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Seelia

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Seelia

By Ian Gammie

“I do not make distinctions based on the personal allegiances of individual fairies. All are suspect.” — Reginald Bakeley

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Introduction

*Seelia* is the third part of a larger project that I’m tentatively calling *The Anthology of Forgotten Dreams.* My plan for this anthology is to create a series of novellas and short stories, all of which work on an individual level, but, at the same time, they interconnect so that each story adds a level of depth to every story before and after it. My major influence for this construction is British author David Mitchell. For a long time now, I’ve had the idea that I want to write a more literary type of fantasy story. I struggled with the concept for a long time, uncertain how I could sustain a plot, voice, and build a world comparable to those in the fantasy stories I’ve always loved, while also incorporating a complexity and form that are uniquely literary. This is my attempt.

Every story in the anthology takes place in same kingdom—the capital city is called Telfair, which is where my thesis is set. The kingdom exists in a time period I like to think of as spaghetti industrialization: an industrial revolution that never took place in the real world on account of the differing histories between worlds—a world governed with magic would innovate at a much different rate. I like working in this fictional time period as it give me complete control of the technology, clothing and speaking styles, and innovations within the world without fighting historical inaccuracies in each and every story—a technique I’m borrowing from Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld*, though leaving out the extremities of the Great A’Tuin.

As I said before, this thesis is the third part of an ongoing series. So far, all three parts are centered on a lead, female character—in this case, Tais. One of the
major problems I’ve encountered in reading fantasy novels is a major lack of quirky female characters. Honestly, one of the problems is a lack of female characters in general—at least not enough to pass the Bechdel Test. I’ve also found in my own reading that when female characters are introduced, they usually fall into very specific roles: mother, daughter, prostitute with a heart of gold, and so forth. It seems that in several books, while male characters are expected to have a certain level of quirk or individuality, female fantasy characters are cut with the same cookie cutters then given slightly different frosting. My goal in this story was to create female characters in a fantasy world without using cutters in the first place.

Tais is a coroner. It sounds simple, but, in many ways, her job is what defines her. With graduation just over the horizon, finding a job I can be proud of and that I’m excited to wake up for every morning has been on my mind quite a bit recently. I think most people in the young adult demographic—and many adults, as well—can associate with the search for a meaningful occupation. For Tais, she has already found a job that gives meaning to her life. While I never directly state why that is, there are several hints pointing to a tragic event in her past that resulted in her choosing her odd field of employment.

As this is fantasy, another enormous component is, of course, magic. Probably the most influential writer to me is Neil Gaiman, who brings magic into real world settings better than anyone else I’ve ever read. Although my story is based in a fantasy world, this particular story hinges on what happens when a ‘normal’ person comes into contact with a magical being that she does not understand.
I hope this isn’t the case, but there is a possibility that while reading my thesis you might become frustrated with a lack of explanation as to how some magical components work. Don’t worry, you’re in good company, Tais doesn’t understand either, and keeping a limited perspective is an important aspect for the longer anthology. As a full project, however, readers would already have a grasp on the magical workings of the world by the time they reached this story. Unfortunately, with the length restrictions imposed on this thesis, there simply was not enough room to include these explanations while also bringing the story full circle.

In brief, the majority of the magic is based on Reginald Bakeley’s *Goblinproofing One’s Chicken Coop* and definitions from W.B. Yeats’s *Fairy and Folktales of Ireland*, with a few original concepts—or inspired, as is the case with the shadow lore from Garth Nix’s *Seventh Tower* series—thrown in for good measure. If you ever have the time or want a few more laughs in the story, several of the character names are also Gaelic words. I struggle with coming up with names, so I decided to make them my own little jokes instead of actual names. Every story needs a few inside jokes stirred in.

The final chapter of *Seelia* is the section I’m guessing will warrant the most criticism, as the poetic death of the protagonist is not exactly in keeping with the urban fantasy genre. I have many reasons for ending the story in this way, which I’ll introduce now. First, as a single piece to a much larger puzzle, Tais plays a peripheral, though influential role, but is not the main protagonist to the overall storyline—there are two, and neither is mentioned in *Seelia*, so feel free to ignore
them for now. Furthermore, in attempting to blend a more literary construct inside of a genre style, I felt I could disregard some of the guiding principles of the genre if doing so assisted the progression of the non-linear narrative, which it does in other sections.

Outside of the larger body of work, there are many elements exclusively within Seelia to justify such an ending. Most obvious is the completion of a cycle that sees a coroner—someone who spends all her time and energy, and who defines herself by working with the dead—confront her own death. While I would argue that her death is in a sense poetic, it is also not a romantic poetic, but rather mirrors the way she lived: awkwardly. Finally, her death is the punctuation mark to a story I’ve come to think of as a love story—though I doubt it will come off that way originally, and, stylistically, it certainly doesn’t read as such. Set in a world where there is physical proof of an afterlife, her death signifies a reunion rather than a departure.

**Chapter 1**

Tais liked her job. More to the point, she liked that she liked her job. She especially liked the benefits that came with liking liking her job. If, for instance, she was ever presented with a social, yet serious handshake and assaulted with the question: what do you do for a living? She was filled with a smug certainty that she
would have no problem at all answering honestly without feeling the need to tack on any sort of excuse for her behavior.

It’s not as bad as it sounds. I’m working my way up. You have to start somewhere.

She rolled the lip of the latex gloves over her hands; she turned on the water; she scrubbed until her skin went pink; she dried her hands on a paper towel; she threw the used up paper, along with the gloves, away in a tiny heap on the floor beside the bin.

Everyone dies too early: a simple motto for complicated times. Only technically true, as well, considering there was all that afterlife to look forward to—the whole business with the shades and the stars and the shining over everything. It might not be so bad; she’d be in good company. Still, Tais didn’t like the idea of leaving her body behind on some unfamiliar table to get hacked to pieces by one of her competitors. Ask any coroner; cremation is the only dignified way to go.

Thank the shades not everyone felt the same way.

She picked up the pen and ledger; she nudged the door open with her knee; she sat in her black leather chair; she removed the pen cap with her teeth and filled out the autopsy report; she dated it yesterday without realizing. Two days later, Mr. Cleary—the man whose very-much-alive wife the morgue was named after—would notice the mistake while on the telephone with a potential client. He would politely pardon himself from the conversation, set the receiver upside down on the stand then unlock the filing cabinet he kept beneath his desk. He’d remove the file of one, Tais Ponder, recall that this was by no means the first clerical error she had made of
a similar sort then recall, more seriously, how she was the worst sort of prude—an attractive one—and make a note on his calendar to begin searching for her replacement. This would be absolutely necessary considering how she had died in the early hours that very same morning. Of course, Mr. Cleary wouldn’t hear this news until the next afternoon, at which point he would add ‘asap’ to the note on the calendar and trace a square around it in red marker.

A bell rang.

Tais stared at her office door as if she thought this might be the time she’d finally be able to see through to the other side. It wasn’t. She sighed then slipped a tassel to mark her page in the ledger, closed it, and placed the capless pen on top, so that it immediately rolled onto the floor to join the growing collection. The real mystery was what happened to all the caps once their pens rolled away, but in Ms. Cleary’s House for the Dead, mysteries went unsolved more often than not.

As one might expect, the waiting room at Ms. Cleary’s was both small and cold. A pot of coffee had been left out on a small table between a colorful arrangement of brochures for personalized coffins and vanity headstones. She walked to the pot and poured herself a cup. It may as well have been iced coffee for all the good it was doing, but Tais blew on her cup before sipping it anyways. She even smacked her lips a little afterwards, just to make sure she was experiencing the beans the way they were meant to be experienced. She stared at the empty waiting room, which really only needed a singular look—even a fleeting glance would do—but she gave the room a full stare on the off chance that someone had come in who
was either very small or remarkably transparent. In the interest of thoroughness, she ventured a, “Hello?” Though no one said anything in return.

She retreated again to her office; she placed the cup of coffee next to a half-empty cup from that morning; she found a new pen in the desk drawer; she got back to work.

The bell rang again.

This time Tais didn’t bother closing the ledger or putting down the pen. It was still in her hand when she entered the waiting room. “Hello?” she asked, then added, “Is anyone here?” She stuck the pen behind her ear and walked to the door. The metal frame was firmly attached to the track and the hinges looked too thick for a gust of wind to have unsettled them. Tais tugged on the handle just in case, but the door didn’t budge.

She frowned. Then she blushed. Then she took the keys out of her pocket and unlocked the door, all the while sincerely hoping no one had tried to stop by earlier and left under the impression that Ms. Cleary’s was closed for the day. She checked the OPEN sign to make sure it was facing outwards. It was. How much good that’d do in conjunction with a locked door was another matter. A paranoid voice in her head told her she hadn’t turned the key in the lock the correct way, so she gave the handle another pull. This time the hinges turned, allowing the door to swing open with only minimal effort. The top corner of the door knocked against a hanging bell, which rattled happily. A small breeze shuffled past Tais and into Ms. Cleary’s. The sky was overcast, but the streets were dry. Even so, it smelled like rain.
For the third time in as many minutes, Tais returned to her office. Having long forgotten about the pen stored behind her ear, she took another one from the drawer. She didn’t even have a chance to bite off the cap when the bell rang again.

“Shades take it,” the curse wasn’t really under her breath, though it wasn’t really out loud either. She said it at that perfect volume between whispered and conversational that is only used by people who spend a lot of time talking to themselves.

She burst into the waiting room. “Hello? Hello!” But the room was as empty as it usually was. The coffee was still cold, the brochures still untouched. No restless voices, no impatient foot tapping, no one carelessly humming a mindless tune. The emptiness was punctuated by the complete and utter lack of indents in the couch cushions.

Tais walked right up to the bell hanging over the door and yanked it from the ceiling. A cloud of dust fell on her hair and the screw at the end of the line struck her in the eye. The clapper swung crazily against the bell, rattling away until she put her hand inside and grabbed hold. She felt the vibrations run up her fingers. Then the clapper was quiet and the waiting room was quiet and the hole in the ceiling was quiet as it stared down at her in what she imagined was shocked disbelief.

And that might have been the end of it if that bell was the bell, but, of course, it wasn’t.

The first thing Tais heard when she returned to her office was ringing. Despite knowing full well it wasn’t coming from the bell in her hand, she nevertheless held it to her ear. What she heard was exactly what she expected to
hear: ringing. But it wasn’t up against her ear. The ringing was flat and distant. On second thought, distant might not have been the correct word. Lackluster, maybe. Or blocked. Muffled.

**Ms. Cleary’s bells.**

A shiver ran down Tais’s spine and her breath caught in the top of her throat. She’d forgotten about Ms. Cleary’s bells. They were a running joke amongst the other coroners. Ring a bell when Tais would walk into a room, put their arms in the air and make moaning sounds: that sort of thing. But Tais wasn’t fond of her contemporaries, so she didn’t respond to their invitations anymore and she didn’t go to the conferences. In her opinion, the beautiful thing about being a coroner was that she was able to help people, without having to deal with them.

Unfortunately, once Tais didn’t have the constant reminders of how silly Ms. Cleary’s bells were—Mr. Cleary made it abundantly clear that they were his wife’s idea, not his—she forgot to mark the silliness for herself. Attaching the strings to the bells had become so habitual that she didn’t think about what she was doing, except to repeat, sometimes as many as five times on a busy day:

\[ \text{The rabbit races around the toe,} \]
\[ \text{away from the light;} \]
\[ \text{pull it tight.} \]

But Ms. Cleary’s bells never rang. How could they? They couldn’t. Strictly speaking, it was impossible and anyone who told you otherwise was a complete loon.
Then again, she’d probably just forgotten something in the morgue. Probably her watch or that necklace she never wore. Yes, she shouldn’t leave such things lying around.

Tais held the doorbell above her head as if wielding a mighty battle-ax, took several deep breaths, then threw open the door to the morgue. To the surprise of every nerve in her body, only the morning’s corpse stared back at her. She laughed, half at herself for being so stupid and half out of sheer relief.

Nearby, the bell rang. The pitch was crisper in the morgue. It took a great amount of effort, but she managed to make herself put the doorbell down on the counter. Quiet. Tais passed the seconds listening to the rhythmic flow of her own breathing. The hushed echoes of her breath circumnavigated the predominantly stainless steel room. A buzzing fly broke the enchantment. Then the bell rang again. Her eyes scanned across the lockers. The ring had come from somewhere in the middle. It took her three more rings to pinpoint the precise locker it belonged to.

C3. She thought back to the ledger: Female. Estimated between eight and eleven years old. Discovered and admitted by John Doe one day prior. Lacerations on the back and ribcage. Potential tendon damage to the sole of the right foot accompanied by significant swelling and blood clotting. Recent scarring behind the left ear. Silt beneath fingertips as well as strands of vegetation found in victim’s nostrils, hair, and throat indicate possible cause of death was drowning, though results were inconclusive without full biopsy.

Normally the thought not to cut her open wouldn’t have even crossed Tais’s mind, but the girl was very young and no one had come asking about her, so she
hadn’t seen the harm in holding off. Besides, there was something interesting about
the marking behind the girl’s ear. At first glance, she’d thought it was another
bruise—the girl was littered with them—but bruises usually spanned a more
uniform area. Upon closer inspection, Tais had realized it wasn’t inside the skin, but
a part of it, burned into it from the outside. Someone had branded her.

Before realizing she was doing it, Tais found herself rubbing the spot behind
her ear. She stopped, dropping her arms too quickly to be casual; she shook the
cobwebs out of her head; she took a deep breath; she blew out on her hands then
rubbed them together rapidly; she slid open the locker like the professional she was
so sure she was.

The smell hadn’t set in yet. That wasn’t especially surprising. It could
sometimes take up to three or four days for a corpse to become putrid. The girl’s
skin wasn’t in the green stage either. Tais liked to break the stages down by colors:
greens, purples, black. Unless the body was part of an ongoing investigation, it
would generally leave the morgue somewhere in the lilac region. But the tone of the
girl’s skin hadn’t changed at all. In fact, besides her preexisting injuries, she was
holding up shockingly well considering she was dead.

Tais ran her finger along the length of string leading from the bell hanging
inside the locker down towards the girl’s foot. She let go near the end so that she
could poke the girl’s toe. When the toe moved, the string went taut and the bell on
the other end rang once before going silent.

A contusion stood out near the base of the heel on the girl’s right foot; Tais
crouched down for a closer look. It was the size and shape of a well-equipped
skipping stone and looked to be the only area where discoloration was beginning to take effect. Tais stared at it for a long, curious minute. Nothing happened. Nothing was going to happen.

It has to be tendon damage, swelling, and blood clotting, her brain told her.

“Only one way to know for sure,” she replied, hoping that saying the words out loud might impart in her a measure of much needed confidence.

She stuffed her hand into the deep pocket on the side of her apron, trying for the life of her to remember the exact spot where she’d left her scalpel. Every time her fingers came into contact with any sort of an edge, they jumped back a quarter of an inch before reluctantly moving forward to check on it. Tais was unconscious of this reflex, but her fingertips had experienced enough scuffs and slices to take their own preventative measures. Eventually her fingers closed around the cylindrical handle of the scalpel and pulled it from the pocket. If they’d had the ability, the five of them would have doubtless breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Scalpel in hand, Tais turned back to the contusion. She frowned.

“That isn’t where I left you.”

It was true. The contusion, which only seconds before had been sitting comfortably at the base of the heel, had worked its way upwards and now resided in the ball of the dead girl’s foot. Tais leaned forwards and prodded it with the dull end of the scalpel. Rather than allowing the blunt metal to sink in—the way swollen tissue or a blood clot of that size should have responded—the contusion held solid and the scalpel glanced off the top of it. If Tais had any lingering faith in her initial diagnoses, it quickly dissipated when the contusion shook itself off then scuttled
around to the side of the foot. Its motion caused the girl’s big toe to twitch ever-so-slightly, which turned out to be exactly the right amount to cause the string tied around the girl’s toe to pull a little tighter and give Ms. Cleary’s bell another chance to ring.

Tais tossed the scalpel up in the air then caught it by the handle with the point facing outwards. Practice makes perfect, her fingertips moaned. She scrunched up her eyes then inched in closer. Her nose was nearly pressed against the girl’s foot when she brought up the scalpel and sliced widthwise across the top of the contusion.

Long antennas spied through the skin. They were followed by a set of pincers, which tore back the flap on either side of them. Once its head was clear of the gap, the insect didn’t tumble onto the table. It burst out between the flaps.

Tais screamed and dropped the scalpel. She tried to pull away, but her face was right up against the skin and the insect was too fast. It leapt the stretch and clung tight to the coroner’s cheek, which wobbled as she loosed another scream. The insect stalked the scream, hundreds of spindly, armored legs propelling the disc shell across her skin. She slapped at it, connecting with its rock-hard shell, but all she felt was the skin on her cheek splitting under the tiny barbs in the soles of the insect’s feet. Panic took over. She felt her heart pounding inside her chest. Too fast, far too fast. Her lungs raced to catch her breath. The creature crawled forwards and took hold of her lip. She felt the antenna brush against her gums.

Tais shut her eyes and screamed.
When she finally opened her eyes again several seconds later, she was sitting on the linoleum floor with her knees pulled to her chest and her back against the wall. She put her head between her legs, gasping for air. The left side of her cheek stung and when it rubbed against the seam of her pant; specks of blood smeared across the black fabric. The dead girl was looking down at her from the table. She held the round end of the scalpel the loose and airy way Tais always imagined a witch would carry her wand. The insect was motionless: skewered on the point.

The dead girl smiled. “You owe me a favor.”

Chapter 2

“Are you sure this is necessary?” Tais asked. They were standing on the sidewalk outside Ms. Cleary’s. The OPEN sign had once again been switched over to CLOSED. Tais glanced at it nervously. She didn’t like the way the extra two letters scrunched up the space on the sign; she was only used to seeing it that way over her shoulder, in the dark, as she was leaving. Above the CLOSED sign, Ms. Cleary’s painted face smiled down on her.

“I told you there’s coffee inside, right?”

The girl, who said her name was Aillea, looked past Tais curiously. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to be dead for... what day is it?”

“Thursday.”

“Four days.” Aillea wrinkled her nose. “No, that can’t be right.”

“Oh, wait, sorry. It’s Friday.”
“It definitely hasn’t been five, I don’t remem—” A worried look slipped over her face. She blinked it away. “You’re sure it’s not Wednesday? It tastes like a Wednesday. I think I died on Monday, so...” Aillea counted off her fingers. “Today should be Wednesday. I need to meet Marville at the Horse and Quarters before Thursday, so it can’t be Friday. It has to be Wednesday.”

“Are you alright?” Tais felt silly asking the question, it was a feeling she was quickly getting used to. But Aillea didn’t say anything, except to stare beyond her with the same, curious look. “Probably not, then.”

“Have you ever been dead?”

“Technically? No. But I had sleep paralysis once. I was trying to go to sleep and suddenly I couldn’t move. My eyes were still open and my brain still worked, I just, I couldn't move. And the whole time I was paralyzed I had this feeling like there was something lurking somewhere behind my eyeballs, and I couldn’t turn around to look. I’ve never been so scared in my life. Is death kind of like that?”

“No even close.”

“Is it like an asthma attack?”

Aillea looked past her; her lips quivered.

“Sorry, stupid question.”

The coroner looked up to Ms. Cleary for comfort in this moment of silence.

“So, how’d you do it?” Tais asked.

“Do what?”

“You know. How’d you come back?”

“I can’t tell you. If I told one person, everyone would want to know.”
“I can keep a secret.”

“That’s nice. I’m hungry.”

The girl’s clothes were much too big for her, but there hadn’t been many options. Tais had rounded up what clothes she could find around the office: a floral dress, a plaid shirt, a flat-collared black blouse, a pair of stockings with a run up the side, all of which seemed to be in decent enough condition—besides the stockings, but what could you do? These situations didn’t exactly come around every day. In fact, in the coroner’s professional opinion, these sorts of things never happened. They couldn’t happen. Though she had to admit, the dead girl made a convincing argument to the contrary.

Aillea chose the collared blouse, mumbling something about only wearing black as she tried it on. It hung like a dress on her and she had to tie it in the back to keep it from slipping off her shoulders. She also put on the stockings, which she pulled halfway up her torso and bunched around her waist.

After prodding the area multiple times to make absolutely certain no other surprises were hidden inside, Tais had cleaned out the open sore on the bottom of the younger girl’s foot to the best of her abilities and wrapped a bandage around it. She’d pulled a pair of shoes a size too big from one of the donation trunks in the corner, but Aillea refused to try them on, saying she wouldn’t wear a dead person’s shoes. Tais thought it was an odd place to draw the line, considering the girl was decked shoulder to ankle in dead peoples’ clothes already, but she was in no mood to argue with a patient so Aillea went barefoot and the bandage changed from white to rusted brown before they left the morgue.
When they walked beneath the lights in the waiting room, Tais noticed that the girl was floating. Well, not exactly floating, but it looked that way. The truth of the matter was far less worrisome, though it did open a fresh bundle of questions in its own right.

Where a shadow should have connected Aillea to the floor, there simply wasn’t one.

She thought maybe the flat lighting combined with the stainless steel surfaces inside the morgue made it more difficult to see a shadow. Shadows certainly weren’t as solid against the reflective tables as elsewhere, so she’d written it off as some kind of optical illusion and not spared it a first thought. Besides, people without shadows weren’t entirely unheard of. There were the Queen’s guards, of course, though Tais had never actually seen one in person and the only person she’d met who claimed to have met one was a mortician named Gerrald. And you can’t trust a mortician; they’re always trying to sell you something.

Tais turned the key in the lock then returned the ring to her pocket. “Ready?” She led the way down the street towards her one-bedroom apartment. Aillea fell in step behind her. Although she was limping noticeably, she didn’t say a word of complaint, which Tais took to mean that she didn’t need any assistance.

Shades bless.

Tais was used to touching people, but there was something about touching living people that made her skin crawl. She still wasn’t sure which camp Aillea was in, so she tried her best to forget that the girl she was bringing home had just risen from the dead. Besides that, all she really had to do was forget about the searing
pain in her cheek and the terrible insect that had tried to force its way down her
throat and the fact that she'd closed shop several hours early and was already on
thin ice with Mr. Cleary. She looked at the clouds hanging low and ominous. Oh, and
the rain. She tried to forget it smelled like rain, too.

“Not far now,” she called over her shoulder.

Days like these were the reason she’d applied for the coroner’s job in the first
place. Corpses usually didn’t tell you to leave work early or insist on coming home
with you. In fact, corpses had very few demands at all; it was a corpse’s family and
friends who made her life difficult.

Tais and Aillea entered the apartment building through the side door with
the iron bars built in. Tais lived on the third floor. She liked to think she didn’t live
by herself, though even Mortie—the alleycat she left a bowl of milk out for every
morning—knew otherwise. She’d been alone since Mortie was a kitten, and he
couldn’t remember a time when things had been different.

Aillea plopped down on an optimistic loveseat at the end of the couch and
went about the process of making herself comfortable, while Tais conducted a
scouting expedition around the kitchen. She came back a few minutes later holding a
loaf of bread, a block of hard cheese, a couple green apples, and a glass of water.
Aillea reached for the water first, emptying the glass in one long gulp then she set
into the bread then the cheese then the apples. When she finished, there were barely
enough crumbs left to starve a mouse.

“Is there any more?”
“No,” Tais said. The younger girl shot a concentrated dose of the curious look; her mouth twisted, but no sounds came out. “Fine, but don’t blame me when your stomach explodes.” Tais went to the kitchen and came back with half a cherry pie.

Contented clucks and the repetitious cycle of chewing and chewing and chewing filled the silence. Aillea’s lips were stained a brilliant shade of red when she finally spoke.

“Let’s talk favor.”

Tais looked over the empty glass, plate, and pie tin. She groaned. “This wasn’t it?”

Apparently she asked the wrong question because Aillea broke into a storm of giggles.

“What’s so funny?”

After an effort, the younger girl slowly stopped giggling; she wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye. “You think your life’s worth half a cherry pie.”

I also gave you bread, cheese, apples, and water, Tais wanted to say, though she knew she wouldn’t gain anything by doing so. Instead, she said, “Hang on, I saved your life too, didn’t I?”

Her self-proclaimed savior looked past her with wide, curious eyes; she nodded, though not at Tais.

“No, you didn’t,” Aillea said matter-of-factly.

“That’s all? That’s your whole explanation?”

“Uh-huh.”
“I knew it. I knew I was right! I saved you then you saved me. That makes us even.” Tais looked at the empty dishes. “Actually, you owe me half a...”

Tais trailed off: the girl who had been sitting innocently on her couch had removed the carcass of the dead insect from the front pocket of her blouse and was dangling it over her mouth.

“If it proves my point, I'll put it back in.”

“But it's dead now.”

Aillea shrugged. “So?”

Goosebumps grew on the skin of the coroner’s forearms.

“I saved your life,” Aillea said. “All you did was wake me up, two days late at that. Be glad you only owe me one favor.”

The bug was still in her hand. Tais forced herself to look away. The coroner's eyes wandered everywhere in the room, except the one place she was most interested in seeing. When she finally built up the courage to look, the bug was nowhere to be found.

“How do I know that thing would have really killed me?”

“It killed me, didn't it?”

The obvious answer was, ‘yes’ or, at least, it would have been obvious if the obvious answer wasn’t also, ‘no.’ Tais, who had never diagnosed the contusion as fatal, went with, “Um.”

“Okay, good, we can talk favor then. I need to get a message to a man named Marville Danan. Like I said, I was supposed to meet him at an inn called the Horse and Quarters on Wednesday, but now that it's Friday,” Aillea flashed the curious
look, which Tais was quickly realizing wasn’t curious, though no other words swept in to fill the void. The girl’s eyes were unfocused and Tais couldn’t tell if she was focusing on something behind her or nothing at all. “I need you to find him for me.”

“Oh, is that all?”

The dreaded look again. It reminded Tais of a puppy cocking its head to the side. Except take out the adorability and add in a healthy portion of condescension. Like a cat cocking its head to the side.

“You’ll have to go to Old Town,” Aillea said, clearly expecting some sort of reaction.

“Alright.”

“Upriver.”

“I know where Old Town is.”

Aillea cocked her head to the other side without moving it at all. “I doubt it.”

The second line of the ledger entry came back to Tais as she watched the girl: *estimated between eight and eleven years old.* She decided she’d have to revise that if she ever got the chance. Despite her tiny size, Aillea was obviously much older.

“Do you have a map?”

Tais went to her room and came back a moment later with an unused map of Telfair. She laid it out on the coffee table and pinned three of the corners down with the glass, the plate, and the pie tin.

“The Horse and Quarters is here,” Aillea said. She jabbed a finger at a spot on the north side of Telfair, just west of the river.
“Alright.” Tais said after studying the spot on the map. “But that’s not in Old Town.” She waved her hand above an area on the east side of the river and farther south. “Old Town’s over here.”

Aillea shook her head. “You do know Old Town isn’t just a bunch of antique stores and spice shops, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Do you?”

Tais nodded. A dark flush swept over her brown cheeks. She frequented those antique stores and spice shops. The weekend before, she’d bought a lovely Seandan-era vase there. She struggled not to glance at it, on the stand, by the door.

Sunflowers would really make that blue glaze pop.

Aillea reached out and pulled the pen from behind Tais’s ear. She circled the spot on the map she’d initially pointed to. Then she scribbled something on the fourth corner and ripped it from the rest of map.

“When you get to the Horse and Quarters, find the master, like I said, his name is Marville Danan. Make sure Marville hears this message. If you get the chance, say it more than once.” Aillea handed her the piece of paper. “Got it?”

“Couldn’t you just go there yourself?”

“Not after Wednesday. Some dangerous people out there still think I’m dead, I’d like to keep it that way,” Aillea said. “It’s honestly the least you could do.”

“I know, I know. Hang on.” Tais read the words over a few times, making sure to store them soundly in her memory. “Okay.”
Aillea held out her hand and Tais placed the piece of paper in it. The younger girl made a fist around the paper then brought it to her mouth. She whispered something between her fingers and when she opened her hand a second later a small pile of ash spilled out onto the rug. Tais stared. Her mouth opened, crowded full of questions shoving to get out. But the questions jumbled together so no individual one managed to extricate itself from the others and, after a while, she closed her mouth again, though she couldn’t for the life of her stop staring at the black smudge on her rug. Everything else was a distant memory.

Chapter 3

The inn was mostly quiet. Relatively quiet. Quiet enough to sit and remember, as long as what you were trying to remember was muddied from the start. It was the type of place that attracted melancholy men who spent a lot of time looking behind them and who sighed because they were brought up learning to sigh and to whom any other action would have been in poor taste, back when the tastes they had were considered good. The bulk of the noise that did exist was caused by the usual clunking of glasses, the standard scuffling of feet, the familiar half-shouted private conversations: in short, the sorts of things that came as natural to an inn as daughters to a king.

In a dark corner of the quiet enough inn, a sober enough coroner twiddled away the afternoon wondering how she was supposed to know which man was Marville. After trying her hardest to eavesdrop on the whispered conversations at
the bar, she finally decided the dark corner was much too far away for her to overhear what she needed, so, after finishing her cup of cider, she made up her mind to ask somebody.

“Excuse me,” she said to the bartender. “Do you know where I could find Marville Danan?”

The bartender was a small, bald man with a patchy goatee. He wore a brown sweater-vest and had the sad, poetic glimmer in his eye of a travelling minstrel born after his time. He would have been stunning in a cloak and tyrolean.

“Who wants to know?” the bartender asked grimly. He dipped his shoulder so he could lean his elbow on the bar and look Tais directly in the face.

“Um, me?”

“And who, might I ask, would you be?” He turned his polished head and gave her his best sidelong glance. “Friend or foe?”

“Friend, I think, or friend of a friend at least. I think she’s your friend anyways. I need to speak to Mr. Danan in private, please.”

“Marville’s a busy man. He doesn’t make appointments with strangers.” The bartender lifted a bushy eyebrow. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t toss you out on the street.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything.”

“Don’t test me, girl. I don’t have the time or patience. Now, are you going to give me that reason, or do you intend to waste more of my precious time?”

“I don’t know. I bought a cider?”

“Any other reason?”
Tais considered then shook her head, no.

“Would you like to challenge me to a game of riddles, perhaps? If you win, I’ll bring you to Marville, but if you lose—”

“No, thank you. I’ve never been very good at riddles.”

The bartender sighed. “Now, stop, just stop. You’re doing this all wrong.” His voice was different: less husk, more fluff. “You were fine sitting in the dark corner, it was a nice touch; I’ll give you that. And, frankly, I wouldn’t have minded you coming over here before I went to you, but, shades have mercy, you’re bad at this.”

“Sorry,” Tais said. “It’s my first time.”

“I should hope so. Didn’t your mother teach you better than to answer ‘friend’? Then all that ‘friend of a friend’, ugh, enough to make me sick. Here, stand up, come on, stand up.” The bartender came around the bar and sat on the stool Tais left empty. He shooed her away with his hands. “Go on. Behind the bar.”

Tais followed his instructions. She stood rigidly and surveyed the inn: nervous someone might be watching, or worse, preparing an order. But no one was. In fact, none of the men in the place seemed to be paying attention to their immediate surroundings at all. Even those in conversation had a far-off look about them.

“Now pretend you’re me. Think small, think tidy. And remember, the person with the least amount of time to spare wins.” The bartender licked his thumb then brushed the scraggly hairs on the side of his head behind his ears, pursed his lips, and sat slouched on the stool.

“Is that supposed to be me?”
“I’m looking for a man,” the bartender said, his voice several octaves higher. When Tais didn’t respond, he reached across the bar, pulled her arm down until she was resting on her forearm. He swept her hair out of her face and, to get her into character, gave her a yank on both ears.

“Oww, why would you—“

“Shhh,” he put his finger over her lips. “Use it.”

Tais rubbed her ears. “Um, what’ll it be?”

“Nice,” the bartender whispered. Then he said, in a mysterious tone, “No time for a drink, I’m looking for a scoundrel, goes by the name of Marville. Where’s he hiding?”

“Marville doesn’t have time for, um...” Tais looked down as the bartender made a firm little fist, “for scum like you.”

The fist transformed into an okay signal. Then he flattened his hand and slammed his open palm against the bar.

“You tell that no good son of a bitch, if he’s not out here in ten seconds, I’ll burn this place to the ground.” The bartender grabbed a bottle of brandy and poured it over the counter then whipped out a matchbook and struck a light. “One.”

Tais furiously nodded her head. “Okay, yeah, I think I see where I went wrong.”

“Excellent. There’s a long-standing tradition of banter in this inn, you know. I won’t be the master who sees it fade away.” He blew out the match then motioned for them to switch back to their original places. Standing behind the bar once more, the bartender offered a small bow. “Marville Danan, at your service.” Then he
noticed the puddle of brandy on the bar. He took a rag from beneath the counter and went to work cleaning up the mess. “Just so you know, if you ever pull a stunt like that in my inn again, I’ll string you up by the fingernails.”

“But, I didn’t. You lit the—“

“I know,” he whispered. Then Marville smiled, “So, who sent you? Was it Treff?”

“Who?”

“Big teeth, small eyes, about yay high.” He held his hand up to his abdomen. “A bit like a rat that’s made its way out of the sewer, but still has the stink about him.”

“Sorry, no, I owed Aillea a favor. He sounds horrible though.”

“The worst. Or close enough to it. Glad you’re not one of his. They always make such a mess of the place. Have me scrubbing for days.” Marville rubbed his finger on the bar. It must have come away sticky because he was back wiping in a heartbeat. “I’m afraid I don’t know any Ailleas. Hold on, what day is it?”

“Friday.”

“Nope, wasn’t supposed to meet anyone on Friday. It’s my day off, you see.” He blew on the bar then rubbed his elbow against it.

“She did mention something about meeting with you before Thursday,” Tais said. Then she thought back on the trusty ledger, “Female, between eight and… nineteen, curly hair, brown eyes, snub nose?” Lacerations on the back and ribcage, silt beneath the fingertips, tendon damage in the sole of the right foot. Tais cringed and forced herself to stop.
“Oh, you mean Seelia.” Marville laughed. “Aillea. Is that what she’s calling herself? Not exactly modest, is she?”

Tais couldn’t help but feel out of the joke. Still, she smiled and nodded along.

“So, did it work?”

“Did what work?”

Marville frowned. The frown looked strange on his face. His mouth was too wide to frown gently. “It must have worked. She wouldn’t be alive if it didn’t.”

“Actually, I was meaning to talk to you about that—“ A crashing sound carried down the staircase and spread like whooping cough across the main room. It was followed by a gruff and loud—though mostly loud—exchange. “It won’t fit through there!” “She’ll fit, you’re just not angling her right.” “Maybe if you lifted your end like you’re supposed to, I’d be able to fit it past the bannister.” “Sure, blame it on me. Just like you did when mom was alive.” “It’s your fault she died!” “Here we go again, why don’t you blame me for dad while you’re at it.” The men in the inn sighed into their drinks and pretended not to hear. When they eventually moved on with their conversations, they spoke a little softer. No one looked to Marville for help. They couldn’t. He’d already ducked beneath the bar.

“Mr. Danan, is everything alright?”

Marville peeked out long enough to whisper, “Who are you again?”

Tais pushed her stomach against the bar to extend a hand. Without intending to lower her voice, she whispered, “Tais Ponder, Head Coroner, Ms. Cleary’s House for the Dead.” Technically speaking, she was also the only coroner at Ms. Cleary’s, but she thought ‘head coroner’ had a sweeter ring to it.
“Oh, dear. Ms. Ponder, I think you’d better come with me.”

Crawling on his hands and knees, Marville led her through the swinging door behind the bar then along a thin corridor. He got to his feet to descend the flight of stairs that led into the empty kitchen. From there they moved quickly through to the back of the kitchen where Marville pulled down a cord to reveal a second flight of stairs opening up into what looked like an attic, yet must have been on ground level. He waved for Tais to go up first. She hesitated, but Marville was quick to follow, so she made her nervous way into the strange attic in the basement of the inn. The only thought left to comfort her was that at least, when Marville murdered her, the other coroners wouldn’t be able to find her body.

Just like Tais guessed, there weren’t any windows in the attic. Once Marville pulled up the stairs, the room went black as a starless night in the country. Then she heard him speak—though she didn’t understand the words—and the chandelier over the decorate table in the center of the room lit itself.

“Please, have a seat,” Marville said.

“I’d rather stand, thanks.”

“Tradition dictates we sit when in mourning.”

“No, really, I’m alright.”

Marville pulled back a chair at the near side of the table. “Sit,” he commanded.

The thought of pushing down the foldable stairs and making a run for it darted through Tais’s mind, but was chased off by images of the candles on the chandelier bursting into flames and the black ash smudged on her rug. She sat. To
her great relief, Marville circled to the other side of the table before taking a seat of his own.

“Right, let’s get this over with. When did it happen?”

“Based on the lack of decay and the unaltered pigment, I’d have guessed Wednesday,” Tais said. She immediately regretted including the description. Over the years, she’d slowly come to the realization that most people weren’t as interested by the rate of their loved ones’ decay as she was. “Then again, she was pretty adamant she died on Monday, so I’m not completely sure.”

Marville tilted his head. The movement was uncomfortably familiar, but Tais got the feeling that it somehow wasn’t the same. His eyes remained intensely focused. “She’s not dead?”

“No, not anymore. She sort of woke up, as you do.”

“And she sent you to meet me?” A wisp of darkness curled across the upper reaches of Marville’s cornea. He blinked. “Smart girl. Young though, too young for such things, I should never have shown her how to communicate with that monster.”

“Monster?”

Marville pretended not to hear the question and continued on, “I don’t mean to be rude, but do you know why she sent you in particular? There must have been other options.”

“I owed her a favor. She asked me to tell you something for her. Sorry, I can’t seem to remember what it was.”
Tais tried her best to concentrate, but found it incredibly difficult in the tight, little attic. The air was clean, but it tasted thick. Claustrophobia began to set in, and she started breathing heavily.

“You don’t remember anything?”

Tais shook her head.

“Nothing at all?”

“Only that she turned the note to ash in her hand.”

“She didn’t clean up afterwards, did she? She never cleaned up after herself when she lived here, either. Drove me crazy. I’m not your mother, I told her. I can’t spend all my time cleaning up after you. There are other guests I need to attend to. But she never listened.”

“I didn’t want to bring her home,” Tais admitted. “But she asked for a place to stay and what was I going to say? No? She’s only eight-ish. I’d like to help her if I can.”

Marville nodded understandingly.

Shades, it was stuffy. Tais glanced around, trying to find any vent to the outside, but the boards pressed together seamlessly and not even light could seep through. A small bed was stored against the back wall, its covers tucked tight beneath the mattress, its pillows fluffed: a mint on each. Beneath the bed she could just make out the outline of a sewing machine. A box sat beside it, presumably carrying the thread. There was the outline of something else farther back, but it was impossible to tell what it was in the flickering candlelight. Tais thought the shape resembled a crumpled hat.
“Is this your room?” Tais asked. Marville nodded. “It’s so neat.”

The master of the Horse and Quarters beamed. “I try to keep tidy,” he said humbly.

Tais ran her finger along the table, when she pulled it away there wasn’t a hint of dust. “Do all the inns around here stay as clean as this one?”

The mere suggestion of such a thing was enough to send the little master into a stir. “I take it you don’t have a lot of experience with Old Town, Ms. Ponder? No doubt by the looks of you. It’s not all pork pies and dental hygienists, you know. Some of us work for our living.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Marville crossed his arms over his chest. “Let’s change the subject, shall we?”

“Yes, maybe we should. It is very clean, though.”

This brought a touch of a smile to his face: enough to undo the frown, at the very least. “Miss Ponder—”

“Tais is fine.”

He looked at her skeptically. “Miss Ponder, what do you think of the girl?”

“Besides her coming back from the dead?”

“Besides that.”

“Well, once her injuries heal, I expect she’ll look like any other girl her age.”

“Come now, Miss Ponder, you don’t think we’re all the same just because we look alike? What a terribly boring world that would be.”

Tais stopped scanning the room and focused her full attention on the innkeeper. Something was strange about him. Either his eyes had changed entirely
to black, or the candlelight was playing tricks on her. “Why don’t you call yourself an innkeeper? Who are you?”

“Why, I already told you, I’m Marville Danan, master of the Horse and Quarters. I’m the one they come to when they need a secret. No one remembers the old ways better than Marville.”

“They?”

“My dear,” Marville said with a grin, “you do know Old Town’s not really a bunch of glass blowers and street performers, don’t you?”

An ensemble of pots and pans exploded into life in the kitchen beneath them. “Damn it, Querry, watch where you’re walking.” “What? I thought making a mess would help.” “Let’s just do this thing so we can go back upstairs.” The candles in the attic began to dim. Looking across the table, Tais could only make out the top of Marville’s head. She pushed back her chair and lowered herself to her knees.

“Marville?” she whispered. “Marville, what’s wrong?”

But the master of the Horse and Quarters wasn’t listening to her, his hands were clutching at the patches of hair above his ears, and he was muttering under his breath, “Mix them each morning; pour them that evening; never leave home without soapy bubbles.”

A broom handle slammed against the bottom of the foldable stairs. “Come out of there, you little freak.” “Don’t make us do this the hard way.” “Shades take it, Querry, let me do the talking, would you?” “Fine, but next time—” “Next time nothing, we’ll pin him to a signpost and none of them will ever bother us again.”

“You hear that, in there?” “Shut your stupid mouth. He’ll never come out if he knows
what’s waiting for him.” “Right.” “We’ll make it easy for you. Come down on your own and we’ll let you walk out the door, so long as you swear you’ll keep away. Hell, we’ll even give you a dish towel to start your new life.” Querry sneered. “That’s right, ya don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.” The broom handle continued to clunk away.

Tais jumped to her feet. “Who do they think they are, threatening you like that?” She felt a small tug at the back of her pants, and looked down.

“No, please, don’t.” Marville appeared to be shrinking. His shirt collar was up around his ears.

“Who are they?” Tais asked again.

The broom handle slammed against the panel hard enough to lift it off the floor. A flash of light blazed across the attic. The master of the Horse and Quarters shuddered. “New owners.” He let go of her pant leg to grasp again at his remaining tufts of hair.

“Don’t tell me, they started Thursday?”

Marville nodded miserably. He began rocking back and forth, slowly easing out of his shoes as his feet shrunk inside them. “Mix them each morning; pour them that evening; never leave home without soapy bubbles.” The candles flickered once then went out. As Tais stood in the darkness, listening to the broom handle bashing against the floor, she remembered the last thing Aillea or Seelia or whoever the little dead girl was said to her: it’s honestly the least you could do. Liar. She could have done a whole lot less. A little voice inside told her she wanted to help the girl. Tais
couldn’t quite put her finger on it; there was just something about her. The coroner felt her heartbeat quicken.

“Never leave home without soapy bubbles, never leave home without soapy bubbles, never leave home without soapy bubbles, never leave home...”

“That’s it, we’re coming up,” the man who was not Querry shouted. The thudding against the floor was replaced by a low moan when the panel opened and the foldable stairs cascaded down, letting in all manner of unwanted light.

Two men came up the stairs, Querry in the lead, his brother behind him. Querry brandished a pistol in one hand, the brother kept both hands in the pockets of his overcoat. “Freeze,” Querry shouted. “Hands in the air.” It took Tais a moment to realize he was talking to her. Once the realization set in, she did exactly what he asked her to do. Her chest tightened and a thin whistle slit through her teeth when she tried to exhale. Screaming never even crossed her mind.

The brother took a lighter from one of his pockets and lit the first row of candles on the chandelier. “Is it him?” “Test her.” “You, hold out your hand.”

Tais looked from the barrel of the gun up to its holder. “What?”

“Hold out your hand.”

She was still looking at Querry when the brother slipped something cold and pointy into her hand from behind. His breath was warm on the back of her neck. Querry watched her eyes for a second then looked past her, “It’s not him.”

“Where is he?” the brother demanded. “Where’s the fae rat?” He flipped over the table, which tumbled to the floor with a sickening crack. “We don’t want you here!” he shouted as he kicked the bed. It buckled against the wall. The sewing
machine crumpled under the weight of his boot, as did the plastic box carrying the thread. "We don’t want you here!" The object farthest under the bed—the one Tais had thought was a hat, which actually turned out to be a book, tall and crooked and twisting, but definitely some kind of a book—was the last to go. The brother tossed it to Querry, who lit one of the corners on a candle and fanned the flames by flipping through the pages. The new owners didn’t notice the empty set of clothes on the floor until just before the electric lights in the kitchen went out.

A cold, blue light crept in through the stairwell. The table cracked against the floor, the bed buckled against the wall, the remains of the sewing machine crumpled into itself. The chandelier began swinging, flinging drops of hot wax clear across the room. The brothers stood gaping while their mayhem soldiered on without them.

Tais pressed her body flat against the wall. She wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and let everything pass her by, but she knew this time it wouldn’t work. There was no dead girl ready to wake up and save her life. Those things didn’t happen. Bleeding happened. Breaking, swelling, dying these things happened; she saw proof of them every day.

Querry pointed the gun everywhere in the room, spinning rapidly, with no target to shoot at. Both his hands clung on to the handle, but they were trembling too much to aim at anything in particular. The brother was turning out his pockets searching, always searching, for what? Nail heads in the walls vibrated, nails pulled up, out of the timbers. A ceiling beam fell, shattering one corner of the chandelier, rolling off an instant before it would have brought the whole arrangement crashing to the floor. The beam landed on Querry’s foot, he shouted and pulled the trigger.
Ringing.

Shades, she was tired of ringing. This time she learned from her mistake: stay away from the ringing. Tais took a step towards the ladder. Her foot struck something on the floor and she lurched forwards onto her knees. She glanced back at her attacker. The book. Without knowing why she did it, she grabbed the book, and forced herself back to her feet.

Then she ran; she ran down the foldable ladder and through the kitchen; she ran up the second flight of stairs, along the thin corridor, and out the swinging door; she ran past the melancholy men sighing ever-harder into their drinks and out onto the street; she ran halfway to Ms. Cleary’s before she remembered it was closed for business.

Chapter 4

It was dark by the time Tais reached her apartment building. The sunset had come and gone unspectacularly behind the clouds: a pink blemish hanging from the edge of an otherwise gray complexion. Night came as a surprise to Tais. She wasn’t sure if she’d thought the day would continue on forever or if many had passed and night was simply losing its place in the rotation, but either way her quiet morning filling out paperwork felt like a lifetime ago.

The moment her foot left the stairwell and hit the carpet in the third floor hallway, she noticed the tension slip casually out of her shoulders. She allowed her
spine to slack off a touch and stepped light and easy to her door. The air tasted sweet and she filled her lungs confidently. No matter how bad things got in the world around her there was always this. There was always home.

Tais turned the key in the lock, relished the familiar feel of the brass handle turning in her hand, then pushed the door open ahead of her. She already had everything figured out: first, she would draw a bath. While the tub filled, she would pour herself a tall glass of wine and heat up some leftover sausage rolls. Then she’d wait until the water was nice and hot—not too hot, but hot enough to make her toes tingle—slip into the tub, and enjoy her dinner. Afterwards it was straight to bed. She could already see her lovely, spacious queen-sized mattress was waiting for her only a couple of walls away.

If the dream of a quiet night alone in the tub was the reason for her dazzling smile, reality was solely responsible for removing it.

The first thing Tais saw when she entered her apartment was Aillea sitting on the loveseat, same as before, guzzling the contents of a shallow saucer, which she held to her face with both hands.

“What are you doing?” Tais shouted, unaware she was angry until she heard herself go off.

Aillea lowered the mostly-empty bowl to her lap. “Someone left milk on the window sill,” she said happily.

“I left that milk for Mortie!”

“Who?”

“My cat.”
“It’s not for me?” The younger girl’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I didn’t know you had a cat.”

“Well, I don’t. But I would like to.” It was just too much. Tais let everything spill out. “And now, thanks to you, I never will. He’ll climb up the drain pipe and think, Tais doesn’t care about me anymore, then go off and die scared and alone in the street with a rusty knife jammed in his belly and no one to say who or what or why anyone in this nightmare of a city wanted him dead at all because that’s just what happens to everyone sooner or later. Apparently, that’s just the way it is.”

Aillea pushed the saucer to the far end of the table.

“You come here, you eat my pie, you drink my milk, you send me running all the way across town, you almost get me killed. Then, to top it all off, you steal from my cat.” Her hands were doing more talking than she was. They jitterbugged crazily in front of her. When she paused to catch her breath, her hands went double time. “You, you... why don’t you go home? Why don’t you just go home to your parents, say you’re sorry for dying on them, and let me go back to work?”

Her hands finally slowed down; she let her arms fall to her sides. Shades, she was tired.

“I don’t have a home.”

Whether from exhaustion or the insanity of the afternoon or the terrified look on the little girl’s face, Tais started laughing. She laughed until her sides shook and her face hurt and she was gasping for breath. She laughed until wet, warm tears rolled down her face and the scratches on her cheeks were inflamed from the salty trails paving over them and suddenly she realized she wasn’t laughing anymore. She
was curled on the couch, not sure how she’d gotten there. The younger girl’s arms were wrapped around her. “It’s okay,” she was saying. “Please don’t cry.”

Tais sniffed then wiped her cheeks with the end of her sleeve. “You look like a tiny librarian in those clothes.”

Aillea smiled.

“Hey, I have a present for you.” Tais reached into her pocket and took out the book.

A fire lit in Aillea’s eyes. She practically bounced off the couch in excitement.

“He gave it to you? Is he okay? I was so worried about him. The new owners, they aren’t good people. Is he okay? Did you give him my message? They aren’t good people, not like you.” Without warning, Aillea went silent. Her boney fingers traced over the freshly blackened corner of the book. “Did he give this to you?”


“But you gave him my message?” For the first time since Tais’d been home, Aillea cocked her head and unfocused her eyes. A moment later she said, “It’s extremely important that you gave him my message.”

“I was going to.” Tais searched her rug for the black smudge. It wasn’t hard to find. “But then I, sort of, forgot it.”

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.” Aillea pressed her palms against her face as she writhed around the couch. It was hard to watch, Tais thought, she was finally showing her age. The coroner didn’t like meeting kids; they were so fragile, she never knew when they might break.
“KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK,” Aillea shouted from the heart of her tantrum.

“How hard is that to remember?”

“Well, I, you... Oh, and he! He took me to the attic in the basement, and then they, with the broom handle, and the foldable stairs, they unfolded the foldable stairs. He disappeared. But, but, the table smashed and the chandelier, it almost smashed, then the man with the gun, and the ringing, and I tripped on the book and I tried to help, and I ran.” Tais never looked away from the rug. “I hate running.”

The awful look appeared. Aillea’s lips moved, but no words came out.

“Stop it! Stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what?”

“That look. Why do you keep moving your head like that? What are you looking at?”

“What, this?” She looked past Tais and cocked her head.

“Yes, that.”

“I’m daydreaming,” Aillea said. “It’s how I talk to him.”

“Talk to who?”

“You wouldn’t know him,” Aillea said. Tais glared at her and motioned for more; Aillea rolled her eyes. “He’s not from around here.”

Perfect, Tais thought, she has an imaginary friend. Because she’s eight. And that’s what eight year olds do: they play make believe.

Before Tais could smother her head against a throw pillow in frustration—something she almost never did—Aillea said, “Tell me what happened.”
“I don’t want to talk about it.” All Tais wanted was to sit in the tub with cheap wine and lukewarm sausage rolls and to get some sleep so she could go to the job that she liked fresh and rested and she could continue to like it.

Unfortunately, when Tais opened her mouth again, instead of explaining this like a reasonable adult, her story spilled out instead. Not all of the important parts came back to her, but the broomstick and the gunshot and the ringing all made appearances. Aillea’s expression became more and more sullen as the telling went on, but she managed to listen fast without interrupting.

When Tais finished, she looked to Aillea, expecting her to cock her head and look past her. Instead, the younger girl held eye contact and said, “I wish you hadn’t forgotten my message.”

“They had a gun,” Tais said. “I really don’t think ‘keep up the good work’ would have changed much.”

“No, it would have changed everything. You just don’t understand.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of this. Want to know something else? I’ll bet you couldn’t explain it to me if you tried.”

Aillea looked at her curiously. Not condescendingly: she didn’t cock her head to the side and the look didn’t make Tais feel left out in the cold for once. In an odd way, Tais was flattered. For all the time she’d spent curious about Aillea, it was the first time she felt any sense that the curiosity was reciprocated.

“Marville is a silkie,” Aillea said.

“A what?”
“A house fairy.” Aillea waited for a question that never came. She decided to answer it anyways. “Have you ever come home and the dishes were done or your clothes were folded or there was a mint on your pillow and you didn’t remember putting it there?”

“No.”

“That’s because you’ve never had a silkie living with you. I mean, where do you think pillow mints come from? Hotels don’t buy them. They could never afford to put a mint on every pillow every morning. But silkie’s don’t care about money. All a silkie wants is to live in a clean house with owners who appreciate it.”

“And when the owners don’t appreciate it?”

Aillea shook her head. “When the owners don’t appreciate it, a silkie becomes a boggart.”

“I take it that’s bad?”

“It’s bad for the owners. You have to understand: nothing matters to a boggart except revenge. It will haunt them over the edge of the world if it has to. Which is why I needed you to tell Marville to keep up the good work. Because I can’t talk to him when he’s a boggart. He’s too busy. And he’s the only one who knows how to find the tall man.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know his name,” Aillea said quickly. “Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh, no, we’re way past that. We were past that the moment you decided to wake up in my morgue. Come on, Seelia, what are you so scared of?”
Aillea’s eyes widened, she hugged her arms around the book and scooted away from Tais until her back was against the armrest and the coroner’s head was at a safe, yet kickable distance.

“Marville told me,” Tais explained. She thought her tone was soothing, but soothing from a coroner is not the same as soothing from someone else—unless that someone else is a mortician; Tais never understood why anyone would want to be a mortician.

“Marville also said you wouldn’t be alive if it didn’t work. I’m guessing it didn’t work.”

Aillea nodded, but she didn’t move any closer or relax her kicking leg or loosen her grip on the book. If anything, she held it closer.

“He had no right to tell you.”

“Maybe not, but he did. And if you’re in some kind of trouble, I’ll try my best to...” she took a hard breath, “to help you. But if I’m going to help, I have to know: who is Seelia?”

Aillea looked at the floor for guidance. “I can’t tell you.”

“She’s you, isn’t she? That’s your real name.”

“Stop.”

“And you’re scared whoever gave you those cuts and bruises is still out there. You’re scared to go home.”

“I told you, I don’t have a home.”

“Was it the men at the Horse and Quarters?”

No audible sounds came out, but she mouthed the word, no.
“Was it your parents? Did they hit you?”

“Don’t talk about my parents.”

“I know someone did some bad things to you. I know you didn’t die peacefully. Please, Seelia, tell me what happened.”

“Don’t call me that. Don’t ever call me that,” the girl was nearly screaming.

“My name is Aillea.”

“Alright.”

“And just because Marville told you a few things about me, doesn’t mean that you know me. You don’t know me.”

“But, I—“

“Me and you, we’re from different worlds. You can’t help me.”

“I can try.”

“No, you can’t. You couldn’t even deliver my message right. You’re not cut out for my world.”

The coroner looked at her patient blankly, trying to find her words.

Aillea found hers first, “I don’t need your help anymore.”

“I can hel—“

“And I don’t want your help.”

“Fine.” Tais shoved off from the couch. “But the next time you need a favor, don’t come to me.” She turned her back on Aillea. It looked very dramatic, very final.

It was met by the crinkling of agitated cushion covers as Aillea shifted forwards.

“Wait.”
Her voice drifted by shy and sweet: a striking departure from how she had sounded a minute before.

Tais glanced over her shoulder, half expecting some kind of magical force to carry her back. She was half right.

“There is one, small thing you could do. Will you tell me a bedtime story?”

“I don’t know any bedtime stories,” Tais responded reflexively.

“It doesn’t have to be a good one, and it doesn’t need a happy ending either. I just don’t want to be me for a little while.”

“Alright,” Tais sighed. She hated how young the girl was: it made it very difficult to stay angry with her with any real conviction.

She thought back to the stories she’d heard from her grandmother when she was growing up; she thought about merrows and soul pots and goblins hiding their eggs in henhouses; she thought about ley lines and leprechauns, red hatted travelers and sprouting gnomes. She thought about love stories and how they made the particles in her swollen airways flutter like snowflakes in a glass globe. They weren’t true though, at least not their endings. Love stories always ended too early.

So she thought about the stories that were truly important to her.

“A1,” she began. “Male. Thirty-four years old. Admitted the Sunday before last with teeth marks and bruising on either side of the neck. Probable cause of death: suffocation...” Tais was the hero and she helped them all in their own, small ways: exposing a treacherous mistress to a grieving widow, discovering warning signs of congenital brain disease, raising awareness about the possibilities of inheriting a nut
allergy. The stories lasted late into the night. No one lived, happily-ever-after or otherwise.

Chapter 5

On Saturday, Tais woke up alone on the couch. Sunlight was streaming in through the window. She scanned the room, but Aillea was long gone.

Quick as algort mortis, the panic set in. For the first time since she could remember, she had closed Ms. Cleary’s early. Now, also for the first time, she would be opening it late. She pictured a pile of black body bags stacked against the door, slowly decomposing, while the local boys threw rocks at them, halting only as, one-by-one, they gathered up the courage to come close, poke a bag with a stick, then run away cackling.

Her stomach growled at her, but there wasn’t time to waste on a luxury like eating. Coffee was waiting for her at Ms. Cleary’s: that’d have to be enough. She snatched her keys from the table by the door and left her apartment wearing the same clothes as the day before.

If she’d had more time to look around, Tais would have found Marville’s book on the nightstand beside her bed with a note taped to the cover, which simply read, *Keep safe. I’ll come back for it soon.*

When Tais reached the morgue—breathing heavily: she’d fought off the urge to run, but power walking had taken its toll—she was encouraged to find the
sidewalk in front of the shop corpse free. On the sign above the door, Ms. Cleary smiled on her reassuringly. She took out her keys, unlocked the door, flipped the CLOSED sign to OPEN, and went about her morning routine.

It came as no surprise that a few, hardly noticeable, mistakes had been made during her mad rush to leave the previous afternoon. For example, the ledger was open on her desk instead of stored away in its cabinet, the coffee pot was sitting mostly full between the brochures, and the corpse she had left in mid-autopsy was still out on the table. A small army of maggots was crawling around its exposed small intestine. The corpse stared at her accusingly.

“Calm down, Mr. Holiday,” she said. “You already had one heart attack.”

Tais zipped up the rubber bag and rolled Mr. Holiday back to his locker, all the while hoping he was scheduled for an open casket. She imagined the look on the unwitting mortician’s face when he unzipped the bag and was justly set upon by scores of angry flies. It was exactly what she needed to kick-start her day with a smile.

The morning slipped away quietly. Tais kept busy reviewing old cases and confirming pick up times for the pale green man in B3, the woman from C2 with the lavender tint, and the guest in E4 who had overstayed her welcome and was verging on charcoal. After a few hours solid work, Tais slipped out to grab a cold sandwich from the deli across the street. When she returned, a uniformed man was in the waiting room standing beside a loaded gurney. She processed the new resident quickly, signed the paperwork, and sent the man on his way. It was the only delivery
she received all morning and she was grateful for the light workload, as it gave her time to consider the events of the previous day.

   Sandwich in mouth, she thought about the dead girl.

   Seelia—though she’d shied away from the name—was one of Ms. Cleary’s great mysteries: the only one to ever walk out. Tais formulated several hypotheses: cutting the insect out of her foot had somehow roused her; Tais’s screaming had been loud enough to wake the dead; something inside the girl was animating her body—a shade or a spirit or the like; magic. A magician had once come to Tais’s school growing up. He wore a purple robe and a tall hat with white stars and carried a gnarled, wooden staff. ‘Look,’ he’d said, ‘nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeves.’ Then, without asking for audience participation, he’d pulled a clementine from behind Jimmy Butler’s ear. Jimmy had cried when the magician peeled then ate the clementine, certain something had been stolen from him.

   You can’t trust magicians, she thought. You never know when you might be forced to be a part of their trick.

   Tais swallowed hard to rid her throat of a conglomerate of dough and turkey and yellow cheese. When the magician had asked her if she wanted a slice of the clementine, she was one of the few students who’d refused, but Jimmy Butler never thanked her for taking his side. She wondered what happened to Jimmy Butler. Better for him that she hadn’t seen him since school.

   A bell rang.

   No, that didn’t happen, she thought.

   It did.
I’m not listening.

Maybe she’d been too hard on the girl. After all, she was only a kid. How could she have possibly known what was going to happen at the Horse and Quarters? Oh, no. She knew. She absolutely knew. She said she couldn’t go after Wednesday—or was it wouldn’t? She knew about the new owners. She knew the type of people they were. Tais reached into her pants’ pocket and removed the iron casting the owners had made her hold. It was shaped like a holly flower: nine points around the edge, with the stems etched in—a perfect replica of the scar behind Aillea’s ear.

The brand.

Tais didn’t want to think about the brand, or the type of person who would brand a little girl. The pain must have been—

“Why didn’t she say anything about the pain?” Tais wondered aloud.

She wiped a glob of mustard off her cheek, flinching when her fingers brushed against the scratches the insect had left behind. It was a shallow, nothing sort of injury, and it stung like all hell.

Even when she didn’t take the brand into account, the lacerations across Aillea’s back were deep, not to mention the gash in the sole of her foot where the insect had breached. And nothing. No complaints, no grimacing, no signs of pain at all.

A bell rang.

Stay away from the ringing, Tais thought. Nothing good happens when you investigate the ringing. Ignore it. Nothing’s ringing. I am at peace. What’s wrong with
you? What if there are more like her? Shut up, you’re at peace. Think of Aillea; think of the others, trapped in their lockers, awake and terrified. You’re cracking up. I have to help them.

“They’re dead,” she told herself. “They’re all dead.”

“Of course they’re dead, sweetheart. I assumed you knew that when you took the job.”

Tais jumped a foot out of her chair, nearly choking on her sandwich in the process. “Mr. Cleary! I didn’t hear you come in.”

“And here I was thinking I installed a doorbell for that very purpose.”

The owner of the morgue looked down at her through crescent-shaped lenses. His face was a series of points: from the tip of his chin to the end of his nose to the peak at the top of his forehead where his receding hairline was combed in straight, silver rows. On closer inspection, the hair wasn’t combed, but rather pulled back into a tight bun, which was fastened to the top of his head.

“I can explain.”

“Mmhmm and Ms. Cleary believes she can talk to ghosts. But I’ll let you in on a little secret: I don’t care what dear old Aunt Beadan has to say. There’s a reason Uncle Cinus drowned her in the bath.” The bun bobbled as he spoke. “Got it?”

“No excuses?”

“There’s a peach.”

Against her better judgment, Tais nodded. She hated being a peach, or any other kind of produce for that matter.
“Let’s try our hardest not to make any more mistakes, now. This is such a delicate business; we wouldn’t want your pretty little head to get the pretty little chop. Yes?” Mr. Cleary tapped the frame of his glasses with a finger.

“Of course.”

“Peachy. I believe you have something for me?”

After a second’s hesitation, Tais put down her pen and handed a copy of the ledger to Mr. Cleary. As soon as she let go, his hand slipped off the ledger and skid along the tips of her fingers. The ledger fell to the floor.

“Clumsy me. Do you mind? These old knobs aren’t as supple as they used to be.”

“What? Oh, yeah, right.” Tais forced a smile then bent down to pick up the papers. Mr. Cleary was busy readjusting his glasses when she stood up to return them. He fidgeted the frames into place on the bridge of his nose then skimmed over the top page.

“You forgot to do the autopsy report again.”

“He only came in an hour ago. I was going to do the report after lunch.”

“Good for you, but, I must say, this isn’t the first inconsistency I’ve found in your work. I’m beginning to think I’ve been too lax with you. Those doe eyes will only get you so far, little darling. Let me ask you something, and I want you to be honest, do you enjoy working here, Miss Ponder?”

“Yes, sir. Very much.”

“Now, that’s just peachy. Though, I suppose it must get lonely working day after day with no one here to talk to. You start hearing voices? Mmhmm? Talking to
the patients?” Mr. Cleary fingered the corner of his frames. The motion reminded Tais of last year’s holiday party. Just him and her and an empty bottle of rum: not quite enough alcohol to kill a man, but enough to make Tais—far too sober to forget the torture the next morning—hole up in a locker for the evening, while Mr. Cleary spun the bottle on the morgue floor, shouting that it was her turn to have a go.

“Honestly, I don’t mind being alone,” Tais lied.

“You’ve been working here three years, if I’m not mistaken. That’s too long for something as lovely as you to stay on the shelf. You’ll have to move on sometime, sweetheart. It’s what he would have wanted.”

“I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Well, when you change your mind, you know how to reach me. Life goes on, Miss Ponder. You’ll do well to remember that.”

Mr. Cleary turned to leave, then turned back.

“The coffee in the waiting room is cold as death by the way.” The corners of his lips quivered, but he glanced at Tais before allowing himself a chuckle at his joke.

“We have fun here.”

“I know.”

They exchanged a glance. Mr. Cleary’s thin, angular eyebrows arched ever so slightly. Tais was the first to look away.

“Back to the grind, Miss Ponder. And remember, if you’re ever feeling lonely, I’m only a phone call away. Day or night.” Mr. Cleary pumped a motivational fist in her direction then waited until Tais returned the gesture before turning to take his exit. It was true what they said; chivalry was alive and uncomfortable.
A bell rang.

“Oh, shades, no.”

Mr. Cleary pivoted on his heel. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

He rubbed the corner of his frames. “I could have sworn I heard ringing.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Mmhmm.”

Tais clinked the metal holly flower against a file cabinet. "Was that the sound? I dropped my lucky charm a second ago, I bet that was probably it."

“I don’t think that was...” He nudged his glasses up towards his eyes. “Where did you find that little beauty?”

“What, this old thing? Family heirloom, I think. It’s been so long, I don’t remember.”

Mr. Cleary winked. “Well, hello Miss Ponder, I didn’t take you for the progressive sort.”

The holly flower was gray and dead in her open palm. Tais thought it looked like a million other knick-knacks she’d seen in store windows around Old Town.

“Sorry, sir, you’ve lost me.”

“You do know what that is, don’t know?”

Tais shook her head, helplessly. “A holly flower?”

“Unless Ms. Cleary is mistaken, what you’ve got there is a fairy trap. A good one, too, by the looks of it. I’ve never seen one with such fine detailing.”
Tais thought about the way the owners of the Horse and Quarters had slipped the holly flower into her hand from behind. It had come as a surprise, although the only trap she could think of had been sprung on them by the boggart moments later.

“You don’t really believe in fairies do you, Mr. Cleary?”

“Ms. Cleary does. Why, she leaves a bowl of milk for them on our porch every evening. I know that sounds silly, but we’re up near Old Town. Folks are a little more superstitious upriver.”

“I hear it’s all swingers and sociopaths up that way.”

“Well, sweetheart, I suppose that all depends on who you asked,” Mr. Cleary said sternly. “Let’s go ahead and fork that baby over.” He took the holly flower from her outstretched hand—lingering against her flesh longer than necessary to pick up the cast. He scraped it against a molar. “That’s iron alright. Ms. Cleary won’t let me carry the stuff, says fairies can’t stand it. Terrible luck to insult a fairy, if you listen to her.” Mr. Cleary flashed open his jacket, revealing an iron chain hanging from the inner-pocket. He winked. “Way I see it, a little bad luck’s just what the doctor ordered in our line of work.”

He handed her back the holly flower. “I wouldn’t carry that too openly next time you head upriver. Not everyone’s as advanced in their thinking as we are.”

“I didn’t know.”

A soft hand flopped down around her shoulder. “Of course you didn’t, that’s what I’m here for.”

“Er, thanks.”
His thumb pressed gently against the nape of her neck, tracing small circles into her skin. His fingers batted at loose strands of her hair.

“I’d better get back to work.”

Mr. Cleary eased his hand off her neck and, winking again, pumped his fist in the air. She forced a crooked smile and nodded.

“There’s my peach,” Mr. Cleary encouraged. “No more mistakes, now.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll try my best.”

“Don’t hesitate to call me if you ever need anything,” he made guns out of his thumbs and forefingers then shot her full of imaginary bullets. “I’ll be waiting.”

Tais remained absolutely silent until she heard the front door close behind him. Then, and only then, she breathed an enormous sigh and allowed her body to slump into the chair. Her half-eaten sandwich sat on top of its paper wrapping on the desk; she picked it up in one hand and tore into it, hoping it might settle her upset stomach. She whittled the sandwich down to where the bread met the foil wrapping then took up her copy of the ledger and shuffled across the office, eager to get back to work and put the whole conversation to bed.

Her apron was hanging from a peg on the wall; Tais lifted it off and slipped it on. The caressed skin near her collarbone itched beneath it. Not in the good way, either. She wondered what Ms. Cleary would have done if she’d been there. Odds were she would have been too busy weaving clover chains to notice any funny business.

The itching persisted. In the long run, having a boss like Mr. Cleary was a small price to pay for keeping a job she liked and that she liked that she liked. Still,
Ms. Cleary’s House for the Dead had a strict policy against office romances and—even if it had only been established for the joke—Tais thought the policy was excellent.

With the sandwich wedged between her shoulder and chin, Tais used her freehand to unwind the foil at the butt of the sandwich. The foil caught around the corner of the bread. She tugged, the bread pulled apart, and the entire top layer of turkey flopped onto the floor.

Tais looked around, making certain no one had seen, then knelt down to pick it up. She had nearly finished wiping particles out of the turkey’s mustard casing when she heard a voice coming through the stainless steel door.

“Yes, I recognize him... No, I’m not going to cry... I don’t have to talk to you, you know... Yes... Yes, I know... Don’t bring my shadow into this. We already agreed you could keep it once I’m finished... So stop talking about it... I can’t turn the lights off; I won’t be able to see what I’m doing... Quit complaining, you’ll get used to it... You’re worse than Tais...”

The coroner’s ears perked. She shoved her face into the door until her cheek smushed flat against it. But, no matter how hard she listened, she couldn’t make out a second voice to complete the conversation.

“Did you see where she stores the scalpels? ... Because I need to cut him, that’s why. What else would I do with a scalpel? ... You’ll get used to it... I don’t care... Do you know or not? ... You aren’t any help at all... I’m nine. I’m not supposed to know how to do that. What’s your excuse?”
On the other side of the door, Tais had risen to her knees and was leaning an ear and both palms flat against it. Her partially reconstructed sandwich sat on top of the ledger at her side. The voice was still muffled and difficult to make out at times, so she forced the seal between her ear and the steel ever tighter. Unfortunately, in doing so, she forgot one simple fact: for her convenience, the door was built to swing both ways.

The next thing she knew, Tais was laying face first against the morgue floor. Her upper half was inside the morgue, her lower in the office. She had just enough time to let out a low moan before the door swung back and gradually thudded to a rest against the top of her head.

“Tais? What are you doing down there?”

Never investigate the ringing, she thought. Shades above, how hard is that? Maybe if I don’t look at her, she’ll go away.

“Why are you on the floor?”

I bet morticians never have this problem. Social, freaking, butterflies. Tais lifted her chin off the ground. “Oh, hi, Aillea. I didn’t see you there.”

The younger girl stood over her and held open the door. As dignified as she could manage, Tais picked up the ledger and sandwich, got to her feet, and stepped fully into the morgue. She swiveled around, expecting to see someone else in the room, and was surprised to find that it was empty. Only the morning’s delivery was out of his locker; the string had been untied from his toe and the body bag was unzipped down below his shoulders. A clump of white hair stuck between the slider
and the teeth of the zipper. Beard hair, mostly. The new patient had a remarkably full beard.

“You know, hair doesn’t really keep growing after you die. It’s just the skin retracts when it becomes dehydrated so it looks like the hair is getting longer. Fingernails too.”

“So?”

“Fun fact. Sorry. Were you talking to him?” She nodded to the corpse.

“No. Do you have a scalpel?”

“Yes.”

“Can I use it?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Please?”

“You’re not even supposed to be back here. If Mr. Cleary knew you were here he’d fire me in a heartbeat.” Tais glanced at the new patient. “Why are you here?”

“I was bored and you made your job sound like so much fun, I thought I’d give it a try.”

“Liar. You know him, don’t you?”

“Who?”

“Him. I heard you through the door. You showed up right after he did and now his bag is open and you want a scalpel. Which means you must have recognized him before they put him in the bag, which means you must have followed the officer from the scene.” Tais’s eyes went wide. “Which means you must have murdered him.”
“Okay, you caught me, I do know him. But I didn’t murder anybody. You can check for yourself.”

Without allowing the girl to stand too close behind her, Tais gave the patient a quick look-over. Strands of vegetation clung to his beard and hair: all too familiar symptoms.

“Alright, so you probably didn’t murder him. But how do you know him?” She placed a piece of mustardy turkey into her mouth absent-mindedly. “Oh, shades! Is he your father?”

“How old do you think I am?” Aillea looked annoyed. “He was my tutor. I watched him die two weeks ago,” she said too evenly.

“It takes a twisted mind to come up with a lie like that.”

“I’m not lying this time. Look.”

Aillea went to the table and slid the zipper farther down, she had to yank hard to pull it through the hair, but the clot split and left the pale, faintly graying body exposed. She pointed to a deep purple bruise in the fleshy area between his shoulder and armpit. At the center of the bruise, the skin was black and broken. Thin purple veins stretched a couple of inches in all directions around it.

The coroner dragged a finger over the bullet hole. She placed the ledger down on the counter; she shoved the last bites of bread in her mouth; she swallowed hard; she went back to the patient and tried to lift his arm. The joint was stiff and didn’t want to move. She forced it, but couldn’t find any trace of an exit wound.
“I could believe he was shot two weeks ago, but it’s not what killed him. Actually, it looks like it was treated. Do you see those notches in the skin? Someone went through a lot of trouble to dig out the bullet.” Tais placed the man’s arm back on the table. She went to the counter against the wall and removed a pair of metal tongs from a drawer. On second thought, she took out a pair of latex gloves as well.

“Bodies usually start to decompose after two or three days. You’ll notice the skin turning green first, then purple, then black. Now, if he died two weeks ago, like you said, he’d be in the black putrefaction stage. His skin would be soft like cottage cheese, he’d be leaking fluids, and he would stink. Bad. This guy isn’t even tea green yet.”

“I know what I saw.”

“You might have seen him get shot, but unless you saw him yesterday or this morning, you didn’t see him die. Rigor mortis only lasts about thirty hours, and he’s stiff as a board.”

Tais pushed a gloved thumb into the tip of corpse’s nose then inserted the tongs into a nostril. When she pulled them back out, a green, dark mass was seized between the tips. “Ah-huh, I thought I might find this here.”

“What is it?”

“Raimeis weed. They plant it in the sewers because it acts as a natural deodorizer. You’ll find it in the nostrils, throat, and lungs of a lot of drowning patients in this part of the city.”

“How did you know he drowned?”
“Educated guess,” Tais said. “I get the impression you two knew the same, wrong people. It made sense you’d show the same symptoms.”

“Except, I didn’t drown—“

The coroner plucked a dried sliver of weed out of Aillea’s hair and held it in front of her face.

“I found it in your nostrils and throat, too. I took most of it out for you.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“Just doing my job.” Actually, removal was a mortician’s job, but they obviously couldn’t be trusted, so she’d taken the responsibility upon herself. Suddenly it dawned on her. The reason she’s felt so compelled to help Aillea, why she hadn’t been able to turn her back on her, why she couldn’t get the girl out of her mind. It was all a part of her job.

“Hold on,” Aillea said. “If Tad was in the sewer, why was the officer pulling his body out of the Nathare Major this morning?”

Tais shrugged. “A few of the central sewer lines pour into the river a little north of here. Bodies tend to get caught in the locks; I see a lot of this kind of thing. Although...” She pulled back the corpse’s ear, frowned, then circled the table and pulled back the other ear; she nodded. “This particular scarring pattern is new to me. I have a theory about it, though. Could you hold out your hand?”

The girl looked up at her curiously, but she did what she was asked and held her hand out over the table. Tais slipped the fairy trap into her palm then gently closed the girl’s fingers around the nine-pointed flower. She stared into Aillea’s eyes the way Querry had stared into hers. A wisp of black smoke rose through her irises.
The smoke spread as the girl continued to hold the iron flower. In a matter of seconds, the entirety of her eyes had gone black. Tiny white specks caught the light from time to time and they shimmered like stars on a moonless night.

“That’s interesting.” Tais licked at a piece of yellow cheese stuck between her teeth.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m not sure. But I think I just found it.” The coroner brushed Aillea’s hand as she took back the holly flower. Her skin was ice to Tais’s touch. “How do you feel? Tired? Sick?”

“No.” The darkness dripped out of her eyes. Their color returned to normal.

“No chills? Your hand doesn’t feel cold to you?”

“My hands are always cold.”

“Colder than usual.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I guessed as much.”

Aillea studied the coroner with what Tais hoped was a new sense of appreciation. The skin on the girl’s hand remained stark white in the shape of the holly flower, as if blood was refusing to move through it. The coroner took off her glove to feel her own skin beneath the cast. Brown and warm. She held Aillea’s palm again, and closed her eyes to compare the two solely by touch.

“You’re really into this stuff,” Aillea said.

“What can I say? I like my job.” Tais held out the holly flower for her to see.

“Do you recognize this symbol?”
“Of course I do. It’s the Seanda family signet.”

Despite asking the question, Tais hadn’t really expected an answer. She turned the flower in her hand to take another look for herself. “Huh, okay. How do you know that?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Alright,” the coroner mulled out the syllables slowly, thoughtfully, like a piece of cheese recently come loose on her tongue. She swallowed it. “Do you know where we can find the Seanda family?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if it’s their signet, maybe they could tell us why the new owners of the Horse and Quarters made me hold an iron cast of it.”

Aillea looked confused. “I know where they are, but that’s not going to help me.”

“Sure it will. There’s one connection I can see between you, the new owners, and the scars I’ve been finding lately. They all have the Seanda family signet. Now, all we need to do is find the Seanda family and figure out why.”

“Let’s get something straight: there is no we. I need to figure this out.”

“But, I’m helping.”

“No, you’re not. I already lost Marville because of you,” Aillea said. “And, even if you had delivered my message—which you didn’t—your theory still doesn’t help me. It doesn’t even make sense. There is no Seanda family signet anymore because there is no Seanda family anymore.”

“Yes, there is. You said you know where to find them.”
“I do. I know which graveyard they’re buried in.”

“Is it possible there’s a surviving relative you don’t know about?”

“Let me try to explain this in a way you’ll understand. You know those antiques you love so much? There’s a reason they’re called Seandan-era. The Seandan royal family died out over two hundred years ago. They have nothing to do with any of this.”

“Why use the holly flower?”

“I said they died out. All at once. No survivors. Believe it or not, that sort of thing doesn’t happen all that often. The Seandans were cursed.”

“If that’s true,” Tais said, “how come someone branded it behind your ear?”

Aillea slowly moved her hands to her ears. Hidden beneath her left earlobe, she found a bump, too small and smooth for the intricate detailing on the iron casting, but she could make out the swooping outline and, with an effort, counted all nine of the tiny points on her finger.

“You couldn’t feel it before, could you? Just like you can’t feel the lacerations on your back or how the iron froze the blood in your veins or the raimeis weed that’s still in your lungs.”

A boney hand dropped from behind Aillea’s ear and landed on the other side of the flat-collared blouse from her chest.

“I spend all my time with dead people, Aillea. I was going to figure it out sooner or later.”

“What do you want?”

“I told you last night. I want to help you.”
“Well, you can’t.” Aillea looked around the morgue. Her gaze lingered on the old man. “You can’t help Tad, you can’t help Seelia; you can’t help any of the people in here. They’re gone. They’re all gone and you can’t bring them back.”

Tears began building in the corners of her eyes, but she didn’t move to wipe them away. Judging by her expression, she was filing her tax return. Judging by her voice, the world was coming to an abrupt, violent end.

“Aillea,” Tais said gently. “Who is Seelia?”

“She’s gone, like all the rest of them. Tad told her to escape, but she couldn’t. Not without the tall man.”

“Why wouldn’t she leave without the tall man?”

“I saw it happen. I saw it happen and I couldn’t do anything to stop it.”

The tears began to fall, leaving trails of wet leading down to her chin. Even when they splattered against her arms, Aillea never noticed them.

“What happened to Seelia?”

“She went back for the tall man a few days later. Marville told her not to, but she couldn’t escape. She couldn’t let him get away with it. She went back. The tall man wasn’t there. She looked and looked, but she couldn’t find him.”

“What did the tall man do? Why did Seelia need to find him?”

Aillea looked away.

“I know you don’t want to think about, but this is very important. What did the tall man do, Aillea?”

“He killed them,” she whispered.

“What about Seelia? Did the tall man kill Seelia, too?”
A glint caught in Aillea’s eye, she cocked her head and stared at the blank wall behind Tais. “Don’t say that, I know what I saw... I know what he was... He was like you: he was from your world... Don’t call me that! Don’t ever call me that! My name is Aillea... No, it’s not. Seelia’s gone.”

“Shhhhh, it’s okay, Aillea, it’s okay. No one’s calling you that. It’s okay.” Tais took the girl by the shoulders and held her steady. “Try to remember, Aillea, do you know how Seelia died?”

Aillea straightened her head. Her eyes swam back into focus. They were dry and hollow. Pink blotches spread from the creases on either side of her nose. She sniffled and, for the first time, she realized she’d been crying.

“Yes,” Aillea said. “She drowned.”

The dead girl rubbed her eyes on her sleeve and ran out of the morgue.

Chapter 6

“Why did she have to eat my pie?”

Tais was sitting on the couch in her living room. Her blue-glazed vase was balanced in her lap and she was straightening sunflowers—not exactly an impulse buy, more of a memory-of-an-impulse buy—which, because sunflowers weren’t in season, were made of plastic and smelled faintly of ammonia.

She was hungry. And she was talking to herself. The two often went hand-in-hand.
“I bet she couldn’t even taste it. If she wanted something to chew on, I could have given her a bag full of celery and she wouldn’t have said a thing.”

Tais groaned and put the vase down on the coffee table; she went into the kitchen and poured two glasses of wine; she almost called his name then she remembered and combined the glasses into one, large glass, which she took back with her to the couch.

A meow snuck in through the window.

“Mortie, is that you?”

“Meow.”

Tais went to the window and tilted open the panel. A lanky, gray-striped alley cat slunk in through the crack, carrying a dead rat in his mouth. Water dripped down his coat, gathering largely in footstep-shaped puddles on the floor.

Before Tais had a chance to stop him, Mortie presented the rat to the corner of her rug.

“Oh, Mortie, no.”

The cat looked up at her expectantly.

“No, I don’t want your rat,” Tais said. “It smells.”

“Meow,” he replied.

Cautiously, he approached her pant legs, deemed them satisfactory, then rubbed up against them, arching his back while he did it. A thick, gray layer composed primarily of cat hair and muck water became the newest addition to her black slacks, which were already sporting mustard, human blood, and a small
amount of formaldehyde solution that she couldn’t remember spilling that day. It was definitely formaldehyde, though; it had that irritating carcinogen smell about it.

“You wouldn’t steal my pie, would you, Mortie? Nope, you’re a good kitty.”

She watched as he pawed at the ledge beneath the windowsill. His claws scraped away long lines in the wallpaper. She quickly convinced herself she’d been meaning to tear it out anyways and the vague, unsupportable notion that he was trying to help only made Mortie more endearing to her.

Tais went into the kitchen and found an old dishtowel. She scooped up the rat and set it on the coffee table between the vase and the wine. The sound of Mortie’s scraping at the wall beneath the windowsill intensified briefly then came to an abrupt stop. He cocked his head to the side and glared at her inquisitively.

“I’m sorry, Mortie, I’m all out of milk.”

“Meow.”

“I can’t get more. The stores are all closed.”

The answer did not come in the tone Mortie was hoping for. Without another meow, he gave her one more glance then sprung onto the window sill and slid out onto the ledge, leaving only footprints, puddles, hair, and a dead rat to remember him by: quite a lot really. Tais breathed in the remains of the musky cat smell. She coughed.

After holding back for two days, the rain finally started to fall. It came in through the crack in the window, which Tais was hesitant to shut in case Mortie had a change of heart and decided to come back inside. She knew a cat needed to have its
space, but choosing to stay out in the rain over being warm and dry with her stung more than a little.

    Tais found a second dishtowel and wiped wet cat hairs off her pants. She stared at the window then at the bundled rat on her coffee table.

    "It wasn’t raining when I let him in,” she said. She wrinkled her nose, defeated. “Oh, I thought I smelled sewage."

    She let her pants fall on the living room floor; she washed her face and hands and brushed her teeth; she went to her bedroom and closed the door behind her; she turned on the lamp: the bulb flickered and crackled, settling finally into a dim, yellowish-green color; she noticed the book on her nightstand and read the note, *Keep safe. I’ll come back for it soon.*

    Not too soon, she hoped as she crawled between the sheets of the bed built for two. “I could use a night to myself,” she lied.

    Tais turned off the light.

    The problem with sleep is that it tends to come on a want, rather than a need basis. While Tais knew she needed a good night’s sleep, what she really wanted was to figure out what happened to Seelia. So she stared at the ceiling. Then she stared at the ceiling. For a while she stared at her pillow, but that made her neck sore and the fabric wasn’t as soft against her eyeballs as it was against the back of her head, so she stared at the ceiling again. At one point she forced a yawn. It didn’t fool anyone.

    Finally, she gave in and flipped the light back on. She rearranged the pillows against the wall to lean against while she sat up in bed. The book was sitting in arm’s reach, so she picked it up and began skimming through it. Unsurprisingly, Tais had
been an excellent reader in school. She measured her excellence on quantifiable variables: how many books she had read, how quickly she had read them, the number of librarians she was on a first-name basis with—all three of them, and the woman who temped behind the front desk every other Tuesday. She was called Sophie.

The book wasn’t written in any language Tais had seen before. The alphabet was familiar and she thought it might be a precursor to Telfarian because a few of the words looked similar—though not enough for her to string together titles or, shades forbid, full sentences. By and large, she flipped through for the pictures.

Each image was hand drawn directly onto the page. Try as she might, Tais couldn’t find any inkblots or errant scratches or mistakes of any kind. Whoever the artists were, they were very good. And very scientific, as well. A consistent theme ran through the images: dragons. Dragons breathing fire, dragons eating horses, dragons being ridden by men with pointy hats, dragons in stables with smoke rising from their nostrils. Detailed schematics depicted draconic anatomy: skeletal structures, digestive tracts, circulatory systems, thoroughly measured wingspans. Nearer to the end she discovered a variety of horns, snouts, claws, eyes, scales, spikes, and tails to sort through as well.

On the last page of the book, Tais found a map of the Kingdom. It was unique in that the Fog wasn’t filled in as it had been on every map she’d ever seen growing up. In the place where the Fog should have been, a vast mountain range had been drawn and labeled ‘Naide.’ Tais turned the page and let out a surprised cough.
The drawing on the back of the map was simple, far simpler than the measured, anatomical compositions making up the majority of the book. It looked as though someone had added it in after the rest of the book was already put together. It was smudged in a few places and was drawn in long, continuous lines rather than short, exact pen strokes.

A bowl was sitting on a porch. Ripples had been drawn into it to show it was filled with some sort of liquid. The rest of the page was covered with tight crosshatching that extended from top to bottom and side to side, and covered any trace of a background. Except for the eyes. There were many sets of eyes in many different sizes. Some were shaped like eggs; others like walnuts or long green beans. One set was perfectly circular—though each eye was so small Tais wasn’t sure if they were eyes or if two drops of ink had accidentally been spilled next to each other. They stared at her. No matter how much she waggled her head, there they were. She could feel her airways begin to swell. She took a few, sharp breathes. It was funny. The kind of funny no one smiles at, but everyone says, ‘Isn’t that funny?’ And everyone nods along. It was just ink on paper, after all. It wasn’t real. Still, even beneath the covers, Tais felt a chill. All of the eyes were shaded black.

Mr. Cleary’s words festered inside her head.

_She leaves a bowl of milk for them on our porch every evening. I know that sounds silly, but we’re up near Old Town. Folks are a little more superstitious upriver._

Tais pictured Aillea sitting on her loveseat with the bowl of milk clutched between her hands and a satisfied smile on her face. _It’s not for me?_ she asked over and over again.
Tais set the book back on the nightstand; she threw the covers off of her legs; she slid out of bed and went back to the living room where she’d left the map. The Nathare Major wound like an enormous snake down the middle of Telfair. It past beneath the shadow of Telfair Castle north of Old Town, it split Old Town in half then dropped towards Ms. Cleary’s, bending west just before it reached the morgue; afterwards it slithered south and east again, through the southern slums then eventually spilled out of the city, where made its way southwest to Gelser and the sea.

Tais followed the river on either side of Ms. Cleary's with her finger. As she’d suspected, the nearest lock was upriver. The closest southern lock was around the bend to the west, well out of Ms. Cleary's jurisdiction. She knew Aillea had been present when they pulled the body out of the river. Now Tais also knew she had been travelling upriver at the time.

She was going back to Old Town.

How could you be so stupid not to realize that?

I had a lot on my mind, Tais told herself, but she came back to Ms. Cleary’s, that must have bought me some time. I can still save her.

You’d better. Shades almighty, I will.

The rain beat in through the crack in the window, spreading across the floor in a long, shallow pool. It reached the edge of the rug at the same time that Tais ran out the door. She left without a hat or a raincoat, but she had a flower in her pocket and she knew where she was going. She just didn’t know what she would find when she got there.
Chapter 7

The cobblestone streets were slippery in the rain. Cracks between the stones filtered small streams, which branched out in regular intervals into other, larger canalled cracks, forming a vast network left to surge uncontained around truck tires and bootstraps. Automobiles were rare around Old Town. The residents preferred it that way. Low exhaust, low commotion: money or prestige or some combination of the two could buy you these things in Telfair.

Tais ran through the empty streets, her dark hair plastered against her face. Black shirts and slacks sucked against her skin, they were heavier than they were meant to be: attempting to convince her to turn back. But there was no turning back. Too many mysteries went unsolved in Ms. Cleary’s; she wasn’t going to let this one slip through her fingertips.

The dead weren’t gone. She had to believe she could help them.

Tais turned the final corner and the Horse and Quarters came into view. Panting in the rain, she struggled to believe this was the same street she’d visited the night before. All the charm had been sucked out—it was broken, battered; it was Old Town stripped down to its bare essentials, flogged, humiliated, and left in the road to rot.

Tables and chairs were strewn across the street outside the Horse and Quarters like bodies on a battlefield. Broken glass littered the gaps between the
cobblestones, damming the canals, which were trying to force their way down the street. Smaller pieces flowed away in the water, but the larger ones remained, brown and green concave shards collecting reservoirs in the cavities above them or folding over and pushing the water around to the sides. Splintered table legs soaked up the rain, turning dark, and steadily warping the wood useless. Napkins, tablecloths, and laundry—clean or dirty, they would all need a good scrubbing afterwards—flapped in the wind or scurried over the stones, catching on corners and halting briefly, until the wind changed directions and the wind pulled them up and pulled them away. Everything was illuminated by streetlights, which lined either side of the fully furnished graveyard in regular intervals like soldiers standing guard for the next, inevitable, attack.

The sign above the door to the Horse and Quarters hung from one corner. Tais ducked beneath it. The door itself had been ripped from its hinges: it lay in the center of the main room, its large, glass window busted in. The melancholy men sat in chairs without tables and sighed like whirlwinds into the mugs they now had to hold in their hands.

Cheer up, Tais thought, at least you’re dry.

She made her way behind the bar, through the hole where the swinging doors had once been, along the thin corridor now bearing scratch marks on the walls. She paused at the stairs. There were voices coming from the kitchen.

“You hear that?” “Hear what? That’s the wind talking.” “Don’t go telling me it’s the wind, we both know damn well it’s not the wind. It’s him, he’s back for another turn.” “I’m telling you, we’re sorted this time. I got us a new trap. He can’t
touch us.” “I heard that one before.” “How could you a heard that one? I only got it an hour ago.” “We should a never agreed to run this place. Old Town ain’t what it used to be.” “Shut up, Querry. He’ll hear you. He’s got ears everywhere.” “I hope he damn well hears me. There’s nothing he could do to me that’d be worse than that fairy’s done already.” “You’re only saying that ‘cus you didn’t see them. If you saw them like I did, you’d shut your stupid mouth.” “That bad?” “Worse.” “Shades help us.” “In case you haven’t noticed, they don’t give two shits about us.” The owners were quiet for a while. Then the brother spoke up, “Okay, it’s time. Let’s go.” A scraping noise was followed by a loud, metallic clang. Their voices grew gradually quieter then faded away altogether.

The stairs creaked only once as Tais climbed down, one more time than she would have liked: a loud, booming creak to her ear. She might as well have fallen down the stairs for all the racket she thought she made. Shhh, your paranoia is too loud, they’ll hear.

She wove her way through the pots, pans, utensils, ladles, woks, plates, bowls, salad forks, and array of cups that decorated the floor along with puddles of beer and remnants of the barrels that once held it. She paid special attention to the beer and went out of her way to find dry paths around the hoppy ruins, only stopping twice for a taste.

A rusted iron grate lay upside down in the corner opposite the foldable stairs. A few feet away from it there was a circular hole in the floor—little more than a drainage well. The largest pool of beer was slowly pouring into it.
After finding a lantern in one of the rare, undestroyed cabinets, Tais crouched down beside the open drain and listened for anything that might be waiting for her on the other side, but all she could hear was the splatter of beer into Wet. At some point further north, the Wet might have been water, but not here. Here it wasn’t even altogether liquid. Here it was mush and pulp and clumps and clots and wads, all unified in Wet.

She held her breath and began counting to ten, easing herself into the sewer exactly the opposite of the way she would have plunged into a warm bath. Somewhere around six, her hand slipped on the beer-laden ladder and she fell the remaining few feet. She let out a small yelp before regaining control. The round roofed sewers magnified the sound; though the echoes remained quiet enough to be mostly masked by the dripping beer.

The Wet was up around her knees. A rat scurried across the walkway on the side of the sewer then leapt and splashed into it. Tais watched for its head to resurface, but she never saw it come back up. Only bubbles. And then nothing. Her heart beat heavy in her chest and her breathing quickened. She started to hum.

Her humming shaped itself into a familiar tune. It rose and fell into three verses, filling up the passageways with warm, soft sounds. Tais knew she should be quiet, but she couldn’t help herself; she wasn’t a spy; she wasn’t an adventurer; she was a coroner, and no one had ever told her to stop humming in her line of work.

Sticky, beer induced footprints lead away down the walk. Tais waded out of the Wet and followed them. The sewers branched and turned many times over—a maze of tunnels beneath the city. She wondered if the tunnels were created before
the rest of Old Town, or if they had been added later. By the looks of the grate in the
Horse and Quarters, she guessed they’d been around for a long, long time: secret
organs inside Telfair. She thought of Marville’s book with the anatomical drawings.
If she had to choose, the closest thing to the sewers would be a dragon’s circulatory
system. There were thin, tiny tunnels that branched off of much larger tunnels at
perpendicular angles—or near enough to them. She considered this for a second
then decided she was wrong. Everything was flowing south, out of Telfair, to Gelser
and the sea. If she was inside a dragon, she was in its digestive tract.

The footprints stopped at a four-way junction. She looked in each direction
for any clues as to which way they might have gone, but the beer had dried on the
soles of their boots, and the footprints dried up with it. The tunnels were identical
every way she turned and the flicker of her lantern shed barely enough light to see
ten feet in any give direction. The longer she remained stagnant, the more cramped
the sewer felt around her; the more claustrophobic she felt, the more hopeless the
situation appeared.

As her frustration rose to the surface, the humming became louder. And
louder. And louder. Tais stopped humming altogether, but the sound of the
humming went on until the rushing Wet could no longer be heard. The humming
rang out with crystal clarity, accompanied by words, loud, booming words that
unraveled into something like a song. Even before the boggart came into view, Tais
remembered the words.

Marville shot down the tunnel to her right. He wore a red hat and a green
jacket clasped at the collar. A pale, blue light shone out from the skin on his face,
neck, and hands. It backlit his goatee—which had grown so wild it was nearly touching his top lip—and the light trailed out behind him like a ghostly cape sewn together with lightning bugs.

Without hesitation—well, not without hesitation, but with an understandable amount of hesitation and no more than that—Tais followed. The light, as most lights do, moved very quickly within the tunnels and she had to run to catch the end of its glow each time Marville turned a corner.

After what seemed like hours of running, she heard voices around the next turn, low and nearly inaudible over the sound of the boggart’s song. She could make out the voices of both of the owners, as well as a third, new voice. The owners were cursing, Querry at the boggart, his brother at Querry. The third voice was as deep as it was angry. He cursed them all from the bottom of his lungs. Tais only just distinguished the words, “the hell did you think, it wouldn’t follow you?” “Help us! He won’t give us a moment’s peace!” “He’s about to be the least of your problems. Get out of here!”

The owners came flying around the corner dressed in gray robes that trailed off behind them. They might have noticed Tais, pressed into the shadows against the wall, but if they did, they didn’t stop to mention it. A sickening thump sounded around the corner, then Marville appeared, blindingly bright so near to her, and she was sure she heard him singing:

Mix them each morning;

Pour them that evening;

NEVER LEAVE HOME WITHOUT SOAPY BUBBLES!
When he was gone, Tais found herself alone in the dark. She stayed that way for several deep breaths; afraid moving might draw the attention of the third voice, silently hidden somewhere around the next corner. She smelled the odorless air and thought of Aillea with the rameis weed in her lungs.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a matchbook. The wood was damp, but the tip still struck and the flame held out long enough for her to relight her lantern. If she was going to face the third voice, she was going to do it in the light. She took one last, fluttering breath and turned the corner.

Chapter 8

The third voice belonged to an enormous man dressed in the same style of gray robe worn by Querry and his brother. It hung loosely off his body, which somehow only made his already bear-sized bulk look that much bulkier. In fact, he was so big that he covered most of the walkway from his position on the ground. His hood was pulled back off his bald head and a red line ran down his temple. A collection of pebbles and dust lay scattered around his head. Tais looked up. There was a rectangular hole in the ceiling where the brick had been forced loose.

She stepped quickly over his body, making certain not to touch it. She’d seen much less impressive injuries to much less vital parts of the body in the morgue, but she didn’t want to take any chances rousing the bear-man.

The tunnel grew wider afterwards and the Wet branched off in two directions, encircling a large area that was sunk, like an amphitheater beneath the
ground. Hanging lanterns cast a cold, harsh light over the scene, causing long shadows to form behind the columns that ringed the theater. The hum of voices filled the chamber, low and inaudible. Murmurs and whispers from hundreds of people, all thinking they were being quiet, but the cumulative effect was like a million buzzing flies trapped between windowpanes.

A thin, stone bridge was fixed over either branch of Wet. They were simple, made for one person to cross at a time with no handrail to keep a person from falling into the muck if she tripped over her own feet, as the she was known to do. Tais eyed the bridges warily. She picked the one on the right because it was shorter and concentrated intently on each step. She made it across without issue then found a collapsed column at the top of the amphitheater to hide behind. The corners of the stone had softened, forming rounded edges over what Tais could only guess had been century's worth of Wet flowing on top of them. Thank the shades the tide was low. She was in no mood to touch the Wet any more than she already had.

She peeped over the top of the column at the amphitheater below. Concentric semicircles made up of stone benches were nearly completely filled with people in gray robes. One hundred, two hundred, it was hard to tell exactly how many: the robes blended into one another, differentiated only by height and width. Their hoods were up, and the scene reminded Tais of a less cultish version of a coroners' conference.

At the base of the stairs was a small stage with a metal fire pit on either side. The stage was built against a rusted over sewage pipe—or, rather, the pipe was built across the stage. A man was tied to the pipe. He was shirtless and his pale skin had a
sickly, bluish tint to it. Smoke was coming out of his mouth. Tais squinted. No, not smoke. Steam. Smoke would continue to rise, the steam vanished inches from his mouth each time he exhaled. Either the air at the base of the stairs was much colder than it was at the top of the theater, or it was warm and his breath was incredibly cold. But, Tais thought, if his breath is that cold, the air in his lungs would have to be frozen. Her fingers brushed the holly flower in her pocket. She shuddered.

The buzzing of the crowd intensified as a robed and hooded figure approached the stage. He held up his hand and the buzzing ceased.

“How's everybody doing tonight?” he asked.

The crowd cheered.

“I said, HOW'S EVERYBODY DOING TONIGHT?”

Everybody screamed.

“Yes, sir, now that's more like it. That is more like it. Let me ask you all a question. Who here recognizes this monster?” The speaker waved vaguely in the direction of the prisoner.

“Mnhmm,” the robed audience buzzed.

“He's Queen's Guard!” somebody shouted.

“What was that?” The speaker pointed to a section of the audience. “I know I heard it somewhere over here.”

“Queen's Guard,” the man ventured a little more tentatively.

“Queen's Guard, you say? Yes, sir, that is correct. Now, I don’t know about you, but I remember a time when I was scared of these things. Scared the living
daylights out of me, I can tell you. Just look at it. Those lifeless black eyes, no shadow to be found like something out of a nightmare.”

“Mmhmmm.”

“Murderer!”

“Yes, sir, yes, sir. And don’t you worry, we’ll be addressing that later.” The speaker’s voice was sweet like molasses—it even had the same quality of sticking in your gut. “But, first, I’d like to share with you a little story.”

The audience buzzed excitedly.

“There was once a prince who lived in a big castle on top of a hill. You all know the one I’m talking about; you see it everyday, bearing down on you like a storm cloud ready to pop. Heck, I saw it on the ride in. Gave me shivers all the way to the bone.”

“Never trust a fairy!” Everyone cheered.

“Hang on, now. Hang on. We don’t want to get ahead of ourselves,” the speaker paused dramatically. “Now, this prince, he was what you might call gifted. What I mean to say is when he closed his eyes he could talk to his dreams. And, what’s more, his dreams talked back. He could hear them in his head, clear as you’re hearing me now. They whispered to him in the dark, told him secrets no one had heard before, showed him things no one had seen before. Over time, he learned how to speak the dream language. And with it, he did amazing things: beautiful, wonderful, amazing things.”

He paused. The only sound in the amphitheater was the rushing Wet around its edges.
“I wish I could say the story ended there, but you already know this story, and you already know it didn’t. They say each dream casts a nightmare in its shadow. It doesn’t make any difference how hard you try; you can’t have one without the other. For every wonder the prince brought into the world, a demon was birthed along with it.

“Now, I don’t know about you, but I hear that story and I ask myself, what good is building something wonderful if you’re only going to turn around and knock it right back down? Is that progress? Does that keep us moving forward? No, of course it doesn’t. It keeps us in the same dump world we were born into with no chance of ever getting out.

“And I’ll tell you another thing, when you play with fire, it’s only a matter of time before you’re going to get burned. This prince, this gifted boy, he found that out the hard way.”

The audience leaned forwards in their seats when the speaker went silent.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough ancient history for now. Let’s let this puppy off the leash. Everybody look under your seats. One of you lucky folks is going to win the opportunity to change the world tonight!”

The hive of gray robes shook as they ducked forward to check beneath their seats. They buzzed louder than ever before, lost in the chaos of the search. Finally, a thin robe in the third row rose above the rest. He held a branding iron over his head and howled victoriously as he made his way to the stage.

The speaker put his arm around the boy’s shoulders. “What’s your name, son?”
“Mac, sir.”

“Alright then, Mac. You know what to do with that thing?”

“Yes, sir. You got to mark the curse before you flush it away.”

“And why’s that?”

“Well, sir, that’s the thing about curses: they keep coming back. And when they do, you have to tell them for what they are.”

“Good man. Let’s get that poker in the fire.”

Tais leaned farther over the fallen column. Where was the tall man? She’d been so sure if she’d tracked the new owners of the Horse and Quarters, she would also find Seelia’s killer.

The speaker began talking again, pulling Tais’s attention back to him. He was kind of tall, she thought. That is to say, he wasn’t short. But, looking at him, she would not think ‘tall’ as his defining characteristic. It was harder to tell with the robe. Sometimes very skinny people looked taller than they really were.

A mound of dust and particles—she didn’t want to think about which particles she’d find in the sewers—swept over the column as a cold rush of air entered the chamber. The current of the Wet sped up, gaining mass from the rain-soaked world above. Tais felt her airways tighten in her chest. A hand slipped across her lips and mouth.

She almost screamed; she almost panicked and hurtled over the column; she almost bit and struggled; she almost blew her cover, but she didn’t. The hand was cold and tiny. Tais fought to regain control over her breathing.

“Get out of here,” Aillea whispered in her ear. “Turn around and run. Now.”
The dead girl lifted her hand away from Tais’s mouth.

“I can help you.”

“No, you can’t.”

“I can scream. I’m pretty good at it.”

Aillea unfocused her eyes and cocked her head. She frowned, shook her head, then finally nodded. “Fine. I’ll let you be my lookout.”

“What are you going to do?”

She pointed to the prisoner on the stage. “If he’s really one of the Queen’s Guard like they say he is, then he might know where I can find the tall man. I’m going to save him.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Stay here. Don’t move, don’t be seen, and don’t make a sound.”

“What if you’re in trouble?”

She shrugged. “Run.”

Before Tais could argue, Aillea had already climbed on top of the pipe and was crawling towards the stage. The crowd let out a roar and Tais looked towards the stage to see what had happened. The speaker was patting Mac on the back. The tip of the iron still glowed a sinister orange, but the prisoner’s expression was unchanged. When Tais turned back at the pipe, Aillea was gone.

The speaker whispered something in Mac’s ear and the boy went back through the crowd to take his seat. He was greeted in the stands by a rough series of backslaps and head pats.

The speaker raised his hand for silence.
“If there’s one thing I want you to take away from this evening, it’s this: the world is changing, yes, sir, and changing for the better. There comes an age in every man’s life when he no longer sleeps with the lantern low to keep the nightmares away. There comes an age when he no longer fears the shadows on a moonlit night. There comes an age when he sees change for what it truly is: a gift. Proof that we are moving forwards.

“Gentlemen, welcome to the Age of Progress. Together, we will leave the darkness in our wake. Together, we will step into the—“

A high-pitched scream cut the speech short. In an explosion of sparks, the hanging lanterns crashed to the ground, spilling oil, which caught fire faster than the robed congregation could scatter out of the way.

Tais ran.

She ran over the bridge and down the tunnel; she ran around one corner and then another; she ran hard enough and far enough that her lungs were screaming at her to stop by the time she was standing over the bear-man. Her lantern was turned to its dimmest output.

The bear-man was still breathing, but when she nudged him with her foot, he didn’t move. She pulled at his robe—grateful to see clothes underneath. The robe was stuck beneath his bulk and she had to tug and roll him in alternating phases before she could lift it off his torso. She had it halfway over his head before he came around.
“Wha—” Tais slammed the base of the lantern hard against his skull. The glass shattered and oil spilled, but the flame didn’t spread or extinguish and the bear-man didn’t move again.

She pulled the robe on over her clothes. It drowned her. The hood was big enough to fit two of her heads and her hands only came to the elbow in the sleeves. Worst of all was the length: the bottom of the robe dragged against the ground, nearly tripping her on multiple occasions.

The tunnels were loud with shouts and the scurrying sound of so many feet fleeing the amphitheater. Smoke poured out; it searched for exit points, but the sewers were sealed tight. Tais lost herself in a fit of coughing. Hundreds of robed figures ran past her, too preoccupied with escaping the carnage to notice her comically fitting attire. In fact, they hardly noticed her at all, except to push her to the side when she tried to make her way through them.

The stream of people thinned the closer she came to the amphitheater. She glanced at the Wet in the passage next to her: it was still rising, moving faster. Tais ran for the bridge. She was halfway across it when she stepped on the end of her robe and pitched towards the Wet. A pair of soft hands caught her around the waist.

“Whoa, easy does it, sweetheart,” a gray-hooded man said. “I’ve got you.”

“Thanks,” Tais said, dropping her voice to something of a growl. She tried to, at least. Most of the words wheezed out of her instead. “What’s going on down there?”
The man gave an all-too familiar chuckle. "We’re having an incy wincy problem with the lights. Nothing to be afraid of, we have it all under control.” He squeezed her hand reassuringly. “You have very soft hands, you know.”

Tais snatched her hands out from his grasp. She ducked her head to ensure her face was fully covered in shadows and smoke.

Mr. Cleary took a step back and looked down at her robe. “A little frumpy in all the wrong places, isn’t it? I keep saying, if you’re going to let in the women, you have to change the uniforms. Nothing progressive about robes, anyways.”

Tais reached down and lifted the end of the robe in one hand to keep it from dragging as she walked away.

“You can’t walk away from me. Don’t you know who I am, little sister? I’m the man who’ll make all your dreams come true.”

Tais couldn’t stop herself. “You have a wife!”

Mr. Cleary chuckled. “Only animals take shelter down here.”

Ignore him, Tais told herself. You’re only required to talk to him during work hours. But I’m the lookout. Fine, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Without looking back, she called out, “Is the speaker okay?”

“Who, Sumlin? He’s better than okay. I knew he was supposed to be good, but I had no idea how good. It was a peach of a speech.”

“I heard he tried to kill that Seelia girl.”

Mr. Cleary put his hand on her shoulder. Tais could feel the muscles in his thumb tense as they prepared for their circles. “The fae slut? Now, who told you about that?”
“Who told me?”

His thumb pulled back the edge of her hood; the nail brushed against her hair; his sweaty flesh grazed her skin.

“That’s right,” he said slowly, as if talking to a child. “It’s nasty business killing little girls. Nast, but necessary. Of course, I wouldn’t expect a girl to understand. I tried to tell the old lady, and she wouldn’t stop crying for half a day. Eventually I had to tell her, I said, if you don’t stop, I’ll tie you to the stovepipe.”

“What about the killer? What was his name?”

“So many questions. Mr. Sumlin doesn’t like questions. Who told you he hired the spook anyways? Was it Treff?”

Try as she might, she couldn’t think of a lie; all Tais could think about was that thumb and the lazy circles it was making against the side of her neck. Her skin itched. Smoke curled to the top of the chamber. Her chest tightened. She struggled more with each passing breath.

“Don’t be scared, sweetheart, you can tell me. I won’t bite.”

His thumb went up her neck and traipsed across her jawline. She could hear his breathing get heavier when he took a step towards her. It isn’t the worst idea in the world, she thought, although she refused to say something as obvious as, ‘I will.’ She waited until his thumb found her bottom lip. Her pulse soared.

“I will!” she yelled, before biting deep into his thumb. The words sounded even worse out loud than she had feared and she wished she hadn’t said anything at all, but she bit down hard—nearly to the bone—so at least there was that to be proud of.
Mr. Cleary cried out and struck back, catching her in the side of the head with a closed fist. Bright lights flashed in front of her eyes, but all Tais could feel was the line up her neck where her skin itched like a fresh row of mosquito bites. She ducked a second blow, causing Mr. Cleary to stumble off balance. He wobbled towards her. It was all the time Tais needed to hurl her shoulder against his gut. Mr. Cleary gasped as the air was forced out of him. He took one step back, then two and three. His arms flapped in small circles and he almost caught himself, but on the fourth step, his heel found the edge of the Wet. The rest of him was quick to follow.

The only gray robes who had hung around long enough to witness it, knelt at the side of the Wet, trying to fish a flailing Mr. Cleary out of the channel before the current carried him away.

Tais took the opportunity to hide in the shadows behind a row of stone columns. There was a gap in the stone where she could look down on the amphitheater. The stage was empty, the speaker gone. Fires burned in the pools of oil that dripped from step to step. The charred remains of several robes were visible at the edges of the fires, but the men inside had managed to slip out of them.

Her heart was beating too fast.

She held onto her knees and put her head between her legs. She fought to take in air. What she managed to inhale was singed with smoke and she coughed it up. Moisture formed in her eyes. They were dry and red and they itched, though nothing like the line on her neck. Tais tried to take another breath. She could feel the insides of her lungs swelling. Her muscles pulled taut. She coughed. It hurt. She let go of her knees and rubbed her eyes.
“Tais?” the voice was high and kind. “You idiot, I told you to run.”

“I did. Both ways. I want to help.”

“You can stop now.”

“Hey, I forgot to tell you,” Tais wheezed. “Mortie came back.”

“That’s good.”

The sound of rushing Wet nearly drowned out her voice, but Tais battled it to have her say. Everyone dies too early: a simple motto for complicated times. Not necessarily true, either. The coroner was determined to get to the last laugh.

“He left again when I didn’t feed him. I really hate cats.”

“Everyone does.”

Tais smiled. She could feel her heartbeat clunking away deep inside her, each beat throbbed up her neck and thudded to a stop against her skull.

“Did you save him?”

“Shhhh. Please, stop talking. Just listening to you is making my throat hurt.”

Tais’s airways squeezed over her organs and she fought to suck down breath. She rubbed her eyes. She squinted. All she could make out was a dark outline, like a shadow perched on the column above her. Her lungs contracted; she hunched forward and lost sight of the girl.

“I’m sorry, I would have left the milk for you if I’d known what you were.”

Tiny, cold hands wrapped around her neck. Tais could no longer feel the itching.

“Shhhhh,” Aillea soothed. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“I have another present for you.”
No matter how much air she sucked up, it could never be enough. Her heart beat heavy in her chest. She felt claustrophobic, like the chamber was collapsing in on her; the rusted iron pipes wrapped around the edges of her peripheries then expanding until her head hurt from the pressure. She tried to turn and see Ailea sitting next to her, but wasn’t able to move before the next inhale barreled towards her chest. Smoke burned in her throat and she coughed.

“I know his name.”

Black spots oscillated on the ground in front of her. One more thing, she thought, one more thing. I can still help.

“The person who hired the tall man, he’s called Sumlin.”

She felt cool arms give her one last squeeze and heard the words, “Thank you,” over the far away sound of someone wheezing. The lights began to dim and the shadows lengthened, and she knew what would happen next because she’d seen it so many times before. Tais imagined herself on a stainless steel table in a dark locker. A string was tied taut around her big toe. All it would take was the slightest wiggle—the most miniscule sign of life—and the bell would ring. It was so impossibly easy.

The coroner tried to laugh.