wish for him to look normal, without missing flesh or organs to worry about—to pass as fully human? Did she wish that she had been able to make him so? Did she wish that none of this had ever happened?

Instead, she just let the sentence trail off into silence, and hoped he would understand what she could not.

“It’s not easy, Nycosa,” he said. “Sometimes you seem to think that I’m used to this.”

She shrugged. “You seemed to take it very well when you...woke up.”

There was a beat of silence. She could feel the tension between them—not necessarily angry or agitated, but rather hesitant. Nervous. They had made it a point to avoid addressing the elephant in the room; the choice had initially been for Nycosa’s benefit, but it had never actually crossed her mind that Asif, who had so quickly accepted the missing flesh from his own body, might have wanted to avoid discussing it as well.

“Waking up to see a dead body isn’t so surprising,” he said eventually, “when you remember dying.”

Nycosa pulled up short. She hadn’t known that either.

“I didn’t understand why all *this*—” And here he gestured at all of himself, his gloves grey with moonlight, “—looked the, um, the way that it did, but I figured...”

He stopped then—took a breath, sighed, swallowed.

“Just because I don’t panic doesn’t mean I’m fine,” he said. “You try to process something like that without going into a little shock.”

She shifted in her chair, taking solace in the sound of fabric against wood; the silence in between his sentences was overbearing.

“I still haven’t processed it,” she said, her voice soft.

She didn’t have to explain. It was painful knowledge for both of them—the mage, and the one she had resurrected—that to that day, they still had no answers or insight as to what had happened, or how it had been possible. Even then Nycosa still half-expected to wake up one day

to be met with the ceiling of her campus lodging, the whole impossible affair with Asif and the morgue having been nothing more than a dream, quickly forgotten.

It was childish—and worse, she still wanted it.

“I understand,” he said, and unspoken but understood, *that you’re scared*.

He was right, of course, and Nycosa knew it, though such a truth had never passed audibly between them. It was simply understood that she wanted nothing to do with what she had been thrust into, and given the choice she would have forfeited whatever ability within her had breathed life back into Asif’s corpse.

“I understand,” he repeated. “But can you understand that you’re not the one with the missing...” He gestured to himself and made a face. “...everything?”

A shuffling noise from the corner of the room cut Nycosa off before she could voice her reply. She turned—just barely faster than Asif did—to see their captive staring back at them with wide eyes. She wasn’t bleary-eyed, just waking up; she had frozen very deliberately at the sound she had produced, and after a moment of processing her position Nycosa realized that she had been trying to wiggle free of her bindings—for a while, apparently, judging by how alert and aware she looked.

“Great,” Nycosa grumbled, turning in the chair to face the woman more directly. “How long have *you* been awake?”

The woman growled from behind her gag. The patch of moonlight illuminating her waist up was enough for Nycosa to distinguish her glare.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “You did this to yourself.”

She didn’t notice Asif standing up until the woman’s expression changed. None of the bite left her eyes, but they widened in fear, and she shrank back against the wall.

“What are you doing?” Nycosa asked as Asif moved forward—one step, then another, painfully slowly.

“Taking off her gag.”

“Why, so she can scream for help?”

“She won’t,” Asif said, and shot a glare in her direction. It was brief, but sharp, and when he spoke again the words carried a heavy weight with them. “Will you?”

Their reply was nothing but deafening silence.

“She won’t,” he repeated, more confident this time. “She’d better not.”

He took another step, and the woman pulled her legs to her chest. Something mumbled and garbled leaked out of the gag. She shook her head; Nycosa could hear the *swish-swish* of her ponytail rubbing against the wall, quick and repetitive. Panicked.

“Will you calm down?” Nycosa snapped. “He’s not going to hurt you.”

“We just want to talk,” he said. His voice wasn’t very placating by nature, but he did his best to make it seem so, raising its pitch and lowering its volume. “We can come to an arrangement.”

With nowhere else to retreat, the woman remained a statue as Asif reached her. He stood as far from her as he possibly could while still being able to reach the knot of her gag; he untied it quickly and stepped away, allowing her to spit it out of her mouth by herself.

“Fuck you,” she spat before the cloth had hit the floor. Her voice was hoarser than it had been before. “Necromancer.”

The word left her mouth like an arrow, and Nycosa flinched as if she had been struck. The fear in the woman’s voice did nothing to mask the fury burning just beside it.

“Shut your mouth,” she snapped back. “Asif, gag her again.”

“Don’t order me around,” he said, not even looking at Nycosa. His attention remained fixed on the woman. “Listen, please. We aren’t going to hurt you.”

The woman made a strange gurgling sound, twisted up her mouth, and then spat in Asif’s direction. It landed at his feet, a foamy glob glistening in the moonlight, and he stared at it for a good ten seconds.

“We aren’t going to hurt you,” he repeated. His voice had gone brittle, stretched thin and ready to snap. “We need to talk before we do anything from here out.”

“Dead men don’t talk,” the woman said, a snarl perched on her face. Though her voice still trembled, fire burned in her eyes, and her hatred overcame her fear. “You should be in the ground.”

"Well, I'm not in the ground." He folded his arms. The building tension exuding from him was palpable in the musty air. "Thanks for almost putting my friend there, though."

Nycosa's hand drifted up to her throat, even though she knew he wasn't looking at her. She could feel the bruises there as she breathed, thick and throbbing.

"She deserves it," the woman said. "Creating you."

Fury surged through Nycosa, both on her own behalf and on Asif's, but before she could rise from her chair and walk over to smack the woman—as she very much wanted to do—Asif spoke.

"How about this," he said, and pulled off his left glove. The woman recoiled when she saw his hand, little more than bone segments connected by nothing more than magic and a few thin sinews of flesh. He closed it into a fist with the dull clacking of bone against bone. "Instead of gagging you again, I shove this in your mouth and you can try to talk around it."

Nycosa blinked. Her jaw went slack. Never, not once in the six months that they had traveled together, had she heard him speak like that. Granted, he spoke only to her, but it seemed impossible to conceive that a man like Asif could speak like *that*. The aggression fit him ill, like a skin that he had stolen from a man much less empathetic than he.

“Now,” he said. His hand dropped to his side, but the glove remained clenched in his other fist. It seemed to Nycosa that he was keeping it in the moonlight on purpose. “Maybe you should *listen* to us this time when we say that we have no idea what you were talking about.”

The woman swallowed. She seemed to turn in on herself; though her face was still twisted with hatred, Nycosa could see fear in the smallness of her posture.

“We’re at an impasse here,” Asif said. “We mean no harm to anyone here, not even you—”

Her lips pulled upward, revealing her teeth in an animalistic snarl.

“Not even you,” he emphasized. “But you understand why we can’t just *leave* you.”

“You could,” she said. Spite dripped from her voice. “Just walk out. I’ll find my way home.”

“But you’ll tell somebody that we...that *I* exist.” Asif’s hands gestured up and down his own body, lingering at the tear in his shirt that his cloak, hanging open, had revealed. Without the fabric of his glove to muffle them, the bones of his hand clacked together. “Won’t you?”

The creases in the woman’s face deepened, darkened. Nycosa made the mistake of meeting her gaze directly; pure hatred crackled in her eyes like fire, and she could almost feel their heat. She looked down at the floor, at her own bootprints in the dust.

“You don’t believe us,” Asif said. The sentence was flat, not a question. “You still think we have your parents.”

Even if the woman *had* replied, Nycosa wouldn't have needed to hear the words. She could hear them buried beneath every rasping breath the woman took, every uncomfortable shuffle and scrape of fabric against wood. My parents. My parents. My parents.

Why did it have to be parents?

"What will it take?" she piped up.

Asif, who had been in the middle of saying something else—she hadn't been listening to what—faltered mid-word and turned on his heel to look at her. The woman didn't move, but the creases in her face relaxed slightly.

"What?" she asked.

"To keep you quiet," she clarified. "We'll do it. I don't care what. What will it take?"

She could tell Asif was staring at her, but she didn't want to see for herself the myriad emotions on his face. He would ream her for it later, she was sure. *Stop making promises you know we can't keep, Nycosa. Your stupid self-preservation blinds you, Nycosa. Think before you try to get away, Nycosa.* It was nothing she hadn't heard before.

"Give me my parents back and we'll talk," the woman said.

"He told you, we don't know where they are," Nycosa shot back. "Listen, I don't give a shit what *else* you want, I'll do it. Anything to get us out of Windfall as soon as possible. But we didn't kidnap anybody."

"Then find them."

"I'm *sorry*?"

"Then find them," the woman repeated. Her tone hadn't changed, but the words themselves were spoken with a surety that could only come from preparedness. She'd premeditated the demand. "Show me my parents and I'll pretend I never saw what you both are."

She placed the same emphasis on “what” as she had on “necromancer” minutes beforehand, but Asif didn’t flinch like Nycosa had. He stood still, stalwart, waiting—for Nycosa, she realized after a moment of inaction.

“Find them,” she repeated.

The woman nodded.

A cold fist closed around Nycosa’s stomach and dragged it downward. The woman, if she actually did believe their innocence—though the opposite was far more likely—had to have known it was an impossible demand. They had no idea where to start; their only blessing was that, given the woman’s frantic behavior before, they had likely disappeared recently, but that still didn’t offer much in the way of help. It was like she was hoping to catch the two of them in a trap, like she expected that in their desperation to keep their secret they would lead her directly to her parents, in the process revealing that they had been lying about their innocence all along. She no longer looked frightened. She had an air of quiet assuredness hanging around her, and had stopped fidgeting.

Well, Nycosa supposed, she was in for some disappointment.

“And that’s the only thing that’ll do it for you?” she asked anyway.

When the woman stood, Nycosa bolted to her feet. Where before her hands had been bound behind her back, they now hung at her sides—red and raw, but most definitely free. The strip of cloth that had restrained her lay frayed and torn on the floor next to a nail that jutted out of the planks.

“Unless you want me to run right now,” she said. “You already know who’s faster.”

Nobody moved. Nycosa—and Asif, she could see out of the corner of her eye—stood tense, primed to sprint forward and block an escape attempt that never came. The woman simply

stood there, her hard expression belying how well aware she was of the tenuous nature of their stalemate.

“Why us?” Asif asked. “What’s stopping you from running anyway and asking someone else to help find your family?”

“Nobody here is dumb enough to get involved,” the woman said, and folded her arms. “They know they’d be the next to disappear. Nobody wants to risk that.”

That was it, then. Her parents had been the latest disappearances. Nycosa wondered briefly if she had seen their names amongst the missing person posters.

“And you?” he said.

“I don’t care.” She turned her gaze to Nycosa. “If it takes working with a necromancer to get my parents back, fine.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you’re lying—”

“You’ll know,” Nycosa cut across. “But we’re not letting you out of our sight.”

“Good. I’m not letting you out of mine.”

“Good.”

The woman took a step forward, rubbing her chafed wrists. She paused before the next step, and again before the next, eyes flicking back and forth between her two captors.

“I’ll be watching both of you,” she warned.

“Gods.” Asif’s still-gloved hand came up to massage at his temples. “Okay. Here. In the spirit of trust, and of not murdering each other, my name is Asif. So if we go mad and try to butcher you, you have a name to track us down with. Happy?”

She squinted at him as if trying to detect dishonesty in his sallow face.

“I swear,” he said. Frustration pushed his brows together. “I’m Asif. That’s Nycosa.” And, ignoring Nycosa’s indignant protest, he prompted, “What’s your name?”

The woman took another step. Paused again. Stepped again. Paused again. The short strides clicked against the floor. An emotion that Nycosa couldn't identify flickered across her face.

“Rhione,” she said finally.

A name to put to the face was more comforting than Nycosa could have anticipated. Now the woman that threatened to expose their secret was less abstract, and more on their level—a person who had something to lose, and a person who had good reason to avoid stirring the pot. Though she would have preferred to obtain that knowledge without Asif giving up her real name.

“Asif, remind me to talk to you later,” she said, turning toward the door. “You. Rhione. Have you already started looking?”

Rhione nodded.

“Then show us where to start,” Nycosa said, and then quieter, “Let's just get this over with as soon as possible.”