

In Between

C.E. Gustafson

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This version was published on 2013-12-24



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Chapter 1

When I died my last thought was “Shit.” Not very eloquent I know, but in my defense dying was kind of traumatic. There was a time when I believed that drowning, like dying in your sleep, would be a nice painless death. I was wrong. I had thought you would go unconscious before your lungs filled up with water and everything went to hell, but as it turns out your lungs filling up is what actually causes you to black out. So that was fun. For the record I did not actively try to drown. I had this ridiculous idea in my head that it would be a good idea to go sit by the lake and watch this giant storm come in. Clearly this was a bad idea. Hindsight is kind of a bitch.

Contrary to popular belief there was no bright light, and I did not go into said nonexistent light. It was just black. To my surprise I continued to think; making “shit” not actually my last thought but perhaps my last living thought. It’s an important distinction. My first dead thought was “Crap. I’m not ready for this!” So not really all that different. Unfortunately I was not given any time to gather myself as the blackness quickly began to fade, and my presumably dead eyes were greeted with a new sight.

I was lying on a bed more comfortable and pristinely white than any bed made in life; it supported your body in such a way that you felt as if you were lying on air. The room itself was tiny, about the size of two beds if they

were squeezed together, and the walls, floor and ceiling were at least five shades whiter than any white on earth. There were no windows, only a door which I cautiously approached. I'm not a big fan of surprises, and this was no exception. The room on the other side of my door was less a room and more a giant airport waiting area. It was kind of like one of those nightmares where you walk out of your bedroom and find yourself in a large room filled with people who, naturally, all turn around and stare at you. Granted no one actually stared at me, I suspect they were all used to random people popping out of doors, but it was still extremely awkward. If the room hadn't been as distracting as it was I probably would have stood there in shock for a very long time.

I likened the receiving area to an airport before, but that does not do it justice. I had emerged from a wall at the back of the room which, when the shock wore off I would realize, was actually covered in hundreds if not thousands of doors. The ceiling was arched and made entirely of glass, leaving the incredibly blue sky visible and bathing the room in a cheerful glow. White marble pillars stretched up from the sides of the room to support the awe inspiring ceiling, leaving the rest of the room open. The tiles on the floor were iridescent, as if each one was made from mother of pearl. Altogether it was very distracting. The room seemed to stretch on forever and was filled with people milling about wearing what looked like white hospital gowns, luckily with backs. Glancing down I realized that I too was wearing one of those awful gowns, this was going to be

interesting. Finally working up the courage, I stepped out into the room and worked my way over to one of the desks. These desks were spaced out evenly between the pillars, each one manned by what I assumed was a person who was also dressed in white. Boy was I starting to hate that color.

The woman at my desk seemed friendly enough, what with her sandy blonde hair pulled loosely into a ponytail and a splash of pink around her neck in the form of a scarf. Her smile was a bit too bright for my taste, but then again I had just died. I was naturally a little irritable. The desk itself was again white, this time made of wood, and reached a little bit above my armpits. I have always been vertically challenged, however, so awkward heights was nothing new to me.

“So,” I said rather bluntly, “this is the afterlife then?” I folded my arms rebelliously, at least in my mind, on top of the desk. Her smile faltered slightly for a split second before she pasted it back onto her face. “You know usually people are confused or disoriented, but I guess you aren’t the first person to cut to the chase so quickly.” She said as she turned to what I thought was a computer and began typing. But really? Computers in the afterlife? What kind of place is this?

“This isn’t actually the afterlife you know, but I’ll let your guide explain that for you.” I stared at her, suspicious of her mind reading capabilities, as she continued talking, “Ah yes here you are. Zoe G. right? You’re a bit early you know, but I guess it can’t be helped now. You’ve been

assigned to Ms. Albin. Her specialty is actually scaring but she's quite good at placing the newly dead. You'll do just fine with her." She scribbled away on a little business card and placed it in my very confused hands as her attention shifted to some poor dude behind me. I backed away, closing my gaping mouth and staring blankly at my card trying to process what she could have possibly meant. Guide? Scaring? Placement? Well, I had gotten at least two things out of that confusing conversation. I was not supposed to be dead, and wherever I was this was not heaven.

I gradually worked my way across the receiving area, my mind blank. I walked on doing my best to ignore the many people milling around me, focusing instead on the small red exit sign at the end of the hall. The large groups of people were finally getting to me and I felt more and more panic bubbling inside of me every second I stayed in that place. Finally breaking through the door I paused and breathed in a deep breath of fresh air. Wondering if I even needed to breathe anymore, my gaze locked on the card that had been placed in my hands. The design was simple - one line of text with a light blue "IB" placed behind it. I scoffed as I read "Welcome to the In Between - where your soul finds its source", and turned the card over. On its back was what I presumed was an address and the name Louisa Albin. How they expected me to find her when I knew absolutely nothing about the city was beyond me. I sighed in exasperation and looked around me, taking in the surrounding buildings and hoping against all hope that this

world somehow mirrored the real one. It did not, but a girl can hope.

The receiving building was clearly the shining jewel of its street. It stood at the very end and all of the surrounding buildings seemed to point to it. I sighed resignedly and started walking. It was going to be a very long morning, or afternoon. It was hard to determine the time, for as far as I could tell it was perpetually sunny in spite of the lack of a sun. I walked for what felt like several hours, asking everyone I met if they knew where the stupid address was. Unfortunately everyone seemed to be as lost as I felt, and my patience was quickly running out. I decided to ask one more person before I finally gave up and resigned myself to an afterlife of wandering aimlessly. Luckily for me they did in fact know where I was headed, and pointed me to a building about six feet away from where I was standing. I blushed furiously and cursed the lack of street signs in this infernal place before finally stomping over to the building and ringing the bell. No, I did not ring a doorbell; there was literally a tiny little bell attached to a rope which I shook back and forth angrily. There was a loud and sudden crash, as what sounded like a large stack of books toppled over, and a small yelp followed by rapid footsteps. The door flung open and a very flustered girl, not much older than myself, stood in the doorway, her hand rubbing a rapidly darkening bruise on her forehead. Clearly the stack of books had toppled onto her head. She smiled sheepishly before grasping my hand and shaking it rapidly. “Hi! Come in, come in. Excuse the mess! I’ve been trying to get this

stupid exper... well it doesn't matter what I was trying to do. Point is it didn't work and now my whole office is a disaster area. Anyway you must be my newest client yeah?" I hid a smile as she rushed in front of me, attempting to tidy up as much as possible while she talked.

Her desk was a clutter of books and beakers as well as various pieces of equipment which I would have expected to see in a chemistry lab, not an office. While she cleaned I took in her appearance. She did not seem very professional, at least not for someone who claimed to own an office. She was wearing a black v-neck ghostbusters t-shirt, the kind with the ghost and red "no" sign, and bright blue skinny jeans which continued to draw my attention in spite of myself. Her hair was short and loosely curled; it was cut in a sort of angled bob, the back so short that a portion at the nape of her neck was practically buzzed, and a blue headband kept the hair at the front of her face from falling into her eyes. I highly approved of her choice of shoes, a pair of well loved black converse covered in dirt and the occasional spattering of paint or possibly some other mystery substance. By the time she turned back around, her arms overflowing with the offending books, I was grinning widely. I was sold the moment I saw her ghostbusters t-shirt. I mean who wears a ghostbusters shirt when their clientele are, for lack of a better word, ghosts!

Taking in my expression she grinned back crookedly. "So" she asked, "whats your name then?" I held out my hand, forgetting momentarily that she had already shaken it, "My name's Zoe. And you?" I asked. She laughed lightly

as she turned back to her desk, cleaning up as much of the chemistry equipment as she could, and said, "Louisa Albin." I flinched as I smacked myself on the forehead mentally. Of course this would be Louisa. When I thought of a guide I had been picturing an old disagreeable woman who would boss me around and undoubtedly make me furious, but no. It would make sense that this tall lanky girl was my guide. I would get the one young, possibly inexperienced, guide. I must have mumbled some part of that out loud because she began laughing. Not a quiet laugh, but a loud surprised laugh filled with energy and life. She doubled over and continued to giggle for several minutes as I stared at her blankly, trying my level best to neither join in with her laughter or feel insulted. After what seemed like forever, she straightened and wiped some tears from her eyes. "You, you thought I would be old a-and disagreeable?" she snorted and burst into laughter again before choking out, "Seriously? That's what you thought of when you thought of a guide?? Oh-oh man. You are going to be so much fun. Who did you think I was?" she giggled "some random lackey of your imagined Louisa's? Man" she sighed, possibly sarcastically, "I love people who jump to conclusions. They always wind up being hilarious." She shook her head slowly, wiping away the last remnants of her tears and adjusting her expression. She turned her now very serious and intense gaze on me and stared.

She just kept staring at me, looking me straight in the eyes until I couldn't stand it anymore and had to look away. She didn't speak for at least a solid five minutes. I couldn't

tell if she was trying to read my mind, it seemed like the kind of thing she'd be able to do, or if she was somehow trying to infer everything about me from my appearance as I had done with her name and title. While she attempted to analyze me or whatever she was doing, I took in the rest of my surroundings.

Her "office" was small, but not overly so. The front of her building was similar to a small bookstore; two large windows on both sides of the door that would have displayed books had that been its purpose. Instead there were various suspicious looking plants, or possibly herbs, lining the windows and hanging from the ceiling above the ones on the windowsill. Some of them looked large enough and questionable enough that, had I been alive, I would have suspected them of being capable of eating me. The walls of her office were lined with bookshelves floor to ceiling, and numerous antique lights were hung from said ceiling. The whole place smelled vaguely like a bookstore - that wonderful musty smell that naturally accompanies old books - mixed with an earthy, flowery scent from the plants. All this culminated in an atmosphere that was both cozy and reminiscent of an old-timey store.

I couldn't make out most of the titles on the shelves with the little time I had, although I did notice a certain "Potion Making in the Twenty-First Century" and "Magical Herbs and Their Uses", as well as a vast collection of "Urban Legends." Clearly this girl had some witchly aspirations and a very specific set of interests, and who could blame her. When you witness the afterlife first hand,

who wouldn't believe in magic and the supernatural? Come to think of it, I didn't even know if she was dead or alive. With this thought I quickly turned my gaze back onto her, intending to stare at her in the same way she had me, hoping to somehow find the answers to my questions in her eyes. To my surprise her attention was no longer on me, in fact as far as I could tell she had completely forgotten about me. She had returned to her desk without me noticing, and was pouring intently over a large book. I stared at her aghast, "Seriously? You're reading right now? I thought you were supposed to be my guide! Shouldn't you be... GUIDING me or something?" She glanced up casually as if I hadn't just been on the verge of yelling at her, "Sorry, I thought you were enjoying looking around. Didn't want to disturb you, I know how irritating it can be to be interrupted in the middle of a thought." She said, her lips pressed together in a tight grin. She stood up slowly and walked around to the front of her desk, resting her hands on its surface and leaning all her weight against it as she once again stared at me. "So," she finally said, "welcome to the In Between Zoe Goodwin. Now tell me, why don't you want to die?"

Chapter 2

“Wh-what?”

“I said, why don’t you want to die?”

“What kind of question is that?!”

Clearly there was some kind of disconnect with our understandings of the way things were. I was under the impression that I was dead; she was clearly operating under a different world view. “You’re here which means you don’t want to be dead! If you did you would have passed on right away!” She said gesturing animatedly at me with her hands. “Everyone who winds up here has a reason that they don’t want to die. Maybe its someone they left behind, or they’re afraid of dying or some other random but equally important reason.” She had started pacing while she talked, her motions getting bigger as her voice gained momentum and volume. “It is extremely important to me that you figure out why it is that you’re here, because we need to find your source as soon as possible! Do you understand?” The last bit was half yelled as she whipped around and walked back to where I was standing. I stared blankly at her as she continued fidgeting with her hands, clearly the last bit was not as rhetorical as I thought. It took a second for her words to sink in, but as my brain finally started to wrap itself around this new information I burst.

“NO I DO NOT UNDERSTAND! No one has explained ANYTHING to me yet! No one has even ASKED how I’m

freaking DOING! Does no one understand that I fricking drowned like maybe 2 hours ago?!? WHERE THE HELL AM I?" By the end of my outburst I was panting, and my previously dry eyes pricked with unshed tears. I was lost and confused and no one, not even my stupid guide, was telling me where I was or what I was supposed to be doing. I had lost my family, my home, and anything familiar in one unfortunate second!

I expected her to be angry or at least shocked, but instead her brow crinkled in confusion and her mouth, which up until now had been at least slightly smiling, was turned down in a disapproving frown. The confusion evident in her voice she said, "That doesn't make any sense! Usually one of the attendants at the station goes over all the basics... Why... Maybe they were swamped... This is very unusual for them." She played with a strand of hair, gazing off into the distance as she turned around; her brow still furrowed she walked over to another computer like device and typed something in before pressing enter. She collapsed into a chair, one hand supporting her head as the other continued fidgeting with her hair. "This" she began, "is the In Between, or the IB as we like to call it." "Yes, I know—" "Just... let me finish ok? I'm trying to fill you in on what they should have. Usually they send a temporary guide to walk you to your destination while they explain how it all works." "Yeah I was lost for a good hour. They just gave me this stupid card with no other explanation!"

Her brow furrowed even more, if that was possible. Her previously annoyed expression turned stony. "Those

miserable, unhelpful, irresponsible sons of..." She paused and took a deep calming breath as I pulled up a comfortable looking chair for what I assumed would be a long conversation. "Clearly something is going on there. No matter, we need to clear some stuff up. First of all, yes you are dead. No you have not passed on. This is the IB, it's a place for the spirits who, for some reason or another, do not want to pass on yet. However, every living, or in this case not living, being requires an energy source or as we call it, just a source. There are various types of sources, but theres no point in going into it right now. I'll try to introduce you to some of them later today-" "Wait, why not tomorrow? Shouldn't I be resting and processing the fact that I'm... you know... dead? Don't people usually grieve for deaths? Like I know it's my own death, but for me it kind of feels like... like my whole family has died. You know?"

Her expression softened at that. Her eyes, which I had seen both happy and angry, took on a new emotion - pity. Her hand left her hair and bridged the gap, reaching for my hand. Were it any other day I would have pulled away, suspicious of the physical contact, but at this moment in time I needed it. It grounded me, made me feel less, well... less ghost-like.

"I know you're upset. You're probably still in shock, but you honestly can't afford to be. I hate to tell you this, but-" and here she paused, seemingly uncertain as to how to continue, "without a source, without some form of energy, you will pass on. You will pass on against your will, and since you're sitting here I'm pretty sure you

don't want that." Her warm brown eyes gazed kindly into mine. Suddenly she sat up straight and a huge smile burst across her face. She jumped up out of her chair, her new grin extremely contagious in spite of the seriousness of our previous conversation. "What?" I asked, my expression slowly mirroring hers.

"I know exactly what we're going to do right now! I was going to take you to someone else first... I was sure he'd be busy today, but I think he'll make time." Her smile grew even larger if that was possible. My grin widened in response, "Where are we going then?" I had to admit, her enthusiasm was infectious. "We're going to the Dream Gates!"

Dream Gates... From what Louisa told me as we worked our way across the city, my brain was not nearly as creative as I had thought. When I was alive I had vivid dreams almost every night, for which I mentally patted myself on the back, thinking I must be exceptional to have such an active imagination. I was wrong. As it turns out dreams are not so much something your brains create as much as they are a place your mind/spirit goes. Once you're in this dream world your dreams may not even be your own, as apparently the dead have been manipulating them as a way to get their sources. Also Louisa was apparently not dead? The conversation went something like this:

Me: "So, you must've been dead for a long time to be a guide right?" Louisa: "Dead?!? Ooooh right, yeah no I'm not dead. None of the people in charge of things around here are dead." Me: "...." Louisa: "I guess we're kind of like

mediums? OR WITCHES!" Me: "You're really big on magic aren't you... mediums?" Louisa: "Yeah, you know - like those people who contact the dead? We're kind of like that only not really... It's like we're able to separate our souls from our bodies and kind of fake being dead, only we can't stay here too long or something bad happens supposedly."

So that was interesting. We walked down the center of what could have been the main street. It was mostly empty, although there was the occasional small group of people stopping to look in at a store window. What the stores sold I couldn't be sure, but apparently there was a market for it. Come to think of it I didn't even know if there was a currency here! I turned towards Louisa and opened my mouth to ask, before another, more pressing thought, demanded to be asked.

"Louisa..." "Yes?" "Um... do I need to breathe here?" She stopped in her tracks and stared at me, her expression blank. I couldn't decide if she thought I was an idiot for asking such a stupid question, or if she was genuinely trying to come up with a good answer. After a few seconds she replied, "No, I don't think you do... Although I'm really not sure." She gazed off into space as she started walking again, lost in thought. I walked beside her, tempted to ask more questions, but patience is a virtue as I've been told many times. "You know?" she began, "I think the best explanation for what goes here is if you believe it, it's true." Seriously? That was her answer? I stared at her, a bit frustrated. It seemed like such a cliché answer; I decided to test it. "So then if I believe I'm capable of bleeding I do?" "Yeah

sure!" "Right. And if I decide I age, will I?" She paused, thinking briefly before answering, "I suppose so yeah!" It all seemed so ridiculous! Reading my expression she laughed before attempting to explain herself further. "You have to understand... you don't actually have a body anymore!" I just stared at her, waiting for more information. "You're basically just a spirit... you know... a consciousness?" Her lips pursed slightly as she tried to explain this in a way I would understand. "Ok, we're almost at the dream gates. Once you get in there I think you'll understand what I mean. Just... just know that here, imagination is power."

We turned a corner and my brain exploded. Ok it didn't actually explode, and while I was shocked, it wasn't because of how awe-inspiring the gates were. In fact they looked out of place in their extreme ordinariness. Where I had expected enormous golden gates reaching up as far as the eye could see, was a small row of turnstiles like the kind you see at a public train station. There were a few people standing off to the side, presumably manning the gates, but it was hard to distinguish them from the rest of the crowd. There didn't seem to be any purpose behind their outfits, and there was no uniform to speak of. The only thing separating them from the rest of the dead was their confidence. Occasionally someone would approach one of the witches - I assumed that's what they were - before continuing to the gates and passing to the other side and into a large grey cloud that looked as if it started at the gates themselves and stretched onward and upward endlessly. How I had been oblivious of its existence

only a few blocks before was what really caused the brain explosion. You don't just not see something like that!

As I stared once again in shock, seemed to be happening a lot today, Louisa approached one of the guys at the side dragging his reluctant form towards the place I was rooted. To say I was nervous was an understatement. I had been avoiding every individual of the male sex since my freshman year of high school. It wasn't that I didn't find them attractive, or that they annoyed me or anything. I just didn't know how to be around them without my brain going into overdrive simultaneously bombarding me with feelings of inadequacy, nerves, and a mostly irrational fear for my safety. But this was a new phase for me; if death isn't the chance to start anew then nothing was. I took a deep, hopefully calming breath and turned to face their approaching figures. He stood a few steps behind Louisa as she began making introductions, his hands, which looked simultaneously scrawny and strong, flitted between caressing his arms, rubbing at his neck, and attempting to brush hair that was not there out of his eyes. He must have gotten it cut recently for that to still be a habit. He had a gentle nervous air about him which eased a tiny bit of my own anxiety.

I turned my attention back to Louisa, forgetting momentarily that she had been trying to tell me something of "utmost importance."

"... Is a guide for the Dream World. I know a lot about the psychology of fear and ways to invoke the other required emotions, but navigating the dream scape can be

tricky so its usually best to bring a dream guide with you. My brother is one of the best guides-“ Wait he’s your brother?” I asked incredulously. Clearly I had missed the important part. “Yeah dude weren’t you listening?” She said her eyes smiling, one eyebrow raised high indicating her exasperation. “Sorry man,” I said laughing, “I must have zoned out. Long day and all...” She smiled again, shaking her head slightly, “Right. Like I tried to tell you before, this is my brother Gareth. Gareth say hi to the pretty lady.”

A light pink crept across his cheeks and his ears turned bright red as both our attentions shifted to him. “Um right, hi.” He choked out. His voice was low and smooth; in spite of his obvious discomfort it carried with it a quiet intensity. My mouth grinned slightly in spite of myself, he was kind of adorable. Ok maybe not adorable... I wasn’t sure I was comfortable with that adjective. He definitely seemed sweet though, not as scary as I had anticipated.

Louisa sighed, her finger tips going to her forehead, “I swear he’s not usually like this Zoe, at least not once you get to know him; he must be having an off week or something. Anyway, Gareth’s going to take us in. We’ll make it quick today, get the easier ones out of the way and if we’re lucky one of them will be your source!” She smiled encouragingly at me, bobbing her head as she bounced on the balls of her feet. She seemed to have a hard time containing any of her excited energy.

“You should try for joy and fear, those are the most fun.” Gareth’s quiet voice cut into Louisa’s train of thought; she smiled up him appreciatively. Did I mention how

ridiculously tall he was? I mean both of them were tall, especially in comparison to my scant 5 feet and 3 inches. I felt like a freaking dwarf; I swear, when I stood next to them I maybe came up to Louisa's shoulders, and, like, the middle of Gareth's chest... maybe.

"Alright!" She clapped, her enthusiasm bubbling out, and turned on her brother. She shoved him in the arm, pushing him back towards the group of witches, "Lets" - grunt - "get this show on the road!"

Not twenty minutes later we were standing before the gates. The line had been ridiculous, not as bad as Disney World but pretty close. Apparently every time you go into the dreamscape you were assigned to specific dreamers. Louisa claimed, Gareth nodding in agreement, that this helped monitor which dreamers had already been hit, allowing them at least one or two dreams of their own per night. I glanced to my right, taking in the comforting sight of my guides before taking one last steadying breath and plunging through the gate and into the swirling grey cloud.

Chapter 3

It felt like I had been plunged into cold water... again. I could feel my knowledge of where I was slipping away as the panic began to take control. Suddenly I was drowning, the water crashing over my head, my lungs aching as they begged for air before finally giving in as the water flooded my body both inside and out. It all felt so real. I felt a hand on my shoulder, somehow I had ended up on the floor, if there was such a thing in this world of clouds, my head in my hands. I rubbed at my eyes, the tears there surprised me. Gareth put a steadying hand under my elbow and helped me to my feet. I sent him an awkwardly grateful smile before turning to Louisa. She smiled at me briefly in what must have been her idea of comfort before turning to Gareth and nodding. "Let's do this!"

The grey clouds swirled all around us. If I were claustrophobic it may have been a problem, but it felt almost safe; they definitely didn't feel threatening. There was no thought in my mind that something could be lurking behind them, they were just kind of there. Gareth waved a hand and the clouds began to merge together, slowly forming more recognizable shapes. "The dreamscape is influenced almost entirely by your mind." His usually quiet voice was louder here and slightly more confident than it had been in the IB. "Have you ever had a lucid dream?" he glanced in my direction, waiting for a sign of confirmation

before continuing, "That's kind of what it'll be like here, at least for you. For the living... its a little bit harder to control. We can't be too sure, but we think it has something to do with their souls being tied to their bodies. You on the other hand don't have a body to return to, so your soul is in full control of your surroundings. You follow?" I nodded slowly, grimacing at the comment on my bodylessness; bit of a touchy subject still. I honestly wasn't sure if I understood anything that he was saying, but it seemed best to just agree and let him get on with it. "Alright" he continued with barely a pause, "lets practice yeah? I know it sounds silly, but try to think of a familiar object, focus on its appearance and maybe its feel or some other tangible sense you have of it; then will it into existence."

I scoffed a little bit inside. This was ridiculous! Seriously? I'd never had a lucid dream in my life! Nightmares, yeah I'd had plenty of them - I'd even died in my dreams several times. There was one time... ugh I don't even like to think about it. Lets just say it involved spiders and other creepy crawly things about ten times their usual size, a maze, and lots of dead ends. I shuddered. "It might be best to think something you associate positive emotions with?" he offered in response to either my shudder or the expression of disgust on my face.

I sighed and searched my mind for something positive. Soomethings positive. Right. I can totally do this! Just... Ooooh. I frowned. That was mostly a positive object... I mean, I had some mixed emotions towards it, but it didn't matter. I closed my eyes and imagined it as it had been

when I was alive. Small, barely the size of my head, and worn. It had been fluffy once, but had since had most of the stuffing squeezed until it was practically flat. Its once shiny eyes were now dull with countless scratches from rough housing, one eye completely gone and replaced with a small black button. Its nose which had once been brown, was now a lighter almost grey color from all the kisses it received, its once soft fur now matted beyond recognition. I willed it into being as hard as I could and opened my eyes slowly. There it was floating in front of my face - a very loved, very old, stuffed bear. I reached a tentative hand out and grabbed it. Finding that it was real I squeezed it to my chest as countless emotions rolled over me. I hadn't had time to really miss my family, but this bear just reminded me of all I had lost. It was too much! I hid my face in its fur as the familiar stinging sensation attacked my eyes; I desperately tried not to cry as I thought of my parents and brother stuck on earth without me. Damnit I was stronger than this! I forced myself to look up and flashed the two siblings a watery grin, "Guess I did it!" My voice was laced with false enthusiasm, but they took it in stride. Louisa skipped over, she didn't actually skip but her walk had a sort of a bounce to it, and put a tender hand on my shoulder before ruffling my hair and grinning widely. "Yes, yes you did! Alright! Now to step two yeah?"

We practiced some more, moving from one object to multiple objects, then a room, a small location, and finally a "small" landscape that seemed to stretch on for miles. I'm sure we were there for hours, but I couldn't be sure;

time moved very strangely in the dreamscape, as it does in dreams. I mean obviously they're the same - dreams and the dreamscape. Gosh, its hard to keep that in mind - the fact that things that happen in dreams actually happen in the dreamscape. Gareth nodded in approval, clearly I was a quick study. I smiled to myself, man I'm awesome sometimes! In retrospect I was clearly full of it, but who wouldn't be - whole new world, filled with lots of new things to try out - its easy to feel like you're on top of the world.

Gareth reached into the back pocket of his dark jeans and pulled out two small sheets of paper. He looked briefly over the two of them before choosing one and handing it to Louisa. "This," he said pointing to the paper in her hands, "is our first target. He's a little kid, about eight years old. I know this may seem a bit cruel, but little kids are easier to scare and it'll make finding out if fear is your source a lot easier." I nodded slowly. He was right, it did seem cruel to purposefully give a little kid nightmares, but then again I'd had plenty of them and they hadn't totally scarred me. Ok, so they had but hey, the damage wasn't irreversible! He'd live...

"Travel in the dreamscape is really easy. I was given his photo and plenty of information on him, so all I have to do is focus on it in my mind and, instead of willing him into being, I will myself to be where he is. It can be a bit tricky, but you'll get the hang of it. For now we should probably hold hands so we don't get lost..." Gareth did his best to explain how it worked. He had stumbled a bit over

the last part, but his confidence didn't slip and his tell-tale blush was nowhere to be seen. He reached for my hand, damn. He had some really nice hands. I know its a weird thing to pay attention to, but hands can tell you a lot about a person! They can tell you whether or not they're hard workers, if they're musicians or artists, any scars they may have are sure to tell a story, and the way a person grips your hand says a lot about their character. He had a really nice firm grip, and his hands were so warm, plus my hand fit so perfectly in his. I tried not to think about how that made me feel. Being attracted to a boy was tricky enough in life, but in death? I wasn't even sure whether I would survive yet, and I knew practically nothing about him! I mean, so he clearly loved his sister... but that didn't really mean anything. He still had the potential to be an untrustworthy jerk, although it seemed unlikely, and I couldn't take the risk. I shoved any warmth I might have felt towards him down, deep into the pit of my stomach, and steeled myself for the task ahead. I couldn't let myself think of anything else until I found my source, and right now I needed to think of something scary - something really scary! This eight year old kid wouldn't know what hit him.

The clouds surrounding us darkened slightly and seemed to blur, like a strong wind was pushing them past us, and then we were somewhere entirely different. I almost thought we were back in the IB, but we couldn't be. We stood in a field on what appeared to be a dark cloudy day. There wasn't any rain, but the clouds looked heavy with it. In the distance, about fifty feet away, was a large apple tree.

It was situated in the middle of a large field, no other trees in sight. Underneath the tree was a small hunched figure who seemed to be holding a conversation with a rabbit. This seemed weird, but then again it was a dream. I started toward him only to feel Louisa's grip on my arm. Her brother may have had a firm grip, but Louisa's was made of iron. She jerked me back shaking her head vigorously. Gareth had stepped back, his head shaking back and forth slowly in anticipation of her outburst, clearly this was not unusual for Louisa. "Never, EVER, go towards a dreamer unless you have to! Do you hear me?" Her voice was steely, a stark contrast to her previous warmth, "It is not the worst rule you could possibly break, but we're doing it for your own safety. We honestly do not know what would happen if you die here. We've heard distant rumors of people dying and just reappearing in the IB, but we can't be sure. I mean those were just rumors from other IB cities..." her voice tapered off as she spoke, "and I'd really rather not risk it. Do you understand? I'd really rather you didn't die ok?" Her gaze was unbending, but there was a tinge of panic in her eyes which stopped me in my tracks. She looked almost afraid, but it seemed so irrational! I mean this was the dreamscape! I had died plenty of times in dreams, and most of the time the world just went black before I realized "Oh I'm dead" and either woke up or started a new dream. I didn't want to believe her, that it could possibly actually hurt me, but not having a body to go back to did give me pause. I stared into her eyes trying to find the source of her worries in them, before agreeing silently.

“Alright, how do we do this then?” I demanded.

“We do it from a distance obviously.” She scoffed, “Did you not get the part about how this whole stinking world can be controlled with your mind? Honestly.” She rolled her eyes at me and smiled. I think she expected me to know what she was thinking before she said it. It was ridiculous, but it didn’t matter. “We’re attempting to scare him, so there are a couple of things you could do. You could try to change his entire surroundings and plunge him into a nightmare of your own creation, but that’s risky.” She paused briefly, as if uncertain, before continuing, “There is one universal truth I have learned in my many years of scaring... It is always most frightening to have a place you once associated with safety... turned into a place filled with fear. Take this landscape that he has created, and fill it with the scariest thing you can think of. Take away his sense of safety.”

She was grinning slightly when she finished. I thought perhaps she didn’t understand how damaging that could be, but there was a cynical twinge to her smile. She knew exactly what she was saying... and she viewed it as an unavoidable moral compromise. Before she could add anything more I closed my eyes and acted on impulse.

The already cloudy sky darkened further, a bright red tingeing the previously grey clouds, the boy barely even glanced up from his rabbit friend - so caught up was he in his conversation. A dark speck formed in the distance and grew slowly, like an ink stain spreading across these sky. This was no ink stain. As it grew a quiet buzzing

could be heard. It grew louder and louder, until it was nearly deafening. The boy looked up. His face blanched, his eyes wide as he watched the cloud race across the sky. No, not a cloud, but a swarm of flesh-eating locust. As he stared, frozen in shock, a similar black splotch began to spread across the ground. As it neared a loud crackling could be heard, like the sounds of millions of tiny legs pounding on the ground. The boy began to back away, the fear evident on his face. His eyes looked wide even at a distance. Two arms broke suddenly through the surface, grabbing his feet and holding him in place as the swarm of locust and the pack of spiders converged on his tiny little form. The spiders raced up his body biting him as they went, the locust going for his hair and face. It was a terrifying sight and his screams could be heard throughout the dreamscape. Finally I tore my eyes away from the scene, ashamed that I could wish such a fate on a small boy like that.

When I finally looked up both the little boy and his tree, as well as the swarms of bugs were gone. Only the field remained. Louisa placed a gentle hand on my back, concern and pride in her voice “How was it? Did you feel anything?” It was the pride that really got to me; my eyes swarmed with unshed tears as I stared at her in disgust. I yanked myself out of her grasp, falling back a few steps. How could she be so proud when I felt so ashamed. She merely looked at me in shock, my disgust apparently surprising her. She looked to Gareth for help, and he took a small step forward, his hand reaching for my shoulders as he stared me in

the eyes. "I know that was hard!" he began, "HARD?" I half shouted half choked out, "THAT WAS THE WORST THING I'VE EVER DONE! And... and it was so easy." I cried, my dam finally bursting. I struggled against his arms as he attempted to pull me into a half hug, awkwardly patting my head as he attempted to comfort me. I wanted his hug to be nice, but it was only awkward and very unwelcome. After a few seconds of torture he pushed me back at arms length and once again looked into my eyes. "I know... I know that was not any fun for you. Believe me I know." He wasn't quite right. I definitely felt ashamed, but it really had been far too easy. "I need to know, just tell me, did you feel anything when it was over?"

"What do you mean?" I sniffled, "What kind of anything?"

"I don't know, like a warmth in the center of your chest? Did you feel refreshed or full or anything at all other than miserable? Just... something close to satisfied?"

I thought back carefully, rubbing my eyes with the backs of my hands. Its true that scaring that boy had been incredibly easy, but it was less because I enjoyed it and more because I was pushing my own fears onto him. When it had finished, when the boy had been overwhelmed, the only thing I had felt was an emptiness in my chest as the guilt over what I had done crashed over me like those awful waters. I shook my head slowly, "No. I-I definitely didn't feel anything like that. I actually felt kind of... empty." I looked up at him through my wet eyelashes, "What does that mean?"

He sighed, his hands falling away from my shoulders as he stepped back, I found that I almost missed their comfortable weight. “It means that fear is not your source.”

I didn’t know whether to be grateful or upset. I knew that I did not want to scare anymore people, but I was very much aware of what this meant. I was still without a source, and if I didn’t find one soon I could very easily pass on. I glanced at Louisa, hoping for some form of non-awkward comfort, but she looked both upset and afraid; she had been hoping this would solve the problem, and now she looked like her world was at risk of falling to pieces before her very eyes. A second later she glanced up and pushed the sadness from her face. Just like that she was back to her enthusiastic, relatively hopeful self. “No worries,” she beamed, “Fear may be my specialty, but some of the others are almost as fun.” She winked, and I felt myself cheering up in spite of the guilt I had felt not minutes ago. I took in my surroundings one more time. The sun had cleared away the clouds, and we were left standing in a large grassy field filled with flowers. The boy really had created a beautiful dream. I turned back to my guides, but they were huddled together, looking at the next sheet of paper with my newest victim. They were smiling and joking with each other, totally at ease.

My stomach twisted as I thought of my own little brother; we had been so close in life. Neither of us had been popular in school, so we relied on each other a lot for our entertainment. We had so many inside jokes. He had been my closest friend and confidant and I missed him deeply. I

could only imagine how he was feeling. He probably didn't even know I was dead yet, after all it had only been a couple of hours - six at most. I stuffed away my feelings and tried to focus on my guides. As I watched them I felt another gentle smile breaking across my face, hopefully these smiles would be a common occurrence with these two around. I really was lucky to have them as my guides. I brushed off the last of my sadness, although a sliver of it stayed in my heart - a memory of the potential damage I had done to this young mind and the loneliness I felt- and headed over to join their huddle.

Chapter 4

Louisa looked up as I walked over, if I hadn't been watching closely I would have missed the waver in her smile. Her brows twitched, and if I didn't know better I'd say she looked... well, remorseful. It wasn't her fault I had as good as killed the boy's dream self, that guilt was all on me. I hesitantly put my hand on her shoulder as I joined their planning session. Physical contact wasn't really my strong suit. I had let Gareth hug me earlier, but I was in shock. Normally I'd have kneed him and he'd have wound up on the ground clutching at his groin in agony. I hoped that my touch would reassure her, let her know that in my eyes she was blameless. Glancing over her shoulder I read the small, carefully written print. Looked like the next target was a young woman, only a tiny bit older than I would have been had I lived, she was maybe eighteen years old. Gareth stood, folding the paper and placing it in his pocket as he walked a small distance away. Louisa grinned lopsidedly in his direction and stood to face me. "She's a classmate of Gareth's, he chose her specifically." I felt my chest tighten slightly at these words, but couldn't place the corresponding emotion. "She lost her brother recently and could really use some cheering up. Since we need to test how you fit with happiness, it seemed like a good idea." She shrugged slightly, and I nodded. The tightness in my chest lessened but was still present. Louisa took a deep breath in

before abruptly saying, "So that was vicious. Didn't really peg you for the killing type!"

My head jerked up at that, my eyes wide, "I'm not!" I choked out. "Or at least I don't think I am. I took what you said to heart, and had my worst nightmares invade his place of safety. I just" I swallowed fighting back the remorse, "I didn't expect it to get so out of hand." I stared at my feet, somehow I hadn't realized I was shoeless. In fact I was still in that dreadful hospital gown! I jerked back "Holy crap no!!! No no no why am I still wearing this?" I grabbed the front of my shirt-gown holding it away from my body in disgust, "Please tell me theres an easy way to fix this! Oh my gosh WHY DID NO ONE TELL ME I LOOKED LIKE THIS!?" A giggle escaped her mouth before she quickly put up a hand in an attempt to stifle them. She was failing miserably. "Dude, I am so so sorry. I thought you knew what you looked like! I didn't realize... oh gods." To her credit she was trying very hard to hold her laughter in as I made very unsubtle attempts to cover my boobs with my arms. My face felt like it was on fire, I can only imagine how red it was. Ugh it probably matched my hair in its redness! Not flattering at all.

Louisa got her giggle fit under control before taking a step closer, her fingers fidgeting with a spinner ring on her right hand. "It's really not as bad as you think. We could come up with a more permanent solution when we get back... or" she paused smiling wickedly, "you could just picture yourself in the clothes that you want to be in and voila! One of the totally awesome perks of coming to

the realization of your near-nakedness in the dreamscape. Believing is seeing!” She winked before turning her back to give me some semblance of privacy. I wasn’t sure why that was necessary as I didn’t intend on being naked. Oh my gosh! What if I accidentally imagined myself as naked! No! Stop! Stop picturing yourself naked you are being an idiot! I closed my eyes and sought out the most comfortable and non-revealing outfit I could, willing it into being. My eyes opened ever so slowly, I peeked through my lashes at my body and breathed a sigh of relief. I was in my favorite sweater - a comfy blue cable knit one that stretched to just past my hips - and a pair of simple black skinny jeans. I smiled at my shoes, the black patterned flats brought back many memories of downtown exploration - visiting the bean, going up to the top of the Hancock building. Granted most of these things happened with my family; my friendships in life, as I’ve mentioned, were few and far between. My grin faded as memories attempted to flood my brain, or what stood in for my consciousness, but I pushed them away. There would be a time for that, and it was not now.

I looked up at Louisa, her expression was one of approval. “I like your style kid. Now lets go cheer up this girl!” She threw an arm around my shoulders, an easy feat considering the height difference, and we ambled back towards Gareth. He seemed to have spent his time practicing the generation of happy thoughts, as he was now surrounded by two puppies, a kitten, butterflies, and a bunch of flowers. He looked absolutely ridiculous - what

with him sitting there in his mostly black attire surrounded by all these fluffy creatures. Louisa and I shared a knowing glance, both of us trying our best not to laugh for fear of hurting his, most likely, easily damaged feelings. He gave the puppies one last pat on the head before turning to us, his smile faltered as he realized he had been discovered and it was replaced with a look of suspicion. Clearly we had overcompensated with our serious faces. Our laughter burst out and his ears turned bright red, but he merely rolled his eyes before taking Louisa's hand, who then seized mine, and whisking us away.

The cloudy sky faded away, only to be replaced by darkness. This darkness seemed unusually thick, but we could still clearly see each other. Rather than darkness it was almost a tangible nothingness. At the center of this void was a small figure curled on the ground in the fetal position. I wanted to run to the girl's side, but resisted, remembering what Louisa had said. This was going to be a challenge. I turned to Louisa expecting some sage advice, but her face was filled with sadness, mirroring the expression on the young woman's face. Her eyes looked almost empty, or filled with despair, as she stared at the girl. I glanced at Gareth, seeing the same worry I felt clearly reflected on his face. I was able to snap out of it first and grabbed both of Louisa's shoulders shaking them hard, but it was pointless. Something about the void had forced her into her thoughts, trapping her there helpless. I was furious. I turned on the girl, but she did not deserve my anger. The void did. I had to fix this! I closed my eyes and tried to

imagine the happiest scene possible, willing as hard as I could that it would be there when I opened my eyes, but it wasn't. The scene was exactly the same, only now some of the same despair I had seen in Louisa's eyes was evident on Gareth's face. I steeled myself against it. I was dead for pity's sake! I would not let the despair feed on me!

I squeezed my eyes shut and conjured more happy images; puppies, kittens, rainbows, butterflies. Something had to work! Yet when I opened my eyes I was met with the same awful, bone-chilling darkness. I wished it was tangible so I could wrap my hands around its flimsy neck and strangle it. You know that saying, "Be careful what you wish for."? Yeah... I really should have paid more attention to those kinds of things. I watched in horror as the darkness pulled back rapidly as if it was being sucked up by a giant vacuum. Only it wasn't being sucked away... It was being sucked together. The entirety of the dark void of despair pooled together into one massive tower, the rest of our surroundings reverting to the dreamscape's natural appearance - dark clouds. My brain raced, my thoughts following one other at a rapid pace. I had to come up with a solution and fast. I had some idea of what despair could do to you in life, but in the dreamscape? Judging by the state Louisa and Gareth were in its effects were similar.

I felt panic swelling up inside of me as I tried desperately to come up with a solution. What could possibly destroy the physical manifestation of despair? I didn't know how to sword fight, but it didn't matter. I highly doubted cutting off its head would make any difference.

Did the black tower even have a head? I could cover it in fire, but yet again I was coming up with physical solutions to a very spiritual problem. Oh my gosh! I was such an idiot! Spiritual. If despair could manifest itself into a physical presence, maybe other things could too!

I closed my eyes, shutting out all of my fear and panic as I focused on what I believed was the opposite of despair. A beam of light burst through the clouds, my eyes flew open as hope rose up inside of me. Hope. Through the break in the clouds came two other beings; a soldier in white armor on a flying horse, and a flock of doves. With the burst of light the dark cloud of despair had recoiled, using its arms to block what would have been its eyes had it been alive. The soldier flew around the dark beast, making small cuts as it went - never stopping in its mission to weaken the beast; perseverance. Finally the flock of doves swarmed the cloud, covering it with their small bodies. A subset of doves flew off from the group, coming to rest by the young woman on the ground. They nuzzled their heads under her chin, cooing softly as they caressed her. A small smile began to spread across her face a minute or so before she began to stir. Her eyes fluttered open as she took in the efforts of the tiny birds to comfort her. They cooed in jubilation, sensing their success before she laughed lightly. Joy. With her laughter the cloud of despair shivered. The cracks that perseverance had been making all that time widened, as the light of hope flooded his wounds. The light spread throughout his body as the cloud slowly disintegrated, leaving only happiness in his wake.

Tears filled my eyes for the millionth time that day as I fell to my knees, a mixture of exhaustion and wonder making it difficult to stand. Louisa and Gareth stirred, taking in the change in their surroundings. Louisa was the first to break out of her shock, turning on me with a mixture of pride and remorse in her gaze. She kneeled, wrapping me in her arms. Her hug was strong and not nearly as awkward as her brother's had been. It took me a second to decipher the small noises I had been hearing - her whisper accompanied by a trickle of tears, "Sorry, I am so so sorry, oh Zoe I'm sorry." A sob broke past my barriers and I returned her embrace with an enthusiasm that surprised me. "Its ok" I whispered back repetitively, and I meant it. I had dealt with despair in life. It is an awful beast that can easily overpower you, drowning out any other thoughts or feelings you may have, isolating you in the process. The only real cure I had discovered was not so much a cure as a way to keep it at bay for a while. It felt ridiculously cheesy, but a combination of hope, perseverance, and joy held the potential to break through its walls; more often then not someone else had to bring them to you. If I had not already experienced it, I would have been just as overwhelmed by it as Louisa and Gareth had been.

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I had expected Louisa to be back to her usual perky self by the time we had reached the gates, or at least on her way to it, but she remained silent and withdrawn. This silence was ridiculously unnerving, especially in comparison to her usual bubbly demeanor. Gareth seemed equally lost in

his thoughts. I had to remind myself repeatedly that it was understandable. Despair is awful and can stick with you long after its gone. As much as I wanted to jump up and down, you know - celebrate my success - I didn't. I was inwardly thrilled at my ability to keep my cool in a crappy situation, I mean I was learning all kinds of things about myself today. It was fantastic, but I wanted to offer some sort of comfort to them. After all, they had done the same for me.

I stopped suddenly, attempting to get their attention as an idea began to take shape. "Hey guys," nothing, "guys?" They finally stopped and turned in my direction. Their expressions hurt, they still looked guilty. "Look. I know you guys are upset that you were useless right?" I wasn't the greatest at reading others, but it seemed like the obvious reaction so I ran with it. "It wasn't your fault though! You know that right?" The both of them nodded unconvincingly. I felt myself sigh deeply, my brain rushing ahead with the idea. I opened my mouth to continue, but Gareth cut me off - turning around and walking toward the edge of the dreamscape.

I followed them out of the swirling dream cloud and back through the gates. The In Between looked exactly as we had left it, the sky cloudless and impossibly blue, the nearby buildings gleaming in the non-existent sunlight. I breathed deeply, savoring the smell - warm vanilla with an underlying earthiness - before turning on my guides my annoyance seeping onto my face. Louisa ignored me, absently reaching into her pocket and pulling out a half

sheet of notebook paper that looked as if it had been hurriedly torn in half before being stuffed into her pants. Gareth wordlessly handed her a pen and she began writing, resting the paper on her thigh as she balanced precariously on one leg. She handed it to me, "This is a list of the different known sources, it'll probably be best if you look through them and try to identify the ones that seem like a good fit. We can test them out tomorrow when Gareth and I get back. I think it'd be a good idea to test the life source first, just to get it out of the way."

"Wait you guys are leaving? Why - I mean I guess I could use the time to sort of come to terms with my death, but I thought you said we needed to find my source as soon as possible!" I paused, uncertain as to whether or not I should continue with my idea, but I leapt ahead anyway, "Also! Um... I thought... maybe we could hang out or something." I looked up at them hopefully. Louisa's eyes widened, a small smile breaking across her face.

"Man I'd love to but... It's just -" she paused, sighing lightly before continuing, "We can't stay here for too long you know? If our spirits are separated from our bodies for too long we risk dying ourselves ok? And frankly I don't think you want that to happen." She smiled wider, trying to let me down gently I guessed. "Also yes! You do need time to think about all this shit, I mean seriously! You died today! You also freaking risked your life in that stupid fight with despair." I didn't think it was a stupid fight, but I guess I could see where she was coming from. "You really should have just grabbed us and left, instead of facing it head on!

It was partly our fault,” she rubbed her neck guiltily, “we should have checked it out before rushing into things, but we didn’t. It was idiotic and we should have known better.”

She looked to Gareth seeking confirmation, but he was already walking away. “Don’t worry about him.” She sighed, her mouth turned down in disappointment, “I think he felt even more guilty and useless than I did.” Her eyebrows shot up as a new thought hit her “Oh crap! I almost forgot to give you this.” She reached into her back pocket and handed me another small slip of paper. This one looked more like a business card. On the front was another address, “I’d love to just hang out though. I know the whole adjustment period kind of sucks... We’ll worry about your source first though k? Oh also the streets actually do have names you know, you were just looking in the wrong place.” With a small wink she closed her eyes and disappeared.

Chapter 5

I looked back at the card, deciding that it could wait I put it in my back pocket and set off to explore. I walked down the street, my eyes open for those elusive street signs I had heard so much about. I turned a random corner and found myself at the end of a small street lined with shops. I looked around, but none of the shops really stood out to me. One of them seemed to be filled with various clothing items, but, as my clothes had stayed with me upon exiting the dreamscape, it held no interest for me. The thing about being dead that really bugged me was that I no longer had a body. I mean... no matter how corporeal I felt, I was still only a spirit. The only benefit this held was that whatever changes I made to my spirit's appearance in the dreamscape would stick with me when I left.

I looked in at every shop as I went by. There was a flower shop - though how things grew in the afterlife was beyond me - maybe wishful thinking? There was also what looked like an art studio. It made sense that even those who were dead would be interested in improving their artistic abilities. After all, who said creative pursuits had to end with death? The next store made me pause, I smiled broadly before pushing the door open and walking in. A small bell signaled my presence as I wandered into the bookstore. It seemed much larger on the inside than its exterior had led me to believe, but isn't that true of books as well? I breathed

in deeply, ah yes. Gotta love that old book smell... Although I did wonder how I was still able to smell without a real nose... I mean I had a nose, but it was a spirit nose - not exactly the same thing. Maybe it was all a figment of my imagination.

A young man sat behind the front desk absorbed in whatever book he was reading, his attention barely swayed as I walked over to one of the shelves lining the walls. I browsed through the selection, my finger brushing the spines of some of my favorites. I wasn't too surprised to see some new books by my favorite dead authors. I briefly wondered if Shakespeare had decided to stick around for the past couple of centuries before I was struck by an idea. I began looking for the nonfiction section. Ah yes, there it was. Hidden among other books related to the In Between and theories on what was after this afterlife was a book on sources. I slid it gently from the shelf and walked up to the man at the front desk.

"Hi, um... I'm kind of new here, how do I go about paying for this?"

"Hmm?" He looked up, evidently annoyed by my intrusion into whatever imaginary world he was absorbed in. "Oh you don't pay, not really anyway. We keep a record of who takes what books. Most people return them after they've read it, but if you wind up wanting to keep it for some reason or another we just make a note of it. Eventually the owner of the bookstore will cash in a favor and that is how you pay him back."

"Huh," I looked down at my book, "thanks. I'll probably

return this in a couple of days then. Uh - I guess I'll see you later, or not." He had already returned to his story, "Whatever." I muttered and walked back out onto the street, closing the door gently behind me.

I absently found myself wishing I had thought to ask for a bag or something. Didn't matter. I pulled out the card with the address to my new home, but before I could really read the address a noise caught my attention. It sounded... well it sounded kind of like barking. Why in the world would there be barking in the afterlife? I hadn't heard any birds chirping, nor had I seen any insects flying around. In fact, aside from the random plant, there didn't seem to be many signs of life anywhere. Yet I was sure I had heard a small barking noise. I looked around, slowly turning on the spot before something caught my eye. There, across the street, was a small storefront - an image of a dog on the circular sign above the door. I caught myself smiling as I half walked, half ran across the street and flung open the door.

The room was bright and welcoming, the walls a nice shade of blue, and it smelled undeniably like dog. You know that musty, earthy smell that dogs seem to carry around with them? The room smelled exactly like that. It was the best scent I had experienced since I arrived, even better than old book smell. I tried to contain my excitement as I approached the desk at the back of the room. It was neat and orderly, a large bin of dog treats on the counter next to a small desktop file cabinet. There was a small bell on the desk which I proceeded to hit repetitively. A small

disheveled woman poked her head through the doorway behind the desk and smiled. Her dark hair was cut close to her head and her sweater was covered in a thin layer of dog hair. She waved her hand at me, gesturing for me to follow her as her head disappeared past the door frame yet again.

It took me a second to realize that I was allowed to follow her behind the desk. Life had ingrained in me a respect of desks and doors marked “employees only.” I opened the small gate blocking the way to the back, and walked quickly around the corner in an attempt to catch up. When I finally reached her she began the interrogation, “So are you here to pick up an old friend?” my face must have communicated my confusion in its blankness because she continued, “You know... did you have a dog in life? Are you here to pick it up?” Her words finally reached my brain and I shook my head quickly, “No I didn’t have any pets in life but I always wanted one!”

She smiled at me, sensing the animal lover in my enthusiasm. “That’s fine. Every time a dog comes in, we check his records with our records of the living. We look to see which owners are due here soon, and which ones won’t be here for many years. The dogs that are going to be left here for decades are put up for adoption, or... foster care I guess. You should know that there is always a risk in this that when the owner arrives they’ll want their pet back.” She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, gauging my reaction. The thought bothered me a bit. I mean, what if the dog came to love me! What if they forgot about their previous owner... They would just be allowed to swoop in

and take them back? It didn't seem fair, but I suppressed my doubts and nodded my understanding anyway.

"Good. Alright then! I'll take you back to the adoptables area." We walked down the hall past several doors, until she finally came to a stop in front of a light blue door. "We keep them together in small groups so that they're never alone. See animals also have a source, or at least the ones with souls do. Since domestic animal are the only ones that come here... well lets just say they all have sources."

"So animals do have souls!" I said. I knew it!

"Not all animals" she laughed, "Just the ones who have significant contact with humans. Something about being around them seems to awaken their souls, and they stick around when they die." She opened the door and I followed her inside. All of the dogs were so freaking cute. I had always loved animals when I was alive. My mother had a strict no-dog policy, but I had always wanted one desperately. They were the only creatures who both loved you unconditionally and were non-judgmental. They also seemed to possess this wonderful ability to overlook all of my faults, even when I couldn't - which was often.

There were five dogs of various sizes playing together in the room. An older looking golden retriever was asleep in the corner of the room, a small terrier curled up into its side. It seemed odd that they would need sleep when the rest of us didn't, but I chose not to dwell on it for the moment. There was also a grey great dane and a chihuahua fighting over a bone, while a medium sized dog - I didn't recognize her breed - watched on. She was mostly white, but had

smatterings of rust colored spots covering her body; her tail was feathered, giving it an almost fan-like appearance, and her ears had a similar feathered quality to them. They hung there framing her face like a wavy bob would on a young girl. And her eyes, she had the kindest brown eyes I had ever seen in a dog. She was also ridiculously skinny; it was like she was made to run. I turned to the young woman next to me, "Whats the white dog's name?"

"Oh you mean the english setter? Her previous owners called her Colby. What a sweetheart, you know, she has one of the sweetest natures in a dog I've ever seen? Although you should be warned...she has a little bit of separation anxiety, and she seems to miss her family a lot. She was taken from them early and both this little girl and her family were heartbroken, but she's very loving. Why, are you interested in her?"

I did feel drawn to her. She looked so sad and lonely, just lying there watching the other dogs fight. I desperately wanted to run over to her, scoop her up in my arms and give her the biggest hug possible. "I am most definitely interested in her."

Out of the corner of my eye I could tell the woman was smiling gently at me, but I only really had eyes for Colby. I walked slowly over to her, her ears perking up as I neared. Her head lifted off of her paws, tilting to the side as she studied me. I reached out my hand for her to sniff and she licked it curiously before standing, her tail wagging slightly. My hand traveled to the top of her head and petted her lightly, her fur was so soft. She stood, her

tail wagging faster as I pet her. Suddenly she ran over to the corner, pushing her nose through the toy basket in the corner before grabbing a well loved pink and blue bat. She squeaked it furiously as she trotted back over to me, grinning as she displayed her prize proudly.

I turned back to the woman, “Yes, I want this dog. How do I do this?” She grinned and walked over to the wall. There was a small coat rack in the corner, various leashes and collars hanging from it. Grabbing a light blue collar and leash she walked back to me and placed them gently in my hands. “You don’t need to do anything. We’ll make a note of her new ownership, and that’s it. You have to understand, each of these dogs needs a home while they’re here. They thrive on affection. Neither of you need to eat here, nor will they need to go outside to go to the bathroom. They can eat, which is why we have treats, but it’s more about the experience than it is about being full. Just give her love and affection and she’ll thrive. Ok? She’s your new charge, so take care of her. Her owners miss her terribly and they’ll be extremely upset if she’s not here when they get here.” There was no levity in her voice or her eyes as she spoke.

“I promise. I’ll take great care of her ok? Is there any rule about them needing to be on leashes? It doesn’t really seem like there’s anywhere for them to run to if they escape...”

“There aren’t really any explicit rules, just... be careful. You’d be surprised at how far they can run, especially this kid.” She glanced affectionately at my new best friend.

Twenty minutes later I walked out of the shop, Colby

at the end of my leash. She seemed overjoyed to be outside again. Her head moved rapidly from side to side as she rushed forward, anxious to start the hunt for any hidden rabbits or squirrels. It was adorable. Her ears were perked up so high I thought they were going to fly off her head. Just watching her run about created a well of happiness in my stomach.

As we walked I finally pulled out the little piece of paper, the address staring intensely back at me. “Well Colby, what do you think? Should we try to find our new home?” The address read 1505 N State Street. Now, I had lived in Chicago for most of my life, so the address was familiar, but it didn’t make sense. It seemed to indicate that it should have been downtown, but no matter which direction I looked the tell-tale Chicago skyline was nowhere to be seen. Maybe I was stuck in the burbs? But that didn’t make any sense either. I grimaced as I contemplated my predicament; why in the world would they put the dream gates in the suburbs? Downtown would have made the most sense. I looked around desperately for some kind of street sign, but they were clearly nonexistent. Remembering the dreamscape, I closed my eyes and tried to will myself to appear at the address. Nothing happened.

I felt a yank on the leash, I hadn’t been paying attention and had missed the fact that Colby had stopped, and was sniffing intently at the ground. It took me a second to register what it was she was smelling, but when I did I started laughing uncontrollably. Of course it would be something idiotic like that. There were no street signs, true,

but the streets were definitely labeled. The street names were painted on top of the pavement in bright bold letters, yet somehow I had missed it. Guess I spent too much time looking up at my surroundings and not enough time staring at my feet. I smiled and pulled on the leash lightly, we kept walking for I now knew exactly where I needed to go. One more block and I was there, we had been on state street the entire time. It made a small amount of sense, after all State street used to have some of my favorite shops. I guess it made sense that this small street was downtown.

We now stood in front of a small brick building that was shaped like many of the bungalows in Chicago; it was squarish, squattish and not exactly beautiful, but it reminded me of home. I glanced down at my new dog and grinned, "Welcome home Colby! Lets go take a look inside shall we?" We walked up the cement pathway, climbed the stairs, and pushed our way through the front door where we were greeted by a small row of shoes. Looks like we weren't living alone then. Hopefully they were all dog people, because Colby wasn't going anywhere, of that much I was certain.

Chapter 6

Upon seeing the shoes I had expected the house to be filled with people, something I wasn't exactly looking forward to if I was honest with myself. I had already spent so much time socializing today, I kind of just wanted a chance to relax. It was fortunate then that just about everyone seemed to be gone... Almost everyone. There was one person there, an older matronly woman greeted me as I walked in. "Ah yes you must be Zo- OH a dog! How exciting!" She didn't seem too upset as she wobbled over and bent ever so slightly, letting Colby smell her hand before caressing her ears lightly. "Well that is wonderful." Her voice had a lovely lilt to it, giving it an almost sing-song quality. It fit right in with her rotund, comforting appearance.

"The house is usually empty, as it's mostly just a place for people to store anything they may need to and relax when they have nothing else to do. Most of us have been here for quite a while and have found a form of employment to keep us occupied during the daytime hours." She smiled gently as she spoke, "You can call me Auntie Tammy alright deary?" She patted my arm gently and twirled around as she began showing me around the house. The living room was furnished in a cozy manner, there was a sofa and an armchair as well as a very inviting bookcase. I gazed back at it longingly as we proceeded

through the dining room, which seemed rather pointless to me as I highly doubted I'd be eating much of anything, to the kitchen which was equally pointless in my eyes. There were a few doors off of each of these rooms, most likely leading to bedrooms. She opened one of the doors off of the kitchen and led us up a circular staircase to the second floor. There we were greeted by a small hallway lined by several doors. We walked to the end and paused in front of the last door. "This will be your room for the duration of your stay sweetie. Think of this as a dorm of sorts, if you will. Your dog is free to roam the house if she likes of course," she glanced affectionately down at Colby, "although I do suspect she'll follow you wherever you go." The last part was directed more to said dog than it was to me. She then dismissed herself and walked back downstairs to preoccupy herself with some random task. She seemed like the baking type judging by the streaks of flour on her dress.

I opened the door and walked into the room that I could hopefully grow to call home. Colby immediately ran up to the small couch by the window and curled up on it, watching me intently as I took in our surroundings. There was another bookcase in the corner, a small armchair positioned next to it. There was also a dog bed and a basket filled with toys. It was nice I decided, although it clearly meant that someone was either watching me or I was extremely predictable. I briefly wondered how Colby would spend her days. After all, there wasn't a ton for her to do... Most dogs I had known in life spent a good portion

of their days asleep, but she wouldn't need to sleep here, although the dogs at the shelter had proved otherwise. It dawned on me that the woman, Aunt Tammy - that felt so strange, was right. She most likely would follow me around all day, only sleeping when bored. I had expected this to bother me, but how could it? Who could be upset when you had a friendly dog at your side at all times.

I smiled at her and plopped myself down onto the sofa. There was a puff of vaguely minty smelling air when I sat, and the cushions quickly formed to my backside. It was like sitting on a minty cloud, it fit me so perfectly. I turned to Colby, "Wow. Is this not the most comfortable thing you have ever sat on?" She seemed to agree as she yawned widely and curled up next to me, resting her head on my leg. It seemed, as I expected, that even though she didn't need rest, the habit was too hard to break. I didn't mind, it made me feel loved, and that was a feeling that had been rare in my life. A warmth so wonderful filled my chest at this newfound emotion, my eyes began to tear up in spite of myself. The backside of my hand rubbed at them furiously. I could not get emotional right now or everything would crash over me at once. Before I could stop it, it did and I was crying uncontrollably. The full weight of my day had finally hit, and my strong front was gone. Colby sat up, clearly distressed at my display of emotions, and attempted to lick the tears off of my face. "Shh shh it's ok, I-i'm f-fine. I promise!" I smiled a watery smile at her but it did nothing to reassure her. I wrapped my arms around her neck and sobbed quietly, her comfort seeping into my

bones - warming me from the inside out.

I missed my family desperately. Not my parents as much, I mean... they weren't terrible as far as parents went, but they hadn't spent much time with us. They had chosen instead to focus most of their attention on work so that they could "keep us fed" and "ensure our bright futures." Well I was now dead. No more bright future for me. The very thought made me furious. It seemed so ironic. They had wasted precious time that we could have spent together by working, and I had missed out on forming strong relationships with them for nothing! The very thought hurt me to my core and my sobbing intensified. More than my parents I missed my little brother. I hadn't thought I could cry any harder, but I was proved very wrong. Oh my poor little brother! My thoughts came rapidly, he isn't going to understand! He's going to be so upset and lost and Oh gods what have I done? Objectively I knew that I hadn't died on purpose, but it still felt like my fault. If I hadn't felt that stupid need to go see that storm I would still be at home with him. He wouldn't be forced to deal with the loss of his sister, one of his only friends. He wouldn't be going through the stages of grief. He probably doesn't even know I'm dead yet! He probably still has hope... do they even know I'm missing? It was a sobering thought. So much had happened in the past twelve hours, it felt like a lifetime. I could use the dreamscape to go see him... this thought seemed promising, until I remembered Louisa's warning. I was not to approach the living. If they thought of me as an impostor or imagined me dead... well I wasn't exactly sure

what would happen, but I was pretty sure it would not be good. I pet Colby as I thought, it was more comforting for me than I'm sure it was for her.

Alright. I may have been in the process of grieving, but I did not have that luxury. I needed to find my source or I would pass on. I would be really truly dead, and I did not want to die, not without seeing my brother again. The mere thought of being non-existent, of being obliterated, filled me with dread. The cover of the book I had borrowed stared back at me intensely. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the half sheet of paper Louisa had handed me hours ago. Her messy scrawl left the words barely legible, but I was just able to make it out. It looked like the main types of sources corresponded with most of the main human emotions. There was joy and fear, which we had tested today, as well as sadness and love. The others seemed rather unusual: inspiration and life... I puffed out my cheek in frustration, how was I supposed to know which of these fit?

I set the paper down on the seat beside me and cracked open the book on sources. The first chapter had a brief explanation of each of the sources and the ways in which people went about harvesting them, followed by a description of how to tell when you had found yours. I skipped over Fear and Happiness - briefly noting that they were described as being the most common - moving on to Sadness. The author declared that there were two types of sources related to sadness - the kind that inflicted sadness on others, and the kind that comforted those who were sad.

The idea of comforting someone's sadness seemed a lot like pushing happiness onto others, but the author argued that there was in fact a difference. I argued that the author was in fact an idiot, but continued reading anyway. Love, he claimed - yes I had decided that they were male - mostly related to romantic love; like playing cupid in the dreams of others. So far this was the one that I related to most strongly. I had always thought of myself as a bit of a romantic, in spite of my lack of luck in love. Inspiration seemed to be the dead playing at being the muses, doing their best to inspire creative ideas in others, and life... well life was disturbing.

When you think of someone as gaining energy from life, you imagine bright happy people who make life more enjoyable right? Yeah, this was not the case. People with a life source were more like life suckers. The book chose the more politically correct term - reapers. They were apparently the only dead who possessed the ability to cross over into the world of the living, which in itself was cool, but the reality of it all was terrible. Their name was fitting as they acted like grim reapers. Its no wonder people freak out so much when they see ghosts. The reapers, or soul suckers as I decided to call them, essentially pick people who are already dying and kill them early, feeding on the potential days or weeks or years they had possessed. It was awful! How were the witches allowing them to play god? It disgusted me, and I knew immediately that I could not possibly be one of those... those awful soul suckers! I slammed the book closed and roughly placed it on the chair

next to me. Colby's head perked up at the sudden loud noise and studied my face curiously. I looked around the room, desperate for something to do, before finally grabbing her leash off of the doorknob and holding it up, "Want to go on a walk? Walk?" I said in a perky voice. She jumped up excitedly, her whole backside wiggling with her tail.

We walked down State street, but the shops were so small! It was still a very surreal experience, as it didn't feel even remotely like Chicago. I found myself missing the tall building and the shade they had offered. They had at least been interesting, not like these uniformly sized buildings that had replaced them. I may have liked them a couple of hours ago, but seeing my favorite forever 21 replaced with a small ice cream store made me sad. Ice cream may have been delicious, but familiarity would have been nice.

We worked our way back towards the dream gates, and when I realized where they were positioned I couldn't keep myself from giggling. They had been built right where the legendary bean had been, or as it was supposed to be called - the cloud gate. That was, after all, its official name, and it fit the dream gates perfectly! I wasn't sure if it had been deliberate - maybe the architect/artist had been a witch - or if they had placed the gates there on purpose. Either way it was a funny kind of coincidence, one that I could appreciate.

We continued down Michigan Ave, I tried to walk slowly and enjoy my surroundings but she was just too excited to be out and about, so I let her set the pace. We walked rapidly. I kept my eyes open for any other

dogs. I couldn't help but feel that she would really enjoy a playmate, and it hoped it would get my mind off of things; things like oh I don't know, maybe DROWNING? Ugh just remembering how I had died made me shiver. I really needed to stop thinking, it wasn't good. I smirked at that. Man did I need human contact; being alone was not nearly as relaxing as it should have been.

Remembering how crowded the receiving area had been I began working our way in that general direction. Now that I knew where all these street names it wasn't too hard to find. It was placed the very center of town, on a small cul-de-sac branching off of 0 State Street. It looked even busier than it had been not twelve hours ago. In fact, some of the witches working there looked almost worried, and I swear, there were far more of them now than there had been. The more I thought about it the stranger it seemed.

Of the people who died on a daily basis, surely only a fraction would wind up here. From what Louisa had told me, if you were here it meant that you had something left to live for. Maybe you were scared of passing on, or maybe you had loved ones that you weren't ready to let go of quite yet. Perhaps you had died young and it just seemed too unfair, or a tragic illness had cut your life short. Regardless that should have excluded most of the old people, leaving the population to be filled with mostly younger dead. That was still a rather large group of people, but I didn't think they died all that often. Did they? And even if they did... surely only a small portion of them would stick around.

Colby and I worked our way up the white marble steps and over to one of the more worried looking witches. I decided to skip any preamble, jumping to the meat of the issue. "What's going on? Why are there so many people here? Oh gods... don't tell me there was a school shooting or something!" He glared at me, maybe he was angry with my bluntness? If he was it was understandable. It took him a second for him to finally realize that I wasn't being mocking or insensitive - just curious. He rubbed at his brow in frustration before squeezing out, "N-no. There wasn't a mass accident or tragedy or anything. It's just... don't tell too many people ok?" he fidgeted, his gaze shifting around quickly, "I shouldn't even really be telling you... it's just so strange. People are dying early! Like several years early."

"Soul-suckers!" I muttered under my breath. "What?" He asked, evidently he hadn't heard my muttering. "Nothing." I said. "Continue."

"Right... well, the weird thing is the only people who can do this kind of thing, overcome fate I mean, are the reapers. But we keep a really close eye on them! I mean each groups of them are assigned to a guide specifically to avoid this kind of thing! It's not like they're bad people... but power can be a bit overwhelming for some. The point is, none of our groups did this. They've handed in their reports and it all checks out."

My expression had grown darker over the course of his explanation. This just didn't seem right to me, but what did I know? I was just as clueless as the next person, and I definitely wasn't in charge. I still couldn't shake

the conviction that the soul suckers had to be behind it. Those damned demons! I was quickly developing an irrational hatred for them, and it intensified as something flashed in my memory. The woman today, the one who had assigned me my guide, had said I was “early.” Holy shittake mushrooms!! I felt my jaw drop as the realization hit me, I had been killed by a soul sucker! I felt rage bubbling up in my stomach, my teeth clenched together in anger. I barely managed to squeeze out a curt “goodbye” before walking away rapidly - Colby trailing behind. I looked down at her and my anger lessened slightly. I crouched down to her level and rubbed her head gently, vowing to confront Louisa when I saw her later. For now I would attempt to enjoy our walk. Maybe I’d get lucky and figure out my source by the end of it! I scoffed, yeah sure. That was likely.

Colby and I spent the rest of the day wandering around the city, occasionally stopping in at different shops. The employees were very welcoming of her, I suppose it had something to do with the fact that she - being dead - was no longer at risk of defecating on their floors. By the time we walked back through the doors of our house I had a bag filled with various dog treats and toys, as well as some of my favorite books. I had also made an exciting discovery, there were movies here! I suspected that the witches somehow managed to bring them across. It was really sweet of them, as I’m sure there were plenty of fangirls who were desperately missing their favorite shows, or cursing the fates for killing them before the finale. I was humming my favorite song and cooing at my dog while I

unhooked her leash, when I heard a familiar voice. I looked up in surprise - Louisa was sitting in my living room! I glanced at my new watch, judging by how long she should have been awake she was at least two hours early. Huh.

"You - you have a dog!" she said. The emotion in her voice was hard to identify, but her giant smile seemed to indicate that it was positive. She pet her ears absently, studying me. "We have a problem." So she was gauging my reaction...

"You think?" I assumed she was talking about the obvious soul sucker problem, but her response surprised me. "Yes. Um, with the new influx of dead we're going to have to go in groups instead of one on one. I've been assigned another person in addition to you, so we'll have to find a balance between finding your sources." I don't know what I expected, but it certainly wasn't that.

Chapter 7

Louisa continued to stare at my face for a few seconds, expecting some sort of reaction no doubt. She had this tendency to keep her emotions on her sleeve and expected the rest of the world to do the same. Experience had taught me however that, even though it may put a small barrier between yourself and others, it was best to keep your emotions in check until the situation was properly analyzed. I bit my lip absently as I thought over how to respond.

I wasn't angry with Louisa, nor was I upset with this random dead person. How could I be? I could hardly blame him for dying. The people to blame, if they could even be called people anymore, had to be the soul suckers. Those awful demons were putting a wrench in our plans, and possibly in my chances of survival. The more I thought about them and their sick needs, the angrier I became. I watched Louisa absently as she played with Colby. It was cute, but it wasn't quite enough to cut through my anger. The unfairness of the situation sucked! But it would be equally unfair to take it out on Louisa, the logical part of my brain pointed out; it could be annoyingly right sometimes.

Taking a deep calming breath I walked over to the mess of limbs that was Louisa and my dog wrestling. I couldn't help the swell of giggles as they formed in my stomach, finally breaking past my lips. They just looked

so ridiculous! Louisa had attempted to pin Colby to the floor, her one arm pressing lightly on Colby's neck. The dog's butt formed a challenge, as it was sticking straight up in the air - making it difficult to pin to the ground. Louisa was making a valiant effort; at that moment she seemed to be attempting to wrap her leg over Colby's body in a thigh crush of sorts. But Colby was having none of this nonsense. She kept wiggling, almost breaking out of Louisa's grasp before she found another way to pin her. I would have broken it up sooner, but both of them seemed to be enjoying themselves. Colby's tail was wagging rapidly and her ears were perked up, so it didn't seem like she was in distress. Louisa's hair, on the other hand, had seen better days. "Alright break it up you two! We have stuff to do!" I said, tapping Louisa lightly on the shoulder. Both of them sprang up simultaneously, looks of chagrin on both of their faces. Colby's lip seemed to have snagged on her tooth at some point, lending a disgruntled expression to her doggy face.

"... So Gareth will probably give Sam a quick tutorial - like he did with you - before they meet back up with us again. In the meantime I thought it would be a good idea to head over there and get started. That way we can get some of your stuff out of the way." She had been talking excitedly for the past twenty minutes as we worked on getting the dog ready to go, after which we had begun our trek to the dream gates. She had spent a while talking about her day, which was rather uneventful - school was like that - before starting in on the boy that would be joining us. Turned out

he had died in a rather unfortunate train accident. He had been on his way to school, and was waiting for the brown line, when someone bumped into him from behind causing him to fall onto the tracks. He would have easily been able to jump back onto the platform had he not landed on the third rail. The train came about ten seconds later, just a few seconds too soon for anyone to jump down and save him. Many people had been mentally and emotionally scarred that day - including Sam himself.

The dream gates were far more crowded today than they had been yesterday. It made sense, but I still hadn't expected it. Usually when you hear about something changing you don't take into account how it will affect you, this was no different. Colby and I waited on the outskirts of the crowd as Louisa wormed her way over to the rest of the guides. We sat there patiently, trying to distract ourselves with the different sights and smells, but the crowd was a stressful for the both of us. By the time Louisa had made it back to us Colby was visibly anxious - unable to sit still, her attention shifting rapidly - and I just wanted to go back home. Though I wasn't quite sure where that word referred to anymore.

She had four pieces of paper in her hands, presumably our assigned dreamers for the day, her smile twisted in annoyance. "Ugh even the line to get assignments is ridiculous today! I really hope they get this figured out, because this cannot be an everyday thing!" We stood and walked over to the line of people waiting to go through the gates. "Alright, well according to Chris - he's one of the guides over there,

works with Gareth - Gareth and Sam went in about twenty minutes ago? So they should be training for another couple of hours. That gives us some time to get through at least one of these." She was forced to half shout in order to be heard, although it didn't seem to phase her. I nodded in agreement, "I'd really like to try love first? It just seemed like the most fitting, I mean why waste time right?" It was now Louisa's turn to nod in agreement. Although her smile didn't quite reach her eyes, "So I take it you want to leave the life test for another day then?"

I felt my gaze harden, my smile becoming tightlipped. "Yes."

That was that. We stood in line for what felt like forever, but finally the three of us made it through. We were greeted by the usual grey cloudy sky, and ground and just about everything. Bending over, I unhooked the leash from Colby's collar; it seemed rather pointless here, and it was. Finding that she was now free didn't do much for her. She just stood there, occasionally glancing up at either Louisa or me as if to say, "So guys, what now?" Louisa glanced at the paper, but before pulling us along to the dreamer she looked at me. "Do you have a plan of action?"

"What?"

"Do you have a plan of action." The question had a hint of sarcasm this time around, as if she knew my answer.

"Uhhh no not yet exactly. I mean I usually just kind of improvise? You know, go with the flow. I find that if I know too much about the situation I make plans and it's harder to adjust."

She nodded slowly, absently. I could practically see the cogs in her brain working overtime to compensate for my lack of vision. Something seemed to click for she looked back up, “Fine. Good. Let’s go then yeah?” and grabbed my hand. I barely had time to grasp for Colby’s collar before we were wished away. I opened my eyes, when had I even closed them?, and began planning.

“Alright, Love.” Louisa started, interrupting my thought process, “Not my area of expertise, not gonna lie. I will say that usually a good crush fantasy good. You know, generic handsome dude flirts with her and before you know it they’re kissing! Then we get out of here as soon as possible before her brain escalates it to an uncomfortable point.”

I started to laugh, but had to stop suddenly as Colby looked like she was about to make a run for the girl. We stood in the kitchen of an apartment building, several other people wandered about, giving it the air of a casual party. Our person of interest was in the living room, just visible through the hallway from our vantage point next to a counter. However it was the other people that really caught my eye. They looked... strange. Almost blurry even, like they weren’t fully imagined. I felt shivers course through my body involuntarily, but in spite of its creepiness it was also comforting. If these were just figments of her imagination, hopefully they would pose little threat to my safety. “Welp, time to play cupid!” Louisa said smirking as she shoved me in the direction of the girl. Glaring over my shoulder, I edged down the hall slightly so I could watch as my masterpiece unfolded.

First I conjured up a harmlessly handsome young man. I made him tall, a little over six foot, gave him a well defined jaw a nice scruffy beard and imagined him into a leather jacket before I willed him to walk over and talk to the girl. She didn't bite right away, so I decided to throw in a dash of humor and a smudge of charm. As they talked she seemed to warm up to him, but had yet to close the deal. So as a finishing touch, I gave him one hell of a smolder and had him direct it at her. No straight girl could have resisted, and luckily for me she was no exception! I pumped my fist, lip action for the win! And walked back toward Louisa, smug in my success and how quickly it had gone. Or at least I thought it had gone quickly... time moved oddly here. A second could last an hour, or, conversely, an hour could squeeze into a second. Judging by the look on Louisa's face, and the fact that my dog was now napping with her head on my guide's lap... well... lets just say time flies by when you're playing matchmaker!

She looked up at me, her eyes tired, and asked, "Well? Did you feel anything?" That cut me short. I had been feeling so confident in my success I hadn't really paused to see if it had any effect on me. I took stock of my body and my emotions, only to find that - in spite of the excitement and happiness I felt - there was no warmth or fullness of heart. I glanced over at her sheepishly, "yeah... nothing." Her grin seemed twisted again, her eyes still so tired as she draped her arm around my shoulder, "better luck next time then!" I scooped up my dog, an incredible fete in itself as she wasn't exactly small. I held her awkwardly - she just

looked so huggable - as Louisa whisked us away to some unknown corner of the dreamscape.

Colby leapt out of my arms the moment we arrived, keen on chasing some squirrels. We were in a familiar field, and, to my delight, were greeted by an equally familiar face. Gareth ambled over toward our spot on the grass and wrapped his sister in a side hug. "You made it I see!" confident Gareth seemed to have made a return now that he was in his comfort zone and not smothered by despair. I grinned up at him, but he had already turned back to his charge. Of course, I thought, a hint of sarcasm present even in my thoughts. Samuel is here.

I followed Gareth with my eyes, curious to see what this kid was like. He had been unfortunate enough to have been run over by a train, but that didn't really give me any information on his personality or his appearance. Huh, my arms crossed I analyzed the situation. He was of average height, a bit taller than Louisa but not taller than her brother, thin but far from scrawny.

He seemed engaged in a conversation with Gareth, his hands moved expressively as he spoke, although there was a certain awkwardness to their movements, as if his hands weren't entirely sure they were doing the right thing. His mouth was full, more so than Gareth's, and at least he wore more colors than black! I wasn't sure why I felt the need to compare them, except that their close proximity made comparison natural. Louisa grabbed my arm, breaking me out of my observations, and half pulled half dragged me over towards the two boys. Colby was off jumping in a pile

of leaves, where they had come from I couldn't be sure. I wonder if the dreamscape was picking up on her desires? Or maybe the desires of animals weren't complex enough. Before I could come to a decision on the viability of dog dreams, we were next to the boys and they were turning to incorporate us into their conversation.

"Sam this is Zoe, Zoe this is Sam." Louisa grinned slyly and turned towards her brother. They began discussing their plans for the rest of the night. Evidently they had to be awake in five hours, and were eager to get started. I turned toward Gareth, intending to introduce myself further, but he was staring at me, his brows furrowed in concentration. I felt like an insect being picked apart under a microscope. The whole situation made me rather uncomfortable, and I took a step back unconsciously. "Hi I guess" I stuck my hand out awkwardly, hoping to break the tension.

He looked at it for a second before shaking it, smiling crookedly, "So you're Zoe? You're shorter than I imagined, and you look less spacey than your death led me to believe." I floundered for a second, trying to find the words I wanted to respond. I was torn between laughter and anger, so I settled somewhere in between "Yeah it wasn't my best idea, but your death didn't give me a very good idea of you either. I mean, it painted you as rather helpless and very unlucky." My tight-lipped smile should have been a warning, but he ignored it, choosing to chuckle lightly instead. "Yeah, not my best moment definitely." His eyes were seriously pissing me off. I've always kind of prided myself on my listening skills, but this kid stared into my

eyes so intensely I wanted to punch him. It was very distracting, and there was something in his green eyes that felt calculating! “You could say that” I said stepping back further and turning to Louisa, “So Lou! Whats the plan!”

“Right. We were thinking that since you already did happiness and fear, we would try mixing it up a little. We’re going to do another fear test for Sam here, just because they are my specialty and, as they are the most common type, it just makes sense. Then we’ll go ahead and do a sad one if we have time. Fair warning, it’ll be emotionally draining, but you gotta do what you’ve gotta do.” We nodded our agreement, and Louisa turned and whistled a short whistle. We heard her long before we saw her, her panting breath and pounding feet gave her away as she galloped over the hill. Her nose was filthy, like she had been digging in something she shouldn’t have been, but her tail wagged fiercely. Sam crouched down immediately, a giant smile on his face as he waved her over. Damnit, I thought. And I had been so determined to hate him too! I guess this was one point in his favor, but he still made me uncomfortable. He glanced up, his eyes peeking out under the dark curly fringe of his hair, “What’s this little girl’s name?” The question was seemingly directed at Louisa, she had whistled after all. Seeing as it was my dog I answered his question. “Colby Jane huh? Awww such a pretty name for such a pretty girl eh?” He cooed disgustingly at her. Ugh why couldn’t he just go away! The others smiled sweetly at him and I wanted to barf. He was charming, but I was resistant to his charms! No one could be that sickeningly sweet.

Chapter 8

I reattached the dog's leash and we joined hands. I chose to put as much distance between myself and the mysterious Sam as possible, attaching myself at Louisa's side. I closed my eyes, prepared this time as we vanished. We appeared in a living room. It was decorated for christmas, and a young girlish voice carried downstairs from an unknown room on the second floor. Louisa had been talking quietly with Sam, probably giving him some advice, before gesturing for him to wander up the stairs. Not willing to sit this one out, or let him out of my sight, I handed Colby off to Gareth, who looked both pleased and overwhelmed with his new charge. He needn't have been, she was already preoccupied with the presents under the tree, viciously tearing the wrapping paper to pieces. I tiptoed up the stairs after Sam, ignoring the wild gestures Louisa was sending my way.

The stairs seemed to stretch on forever before the landing finally appeared. I crept over towards where Sam was crouched down by the doorframe, his attention wrapped up in whatever was happening inside the room. I peeked over his shoulder and stared in confusion. Nothing about the scene seemed particularly frightening. Past the doorway was the penultimate little girl's room. Everything surrounding the little girl was in various shades of pink or purple. She was seated at a child's table, serving tea to various stuffed animal nobility. I half expected them

to move or come alive, it was a dream after all, but they were still. The most surprising feature of the room, was a rather large man dressed in red and white, his belt stretched taught over his wide belly - Santa. This little girl was having a dream about a tea party with Santa Clause. The scene was ridiculous, but all I could think was "shouldn't Santa be off delivering presents? I mean it seems like he's wasting some precious time with this little tea party of his" before I reminded myself that none of this was even remotely real. I shook my head in an effort to snap myself out of it, before tapping Sam lightly on the shoulder. I hadn't realized how tense he was, but my touch had clearly shocked him out of his reverie. He turned on me, clearly frightened, but his eyes closed in relief the moment he recognized me. "Oh thank goodness, you scared the crap out of me!" His head dropped into his hands as he laughed, the fear seeping out of him. "So" I began, "You thought to Santa would be frightening?"

His brows furrowed, "No. No I didn't, do you think I'm an idiot? Gosh! I was just planning my attack! Honestly." He turned back to the scene, once again concentrating. "It isn't that hard you know" I said, amusement evident in my voice, "Its actually easiest if you take your fears and use them to scare the girl. Thats what I did, although... it didn't exactly end well." My gaze drifted upwards as I remembered that unfortunate event. Had that really only been yesterday? It seemed like forever ago! I redirected my attention to Sam, but he seemed to be deep in thought. He almost looked constipated, I suppressed a giggle, he

didn't seem like the type of person who would enjoy being laughed at.

Something moved in the corner of my eye, distracted I turned to see what it was. A giant mouse was currently stalking towards the young girl and her unsuspecting guests. Not even Santa had noticed! Although I suppose that, as he was just an extension of the girl's subconscious, he couldn't be expected to pay attention to those kinds of things. The mouse reared up, ready to attack, but before he could, the element of surprise was taken away from him. The little girl turned in her chair and looked him in the eyes before smiling gently and pulling out a chair. She patted it meaningfully, and the giant mouse, after staring at her in shock, proceeded to sit down and join the tea party. I slowly turned to Sam, my mouth twitching as I tried desperately not to mock him for his failure. After seeing his face it was really hard to resist, he looked so completely shocked and betrayed by his creation. I put a hand on his shoulder, "better luck with your next try." He glared at me, yeah I had been right. Not the best loser ever, "You wanna try?" there was a twinge of laughter mixed in with his annoyance. I grinned slightly, "Gladly! See, Louisa once told me that when you are scaring someone it's best to invade a place that was once safe." I turned back to the scene and concentrated on my goal. I was going to turn Santa against her.

It took him a couple of seconds to realize what I was staring at, "Santa?! Really? Are you insane? Santa isn't even remotely frightening! Maybe you've been dead for too

long.”

“Seriously? Dude I’ve been dead for like a day! Ugggggh just - watch ok?” I said, rolling my eyes. Honestly, did he have no imagination?

“Hey,” he was touching my arm. I resisted the urge to flinch away. We had been talking civilly, but you do not touch me without my permission! Unless I am in severe emotional distress... I shook my head briefly, trying to banish away the memories. Crap! He was still talking! “Sorry, I zoned out for a sec. What were you saying?”

He smiled one of those smiles that don’t quite reach the eyes before repeating his question very slowly, “Why don’t we just will her to be scared?” Now that was a thought. I felt rather foolish for not having considered it myself; I had just taken Louisa’s examples as law. When had I stopped thinking for myself? I shot him my first real smile since we had met, “That’s actually not a bad idea Sam! You should try it.” Gesturing to the girl I backed away, letting him take control of the operation. He crouched there, back tense, as he concentrated on the tea party in front of him.

Nothing happened at first. The tea party continued as planned, until the child reached up to offer Santa more tea. She paused, her face frozen in a mask of confusion. Then something broke inside of her. She fell to the ground screaming in terror. Her face twisted in agony, she lay in the fetal position rocking back and forth. Her scream carried on, a non-stop high pitched whaling noise, drowning out the sound of feet on the stairs behind us. Louisa and Gareth pushed past us, rushing to the child’s side. Gareth

turned on us, his face hard, "What did you do!" The girl continued to scream in spite of the comfort Louisa tried to offer, it was like she couldn't even see any of us. All she knew was the fear. Sam was trying to explain himself to Gareth, "I'M SORRY OK? I- I didn't know this would happen! It seemed like a good idea-" at this he turned to me, seeking confirmation. "He's right, we thought it seemed like a good idea. We - we tried to will her afraid..." I couldn't lift my eyes from the ground. I felt so small under his gaze. How were we supposed to know this kind of thing would happen?

While we had been talking, Louisa had lifted the child into a seated position and had stopped trying to calm her down. She was whispering something into her ears instead, ignoring the ongoing screams. She closed the girl's eyes with her fingertips and, after a few seconds, the girl vanished. She stood, her expression grim as she put a hand on the still furious Gareth's arm. "It's our fault Gar. We should have been watching them, it's what we're here for. I'll take Sam for the rest of the night, you take Zoe. I think its best they have some one-on-one time for a while." With hardly a glance in our direction she grabbed Sam by the arm and led him away. I turned back to Gareth, intending to ask him where we were going or something - anything really, but he looked exhausted - and something else. Guilty maybe? It was hard to tell. So I shut my mouth, walked back down the stairs, picking up the end of Colby's leash from where it had been left on the floor, and out the door.

I don't know how long I was walking, it could have

been a minute or an hour, but I didn't stop. My mind kept replaying the image of the little girl on the floor over and over and over again. It wouldn't stop and I needed it to stop I needed it to stop! So I kept walking, because as long as I walked I didn't have to talk about it. I couldn't talk about how I had been the one who let him do it. I had been the one who decided it was a good idea! Because I was disappointed in myself for being too conformist or something. I was annoyed with myself for trusting other's judgments and not making my own.

That stopped me short. At what point in my life had trust become a bad thing? At what point did I decide that the only opinions that could be trusted were the ones that came from my own brain? How idiotic could I be?

Why did I suddenly smell peppermint? It was then that I heard the footsteps, and, a second later, felt the hand on my shoulder. My eyes closed and I felt myself grimacing as I turned around, my head hung low.

Chapter 9

“Don’t run off like tha-“

“How bad was it?” I bit down on the inside of my cheek as I waited for his answer. When it didn’t come I forced myself to look up, and found his eyes staring into mine. I bit down harder, trying to stop myself from crying - trying to stay strong. The taste of iron ran across my tongue; the taste of blood.

“We don’t - we won’t know until later.” His hand dropped from my shoulder as he backed up, his hand raking through his hair. “They’re going to send a witch by later to check in on her, someone familiar with the family.” His eyes bore into mine, trying to understand something - anything probably. He sighed deeply, making me feel so small in the light of his disappointment. “We need to talk. Why don’t you let Colby run around for a while.” He rubbed his neck as he spoke, turning away to do who knew what. I bent down to unhook her leash, pausing briefly to will countless rabbits and birds into the nearby field for her to chase. I watched as she ran off, full of joy. I turned back to Gareth, my heart falling into my stomach as I prepared myself for what was sure to be a severe reprimand. Lectures had always made me squirm.

What I saw cut me short. There was a new crispness to the air, the kind of bite that signals the start of fall. We had been standing in the middle of a field of tall grass. Now

there were several trees - their leaves reddening - and one of those bench swings that you only expect to see on the porches of the elderly.

Gareth had already settled himself onto the swing, his arms crossed as he watched me. "Well, have a seat." He gestured to the open spot next to him. I reached up to brush some non-existent strand of hair behind my ear - forgetting for a moment that I had put my hair up that morning - and slowly approached the bench. I felt my insides squirm as I sat down and leaned back into the bench. He didn't look at me, but continued to gaze straight ahead, his thumbs moving in slow almost comforting circles against his arms. I watched as he took a deep breath and feeling the muscles of my body tense as I readied myself for whatever verbal attack I would receive.

"I don't know why I do this anymore." He said as he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands folding into each other. It wasn't what I expected, but I didn't let my guard down. "Sometimes I just... I just wish I knew nothing. I wish I could forget any of this existed."

"Why would you want that?" I had wanted to just listen, but I couldn't stop myself from interrupting. The words had just leapt out of mouth without my say so. "Isn't it nice to, you know, know that there's something after life? I mean isn't this what everyone is so afraid of death for?"

He exhaled in a breathy laugh, his head shaking back and forth. "It isn't quite like that, not from my perspective." His eyes sought mine and held them captive. "This isn't the afterlife Zoe. This is just some... hollow and pathetic

continuation of life for those too” his voice became more desperate and venomous as he spoke, “- too afraid to die properly!”

He must have seen the hurt in my eyes for he stopped short, his mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for air before saying, “I didn’t mean you Zoe, I just - GAH why is this so difficult?” His head dropped into his hands, “I just meant... I don’t know what I meant. It’s so frustrating Zoe - watching people come here and refuse to die. It does something to them! It changes them - it...” He ran a hand through his hair again as he rose back up, his back falling into the cushion behind him as his other hand rubbed at his eyes. He looked so tired. I wanted to reach over and touch him, pull him into a hug - do something to offer some form of comfort. But I was a coward, so I sat where I was - watching as this person I had begun to respect became human.

He looked up and gazed into my eyes again. His eyes were so blue - almost like ice - they were so distracting that I almost didn’t hear his question. “Zoe. Why do you want to be here? What’s keeping you from just passing on?”

I recoiled slightly; it was a familiar question, but not one I liked to answer? Why did I not want to die. Who didn’t want to stay around for as long as possible? I mean why did he think people were so fascinated by stories involving the elixir of life, or immortality? No one in their right mind wants to be dead. I gazed at him, my stomach boiling in anguish. I half hoped he would laugh it off as a joke, but he was very serious; the intensity of his gaze

did not lessen. I forced myself to relax as I let myself really think about it. Why did I want to be here?

Countless answers flashed before my eyes, some I had considered already, others were new. I knew I didn't want to leave my family behind, I had too much to live for, I had died young and I wasn't ready, I wanted to write a novel for pete's sake! But the one answer that stood out, the one that rang the most true, was also the one that I was almost ashamed of. I was afraid. I didn't want to die because I was afraid that there was nothing after this. That if I passed on I would disappear into oblivion, never to see any of the people I loved again. I couldn't do that, it wasn't an option. I also wasn't willing to tell Gareth why I really didn't want to die, but he seemed to have sensed that I had come to an answer on my own. He leaned back again - I hadn't realized how close he was - and smiled slightly to himself. It wasn't a real smile, more a knowing smirk, but at least it wasn't the same blank exhaustion I had seen for the past few minutes.

"That," he said finally, "is your motivation."

I stared at him, my expression a reflection of my inner confusion I'm sure. "You needed to figure out what your reason for staying here was. Zoe... hold that reason close to your heart. I don't care if you think it's stupid just... hold on to it ok?" He closed his eyes as he spoke, shutting out the rest of the world. "If you don't know why you're here, it can be easier to get lost in - well, in all of this." He opened his eyes and gestured encompassingly at our surroundings.

"All of this, this power the dreamscape gives you - it can be overwhelming for some people." He let his hands fall

onto his lap, his eyes staring at something unseen, "Trust me. I know." In that moment he looked so small, as if he had seen more of the world than he wanted to; as if life had overwhelmed him with all its terribleness and he was sick of looking at it. I felt concern rising up in the pit of my stomach, he worried me. He shook his head slightly, jarring himself out of his reverie and stood up, stretching as he did so. "Alright Zo-bo, we'd best get moving. This is your second day, and you only have about three days left before you start to fade away." He smiled humorlessly at me and offered his hand. I started to reach for it, but paused and looked up at him.

"Gareth." His eyes stared back at me, his brows furrowed in confusion, "Why are you here? You're clearly not happy here, so why do you do it? Why don't you find something you enjoy?" I heard my voice shaking with silent tears. I considered biting the inside of my cheek again to stop them, but the memory of the blood stopped me. I watched as his hand and smile dropped away as suddenly as they had come. Colby, mood ruiner that she was, chose that moment to run up and jump up on him. She had clearly been having a blast chasing the little animals and had come over to share her excitement with us. Gareth smiled softly at her, dropping into a crouch to rub her ears and receive kisses. He looked up at me, "It doesn't really matter. The point is I'm here, and I'm going to help you. Now," He clipped her leash onto her collar and stood, offering it to me as he said, "Let's go find some people to inspire!"

"Wait," I half shouted as I stumbled after him, "I thought

we were doing sadness next. How do you - gah!" Colby jerked forward suddenly, pulling me face first into the dirt. I pushed myself up, glaring at my dog as I brushed hair out of my face. "Ugh. How - uh how do you... inspire someone in dreams?" Gareth offered a hand as I spoke and helped me to my feet. We continued walking through the woods, as we had been for the past ten minutes. "Also, dude. Why in the world are we in the middle of the woods? I thought dream travel was more... accurate or something." I reached up to brush a branch out of my way, when something large with numerous legs fell onto my shoulder. I shrieked and jumped up and down. Swatting repeatedly at my shoulder, "Oh gosh ew ew ew get it off! Get it off!! No no no no!" My hand finally hit the large something. I watched in horror as a giant spider, about the size of my fist, fell to the forest floor. "Oh hell freaking no!" I squealed as I jumped up and down on it. By the time I was done it was unrecognizable.

I paused for breath and watched as Colby ate what was left of the spider. I was shuddering uncontrollably, but froze when I heard laughter. I spun on Gareth who promptly put a hand over his mouth in an attempt to hide his reaction. My hands shook as I tried very hard not to strangle him in my humiliation. Honestly, he could have helped! I stomped ahead quickly before I either slapped him or worse, joined in his laughter.

I brushed more branches out of my way, working towards who knows what. "Zoe! Wait - " he sounded breathless, but was still laughing which infuriated me more. My cheeks were surely bright red, and I didn't really

want him to see the evidence of my embarrassment. “Look” he said, “I’m really sorry ok? I should have helped, but it was just a spider! I didn’t think you would freak out so much.” I could hear the smile in his voice as he spoke. He sounded sincere, so I turned around. He smiled wider and it reached his eyes, which made me smile in spite of myself. His genuine smile was so contagious! He laughed lightly again, a real laugh - not one of his bitter or fake ones - “It really was funny though. You should have seen your face!”

“Ugh I know... They weird me out! I can’t help it.” My cheeks felt like they were on fire, my hands came up to shield my eyes against my will. I felt him punch my shoulder lightly before he continued, “Anyway... before that spider so viciously attacked you, I was going to say...” I peeked through my fingers to watch him as he talked, his smile was already fading. My heart hurt a little when I thought of how short lived it was. Aw crap! He was talking and I wasn’t listening... again! I tried to catch up, “ - how these things are sometimes. This kid seems to be in the middle of a dream involving the woods so that’s where we are.” I nodded, attempting to feign understanding, but he shot me a withering look and I felt myself blushing yet again.

“I was trying to tell you, little miss space cadet - “ he said tapping me gently on the forehead with his fist, “that we’re stuck in these woods because this kid is already dreaming.” He looked around absently, forming a plan perhaps. I hoped that was what he was doing anyway. Plans weren’t exactly my expertise, and I could really use some guidance.

“Oh right! Crap!” I grabbed his arm, attempting to get his attention, “How the heck am I supposed to inspire this guy?”

He looked down at me, his eyes had a glazed over quality to them like he was still preoccupied with planning, but he managed to answer my question, “Hmm? Oh right! Sorry. You guys really weren’t that far off when you tried to influence a dreamer directly. You just... went about it in the wrong way.” Here he shot me one of those disapproving, tight-lipped smiles he was so gifted at. I laughed nervously, “ha ha... uh sorry?”

“Suuure you are.” He shook his head before continuing, “You can’t force an emotion on someone, but you can offer them the choice to accept that emotion as their own. Do you understand?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Ha, well I appreciate your honesty.” I felt myself smiling in the face of my confusion, his sarcasm was endearing. I felt a small warmth in my chest, just seeing these other sides of him - sides that weren’t stoic silence or awkwardness - was rewarding. I felt... special almost.

He continued, “Have you ever had an intrusive thought?”

I shook my head, I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. The confusion was not exactly a new feeling at this point.

“An intrusive thought is one that doesn’t feel like your own, but you accept it as your own because it’s in your brain. I’m trying to explain this as simply as possible...” He looked up as he spoke, like he was trying to figure out the

best way to word this.

“Ok. In life, when you’re awake I mean, intrusive thoughts are kind of a bad thing. We’re talking those thoughts that are like man what would happen if I threw myself off this building right now! Or what if I just stole that apple. Things like that.” His hands moved wildly as he talked, attempting to accentuate his words as if his hands could somehow tell me things his words could not. “They’re generally bad thoughts, and you wouldn’t think them normally right?” I nodded slowly, understanding dawning on me. “So in dreams, have you every just... been surprised by something that happened in a dream? Like you did something that felt totally out of character? Maybe you killed someone, or I don’t know! Just something that didn’t feel like you. Or maybe -” He seemed to be getting more excited as he talked, he was on a roll! “- Maybe you have an epic adventure in a dream! And you’re shocked by how awesome it was. Like how could my brain have possibly come up with that amazing scenario right?” I nodded emphatically, trying to encourage him to keep talking. “Sometimes it wasn’t just your brain! Sometimes we sort of prompt these ideas, offer them up to the dreamer’s brain and its up to them whether or not they run with it! This is how we inspire them. We give them the option to go on grand adventures or seize a story idea, and its up to them to act on it.” He was grinning widely again, caught up in his explanation. I couldn’t help but grin back, this was going to be insanely fun.

We finally made it through the woods, stopping just at

the edge of a clearing. In the middle of the small clearing was a young man. He appeared to be in his late teens, and was holding a conversation with a lion. The lion had a wise demeanor, as most lions do, and was spouting nonsense in an intelligent voice. It made sense. If you say something with confidence and an air of knowledge, you can convince anyone that you are correct. This lion was no exception. I began to inch forward, intending to approach it, but Gareth's arm stopped me.

"Are you crazy?" Judging by his wide eyes and infuriated expression I had just made a major mistake.

"What? I was just--"

"Look I know what you were just." He took a deep steadying breath, "Do you remember one of the first things Louisa told you about dreamers?"

I paused thinking back as far as I could, it felt like it had been forever ago. "Ummmm... was it how they're awesome?"

His eyes squeezed shut, his fingers pinched the bridge of his nose; I think I was wearing him thin.

"I'm sure she told you, you do not" he paused for emphasis, "NOT, approach dreamers. Ever. We have no idea what happens if their imagination overpowers yours. They could will you dead, and I'm pretty sure you would stay dead this time." He glared at me, his eyes willing me to remember this time.

"Do. Not. Approach the dreamers."

"Ok ok I get it, calm yourself!" I backed up so that I was standing next to him again, making extra sure that Colby

was next to me and not anywhere near the dreamer. I didn't even want to think about what I would do if anything happened to her.

"So," I said, my gaze trapped on the man in the clearing, "What do we do now?"

"Now we... uh... you know? I actually don't know what we should do next. Huh" he shook his head slightly, "did not see that coming."

I stared at him, my mouth hanging open slightly. I wanted to slap him or punch him or I don't know - punish him somehow for being an idiot and not having a plan! Seriously how could he not live up to my ridiculous expectations!

I felt giggles rising up inside of me but suppressed him. I really did expect way too much of him; he was only human.

"Alright," I began, "what does his little fact sheet say?"

Gareth pulled it out of his back pocket and began to unfold it, leaning over I attempted to look over, or around, his shoulder. He held it lower so I could look at it properly, thus began our ridiculous attempt to form a plan of attack.

"Is he a writer or anything?"

"Nah it looks like he's an artist... honestly Gareth, does that dude look like an author?"

He looked up at him, "No. Definitely not. He doesn't have that... you know. That air that says, 'I killed someone today.' Know what I mean?"

I nodded, "Yeah man. You have to be pretty twisted to go killing off your babies."

Our conversation died as we both considered the target.

How do you go about inspiring an artist? I ever so gently offered him a thought, maybe you should make the lion technicolor. Nothing noticeable happened at first, but a few seconds later the man's head shook slightly. Like he was shaking off a terrible idea. Right. Technicolor is a bad idea, got it.

I tried again, you should totally paint the lion man! I waited again. This time his head tilted to the left slightly, as if he was considering my idea. Which actually... he probably was. He nodded. Holy crap he nodded! I wanted to jump up and down I was so excited! He had accepted my idea, man I was awesome. It had only been my second idea, so clearly I was meant for this.

Suddenly the image changed. Before me stood the same young man, but instead of a lion there was a lion... man. An anthropomorphic lion... Oh dear goodness.

"Gareth, this sucks." His eyes met mine, they squinted slightly, his eyebrows furrowed before understanding dawned in them. He looked at the scene and then back at me, his eyebrows crawling up his forehead. "Seriously?" his voice was higher pitched than normal, "of all the things you could have done... you inspired him to imagine a... um... a humanoid lion?" I nodded, my eyes squeezed shut against the disappointment. I heard him laughing and promptly punched him in the arm - hard. He merely laughed more. "Alright man, clearly this inspiring shizz is not for me. Ok? Ugh lets go." I turned around and started walking away, pulling Colby along with me. She was confused, all she wanted to do was go say hi to her new lion friend! That

was not going to happen.

Chapter 10

Gareth ambled after me, calling my name as he tried to keep up. It took him a second to push through the branches, but he finally caught up with me, grabbing my sleeve in an attempt to get me to pause. My body was slouched, my face expressionless as I turned to face him. The laughter disappeared almost immediately from his eyes, his hand dropping from my shirt as he took a step back. “Wh- what’s wrong?” his mouth wanted to smile, but it hesitated, “I thought that went well... didn’t it?”

I looked up, releasing a sigh as I allowed myself to fall back onto a large tree root. I pulled Colby to me, petting her ears gently as I spoke; she offered me a comfort that I wanted right then, but was afraid to ask for. I gave myself a few seconds to gather my thoughts, waiting until Gareth seated himself next to me before I spoke. “I didn’t feel anything, Gareth... I” I looked over at him finally, my eyes pleading with him to understand what I meant.

“... It’s not your source.” He finished for me. I nodded slowly, “That’s no big deal though.” He offered, bumping my shoulder gently with his, “There are still other possibilities, it’s not like this was your last hope.” I opened my mouth to respond but paused, choosing to really look around for a second. It really was beautiful there. We were seated at the foot of a giant tree, larger than any I had seen while alive. All around us were trees of comparable size,

birds singing from their hiding places in the branches. It felt almost magical and I desperately wanted to hope... but I just couldn't do it. When I really thought about it, I knew he was right. I had no reason to feel so hopeless, but the longer I was here the more mechanical it all felt.

I never slept, I never ate, I only piddled away my time in the In Between, or manipulated people's dreams and thoughts. "It just feels... so pointless you know?" I shifted my gaze to his, desperately wanting to make him understand, "I know you told me to hold onto my motivation... but it doesn't feel like enough!" By the time I had finished talking his brows were furrowed, not in anger but concern.

"Do you mind... if I ask what your motivation is?" his words gently prodded, and I found myself answering, "I know it seems silly... but I'm afraid. I'm afraid that if I die again, if I don't find a source, I'll just disappear! I really don't want to just be done, but I feel like I don't have a future anymore. You know?"

He nodded slowly and I talked on, "It's like, when I died I was right on the verge of applying for colleges. I mean I had just finished taking the ACTs and my whole world felt bright!" I gestured helplessly, hoping he understood, "I wasn't... I wasn't the most well-liked person in school. I didn't really have any friends, but college seemed like a chance to finally start over! Meet new people you know?" I collapsed in on myself; my next thought hit me hard before I verbalized it, "But it's all gone now. I'm stuck here, I'm dead! I'll never go to college, I'll never turn 18 or 21, or go to my brother's wedding-"

“Your brother is getting married?” he interrupted, his eyes wide.

“No,” I laughed, “he’s younger than me actually... I just meant in the future you know?”

I smiled at him for a second before my mouth fell back into its frown. “That future is gone now... and I’m stuck here,” I could feel the bitterness rising up in my throat like bile, “trying to survive by feeding off of the emotions of others... hurting some of them! Manipulating their thoughts! It’s all just... it’s all just not me.” My voice pleaded with him to understand, and he seemed to; he was nodding slowly, his face echoing the concern that I wanted him to feel.

My head went into my hands as I let myself feel the pity I seemed to want. I felt his hand rub my back tentatively, attempting to offer some comfort; it wasn’t really his strong suit.

“My dad died when I was seven.” My head snapped up, my eyes wide.

“What?”

“Yeah...” he laughed nervously, rubbing his neck. “It was sudden. Brain aneurism...”

“Oh Gareth... I’m so sorry, wh-“

“It’s ok! Really,” he put up a hand in a calming gesture, “I saw him the next day. Here I mean... he showed up here.”

I watched his jaw clench briefly, his eyes pained.

“Isn’t that a good thing? I mean - you didn’t lose him entirely you know?”

“Of course yeah - that’s what I thought too, but he

was... different." His eyes searched mine as he thought, "He was fine for a while... until he found his source. Then things started to change." His hands fidgeted absently as he talked, I wanted to reach over and place my hand on top of his - offer him comfort and calm his nerves - but I resisted. He turned to me, catching my eyes with his intensity, "Zoe." He tore any of my diverted attention back to him, "There are worse things than oblivion. If I were you... lets just say there are other things you should be afraid of."

He pulled himself up and offered his hand and helped me to my feet. "We will find your source, I promise. And when we do, we'll focus on finding you a future, because you're right. It is important." His smile looked strained, but it was a smile nonetheless. I glanced down at my hand, which was still held prisoner in his, and back to him. He dropped it like it was on fire, his ears bright red as he cleared his throat, "Ah yeah... um... we should go... find the others or something."

He began trekking through the woods again, pushing aside branches and bushes as he worked his way forward. I followed behind slowly, entertaining myself by watching Colby chase invisible bugs or birds. It was far more entertaining than it should have been. As I watched her I thought through what he had said. I wanted to trust him, take him at his word, and believe in his promise that there would be a future for me, but it was so hard. I just couldn't shake the feeling that, no matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't have a source at all. That it would be impossible to find, and I would wind up fading away in spite of all our efforts. With

this conviction in my heart, it felt cruel to allow myself to form friendships with these people. If I died, wouldn't it just hurt them more?

I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I found myself tripping over roots more than once. There were only two possible sources left: sadness... and life. I really hoped that I wouldn't be a reaper, but was sadness really any better? Both options felt especially bleak, but I tried to allow myself at least a small sliver of hope. Even if I found myself with a terrible source and was forced to make people sad, at least there would be a glimmer of hope for my future. I clung to this thought for dear life, finally allowing myself to smile slightly. I wasn't sure I would be able to cope with being a soul sucker, but I would tackle that obstacle when it appeared.

I looked up from my reverie just in time to watch as I ran into Gareth's back... hard. Rubbing my nose, I peered around his shoulders trying to see what had caused the sudden stop. There didn't appear to be anything dangerous, but as I stared into the woods ahead of us I noticed something moving. Several feet in front of us was the dark silhouette of a crouching man. I watched as he slowly righted himself, turning his face in our direction. Neither of us could make out his features in the shadows of the trees, but he began moving towards us. We backed up slowly, then it happened. The man stepped into the light and I felt, more than heard, Gareth draw in a sudden breath. He jerked backward suddenly, nearly toppling over me, but at our reaction the man turned and vanished. I gently shoved

Gareth away and turned him to face me.

“What the hell was that about?” I demanded.

“I-it was n-nothing... just... I thought I-I recognized him. I was confused.” I watched his face closely, but he was distracted. I thought I heard him mumble, “I must have been,” but I couldn’t be sure. My hair was starting to come undone, so I blew the offending strands of hair out of my face and grabbed Gareth’s hand. “We’re getting out of here!”

I squeezed my eyes shut and conjured up images of Louisa and her smiling face. We vanished, leaving the forest far behind.

We appeared in the middle of a swarm of kittens. Literally. We were standing in a field of adorableness. “Hey!” I turned around slowly, trying to find the source of that voice in the midst of the kittens. She stood about ten feet away, her arms full of kittens and several others either scaling her body like a giant climbing wall, or sitting regally on her head. Louisa waved at us excitedly and gestured for us to come closer. Gareth and I shared a bemused look before shrugging and wading through the kittens as best we could. Colby came in handy here. It was like Moses parting the Red Sea, only this time it was a sea of kittens... and they were parting in fear of a largish dog. She didn’t pose much of a threat; she merely leaned down and sniffed them at random, occasionally pushing one out of the way with the tip of her nose.

By the time we reached Louisa I was profoundly grateful that my allergies did not exist in the dreamscape,

because that would have just been horrible. She bridged the distance and, instead of pulling me into a hug like her posture suggested, she placed a small black kitten into my hands. I stared at her blankly, awaiting an explanation. She merely grinned larger and gestured over to Sam. He was lying down another ten feet away, squished underneath a virtual blanket of kittens, his hands shielding his eyes from their little paws.

“What in the world happened here?” I finally choked out.

“Oh no biggie,” she said winking at us, “We just attempted to cheer up a girl with kittens. Only Sam here went a bit overboard, also turned out the girl has some ridiculously irrational fear of kittens? So that kind of backfired... But hey it was fun for us!” She turned nodding brightly in Sam’s direction. He groaned in response, curling in on himself more.

“Why haven’t you just willed them away?” I asked. It seemed like a reasonable question but Louisa just laughed. “Well, I suggested it, but Sam is panicking a bit over there and I figured this would be a good lesson for him. So I’m just chilling out until he pulls himself together.” She continued to just stand there, smiling contentedly at her brilliant teaching skills.

Gareth and I shook our heads slowly... she was incorrigible. Ignoring Louisa’s protests, I walked over to Sam and helped him to his feet.

“Thank you!” he said, his voice a bit breathless. It was hard to tell how long he had been under those cats,

but it had to have been a while. I helped him brush the stray strands of fur off his shirt before leaning over and whispering into his ear, "Dude. Seriously though... just will them away!"

"Don't you think I've tried? No matter what I do they just stay here... It's like they've developed minds of their own, little berks." He glared at them venomously as he spoke, his hands and face were covered in tiny little scratches; I was pretty sure he was going to hate cats from now on. I looked him in the eye, winked, and focused intently on our surroundings - imagining that we were not surrounded by cats, but instead were in the default cloudy landscape. A great wind wooshed in and swept the cats away as if they were made of smoke, sweeping the clouds in with them. His eyes shown with thankfulness and relief; he opened his mouth to thank me, but I stopped him with a whispered "don't mention it" and turned back to Louisa and Gareth.

"Guess he finally figured it out!" I said a bit too loudly, "Bet he just needed a teacher with a bit more patience eh?" I wagged my eyebrows in Louisa's direction. She scoffed and rolled her eyes, her mouth doing a poor job of hiding her grin.

When we finally reached them, Louisa threw an arm around my shoulder, holding me back slightly as the boys trudged on ahead. "I know you did it" she said in secretive tones. I found myself laughing nervously, unsure of how she would react, but she merely pushed me away playfully. "No matter, I knew he wasn't quite cut out for this anyway."

“What do you mean?” I asked. Her voice had been playful, but her eyes said otherwise.

“It’s just...” she hesitated, pulling on a lock of hair, “he’s not exactly the most... imaginative person?”

That was all it was? “Ha! Come on, what does that have to do with anything?” My face relaxing as the levity of the situation registered in my brain. I watched out of the corner of my eye as she stared at him, concern written in her furrowed brows and downturned mouth.

“Nothing.”

She jogged off to catch up with the boys, but I found myself staying back. It clearly hadn’t just been “nothing,” but I couldn’t see how a lack of imagination really affected anything. It might make it a little difficult for him to generate a source, but it definitely wasn’t the end of the world. And it didn’t warrant the look she was shooting him; a look that was full of worry and suspicion. I brushed off my worry as best I could, damn it was contagious, and caught up to them just as we joined hands and reappeared at the gates. As I thought of what was in store for me I sighed deeply; it was going to be a long day.

Who was I kidding? It had been a long two days, and because I never slept it felt like four! I know that I didn’t need sleep, but honestly? When you’ve been doing things, and thinking, and planning, and being active non-stop you start to feel a little crazy. So I may not have physically needed sleep, but mentally? I was in serious need of some down time, and I finally understood why my dog still slept now that she was dead. So it was, to my dismay, that I was

put in charge of helping Sam find his new home. When Louisa told me I had grumbled a bit, but a stern look from Gareth was all it took for me to shut up and... well... grin and bear it.

I stayed to the side, trying to keep Colby from jumping on any random dead people, while they gave Sam the address and other mysterious advice. Then they waved goodbye and were gone for the day. I pulled Colby along with me as I worked my way over to Sam, "So," I began, "What's the story then? Where are we headed?" He handed me the business card and said, "I don't know, you tell me!"

It took me a second to register the address, but when I did I couldn't help but laugh. "Follow me man, this is going to be... interesting."

His eyes widened, "Why? Is something wrong?"

"Ha! No man, nothing is wrong." I said, trying my best to smile reassuringly. "You... you're going to like it, trust me."

"Aunt Tammy!" I shouted as we walked through the door. "Here, you can just put your shoes there with the others. Aunt Tammy? You here?"

The larger woman ambled out gently, wiping her hands on her apron as she did so. "Aw hello sweetie, how was your day then? Did you find your source? Oh! Hello hun, what's your name?"

Sam stared at her wordlessly for what felt like forever before finally shaking himself out of it and offering his hand, "H-hi! My name is Sam... um Zoe was supposed to be taking me to my new home?" He looked to me for an

answer, his eyebrows raised in confusion. I couldn't help but grin sheepishly, gesturing to the door and the numbers next to it. It took him a second, but he finally caught my drift and walked slowly out the door. When he came back he was grinning widely, "So," he said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively, "We're roommates then?"

Aunt Tammy chuckled lightly, "Oh no dearie, you each have your own rooms. Just think of this as a dorm of sorts alright? You are free to come and go whenever you like, and I'll be here to answer any questions you may have." She said, patting his arm affectionately and working her way back towards the dining room. She paused in the doorway, "Why don't you give him the tour sweetie, I'm going to go check on my brownies." I leaned down and unhooked Colby's leash from her collar, smiling as I listened to Tammy's happy humming.

"So... sweetie, going to show me to my room?" I punched him, maybe a little too hard as he kept rubbing at it, and lead him towards the stairs.

"Dining room," I said pointing as we walked, "Kitchen, stairs, hallway with doors, your room!" I stopped, opened the door, and shoved him in. "Enjoy your rest and relaxation!" I said, waving cheerfully before I slammed it in his face.

"Phew, what a day huh Colbs?" We worked our way down the hallway to our room, ok so it was more like two doors down, and walked into our sanctuary of peace and quiet. She went immediately for the couch, while I walked over to the bookshelf, brushing my fingers along the spines

of my beloved books. Pulling out a particularly promising looking one, I plopped myself down onto the couch, fully intending to stay there for the remainder of the day.

My eyes were gently drifting closed, the book lying forgotten on my chest, when someone began knocking on my door. “Ugggggggggggggggh” I groaned loudly, flinging an arm up over my eyes. “Go away!” I shouted at the door. The person paused for a second, and for one blissful moment I thought I might actually get to take a nap in the afterlife... and they started up again with the knocking. I threw my book down onto the floor and topped out of the couch onto the floor. It took me a few seconds to pull myself up again, partly because Colby, having been disturbed, had begun to lick my face in her excitement. I pushed her away gently, stood, and swung the door open. To my surprise - ok I was not that surprised at all - Sam was there waiting for me.

“Whaaat are you doing?” he asked, hand still poised as if he was going to resume knocking, this time on my head.

“Well I was trying to - you know - relax? I know it may be unfamiliar for you, but you should try it. I’ve heard it works wonders for your sanity.” I grinned, my mouth tight.

“Oh really? That sounds boring.”

I gaped at him. Was he really that thick? Or did he just enjoy ignoring all of my nonverbal cues. I mean, I could have sworn that last line was dripping with sarcasm. He plowed on, “So you wanna go explore the city or something?” His grin was resolutely cheerful, and I suddenly remembered why I had wanted to punch him

when I first met him. He was oblivious to anything he didn't want to hear. I found myself rubbing my forehead as I weighed the pros and cons of slamming the door in his face. Unfortunately, I was pretty sure he wasn't the giving up type, and my dog looked like she was up and ready to go outside again. I gazed at my couch, longing desperately for its encompassing warmth and more doggy snuggles before I sighed in defeat.

"Fine..." I said. One small conversation and a lot of small talk later, we were out the door and halfway to the dream gates.

"So. Where are we going then? What's your big plan for the day?" I shot him the best, most long-suffering look I had and waited for an answer. Apparently he had ignored me, choosing instead to walk faster towards our unnamed destination.

Chapter 11

We continued down Michigan ave, passed the dream gates and towards the lake. Before I realized what I was doing I had grabbed his arm and yanked him to a halt. "What are you doing? The Lake? SERIOUSLY?" He paused, his mouth open slightly as he stared at me, then a small teasing smile broke across his face.

"What... you afraid of water?" he said, a smirk in his voice.

"Well considering how I died, I'm not really sure why you're surprised."

Understanding slowly dawned on his face, his mouth forming a small o shape. He opened his mouth to apologize, at least I hope that's what he was doing, but I interrupted him, "It- it's no big deal I guess. It's not like it can kill me now right?" I laughed hollowly and approached the lake.

I stood on the beach, my shoes forgotten, toes buried in the sand, and stared out at the cloudy sky. Cloudy sky... big waves... I rounded on Sam, he was still a ways away from the lake, and ran up to him.

"There are clouds in the sky!" I said. He stared at me like I had gone insane, "Um... yeah. That's what the sky does... it gets cloudy sometimes." He gestured at the clouds, "You know - rain? Circle of life? Sound familiar?"

I shook my head rapidly, the words spilling out of my mouth, "It's not that. I've been dead for two days..." I took a

breath to slow myself down, “every day that I’ve been here has been sunny. Every day. There is no actual sun here, but it’s always sunny! Not a freaking cloud in the sky, and yet look at all of them!” I waved at the clouds, hoping that the urgency in my voice would clue him in to how serious I believed the situation to be.

His gaze shifted from my face to the clouds, studying them intently. “Are you absolutely sure?” He put up a hand to stop my angry retort, “Listen I’m just saying... it was already cloudy when I got here. I just kind of assumed that was how it was here. Ok? Now don’t take this out on me.”

I fell back into the sand staring at the waves, my dog forgotten the moment I noticed the cloudy sky. She didn’t care, she was too busy running up and down the beach like a madman. I heard him join me in the sand, my gaze still trapped on the sky. “Maybe you just came during one of the sunny days.” He offered. “It’s possible they change the weather based on the day... who knows! Maybe some of the witches control the weather! Huh? Huh?” he bumped my shoulder, trying to cheer me up with his speculations. “Or maybe... maybe it’s like a day by day thing...” he paused, gauging my reaction before soldiering on, “maybe Mondays and Tuesdays are sunny, but Wednesdays are cloudy, and Thursdays... maybe Thursdays are rainy! It’s totally possible.”

His efforts were admirable, so I offered him a small smile as a reward. “Maybe” I said, “-maybe the sky reflects my mood.” I regretted it the moment I said it; it revealed too much about how I was feeling, and I really wasn’t sure

how much I trusted this kid. I mean, lets face it. He had some pretty terrible ideas in the past twelve hours; even if he could be trusted, his ideas could not.

We sat in silence for a while after that, watching the sky, the waves, and the dog who stood in stark contrast to the gloominess of the others. She broke through my negative thoughts with a big wet kiss and a face full of sand, and suddenly I was laughing. My heart warmed slightly as I pet her, she was such a sweet creature I just couldn't help myself! It was like... it was like she brought light with her wherever she went.

Sam leaned over and rubbed her ears affectionately, "She's great you know! Seriously she has to be the sweetest dog I've ever met." I smiled at him gratefully, "I know."

"You know... maybe I should get a little pet friend or something. Might be fun eh?" It was hard to tell if he was serious, or if he was trying to cheer me up, but either way it was a sweet thought. I started to respond, but stopped myself short. My brow furrowed as negative thoughts threatened to flood my consciousness.

"I would have said yes... because Colby really has been fantastic, but..."

"But?"

"But... don't? It's just -" I paused, trying to figure out how to word this in the least confusing way possible.

"It's just that... I don't know how much longer I'm going to be here you know?"

"Really." His voice made me cringe. It was curious, but there was a hint of coldness behind it, like he wanted to

strangle the negative thoughts in my head.

"Really..." I voiced hesitantly, "I've been here for two days now Sam! This is my third... I only have two more times in the dreamscape before I fade away, if that! And I've already gone through most of the sources-" I paused, trying to keep my voice strong. I was so sick and tired of feeling weak in front of others, and Sam was the last person I wanted to see me cry. I cleared my throat, "I have two options left... sadness or... or life." I said, desperately hoping he understood and I wouldn't have to explain myself further.

"So what! Is that all?" he scoffed, "Come on that's no big deal! At least you're useful in the dreamscape. Everything I try fails... I'm just not cut out for any of it." He frowned, his eyes empty as he stared at the black water. I watched as he shook his head slightly, turning to me with a small smile. "We're going to make it through this, and when we do? The whole world is ahead of us!" he paused, his mouth gaping before continuing, "Actually... you know? I don't even know if the rest of the world exists here?"

Now that thought had me giggling again, because he was right! For all we knew, the people here were the only people in the In Between! Maybe, of all the people that died, only a very small number weren't ready and chose to stay behind.

"Oh no!" I said, my eyes screwed up in mock despair, "I'll never get to see egypt! Or france! Curse you demon who took me too early!" I shook my fist at the sky, cursing my fate. It's true I was trying to joke, but there was a hint

of truthfulness in my frustration, and he sensed it.

“Did you die early too?” he asked.

“Too? Oh no... Oh dude, did you die early as well?”

He nodded wordlessly, his mouth screwed up in a grimace.

“You know?” I said, “We should start a club. A ‘congrats you died early’ club. I bet there’s a lot of us...”

I found myself smiling along with him as we planned out our club, what the meetings would entail. Would there be snacks? Music? It was a lot of fun, and I realized, a bit frustrated at myself for not having come to the conclusion earlier, that he was in the same place I was. Literally. We had both died early, and we were both stuck trying to find our sources. Both of us were struggling with it as well, and the both of us were terrified of dying. Or at least, I thought he was terrified. It was rather hard to tell with him; he was just so happy and smiling all the time. Sometimes it looked force, but you could never really tell. Usually I hate people who use happiness or any other fake emotions as a shield, I find it hard to trust them, but with him... well, lets just say that it’s hard to hate someone when you realize you’re facing the same enemy.

We continued to chat mindlessly, Colby resting between us, apparently worn out from all the running. I learned that he too had grown up in Chicago, only he was an only child. I told him about my little brother, how much I missed him, and how worried I was that he wouldn’t be able to cope with school without me. I was in the midst of telling him about my parents and how aloof they had been

at times, when we heard a rather loud grunt behind us. We turned around and were greeted by the sight of a rather large man clearing his throat.

He extended a hand in greeting, and the both of us shook it politely. He was a rather rotund man, his neck nearly nonexistent, and his hairline receding rapidly. He didn't look unkind though, in fact he had very kind eyes. Overall, he reminded me of a beardless, slightly less rosy cheeked Santa Clause. Once the initial shock wore off I flashed him my most cheerful smile and asked, "What can we do for you today sir? Are you lost?"

He guffawed, "No no child, I'm not lost. I'm taking a census actually." At this he pulled out a clipboard from the bag strapped across his chest. He wet his pen with his tongue, resting it on the paper, and looked down at us expectantly. When we merely stared up at him in confusion, he paused.

"Haven't you been told yet?"

We shook our heads no, confused as to what exactly we hadn't been told.

"Sorry sir, we got back from the dreamscape a couple of hours ago. We've just been sitting here talking. What seems to be the problem?"

"I see..." he said, sighing deeply and holding his clipboard down at his side as he began to explain.

"There seems to be a problem with the reapers. All of the ones we know of have been reaping responsibly, yet people are dying earlier more and more every day. I-" here he puffed out his chest as if proud of his new position, "have

promoted to the official in charge of the census.” Taking in our blank stares his chest deflated slightly. “That doesn’t ring a bell with either of you?” We shook our heads slowly and he sighed. “I guess it is not important then. The gist of it is I” he said importantly, “have been put in charge of recording every citizen’s status in the official records. We had attempted to give you... living-challenged individuals a chance at some semblance of privacy, but clearly there has been an abuse of that anonymity, so we are forced to rectify the situation.”

I nodded slowly, fairly certain I understood what he was talking about.

“Good.” He said, “Now then. Your names, ages, and sources please.”

“Do you want the ages we died at or how long we’ve been here?” Sam asked, his voice tinged with humor at the man’s self-importance.

“That is a good question.” The man considered this new predicament seriously.

Sam winked at me before saying in a tone similar to the official’s, “Because of course, I consider my death to be a second birthday of sorts, and I fully intend to celebrate both occurrences.”

The man nodded seriously, “Yes yes. That is a very good point young sir. Why don’t you give me both ages and that will do perfectly.”

Sam nodded, his eyes closed in mock seriousness, “I would be eighteen when I died, and my death day was yesterday so... I guess that makes me a one day old then!”

The man looked at him, concern on his face, “I am so sorry to hear of your - uh - loss.” He stumbled over his words, unsure as to whether he should be sad or not, “and what is your source?”

“Undeclared as of yet.” He winked.

The man jotted down the information before turning to me, “and what about you young lady?”

I informed him that I was seventeen, and had been dead for two days now. I too was undeclared, although I was seriously considering sadness and life. He nodded, the epitome of seriousness, before thanking us for our time. We were told that, upon finally deciding our sources - as if that was an option - we should come down to his office at the receiving area and declare our source. Then he was gone, and Sam and I were left trying to figure out what exactly had just happened.

My smile faded away as my brain caught up with the recent events, and I fell back onto the sand. Sam joined me a second later, his hand reaching up to support his head as he folded in on himself.

“So-“ he began.

“So...” I answered.

Both of us just sat there, the wind blowing sand into our hair, the waves crashing on the beach. The clouds in the sky caught my attention again, and I found myself staring into them. Perhaps it wasn't my emotions they reflected, but the state of things. It was a troubling thought. I watched as they rolled, dark clouds bubbling up over the horizon and crashing into the others, slowly merging into

different shapes. The looked dark, heavy with rain perhaps. Rain in the afterlife... now that was a thought. I found myself grinning tightly, my thoughts far from happy as I considered my fate.

"So apparently the reapers are out of control then." I started, attempting to force myself out of my head.

"Well... it's only a small group of them." Sam argued. "I mean, he did say that the ones they were aware of were perfectly fine."

I looked up at him, one eyebrow raised at his naivety. "Seriously dude? The both of us are probably here because of those reapers. You do realize that right?"

He nodded slowly, "But... Zoe. You know there's a chance we might be reapers ourselves right? I mean look at us! You only have two options left and that's one of them, and me? I'm failing at everything else!" his voice had a manic quality to it.

"I know-" I said quickly, "but seriously? Think about it man! That kind of power? That kind of power has a history of corrupting people!"

"But not everyone is corrupted by power!"

"Sure," I responded, "but isn't it better to be guarded against it? I mean... isn't the risk of them being corrupted greater than just... letting them be?"

He stared at me, not quite following my train of thought. "You know... if I didn't know better, I'd say you were implying that they shouldn't exist in the first place."

I wanted to reply that of course not! That would be insane! But the more I thought of it... the more I realized it

was true. I really didn't think they should be allowed to live on. I mean they were playing god with the lives of others! They had killed us long before we were supposed to die! That kind of thing couldn't be allowed to happen, and the witches were clearly doing a poor job of keeping them in check. Maybe they had been human once, but they didn't seem to have any reserves about killing off their fellow humans. Perhaps they had lost sight of their humanity. I tried to explain my thoughts as best I could, but Sam's expression just grew darker as I talked.

"Seriously??? You can't see any possible way that reapers could be beneficial for humanity?"

I shook my head, "No! Of course they can't! No one deserves to have their life cut short just so that someone else can live longer. That just isn't right!"

He gaped at me, "What about the sick. What about the people who are suffering? Even if they took them just a couple of minutes early, or a couple of hours early... wouldn't that be a good thing?"

"NO! No. It would not be a good thing. What if those last minutes were the only chance they had to say goodbye to their families! How could you rob them of that opportunity?"

He shook his head, disappointment written in his narrowed eyes and lowered brows, "Everyone deserves a second chance at life Zoe. It doesn't matter what kind of person they are, they deserve a chance."

"Not if they take another's life. No one should live to hurt others."

“What do you think the rest of the dead are doing Zoe?” his voice grew louder as he spoke. “You think they aren’t hurting people? You think WE didn’t hurt people today? How is what we did to that little girl any different than what the reapers are doing to the living?”

“WE AREN’T KILLING PEOPLE SAM!” I had to stop to catch my breath, trying to calm myself. “We... we may leave scars, but at least we let them live on.”

He just shook his head slowly, “Zoe, what are you going to do if you wind up being a reaper?” his eyes were serious, his gaze concerned as he waited on my answer.

I paused, unsure as to how to even respond. “I honestly don’t know. I’m - I’m not sure I could live with myself if I was... If I was one of those - those soul suckers.”

“Well-“ he said quietly, “you better pray that you aren’t one.” He stood up, brushing the sand off of his pants, his expression blank.

“I think we should take some time for ourselves. It’ll be a while before they get here, and I think we both need time to think.”

I watched him walk away, torn between wanting to apologize and the stubbornness that kept me from wanting to admit that maybe... maybe I was wrong. I curled into myself, trying to stop the awful feelings coursing through my stomach. I really didn’t like it when people were disappointed in me, and disappointment had been etched all over his face. But I felt so right! Soul suckers were clearly bad, but... I sighed, standing up and leading my dog away from the beach. The clouds rolled menacingly over our heads,

but I ignored them - lost in my thoughts.

Chapter 12

We wandered around the city, or what was left of it here in the afterlife, trying to find something to do. The city was filled with people, wandering around aimlessly, some going into shops others just enjoying being somewhat alive. We were stopped by several other witches, each wanting to know our source and age. It was incredibly frustrating, and I found myself wishing that there was a sticker or something I could wear to indicate that yes, I had already filled out your census, and no I was not a danger to any of the living. Unfortunately nothing like that existed, so I was forced to put up with it over and over again.

Finally I gave up and gave in, heading back towards home. It was probably for the best anyway, as Colby looked positively exhausted. I was still coming to terms with the fact that you could be mentally or spiritually exhausted without being physically exhausted. There may not have been any physical need for sleep, but I was beginning to really appreciate its importance now that it wasn't required.

When we walked through the front door I found myself checking for Sam's shoes in the lineup, hoping that he was still out and about somewhere. Oh thank goodness, they were gone! I breathed a sigh of relief and inhaled the aroma of freshly made brownies. Oh how I had missed that smell. Colby ran off into the kitchen, her tail wagging

enthusiastically in her wake. The sound of laughter echoed out upon her arrival. Smiling, I ambled out into the kitchen, intent on seeing what I was missing.

Tammy was trying uselessly to hove the dog off of her chest, but she was intent on licking her face. There were two girls seated at the table, one looked like she was in her early twenties, the other like she had died when she was thirteen. I tried to smile at them, maybe make some new friends, but my heart wasn't really in it. My thoughts overpowered my ability to think, and my smile barely reached my eyes. As I thought of the day ahead and watched how happy Colby was, surrounded by all these people, I had an idea.

"Um - Aunt Tammy?" I started, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear absently.

"Yes dear?" she glanced up, her brows raising in concern as she took in my appearance, "Whatever is wrong sweetheart? You look like someone tore the head off your favorite teddy bear!"

My laugh was hollow, "It's nothing. Just... thinking I guess. Actually," I paused, uncertain, "um - I was wondering... if it would be alright if Colby stayed with you? Just for today of course" I added hurriedly, "It's just... we're testing sadness today? And I think she would have more fun here with you. Would that be ok?"

"Oh of course dear, there is no problem. I'm sure we'll have a marvelous time, won't we sweetie" she said cooing at Colby as she ruffled her ears.

"Thank you so much, I really really appreciate it." I

stepped forward hesitantly, pausing before pulling her into a quick awkward hug. She pat me on the back gently before pushing me back and holding me at arms length.

“You take care of yourself you hear? I don’t want to hear about you doing anything reckless and hurting yourself. I don’t think this puppy would ever forgive you.”

She was so sweet, I found myself nodding, flashing her a sheepish grin.

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like to head out early. There are just, there are some things I want to think through.”

She nodded slowly, “best give your pup a good hug before you go. Make sure she doesn’t miss you too much.”

Colby walked over to me, her tail wagging cheerily as I wrapped her in a tight hug. She licked my nose and smiled her doggy grin, warming my heart and giving me courage for the day ahead. I rubbed her ears fondly, gave her a small kiss on the top of her head, and walked back towards the front door. She ran ahead of me, rushing towards her leash, her tail wagging rapidly at the idea of going outside again. Her ears were perked so high, it was hard not to kiss her again. Her head tilted as I put my hand on the doorknob. What was I doing? She was supposed to go with me, her face seemed to say. She pointed at her leash with her nose and whined sadly at me. When she finally realized that I wasn’t bringing her along her ears drooped, and she ran over to the couch by the window, jumping up onto it to watch as I left. I couldn’t help but look back at her as I walked down the sidewalk, waving at her before she was out of sight. Who knew that leaving a dog at home could

be so heartbreaking? I felt so guilty, but it was necessary. It was going to be a difficult day, and... if worst came to worst... I wanted her to get used to my absence.

I stopped at the corner of the block, rubbing my watering eyes. Ugh if I ever found my source, I was going to take as many days as I could off and just relax. This was a far too emotional week for me. Deciding what to do with the rest of my day was... to say the least... difficult. There wasn't really anyone that I wanted to talk to, and I knew for certain that I wanted to avoid as many witches as possible. The last thing I wanted to think about right now was the soul sucker pandemic. As I wracked my brain, trying to think of some place that was safe and secluded, one such place popped into my thoughts with a sudden clarity. A mischievous smile broke across my face, I knew exactly where I was going to spend the rest of my afternoon.

It took a while, what with all the dodging and evading I was doing - every time a person came into view I ducked behind the nearest large object, but I got there. I opened the door ever so slightly and glanced inside. The office was completely empty. It didn't seem very wise of Louisa to leave her office unlocked, but I was not going to complain. I crept inside, my eyes sweeping the room carefully, wary of any alarms or possible traps. Louisa seemed like the booby-trapping type of person, but as I walked further towards her desk, nothing continued to happen.

There was some sort of experiment scattered across her desk - or at least... that's what I assumed was happening with the bubbling cauldron. It really was more of a giant

beaker, but considering her obsession with the supernatural... well, cauldron just seemed like a more appropriate word choice. The mysterious substance simmering there, blue steam erupting from its contents every second or so. It looked kind of dangerous - not exactly something you wanted to leave alone for long periods of time. I turned, browsing her shelves for something interesting to occupy my time. Several titles stood out, "Dreamscape - Is It Magic?" and "A Comprehensive History of Witches and the In Between." I chose the last and settled myself in an especially welcoming chair in the corner. It was huge, enveloping my body as I settled myself up against the arm rest, my legs hanging over the edge of the other. The book was old, that wonderful musky book smell assaulted my senses as I opened it. I breathed it in slowly, savoring the smell and enjoying the very fact that I could smell even in death. It didn't matter that it might have only been because I believed I could smell it, I enjoyed it nonetheless.

It definitely was not the most interesting read, but it was informative. Apparently witches had existed since time immemorial. Their existence stretched back to the existence of humanity itself. What had started out as a small group of people who communed with the dead, eventually became a governing power - keeping the dead in check. The bubonic plague had made their existence especially important - as it was one of the first documented cases of reapers going insane and killing people indiscriminately. Why they hadn't come up with a better solution was beyond me, perhaps they hadn't thought it was necessary.

The reapers had been in control for hundreds of years, this being the second case. Or at least the second serious case.

The longer I read, the heavier my eyelids felt. I was reading about the dreamscape and the select few cases of other sources going insane, when the next thing I knew I awoke to Louisa shaking my shoulder.

“Heeey” I smiled groggily up at her.

“Hey you,” she said laughing at me. “I see you’ve been enjoying yourself.” She slipped the book off of my lap and looked at it. “A history of witches and the In Between... really? Of all the other interesting books in my library, that was the one you chose?” She shook her head in mock disapproval before helping me out of the seat. Damn but it was comfortable.

“So-“ she said, arm draped over my shoulder, “You ready for today?”

I nodded slowly, uncertain.

“Hey,” she spoke softly, “Don’t be too worried ok? It’s going to go great alright? Have some confidence!”

This was going to go terribly. I stared at the assignment sheet in shock, finally tearing my eyes away from it to at least try to listen to Louisa and Gareth’s plan for the night.

“We’re going to split up for now, just because we want you to each have a chance to try this on your own.” Gareth said. He nodded at Louisa and she continued, “Sam, you’re going to go with Gareth for the day, and Zoe you’ll be with me.” She shot me a smile and a thumbs up. I tried to return the smile, but my heart was currently resting in my stomach, making it difficult to have any expression but

fear. The name on the paper stared up at me, filling me with dread, “Theresa Goodwin.”

It wasn’t until we were past the gates and about to vanish that I was finally able to open my mouth, “We’re targeting my mother?”

My voice shook with the intensity of my emotions. I couldn’t decide if I was angry or scared, or maybe sad; they all boiled inside of me, drowning out my thoughts. Louisa put a comforting hand on my shoulder, trying her best to calm my nerves. “We figured that it would be easiest to make someone you knew in life sad... and honestly hun? You didn’t have that many people to choose from.”

I nodded absently, my thoughts still circling around the fact that I would be seeing my mother in a couple of minutes. They hadn’t quite gotten to the fact that I would be forced to make her sad, something I had avoided doing at all costs in life.

“You know... you’ll be comforting her as well right?” Louisa said, interrupting my thoughts. I tried to smile, but it was difficult.

“Lets- let’s just get this over with.”

I could see her staring at me out of the corner of my eye like I was an animal in need of help, but she nodded and grabbed my hand. Giving it a tight squeeze, we vanished.

We stood at the edge of a street, my street... or the street I had lived on in life. Across from us was my house. My old house. It looked just as I remembered, it’s red door staring at me, a comforting glow shining through the windows. From our position I could just see inside. My mother was

seated there, talking to my father about something. She didn't look too broken up about my death, but maybe she was using dreams as a distraction. I know I would have done so.

We stood there in silence as I wracked my brain for a way to make her sad without scarring her. I could think of several ways, but I was afraid to act on any of them. They all seemed cruel, and I had done my fair share of cruel things in the past few days. Louisa leaned over and put a hand on my shoulder again, lending me her strength and assuring me that whatever happened, it would be ok.

I took a deep steadying breath, and began imagining the saddest thing I could. Her finding out I was dead. I watched in silence as a police car drove up to our house, slowing to a stop in front of it. A tall, serious looking man stepped out of the car and straightened his cap. He walked slowly, oh so slowly, up my front steps, finally pausing before the door. His hand raised up and he knocked three slow knocks. Tap... Tap... Tap. I could hear the hollow sound all the way across the street. I watched through the window as my mother stood and walked over to the door, disappearing through the doorway into the small foyer and out of my sight. The door slowly opened in and the police man began to speak. I couldn't hear his voice, but I could see the play of emotions run across her face as she registered his words. Her brows rose up in surprise, before crashing down. Her mouth shook as she grasped at the doorframe for support. I watched as her hand slipped and she fell to her knees before the man, sobs shaking her body.

The rest of the scene unfolded in slow motion - my father standing up and going to her, he too collapsing in despair. I watched as he held her, rocking back and forth trying to stop their sobbing. The policeman reached out a hand, wanting to give comfort, but he drew back. He said something else, then turned and walked back to his car, driving away into the distance. My parents stayed at the door, but I couldn't watch anymore.

I turned my back, tears streaming down my face. I cried. Louisa attempted to comfort me, trying to remind me that I had one more thing to test. I did my best to think of some way to comfort them, before settling on the best possible option. I turned back, watching a scene that I knew would never happen in real life. I watched as my doppelganger walked, no ran, up to the house. Taking the steps two at a time she landed on the top step. My parents stood slowly, wrapping her in their arms, laughing in relief as their dream finally came true. I was home. I was alive. They didn't have to be sad anymore, but it wasn't real, and I knew it.

I turned away and walked down the block, rubbing at my eyes hopelessly as I continued to cry big ugly tears. Louisa ran up to me, torn between offering me congratulations on successfully doing what I had to do and comforting the loss that I felt so dearly. I turned to her, struck by a thought that rendered everything I had just done pointless.

"I didn't feel anything Louisa. I FELT NOTHING!"

"Th-thats not true Zoe." She said, fighting back tears herself.

“No it is. I felt sad, yes. But I did not feel anything inside of me. No energy, nothing. This was not my source Louisa. I just gave my mother false hope for nothing. She’s going to wake up, oh gods... she’s going to wake up, and she’s going to be devastated! She may not even know I’m dead yet and when she finds out... oh my word. I just SAW how she will react and it is awful!” I cried and cried, my tears endless. Louisa attempted to wrap me in her arms, but I fought her, “DONT TOUCH ME! Don’t - touch me.” I collapsed on the ground. Broken.

Chapter 13

There was a sudden breeze and I looked up from my crouched position on the ground, Louisa's hand dropping away as she stood. Gareth and Sam were back. Gareth took a step forward, his hand raised as if he wanted to help, but Louisa stopped him and Sam who had opened his mouth. I hurriedly wiped my eyes and stood, trying to straighten my clothes as much as possible.

When I finally turned to face them the both of them were involved in an animated, if clearly staged, conversation with Louisa. I felt an immense surge of gratitude towards her, and shot what I hoped was a thankful smile in her direction.

"So," Gareth began, "I take it it did not go well?"

Louisa glared daggers at him, as if she were furious that he had even opened his mouth.

"I mean clearly," Sam said turning towards Gareth, but before he could continue Louisa had, not very subtly, punched him hard on the arm. "Ow! Damn it Louisa!"

"Well then," I said, clearing my throat before I continued, "I guess there's only one test left for me huh?" my eyes began to water again, but I bit my cheek until the urge to cry went away.

"Yes..." Louisa said, turning anxiously between me and her brother. "Um, why don't we test the both of you at the same time... Just get it out of the way."

We all nodded our agreement and wordlessly joined hands. Louisa glanced in my direction before giving my hand a tight reassuring squeeze. We vanished, and found ourselves at the gates.

This didn't make any sense... most sources were taken through the dreamscape. I turned to Louisa, opening my mouth in the beginnings of a question, "Wh-"

"This-" she interrupted, "needs to happen in the In Between." She looked over us all slowly, "Reapers are different. They're almost... they're almost a different breed of spirit. Like witches, they are the only ones who can cross over between the realms of the living and the dead."

I nodded slowly, my gaze on the floor. This sounded kind of familiar, like something that must have been mentioned in one of my books. I stayed lost in my thoughts as we approached the gates. What was I going to do? I didn't want to be a soul sucker, but I didn't want to die, and this was my last option. I squeezed my eyes shut tight, there was no point in thinking about it until I knew for sure what I was.

We crossed through the gates and I stared up at the sky. It looked as if it was growing darker, more menacing. We followed Louisa over to the side a ways, until we were standing maybe ten feet away from the gates, away from the crowds.

"Alright then," her voice sounded strained, like she was attempting to be happy but just couldn't muster the cheerfulness it required. "It's a lot like travel in the dreamscape, just close your eyes and choose a focal point from life.

Something concrete is usually best... Since we're aiming for Chicago I recommend maybe the bean? Or your house. Either one works, but make it a structure not a person."

I closed my eyes tight, shutting out any other thoughts as best I could, and focused on my house. My home... comfort captured in its red bricks, light shining through the windows, shrubs growing in the yard which was overrun with weeds as my father had no time to care for it. I missed it more than I realized. I tried to keep the image in my mind and willed myself there as much as I could. There was a loud pop, and I opened my eyes.

I had not moved an inch. It was Sam. He was a reaper.

I reeled back, my whole body shaking with the shock. To Louisa and Gareth it must have looked like I was shocked by Sam's disappearance, but I wasn't, not really. It was the inevitability of my own death that really shook my spirit. My mind began to spin, trying to come up with a solution. There had to have been a mistake! I must've somehow missed my source, or messed up one of them... misinterpreted my response to it... but no. That wasn't possible. I had easily accomplished all of the tasks, I had been able to evoke each source... but none of them had fit. I wasn't a reaper, that much I knew, and I was grateful! For I still didn't really trust them, but I couldn't reject Sam. It wasn't his fault... not really. All his arguments in favor of the reapers came flooding back into my mind. He had been right, mostly anyway. I still didn't agree fully, but in his case? Surely he deserved a chance to prove that he wasn't like them.

I looked at my friends, for that was what they were now, or at least the closest I had ever gotten to having them. My heart sank into my stomach as I realized how much pain I was going to cause them when I faded away. It was worse than thinking about the pain I had caused my family, because at least then it hadn't been my fault. This was, or at least it felt like it was. I had had one task... find my source and keep existing, and I had failed. I had failed all of them. The more I thought about it the more messed up I felt. I knew right then that I wanted to make my passing as easy on them as I could, and I could only see one way of doing so. I had to push them away... make them feel like they had never truly known me. That I was a... was a terrible person. I steeled myself for what I had to do.

Sam popped back in, his face excited at his newfound ability. "I did it! Oh my gosh I found my source!" he laughed excitedly, his face lit up with happiness... until he locked eyes with me. His expression began to fall, his eyes filled with apprehension as he awaited my response. It hurt to know that he wasn't sure if I would reject him... it hurt even more to know that, even though I didn't mean it, he was right. I took in a deep breath, closed my eyes tight for a couple of seconds, and opened them. My gaze was cold, my mouth a straight hard line as I looked at him. I mustered as much hatred as I could into my voice and spoke, "Get - away - from - me." I spoke slowly, deliberately. My words edged with a harsh conviction that I didn't feel. I watched as he stepped back, looking physically pained, his hand subconsciously gripping where his heart would have been.

I wanted to cry, hurting him made my gut clench in rejection of the words that came spilling out of my mouth. "You're... you are a soul sucker. You know how I... how I feel about soul suckers." He took a step towards me, his hand stretched out in a pleading gesture, but I jerked backwards. "No." He took another step, "NO." I shouted as loud as I could. "Do not touch me."

Louisa put a hand on Sam's arm, pulling him backwards as she and Gareth stepped forwards, blocking him from my view. "Zoe," Louisa said, her voice calm, as if she were attempting to talk down a scared dog, "You don't know what you're saying... I know you're upset about your mother a-and the fact that you still don't know your source... but - but we'll help you ok?" she said, her smile faltering as she spoke, "We can figure this out."

I forced myself to step forward and pushed her away, hitting her on the arm harder than I wanted to. "No." My voice was hard, filled with more false hatred, "You have been no help at all. You and Gareth." My voice trembled as I spoke, and I tried my best to make it sound like disgust and not sadness. "You failed me, and I have no use for you or your help." Gareth started forward, looking like he was torn between slapping me and trying to shake reason into my thick skull. Before he could do either one, Louisa had stopped him and I had already stepped backwards. I turned my back on them, forcing myself to feign strength, fake the confidence I didn't feel in my straight back, and walked away. By the time I had turned the corner, I was crying silently, my body stiff as I tried to maintain the facade.

When I was finally far out of sight, far enough away that I knew they weren't coming after me, I broke down and cried. I let myself curl up into a little ball as the sobs wracked my body. It hurt so much! Of all the people I had scared or possibly scarred in the dreamscape, hurting my friends was the worst. I rubbed at my eyes, trying to stop the flow as I stood. Colby! Oh thank goodness I still had her... I could use some unconditional love right about now. I heaved myself up and finally stopped the crying. My breath still hitched occasionally as I neared the house, but for the most part it was under control.

I walked up the stairs slowly, desperately hoping that I wouldn't run into Sam. Surely he hadn't had time to come home yet... I let loose a shrill whistle as I walked through the door, calling out with as much cheer as I could muster, "Colbyyy! Colby, come here girl!" I was still clapping for her when Tammy walked into the living room. Her expression cut me short, and found myself straightening from my bent position as I looked up at her. She looked almost... worried, or concerned, and she kept wringing her hands. "Zoe..." she began, and I knew something was wrong. Her tone dripped with concern, "Someone - someone came by while you were gone. She-" she paused, staring at her hands as she worked up the courage to speak, "she had a note... from the adoption place?" She took a deep breath, but even before she spoke I knew what she was going to say.

"She's gone... isn't she." I spoke in a monotone.

"Yes dear, oh I'm so so sorry." She walked forward and enveloped me in a hug, but I just stood there. My

whole system in shock. “I wanted to stop her, I tried - I tried to explain that you loved her... that there was a connection! But” she paused, rubbing my back, “but Colby just seemed so happy to see her, I couldn’t stop her. I’m so sorry sweetheart.”

I pushed her away gently, and walked wordlessly away up the stairs to my room. Once inside I locked the door behind me, curled up on our couch... her favorite spot... and just stared. I wanted to cry, I wanted to sob and rage, but I couldn’t. I had known the risks, and even if I wanted to cry I wasn’t able to anymore. My tears were gone, I was completely out of the energy required to cry. So instead I folded in on myself, hugging a pillow to my chest, and heaved dry sobs into my pillow until I fell asleep.

Chapter 14

When I woke my eyes felt as if they had been glued together. It was not exactly a sensation I expected to feel without a body, but considering everything that had happened... well, I wasn't surprised. I sat up slowly, staring around my room absently. I wasn't going to miss it exactly, but it had become a comforting sight. Sight... I was really going to miss being able to see. I glanced at the books scattered around the room. The one on sources stared mockingly at me, so I picked it up, uncertain as to what I should do with it. It wasn't like it was of any use to me anymore, so I pushed myself out of my chair and walked slowly over to the trash bin. It made a satisfyingly loud clunk as it hit the bottom of the metal bin.

What to do with my last days... or day. I realized I had no idea how long I had slept! My door stared at me out of the corner of my eye, daring me to venture out and risk seeing certain unnamed people. I approached it cautiously, gulping as I did so, and creaked it open veeery slowly. I peaked around the corner, allowing just the top of my head to show. Seeing no one in the hallway, I tiptoed down to the top of the stairs and began my descent. There in the kitchen was the very person I was looking for. I walked up behind her; she turned and smiled upon seeing me. "Ah there you are little sleepy head. You've been up there for quite a while! I was beginning to think I should send someone in

there to check on you.”

She continued to busy herself around the kitchen. It seemed to me like she was always baking something or another, but if it made her happy who was I to stop her.

“Aunty Tammy, exactly how long was I upstairs?”

“Oooh” she began, drawing out the oh as she thought, “I would guess a good ten hours or so, maybe twelve!”

Groaning deeply I stepped back and wandered out to the living room. Twelve hours? I had slept throughout an entire day! Ugh how long did that make then? How long had I been here... I began to count in my head. If I was correct... this would be my fourth night here which meant... I only had one, maybe two days left. I collapsed onto the couch, my head in my hands as I tried to decide what to do with what was probably my last day of existence. As the despair began to fade, acceptance settled in and I knew what I needed in that moment.

The walk to the dream gates was by far the most miserable walk of my death. First I was alone, and second I was pretty sure it was my last. I really did try to savor it, but it felt pointless. The gates looked as they had before, surrounded by tens, if not hundreds, of newly dead. In the corner stood the usual gatekeepers, but the multitude of dead were overwhelming them - taking up all their attention. It was the perfect distraction, and allowed me to slip through without anyone noticing. As much as I really did not like the soul suckers, at this moment I was incredibly grateful to them. Once I was successfully through the gates I stepped off to the side and closed my eyes, conjuring up an

image of the only person I wanted to see... The only person in the world that I wanted to say goodbye to before it was too late. Then I vanished.

There he sat, just as I remembered him, my brother. His hair was just as messy as I remembered, his orange locks sticking up in every direction. His glasses fell further down his nose as he stared at the ground, intent upon something there - most likely a bug of some sort. Even in his dreams his clothes looked slightly too big for him. I smiled in spite of everything and ran up to him, ready to wrap him in my arms, but upon seeing me he backed away. His eyes were wide, his mouth quivering with fear and disbelief, and perhaps... a touch of sadness.

"N-no! Y-you're not here. Y-you're not real! You're dead!" I felt every cell in my body wanting to believe his words, wanting to believe that I truly was dead, but I resisted.

"No! I'm not dead!" I half-shouted, focusing on those words until they felt true and I no longer felt like I was fading.

"H-how did you do that?"

"What?" I asked, my brow furrowing. I hadn't really done anything that I knew of, but his eyes were huge - like they were ready to jump out of his head.

"You - that's impossible. You were f-fading and... and you came back! You became real again." He looked into my eyes, trying to really see me. His stare intensified, his mouth turning up slightly as he allowed himself to hope. He so desperately wanted me to be real.

“Hey,” I said in the most soothing voice I could muster, “It really is me.” I smiled hesitantly at him, slowly opening my arms so he could examine me. He poked and prodded a couple of times before finally wrapping me in his arms.

“Zoe?” his voice shook as he spoke, I could feel tears dripping onto my neck.

“Yes, it’s me. I’m...” I pushed him back, looking into his eyes, “well ok... I am kind of dead, BUT” I spoke before he could interrupt like I knew he wanted to, “I haven’t passed on quite yet. Do you follow?”

“So... you’re a ghost then.” A small frown had replaced his smile as I talked, the hope going out of his eyes.

“Well kind of... it’s, it’s complicated.”

He stared blankly up at me, his brow furrowing as he held back a myriad of questions. I sat down and pat the spot next to me, gesturing for him to join me, “It’s confusing... have you heard of purgatory?” I waited for him to nod, “It’s kind of like that only it’s not. Because you don’t actually have to prove that you’re good to magically go to heaven, rather its more like a second chance at life.” He nodded slowly, but his eyes were still confused.

I pursed my lips, trying to come up with a better explanation. “Ok, here we go. It’s like I died, but on my way to the afterlife I looked back and decided that I really wasn’t ready to die yet, so I was sidetracked.”

“To my dreams?” he scoffed.

“No,” I said, laughter in my voice, “it’s a place called the In Between. We just have access to dreams, so I can come and talk to you when you’re asleep.”

“Whenever you want to? C-could you come every day? And I could tell you about school? It would be like you weren’t even dead!” He talked faster as the ideas came, his excitement evident in his voice. He looked so hopeful I could feel my heart breaking all over again.

“N-no... not exactly.” My brows furrowed as I tried to figure out how to break my second death to him. This had not been the most well thought out plan apparently.

“I-its like...” I paused. Maybe it was better to just tell him the truth, “Look Chris... In order to stay alive in the In Between you need some kind energy source. Most are able to get it from different emotions or ideas - sort of intangible things you know? But for some reason nothing is working for me, so I’m going to fade away soon whether I want to or not.”

His face screwed up in concentration, “So what you’re saying is... you’re going to die again.”

“Yes.” My throat felt tight with the tears I was holding back, I wanted to wrap him in my arms again. Tell him how sorry I was, that I had never meant to leave him. “I’m so-“

“Don’t you dare say you’re sorry.” He said, his eyes fierce. “You know I hate it when you do that. This isn’t your fault! It- it isn’t anyones... as much as I wish it was so I could at least blame someone... I can’t.”

I lifted a hand and brushed some of the hair out of his eyes, “You’ve been forced to grow up so fast... I am sorry about that, for that is my fault.” My eyes narrowed as I gazed at him, really taking in his eyes. They looked so much older, more exhausted, than they had when I was alive.

"It's ok Zo. I'll live." He said, laughing emptily as his words sunk in. "So!" he began in a much more cheerful voice, "made any new friends?"

"Well... I did..." I said, pulling at my reddening ear as I spoke.

"Oh Zoe... you didn't..."

My shoulders hunched slightly at his tone, I had to look away, "Look it's just... I didn't..." I sighed, "I didn't want to put them through the same thing I did with you! So I kind of, um, ha... I kind of tried very hard, and very successfully, to push them away." The last part tumbled out of my mouth at a rapid pace, as if I hoped he wouldn't understand it.

"Ouch! Why'd you punch me?" I rubbed at my shoulder as I stared aghast at him.

"Because you're an idiot!" he scolded, "honestly Zoe. You spent so much time bemoaning the fact that you didn't have any friends, and the moment you make friends what do you do? You alienate them. You are just so damn predictable."

"Cut me some slack ok? I did it for their own good!"

"Oh please!" he scoffed, "for their own good? You did it because you hate goodbyes and were too cowardly to see if they actually cared about you."

I folded my arms, pouting slightly at his tone. Honestly, he was younger than me! This whole situation just felt wrong.

"Zoe," he said, his voice softer. My shoulders relaxed as I looked at him, his eyes screwed up in concern. "You know what I wanted the moment I found out you were dead?"

I shook my head a fraction of an inch, waiting for his answer.

"I wished I had had more time... more time to say goodbye and tell you that I loved you... that I would miss you. I wanted to tell you how much you standing up for me in school meant. How you got me through a lot of really hard times, and how I wasn't sure I would be able to survive without my big sister to protect me."

My eyes stung, my throat tight as I listened to him. The hurt in his voice made my stomach clench up in regret, "I just wish I had gotten the chance to say goodbye. I don't care what you said to your friends Zoe. If they really were your friends I'm sure they'll forgive you." He paused, his gaze hardened as he looked into my eyes. "But I know one thing. They will not forgive you for dying without saying goodbye. Not when it wasn't necessary."

His small hand gripped my shoulder tightly as his words sunk in. I nodded, my shoulders hunching in shame, before he pulled me into a tight hug.

"I love you Zoe. I love you a lot and I'm going to miss you more than I can say. Just... I really hope... that whatever is there on the other side is good ok? I love you."

I hugged him as tightly as I could, my throat so tight I wouldn't have been able to speak if I had tried. By the time I pulled away my nose was a stuffed up mess and my eyes must have been bloodshot. I wiped them furiously, and leaned in to kiss him goodbye. Then I eased myself up off the ground, brushed off the back of my pants, blew him one last kiss, and vanished. Had I stayed behind I'm sure I

would have seen him crying as he curled into himself. His sister was truly gone.

Chapter 15

I was hesitant to walk back through the gates, as what I had done felt borderline illegal... if that was even a concept here. I half expected the witches to be waiting for me, handcuffs at the ready, but the area in front of the gates was completely empty. The crowds of people were gone, and the witches with them. They must have all gone into the dreamscape, and with a crowd of that magnitude they would have needed all the witches they could get.

So it was that my exit from the dreamscape was rather anticlimactic. I walked through the gates and continued walking, trying to decide what to do first as I went. Louisa and Gareth definitely deserved an apology, but... it was Sam I had really rejected. I frowned as I walked, increasing my pace; there was no guarantee that he would be at the house, but I had to check. I burst through the front door, and ran up the stairs to the second floor, taking the steps two at a time. My journey came to a sudden halt as I stood before Sam's door. The rest of the hallway was empty, everything completely silent as I stared at it my brow troubled. I couldn't even decide if I wanted him to be there or not. My hand extended as if bewitched and tapped on the door. I flinched back, my whole body tense and ready for action, but nothing happened. After a few seconds of nothing continuing to happen, I relaxed and stepped forward, pushing lightly on the door. It opened.

I tiptoed into the room, my gaze sweeping every dark corner in case I missed his hiding form, but it was empty. The room, once I turned on the light, turned out to be quite similar to mine. There was a large comfortable looking couch, a bookshelf in the corner - although his had significantly less books than the one in my room - and an assortment of lamps and other random nicknacks. There were several options, and I found myself sitting on his couch while I considered them. I could go out and visit Louisa's office in the hope that she was there, although I was fairly certain that she was in the dreamscape, or I could sit here and wait for Sam. Granted, I could have gone to my room to wait, but I didn't want to miss him. I grabbed a couple of interesting looking books from the shelf and curled up on the couch. My eyes occasionally drifted to the door as I pretended to read. If only I had a watch! I honestly had no idea how much time I had left before I would fade away, and I could feel my insides squirming with the anxiety of it all.

The book I was attempting to read was some sort of history book documenting one war or another between two or more vaguely european countries. Did I mention I was only pretending to read it? Honestly, who needed history when you were dead anyway? It's not like it could affect me here. I tossed the book onto the floor without a second glance and opened the next one in my pile. Upon reading the first line I flipped back to the cover to read the title. Huh! Sam had found a book on soul- I mean... reapers! Smiling to myself, I settled back into the cushions and began to read.

It wasn't the most interesting book I had ever read. There was a brief history on how they had come to be, which I skimmed, followed by a detailed description of how to identify which people were ready to die, also skimmed. I wanted to be interested by it, but I just couldn't get myself to focus. The longer I tried to read, the heavier my eyelids felt.

Just as I felt myself nodding off for what had to be the thousandth time, I heard the door open. I shot up out of my chair before he could react, my hands extended in a placating gesture. "Just... give me a chance to apologize, please!" I said in the calmest voice I could muster. There had been a second when he entered the room, before he saw me, when his eyes had looked exhausted - almost sunken in - and his mouth drawn in a straight line. It quickly faded, only to be replaced by a look that screamed anger and betrayal.

"Ok... I know this is going to be hard, and that what I said was practically unforgivable-"

"It was." He interjected. If eyes could freeze, his were doing a pretty good job.

"R-right... and I'm really sorry! You have to know, I didn't mean any of it! I swear - its just..."

He glared at me, closing the door behind him as he tossed his things to the ground and walked towards me. He stopped a foot away and loomed over me, his glare adding several inches to his emotional presence. "What. You didn't mean it? We both know how you feel about soul suckers Zo. Why in the world would I be any different?"

I swallowed nervously, taking a step back as I tried very hard to meet his gaze. It was incredibly difficult, but I needed him to know that I was telling the truth.

“Y-you are different! All of those opinions? All those beliefs I was spouting were nonsense. They weren’t founded on anything real... you’re the first person I’ve met who is actually a so- a... reaper.”

His glare did not lessen in intensity or frigidity, but his shoulders did relax slightly. At least his jaw wasn’t clenched quite so tight, that gave me a tiny bit of hope. I soldiered on, “I didn’t say any of that because there was truth to it, I said it because I was trying to make you all hate me.”

Perhaps it was the beginnings of tears in my eyes, or the sincerity that laced the tension in my brows, but his expression softened ever so slightly.

“Why in the world would you want us to hate you Zoe?” His hand rose up to ruffle at his hair, his eyes lessening in their coldness - now less like the arctic and more like northern wisconsin.

“Sam... I haven’t found my source - you do realize that that’s what happened back there right? As much as I really did not want to be a reaper, not being one meant that I’m going to die... again.”

I couldn’t bring myself to look into his eyes anymore, so I stared at my feet and forced myself to keep talking. “I did the math man. I’m going to fade away, and for once I actually felt close to people that weren’t family. I didn’t want to hurt you guys... not with my death anyway. I’d

rather you hate me than grieve for me.”

My eyes stayed trapped on my shoes, the tears dripping silently down from my eyes, and off my nose before finally splashing onto those same shoes.

“That is the stupidest thing I think I’ve ever heard.”

My head snapped up, my mouth open and ready with countless retorts, but his gaze stopped me short. He didn’t look angry anymore, ok... he looked a little annoyed, but at least he didn’t look as hurt. I rubbed hesitantly at one eye, not quite sure if it was ok to be happy. Suddenly he grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

“Are you insane? Honestly Zoe! You are such a dolt. Did you really think we’d just let you die? We’re your friends. I’m sure Louisa had every intention of taking you into the dreamscape and redoing every single source just to make sure. I mean seriously-“

He kept rambling on, but I had stopped listening. I rubbed at both my eyes in earnest now. My heart felt light again, a gentle warmth radiating out from it and spreading to my bones as the strength of their affection for me finally registered. A half sob half laugh broke past my defenses, and I found myself shaking with the force of it. Sam just stared at me, unsure as to whether I was still sad or was now suffering from some sort of fit. To answer his question, I reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him down into a warm hug.

“Thank you” I whispered into his ear. He pat me awkwardly on the back, before pulling away and choking out a strangled “You’re welcome.” The poor boy, his cheeks

were bright red. My happiness came crashing down as I realized how massively I had screwed everything up. I fell back onto the couch, my gaze blank as it all registered.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” Sam asked, sitting slowly, cautiously, on the cushion next to mine.

“I’ve messed it all up... I don’t have any more time Sam.” With this realization finally vocalized, my head collapsed into my hands, all hope gone. He put a soothing hand on my back and attempted to rub it in small circles. His actions were jerky and awkward, but it was a valiant effort. I shot him a grateful smile before returning to my moping.

“We could at least think through everything... maybe if we just rethink through the options something will stand out?”

The glare I shot him was withering, but I sat up anyway and turned to him fully intending to play along.

“Alright. Um... the different sources, so fear?”

“No definitely not.” I said, my head shaking back and forth rapidly, “The only thing I felt after that was guilt. It was awful!”

He nodded thoughtfully before continuing, “Sadness?”

“Oh gods no! That was one of the worst thing I’ve ever done to a person.” I shivered at the memory.

“Right... Joy then!” he smiled hopefully, but I shook my head morosely.

“Nope.” I said, making a popping noise on the p. “That was a definite no for me.”

“Right... and we know it’s not life, so that leaves just

love or inspiration right?”

I sighed as I sank back into the couch. “This is hopeless! I don’t even know what it’s supposed to feel like! And Gareth and Louisa are no help. Uh ‘its a warm feeling” I said in an awful imitation of Gareth’s voice. “‘Its like you’re energized.’ I mean what does that even feel like? What a horrible descriptor!”

Sam’s brow furrowed as he thought, “Well...” he began, “for me... it wasn’t that as much. I mean there was some warmth, but the energy thing wasn’t that prominent. It was like... like my heart was suddenly happy. Like a warmth spreading out from my center, filling my body with happiness and - well - energy.”

I sat forward slowly, my eyes widening as I did so. I could feel my heart’s pace increasing as I leaned toward him, “Sam, oh Sam you beautiful soul you! I could kiss you!” He blushed furiously at my exclamation, but I had already jumped up out of my seat. “Oh my gosh, oh my freaking gosh! Holy freaking crap dude!”

He stared at me wide-eyed. “What? What is it?”

I whirled on him, pulling him up out of his chair and dancing around the room with him. My face felt like it was going to break with the force of my smile, “I know my source!” I sang out as we waltzed. That stopped him short. He stood there, rooted to the spot as a smile slowly worked its way across his face.

“You do?” his eyes were so bright they were like stars.

“Yes! Well... no... I mean I’ve felt that feeling before. Several times actually. I don’t really know the exactly

source yet, but at least I know I'm not dying!" I laughed brightly and continued to twirl around his room, my grin wider than it had ever been before. I wasn't going to die! This had to be the best day ever.

"Oh my gosh," I said, grounding to a halt. "Louisa and Gareth! Oh my - oh oh I'm a terrible person..." my smile had slipped off my face and was rapidly being replaced by one which reflected the horror I felt in my heart. I turned on Sam, "We have to find them! I have to apologize!"

He laughed at my expression, "Yeah... you really do. You were so mean to them, I thought Louisa was going to cry... or slap you."

Chapter 16

Our conversation drifted off to a halt. Not sure what to do, I rubbed at my neck as my eyes wandered the room. I glanced at him out of my periphery, he was looking at his feet, his arms crossed as his thumb moved in a comforting circular motion on his arm.

“Are you sure you’re ok? I know it was harsh...” I asked, my voice drifting off in uncertainty.

His thumb paused its movements and I looked down at my feet, waiting for his answer.

“Look...” he said, his feet shifting back and forth as he spoke, “It wasn’t your best decision ever, but I understand why it happened. So really - it’s ok.”

“Thank you.” I said in a soft voice. I reached out and gripped his shoulder, squeezing it lightly. The whole situation felt awkward, and I found myself looking around the room for some excuse to leave. Before I could figure something out however, I remembered Louisa and winced.

“Sam? Um... I’m not sure if your night is already busy, but could you do me a favor?” I cringed as I asked him the question, unsure as to whether I wanted him to come or not, or if he would even agree to help.

“Maybe? What’s the favor?”

“Could you come with me to find Louisa? I.. I could really use the moral support.”

He smiled and reached a hand out to wrap me in a half

hug as we walked towards his door. "Of course I'll come." It felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and a warmth spread throughout my heart and body. My thoughts ground to a halt as I realized the significance of that feeling. I stared up at Sam. Could that even work? Could I really harvest my source from people who were already dead? Before I could fully register the importance of this discovery he continued with, "I want to see the expression on her face when you explain your reasoning. It's going to be epic!" My face paled as the truth behind his words sunk in. She really was going to kill me... again.

We walked down the deserted State street, or the In Between equivalent of State street, toward Louisa's office. My stomach squirmed with nerves as I thought of apologizing to her. Gareth would be equally difficult, but Louisa... oh she must be so upset with me. I tried to stare up at the sky to calm the nerves, but the dark clouds were not helpful. If anything the boiling black clouds added to the overwhelming menacing feeling that was plaguing me. I tried to look at my feet, but that wasn't any help either, so I closed my eyes.

By the time we reached her office door I was close to hyperventilating, but the scene before us robbed my of my breath completely. The office was empty. Ok, it wasn't completely empty, but it was as good as abandoned in my eyes. Most of the books were still on the shelves, though a few were scattered throughout the office. The only thing truly missing was the usual experiment that normally occupied her desk, as well as any other signs of

life. I neared her desk, straightening the lampshade before turning to Sam. I opened my mouth to express my distress, my eyebrows screwed up in worry, but was stopped short. Looming over Sam's shoulder, blocking the only exit in the process, was a large, dark shadow.

I clenched my jaw as I held back a scream; instead I reached for Sam and grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him to me. He stumbled forward, but I caught him and turned him around. He tried to step in front of me, protect me, but I was done being afraid. I grabbed his hand and turned to face the threat with him by my side. The shadow of a man stepped slowly into the light; I squinted at him and took a subconscious step forward. He looked... familiar. He had to duck to enter through the doorway, and I realized that he would have dwarfed even Louisa. His eyes looked far older than the rest of his body suggested. They were tired. It wasn't that he had large bags under his eyes, or even dark circles; the eyes themselves just looked worn - like they had seen more than any man should. In spite of his looming height and menacing exterior, he looked almost kind. I looked briefly at Sam, his eyes were still widened in fear, but the situation didn't feel as dangerous as it should have.

I took a deep breath, calming any doubts I could, and stepped forward extending a hand. The man just looked at it, scratching hesitantly at his beard before reaching out a hand in return. He had a firm grip which was comforting. I've said it before and I will again, a person's hands will tell you a lot about them. These hands were warm and dry, his

grip firm but not crushing. It spoke of confidence, but in its softness betrayed a more gentle nature. I smiled up at him, "Hello sir, I'm afraid this isn't my office. Louisa is out at the moment, is there anything we can do for you?"

"As a matter of fact, there is."

He eyes stared intensely over my shoulder. I turned to see what had caught his focus and groaned inwardly. Sam.

"Louisa and Gareth were taken, and that boy is going to help me rescue them." He said and pointed at Sam. The poor boy staggered backward and fell into an awaiting armchair. I ignored Sam's despair and turned on the man, "What do you mean they were taken? Who took them? Where - why - why would anyone just-" I stumbled over my words as my voice picked up pace, but the man just stared at Sam. His eyes burning with an intense determination. It took me shaking him slightly for him to finally turn back to me. His eyes narrowed as he looked at me, and I suddenly knew how a fly must feel right before they're swatted. I backed away hesitantly, his gaze no longer kind.

"I am Louisa and Gareth's father - I am Thomas Albin." He said in his gruff voice, "And this boy," he pointed to Sam, "is going to get me in to where they are being held. Is that a good enough explanation for you?"

I shied away from him as he spoke, but nodded my understanding. He reached forward, aiming for Sam's arm, but I cut him off. "No." I tried to shoot him my most intimidating glare. "Louisa and Gareth are my friends. If they're in trouble, I'm coming too."

I felt the weight of Sam's hand on my shoulder, "It's ok

Zoe.”

“No. It’s not ok. I’m not letting you go alone.” My eyes never left the man’s face as I spoke. Sam let out a large sigh and his hand left my shoulder. I felt a grim smile spread across my face as I faced Tom. His hand rubbed at his eyes as he watched the scene play out.

“It isn’t that simple-“

“Yes it is actually.”

“No you don’t understand...” he said, his brows drawn together apologetically. “You physically cannot come. She... the woman who has taken them, has a barrier set up. It only allows reapers through.”

My heart sunk into my stomach as my brain finally caught up with what he was saying. “H-how is that even possible?” I finally choked out.

“They’re in the dreamscape.” He said it with a certain finality, as if that was all the reason I needed. One eyebrow raised, I crossed my arms and waited for a better explanation. He sighed again, his posture broken as he slumped down against a shelf. His mouth quirked in a sour smile as he spoke, “Surely you know what I mean. You’ve been going in and out of it for what... four days now? Anything is possible in the dreamscape. All you have to do is believe.”

I nodded slowly, it made sense... kind of. “So... let me get this straight then. This woman has captured Louisa and Gareth and is holding them somewhere in the dreamscape, and she’s gone ahead and surrounded herself by reapers. That sound about right?”

His head bobbed once in affirmation. “Something is still

bothering me," I began, "Why reapers? Why does she trust them?"

"It's not so much that she trusts them... she's been recruiting reapers over the past year." He looked down as he spoke now, his body folding into itself. His voice small he continued, "It's how she got me."

The pieces finally began to fall into place. "So... you're a reaper then. What happened to you? Lou and Gareth don't really... well they don't really talk about you."

He looked up at that, his smile small and sad. The exhaustion in his eyes began to make sense; he had done countless things he regretted. "I was bitter." He said, "By the time she approached me, I had been dead for years. You need to understand that I had really begun to forget why I wanted to live in the first place."

The pain in his eyes was too much for me, and I found myself staring intently at my hands as he spoke.

"The first time I spoke with her, she made it sound amazing. I would be free from this society, free from all the people who looked down on me for being a reaper." I looked up then, guilt seeping out from my heart throughout my body as I listened. "You may not have realized it yet, but we aren't the most popular individuals here. I just... I wanted to be done with it all, but I didn't want to die. So I took what she said to heart and decided to follow her."

He shook his head slowly, as if chastising his past self for making that decision. "I faked my own death... well my second death. Then she took me in. For a while it was nice, freeing even... we were given free reign - allowed to take

whomever we deemed ready to die.” His gaze darkened, “The others though... they - they changed. I changed. No one should have that much power over life, over fate. It does things to you.”

“So why are you here now then?” Sam interjected. I turned to look at him, his outburst had surprised me. His eyes were dark, his gaze accusatory.

“I’m here...” began the man, “because in spite of everything, in spite of everyone I’ve killed, I still love my children. I can’t leave them with that woman. I think she plans to kill them.”

“Well that answers that question.” I said, standing as I spoke and walking over to Tom. I held out a hand to help him stand, but he stared at it in confusion. “If she’s going to kill my friends there’s nothing you can do to stop me from going.” I reached forward and grabbed his hand and yanked him to his feet.

“Didn’t you hear what I said earlier? You cannot physically go past the barrier. It won’t let you pass.”

“I did hear what you said.” A small wicked smile broke across my face, “anything is possible in the dreamscape.”

I ignored their groans and walked to the door, flinging it open. “Now. Let’s go invade this woman’s fort shall we?”

Chapter 17

We worked our way through the empty streets towards the dream gates. Sam and Thomas were talking in hushed tones, but I ignored them. My thoughts were swarming, taking all my attention. I had been faking confidence, I had absolutely no idea what I would do once we got to her barrier. How in the world was I supposed to get past something that could tell what your source was? I mean I didn't even know what my source was. Ok, so I had my suspicions, but I couldn't be sure. Now that I knew what it felt like, I at least knew that I wasn't passing on any time soon. That warm feeling had been present so many times over the past four or five days. It was there anytime someone had hugged me, it was there when my dog had made me feel... loved. Wow... I was an idiot. It was so obvious I wanted to laugh. Love... well not exactly love. I mean I didn't feel all warm and fuzzy when I was manipulating people into kissing each other, but if it was genuine affection... well that made infinitely more sense.

My brow furrowed subconsciously as I thought. The one thing that I kept coming back to was how I had gotten, or harvested, my source. At least half of that warmth had come from interactions with people or animals who were already dead. If it was possible to harvest your source from your fellow dead, why were we still haunting dreams?

Before I could try to come up with an actual answer, we

were there. The gates were still empty, everyone still inside creating dreams, or nightmares, for the living. Thomas turned to us, putting a hand on both our shoulders as he stared us in the eyes. "Alright Zoe. Sam and I have been talking, and we think the best bet..." he looked to Sam, uncertainty written across his face, "is for you to force yourself to believe that your source is life." Sam finished. The both of them were tense, as if they were scared of my reaction, but I merely nodded.

"That makes sense." I looked the both of them over as they relaxed. "I'm not sure that it will work, but you're right. It's probably the best bet."

Thomas gave the both of us a curt nod before turning to the gates and walking into the dark cloud. I glanced back one more time at the sky. Its clouds were now almost the same shade as the dreamscape. A small shiver ran up my spine as I stared at them, it all felt wrong, but I had no choice now. Squaring my shoulders I faced the gates and followed Sam into the dreamscape.

We were greeted by the usual cloudy landscape; something about the familiarity of it all was comforting. Sam's fingers wiggled their way into my hand, and I squeezed it to reassure both of us. I shot him a grateful smile and grabbed Thomas' hand. He nodded at us, "you know the plan." And we vanished.

When I opened my eyes I was standing in the middle of a small clearing in a wood full of giant trees. It all felt vaguely familiar, like I had been there in my dreams before. In fact, I was fairly certain that if I ran over that hill I would

find a small lagoon at the base of a waterfall. I opened my mouth to tell one of them, but Sam put a finger over my mouth. He was looking around jerkily, his eyes wide. Thomas finished looking around and gestured for us to join him.

“Alright,” he whispered. “The barrier is just a few feet ahead. Now would be a really good time for you to start believing Zoe.”

I nodded and squeezed my eyes shut tight, focusing desperately on my source. The boys started to edge forward, I opened my eyes just as they passed through the barrier, vanishing from sight. Panic bubbled up in my stomach, but I forced it down and tried to convince myself that my source was in fact life and not affection. This would have been a lot easier if I didn’t know what my real source was. I felt a slight shift inside and opened eyes. I didn’t exactly feel different, but maybe it had worked. I walked forward, hoping that I would just pass through, but I was stopped by an invisible wall. *Crap!* This needed to work. My failing to pass through would have created a disturbance in the wall and would surely let her know that something was wrong. I had to do this quickly before anyone came to inspect it. I closed my eyes and, instead of trying to convince myself, I willed. After all, that was how I had manipulated the dreamscape in the past. I opened my eyes and stepped forward, letting my stubborn will force the barrier into believing that I was a reaper.

Sam rushed forward and wrapped me in a tight hug, I had crossed over. I grinned wickedly at the both of them,

“No one is a match for my stubbornness.” That got a small laugh from Thomas which felt like a feat in and of itself. I smiled broadly for a second before remembering my mistake. “We need to get away from the barrier right now!” I said, my eyes widening as I fully realized our predicament. “I didn’t get through the barrier in one try, I think I caused a disturbance in the shield. I’m sure that she’s been notified. We need to, you know, get away from the scene of the crime!” Catching on to the urgency in my voice, they nodded quickly and we rushed away.

We kept walking through the woods for a ways, until we finally broke into a large clearing. I had to remind myself to close my mouth once the shock had worn off. I don’t know what I had been expecting, but it was not this. At the center of the clearing was a large cottage surrounded by a small garden. A small river ran through the clearing, which was more like a valley, and by the cottage. There were numerous other houses spread throughout the valley. Each house varied in style, most likely reflecting the individual styles of the people who lived in them. The cottage itself was surrounded by flowers, its walls covered in creeping roses. There was even a sweet smelling smoke flowing slowly out of the chimney, like something delicious was baking inside. Altogether it was not what I had imagined when I thought of this woman. She was someone who kidnapped other witches and allowed reapers to kill people at will. I had half expected a large gothic castle, maybe lightning and thunder. At the very least I wanted it to feel menacing, but this was actually welcoming! I couldn’t help

myself from wanting to like her for her appreciation of beauty, but I forced those positive feelings away. They had no place in this rescue mission.

I turned to Thomas, "So... what do we do now?"

He gulped in apprehension as he stared at the welcoming cottage. "Now..." he said in a small voice, "We go introduce the two of you as new recruits, and hope against all hope that she is keeping them in there." He pointed at the cottage, his hand shaking in fear. What exactly had this woman done to make him so afraid?

We crept silently through the valley. I kept glancing at the houses, waiting for someone to jump out at us and question our presence, but nothing happened. "They're all in life." Thomas said, his voice quiet. The walk up to the cottage doorway was uninterrupted. It seemed that our fears were unfounded, and I began to wonder if Thomas had exaggerated things. Maybe his mind had begun to degrade over the years.

So it was that by the time I knocked on the door it was with a hefty amount of skepticism. The door creaked open and we stepped into the cottage. It opened to a small cozy sitting room. At the end of the room was a small fireplace, bookshelves on either side of it and a small cozy couch in front of it. The fire gave the room a warm red glow which was both calming and welcoming; the warmth of it all made me forget all my worries and troubles.

I heard a noise behind me, but the room's warmth had sapped me of my energy and made me helpless in my apathy. I could not bring myself to look behind. I vaguely

heard a voice asking Thomas what our business here was. I tried to listen to his response, but my mind was clouded. He must have answered correctly, for the fire went out and I felt my head clearing in its absence. I shook my head slowly as I regained my senses. Tom walked past me, gesturing for us to follow as he walked through a door. This door had taken the place of the fire. It was altogether disorienting.

The door opened to an iron circular staircase. Although it seemed to stretch down endlessly, we reached the bottom in no time. We entered a long hallway lined by iron doors. I couldn't help but wonder what they contained; whether they were trying to keep something in, or keep it out. The large iron door at the very end of the hallway eased open. Through it I could see what looked like a large room, similar in size to the sanctuary in an ancient church. A lone figure stood at the back of the room, her back towards us. I felt sure in that moment that this was the woman who had taken my friends. Then she turned around and I wasn't sure what to think anymore.

"Aunt Tammy?" I asked in shock. "H-how are you here? What are you doing?"

She had turned at her name and was now staring at me with a mix of pity and disappointment.

"Oh dear, and I had such high hopes for you dearie." She sighed as she walked towards us.

"What do you mean?" I looked to Sam, but he looked as confused as I felt.

Thomas spoke up, "M'am, these are the new recruits. I told Al I was bringing them to you and he sent us down

here.”

She nodded wordlessly at him, her posture straight and commanding. Seeing her here, away from the house, away from the kitchen where she made such delicious food was unsettling. She looked the same as she always had, but the air about her was entirely different. She had been so motherly, so comforting, but the cold look with which she analyzed us was a polar opposite. Her previously soft curves now looked more like hard angles, which in itself was an impressive feat.

“Y-you’re the one who took Louisa and Gareth?” I asked, my heart in my throat. I could feel my palms sweating as I tried to figure out a way out of this situation. She stared at me, all pity gone the moment she heard the word “recruit.”

“Yes, I suppose I am that person.”

“Why in the world would you do that? Who are you?”

“It is no matter.” She said curtly, turning to address Thomas, “Take these new recruits to one of the other rooms. You can give them a brief run over of the rules, a little training session if you will, and get them to work. Have fun you lot.” She waved at us dismissively and walked out of the room.

The moment she left I collapsed forward, my hands resting on my knees as I tried to take slow deep breaths. My dorm mother was the head of this... this insane group of reapers. I looked up at Sam, who looked equally shocked and confused, and Thomas. He reached down and grabbed us by the arms. “We have to move quickly. I don’t know

where she went, but if we're lucky we can find the room where they're holding my children." We rushed forward through the door and ran about opening doors and checking for our friends.

Chapter 18

We must have opened hundreds of doors, but most of the rooms were empty. The ones that were not didn't contain anything of interest. Some led to kitchens, others to laboratories or bedrooms. The more rooms I opened, the more it seemed like this was less a prison, and more a resort of sorts. It fit into the matronly impression I had of her, but it did nothing to eliminate the disturbing coldness I had seen in her eyes. In addition, we were no closer to finding Louisa and Gareth. Losing patience, I turned to Thomas, "Do we even know why she wanted them in the first place? Maybe it wasn't for anything nefarious, maybe she just wanted their advice?"

He turned on me slowly, the same tired sadness in his eyes again. I sighed in frustration, "Honestly, how do we even know your story was true? She doesn't seem that dangerous to me." I waved my hands around flippantly as I spoke. Sam waved behind him, trying to get me to shut up, but I kept going. "For all we know, you're the one who's been turning reapers bad. How do we even know you're their dad hmm?"

He moved forward suddenly, I flinched backwards but he stopped. His head in his hands he shook it back and forth, "There is nothing I can do to convince you. You will just have to trust me. I know that is a difficult concept for you to understand, but bear with me. Please." He must

have noticed my skeptical look, for he smiled wryly and said, "I did not recognize her when I first met her," he began walking down the hallway again, opening doors as he went. "But that name... Tammy, it rings a bell." He looked back at me, his brows drawn together in pain at the memory. "My daughter, Louisa, has done well as a guide, but she is not perfect. No one is after all. There was one young boy about two years ago; he was one of her first clients. If I remember correctly, his mother's name was Tammy, and she was a witch."

I looked down, my brows furrowed as I processed this new information. If he was right, it didn't necessarily mean anything. Although it did give her a connection to Louisa... I looked to him, hoping he would offer more information, but he was preoccupied with the doors. "If it's alright... what happened to the boy?" I asked.

He paused at a door, his back turned, the only indication of any discomfort at the question was his tense back. "He passed on." That was all he said before turning back and continuing down the line. I looked to Sam yet again, but he shook his head, gesturing for silence. I grumbled inwardly. This whole not knowing things was frustrating beyond belief. The whole situation made me realize how little I really knew about my friends, but what really surprised me was how much I wanted that to change. I wanted to rescue them; I wanted to finally be around people that enjoyed my company.

We continued looking for them, searching every corner we could find. We must have gone down every hallway we

came across, but it was all hopeless. No matter where we looked, they were nowhere to be found. If only we could just... home in on them or something. I spun around in a rush; Sam and Thomas stumbled back startled. "We're in the dreamscape!" I burst out.

"Yes... and?" Asked Sam.

"Dude!" I said and punched him in the arm. "Whatever you believe comes true here right? We can just freaking will ourselves to them! Honestly, I'm surprised we didn't think of it earlier."

I gripped their arms and pictured Louisa's face in my memory, willing us to be there with her... wherever she was. I felt the tell-tale gust of wind that signaled our disappearance, and opened my eyes.

"Ooooh no no no! You shouldn't be here. What are you doing here!?" Louisa! That was Louisa's voice! I turned around and there she was. She looked exhausted, but I ran over to her and wrapped her in a tight hug.

"Louisa I am so sorry, I didn't mean any of what I said I swear! I am so so sorry, please forgive me!"

"Zo, I- I can't - breathe."

"Oh! Sorry..." I leaned back and held her at arms length. She smiled softly at me and patted me lightly on the top of my head, and I wanted to cry. I didn't thankfully, but it was hard... especially after I really looked at her. She looked so tired; her skin was more pale than I had ever seen it, and her eyes had dark circles underneath them.

"Wh-what happened to you?" I asked.

"Don't worry it's not anything anyone's actually done

to me. I'm not being tortured or anything it's just..." she paused, taking a deep breath not to gather her thoughts, but because it was necessary. "We were taken after you and Sam left. She forced her will on us - I don't know how she did it, but she did - and we can't leave. We've been here in spirit for more than twenty-four hours! That's why we look this way." I glanced at Gareth, Sam was talking to him, and he looked equally exhausted. Upon really examining them they looked almost... faded.

"No!" I said as it finally hit me. "Oh Louisa... you - you've been here so long that you're - you're fading. Oh gods Louisa no." I felt my eyes stinging and did my best not to cry again. I needed to be strong. "We have to get the both of you out of here." I said, rubbing at my nose. I leaned over and put my arm underneath hers, using it to steady her as I pulled her up. Sam did the same with Gareth, and I looked around for Thomas... who was their father. Louisa saw him first. Her eyes widened at the sight of him, like she was seeing a ghost. From her point of view I suppose she was. She pushed away from me and stumbled a few steps towards him.

"Dad?" her voice was so tiny, like she was afraid to hope that maybe... just maybe... he was alive. He avoided her eyes, his shoulders bent as he awaited his judgment; Louisa, wonderful person that she was, leapt forward and wrapped him in a tight hug.

"Oh Dad, I've missed you so much." Her voice trembled with the weight of unshed tears. Her father stood there frozen, but eventually, after what felt like several minutes,

he raised his arms and returned the hug.

I looked to Gareth, checking to see if he was ok, but he just stood there. This all felt like more of a family affair, so I turned my back and focused on figuring out how to get out of... wherever we were. As I turned one thought did stick with me, he had been telling the truth; Tammy was evil, or, at the very least, was guilty of manipulating people into monsters.

We were trapped in a steel cell; the walls were completely solid, and there was no door in sight. I thought about trying to will the lot of us out of it, but Gareth interrupted my thoughts. "It's no use. We've been trying everything we could think of to leave. Nothing has worked." I nodded my thanks to him and began to pace. There had to be some way out. The saying "Where there is a will, there is a way" made far more sense in the dreamscape than it ever did in life. If I could think it, there would be a way out of here.

I voiced this to my companions, but Louisa disagreed. "Sure that's kind of true, but her will is stronger than yours. You can't break someone's will... not when they are so much stronger than you."

I smiled wickedly, "You may not be able to break it... but you can sure as heck bend it."

I turned to the walls and stared at them. She didn't want us to be able to vanish out, and she had made certain that there were no doors. Perhaps I could bend her reality... I focused my mind on one small piece of the wall and willed. To my great satisfaction the steel door rippled and shifted. The piece that I was focused on became transparent like

glass, or, as it was in this case, ice. I glanced back at my friends and winked, then turned back to the wall and kicked with all the strength I had. The ice completely shattered. We had an exit.

I turned to go back for Louisa, but her father was already supporting her. I peaked around the corners of my makeshift doorway; their room was off of the same hallway we had been searching, and it was empty. I motioned for them to follow, and crept forward. Once they were out of the room we joined hands, and I willed us back to the dream gates. Nothing seemed to happen; I opened my eyes carefully, and found that yes... we were still there.

"It didn't work." Thomas said, his voice resigned.

"Thank you captain obvious." I said and crossed my arms as I tried to think of a way out of this.

"Zoe... it might be something she placed directly on us" Louisa said gesturing to her brother. I pursed my lips at the thought, and closed my eyes and vanished. I reappeared a few steps away and groaned. Damn it all to heck in a hand basket!

"Alright." I said turning to the group of them, "We're going to have to do this the hard way." I looked them over as I tried to think of a way to manipulate her reality to our advantage. I grinned slyly and imagined a sort of chameleon field around the two siblings. To my delight they faded from view, practically invisible unless you knew where to look.

"Like I keep saying," I said as Sam gasped, his astonishment hilarious in my eyes, "if you believe it, anything is

possible. Man I love dreams!”

We walked down the hallway at as casual a pace as we could manage, trying our best not to look guilty. Luckily, most people were in the world of the living... killing people.

Finally, the fireplace doorway was in sight. I rushed forward and looked through the doorway, no one was there so I edged into the room, and felt a knife at my throat. Thinking quickly I willed the knife to be a harmless feather, feeling it change I turned on the person and shouted, “Run!” to my friends. When I saw who it was I threw up a hand and willed.

“That’s very clever Zoe dear. Protecting your friends with a barrier of your own.” Tammy said as she walked circles around me. “Surely you don’t believe that will really stand any chance against me.”

“What do you want? Why are you doing this?” I asked, hoping to stall her for as long as possible.

“Oh honey, you seriously expect me to spill all my secrets just because you asked?” She scoffed as she continued to pace, I felt like a lioness’ prey.

“Works on most villains in fiction doesn’t it?”

That stopped her short. She stared at me, shock written in her wide eyes. “You think I’m the villain?” I nodded quickly, she was talking.

“I” she said, her hand at her chest, “am the victim!” She continued her pacing, “Those people you call friends are the true villains. They killed my son. Those... awful witches, and the reapers. They murdered my baby boy.” Her voice was firm in its intensity, but still she cried. Her

pain justified her actions, at least in her eyes.

"That does not excuse your ac-" I paused, "Wait... the reapers? Then why in the world are you working with them?" I stared at her aghast.

"Working with them?" she laughed dryly, her eyes still wet. "I'm not working with them. I'm using them."

I glanced over at my friends and back to her, "What do you mean?" I asked, trying to force as much neutral curiosity into my voice as possible.

"I am manipulating them, I'm turning them into the monsters they truly are. Revealing them for their true natures, and using them to destroy themselves."

It didn't make any sense at all; I stared at her blankly. "I'm not following."

"Of course you aren't sweetheart. You wouldn't." She sighed, shaking her head. "Surely you of all people have noticed, oh affectionate one?" my eyes widened and I backed away, "Oh yes, I know your source. I'm surprised it took you so long to find out. And no, I am not a mind reader. You're just very... transparent." She smiled sweetly at me, but my heart felt cold.

"So-" I said, my voice clipped, "what is it I'm not noticing?"

"That you don't need the living for your source. We don't need them to stay alive, but the reapers do. They live by taking the lives of others, and the dead no longer have lives to take." She grimaced as she spoke, her eyes gleaming wickedly. She leaned in closer, "I am using them to get my revenge. Revenge on both the Albin siblings, who misled

my son and therefore caused his death, and on the reapers themselves. They killed my son early. If they didn't exist, he would never have been in this situation in the first place."

"Two birds with one stone..." I said softly. In spite of how much her plan disgusted me, I finally understood it. In her eyes... she was a hero. Finally ridding the world of an unnecessary evil.

"Wait... wait just one second." I said, my words picking up pace as her plan registered in my mind, "In order to completely destroy them... you'd have to--"

"Yes. I'd have to kill everyone who was still alive."

I stared at her in horror, "But that's terrible! How can you possibly justify that?"

"Well look at yourself!" she said, laughing almost maniacally, "You're still here aren't you? We all are. I'm not killing them; I'm setting them free."

With that manic gleam in her eye she turned on my friends. "Now then, enough talking. That was rather clever of you sweetie, but we do have business to attend to. I intend to have my revenge." She waved her hand and I felt the shield I had in place ripple, but I held it in place firmly. My will was strong, much stronger than even she knew, and I was not going to drop that shield until I was good and ready.

"Well don't you have a powerful imagination, or will if that's what you prefer." She turned on me, her expression cold. "I do like you Zoe dear. You have a good heart, and you haven't hurt anyone I love. You feed on affection for pete's sake! But... if you insist on getting in my way, I will

not hesitate to eliminate you.” She marched toward me, and grabbed my shoulder. “You will not get them out of here, and they will fade into the In Between in an hour or two. There is no escape for them. If I were you, I would leave.”

I smiled broadly at her, “No can do. But, unfortunately for you, my friends are already gone.” I waved my hand in their direction and the shield vanished, along with them. Well... all of them except Sam. I groaned, “Sam! What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be with them!”

He looked over at me sheepishly, a slight blush sweeping his cheeks, “I couldn’t just leave you with her alone. And now that I’ve heard her plan... well I’m glad I stayed.”

“No! What have you done!” Tammy said turning on me, her eyes wild, teeth clenched. She reached for the front of my shirt, but Sam was already there pushing her arms away.

“Oh no you don’t.” He said, coming to stand by my side. “Did you really think we’d let you hurt our friends? Don’t you know how ingenious this girl is?” he said gesturing at me and I blushed furiously at his compliment.

She clenched her hands repeatedly at her sides, and turned about pacing the floor.

“They’ll be long gone by now.” I said, “And... as I’m sure you’ve realized by now, I’ve taken a page out of your book and have taken away your ability to travel by will.”

Sam smiled, his eyes gleaming mischievously, “You’re trapped, and you aren’t going anywhere. You may think of your actions as justified, but... well... let’s just say we think otherwise.”

“As we speak,” I continued smiling, “Louisa and Gareth have returned to the receiving area and are sending in reinforcements.”

“You will see justice.” Sam finished.

I couldn’t help but high five him for our absolute brilliant plan, but Tammy just laughed at us.

“You really think this will work? I will find a way out of your barrier, my will is far stronger than yours Zoe, and when I do... I will sick as many reapers on your friends as possible. I will have my revenge.”

My mind raced at her words. She was right, and I only had a few precious minutes left before she would be gone. I racked my brain for an idea, some plan... a way to stop her for good. I looked up, tears in my eyes. I knew what had to be done.

You know that quote, “to die will be an awfully big adventure”? I always thought it was a silly idea, yet that quote had never meant more to me than it did right then. My biggest adventure had started with my death, it only seemed fitting that it should end with it. People really aren’t meant to live forever, at least not as they are now. We’re too corrupt, too obsessed with taking and surviving, that we underestimate the life giving powers of love, of generosity. You live too long just taking, and you turn into a monster. I didn’t want to turn into a monster. I’d said my goodbyes, I’d made my peace. I’m ready for my next adventure. T’will be an awfully big one after all.

I lean over and wrap Sam in a hug, backing up and leaving a light kiss on his cheek. Having said my last

goodbye, I step back, close my eyes, and bend Tammy's will so that it is in line with mine. I will the both of us to pass on. My last sight is her fading away, then I too pass on.

Chapter 19

Sam

I was still reeling from her kiss, ok... it was a kiss on the cheek, but still... when Tammy faded away. I turned to Zoe, ready to return her hug in celebration, but she too was fading. My heart felt like it was stuck in a vice. No, oh please no, she couldn't just be gone. It wasn't possible! We had won... why would she do this? Why would she do this to me? I suffocated any tears that wanted to come out, this wasn't possible. She had probably just found a way to transport her to the witches... leaving me behind.

I locked away my panic deep in my stomach and closed my eyes. I did my best to concentrate on the dream gates, but it was hard to focus. Transport, really anything, in the dreamscape was not my fort  , but I forced myself to try. I felt a gust of cold wind and opened my eyes. I was at the gates, but Zoe was nowhere in sight. The panic pounded at my walls, but I resisted. I had to find Louisa and Gareth, they would know what to do.

The area in front of the gates was relatively clear, but what really caught my eye was the sky. Zoe had been so entranced by it, it was hard not to notice it now. The clouds were lightening, but the sky still remained resolutely cloudy. I wanted to hope; perhaps the clouds meant that the world was still unbalanced. Perhaps it meant that Tammy was still alive, which would mean Zoe was as well. I held onto that hope for a full two minutes, until the sky cleared.

All that hope vanished in an instant.

The sound of hurried footsteps reached my ears long before I looked up. When I did finally look up, it was to a large swarm of witches rushing towards the gates. I stepped forward and stood in between the mass of people and the gates themselves, holding up my hands in a gesture of peace.

“She’s dead.” I spoke in a loud voice, projecting it out over the crowd. “The woman in charge is presumed to be dead. There are still countless reapers on the other side who have been misled by her words. I will leave them up to you.”

A man, who I assumed was in charge, approached me and asked for a location, or a focus of some sort. I gave him what he wanted and stood to the side as they swarmed into the dreamscape. Half of the group stayed behind and returned to the living in an attempt to find the rogue reapers before they did too much damage.

The cleanup process was going to be hell for the people in charge, but I doubted there would be much resistance. From what I saw in that awful cottage, it was mostly a personal vendetta. She had manipulated the views of these reapers to her own devices, and it didn’t seem likely that any of them would choose to carry out her plans once they realized said plan was to eliminate them.

I breathed a deep steadying breath and slowly marched toward Louisa’s office. The walk was unpleasant, to put it lightly. Everything I saw reminded me of her. A woman walked by with Colby, must have been the now-dead

owner, and I felt my heart clench at the sight of her. I saw the beach in the distance and, again, it felt like iron bars were being wrapped tight around my heart. Louisa's office caused a particularly strong pang; it held too many memories. I just wanted to go home, but not to the house here where I would be reminded of both Zoe and Tammy. I wanted to go back to my house in life. Back to my family and friends. I was a very sociable person; I've always surrounded myself with people whose company I enjoyed. Now I just felt... alone.

I opened Louisa's door and approached her desk, my fingers dragging along the wood as I walked. The office was empty of course; Louisa and Gareth would need time in their bodies, time to recover, before they came back. And when they came back... they would expect to see Zoe. I would have to break the news, and I wasn't sure I was really up to the task. I fell back onto one of those awful armchairs and let my head fall into my hands. Zoe always seemed so comfortable in these infernal things, but they had a tendency to poke and prod into all of my bony parts.

I didn't like crying, especially not in front of people. Objectively I knew that it didn't make me any less masculine, but it was still something I preferred to do in private. Now that I was alone I let myself grieve for the loss of my new friend. I let myself cry until I was out of tears. Then I wiped my face, blew my nose, and tried to find something I could do to occupy the remaining hours of my day... without Zoe.

Chapter 20

Gareth

When Louisa and I finally made it out of the dream-scape we said a brief goodbye to our father, or Louisa did at least, and went home. My body was in so much pain when I finally came out of it. All of my joints ached from lying in the same position for more than a day, and I had a pounding headache. On top of everything else I was starving, and had missed a day of work. It was the summer before my first year of college, so I had found a summer job working at one of the libraries downtown. They were probably going to kill me when I went back on Monday, but I really needed the weekend to recover.

My sister and I talked over breakfast; we were both concerned about Zoe, but our spirits were too worn down to allow us to go back and check on her. I smiled at the memory of her ingenious plan. When we realized that we could move without her seeing us I was impressed. That kind of illusion took a lot of will-power, and her expression had been so intense, so cold, I had been genuinely afraid for Tammy or whatever her name was. I vaguely remembered the incident with the boy, but his death hadn't affected me as much as it had Louisa. I had never really been very close with him, in fact... Zoe was one of the first people I had actively chosen to trust in years.

"What are you smiling about?" Louisa said, her in-

terrurption to my thoughts wasn't entirely unwelcome. I quirked a small crooked smile up at her, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"It's a girl isn't it." She deadpanned. Curse my stupid ears; their redness always gave me away. I laughed it off, "I was just thinking about Zoe. You know she's seriously talented in the dreamscape, and that means a lot coming from me!"

"Oh I know it does." She said, her tone light but she meant it. Her smile dropped away as she looked at me, "She'll be ok you know. I'm sure nothing will happen, and she has Sam with her. Plus we did make sure to send in the cavalry."

I looked down at my cereal and nodded. She had a tendency to pick up on the things that were bothering me, most likely because they also bothered her.

"You remember that too ok? Don't worry too much. It won't do either of us any good." I reminded her.

By the end of a long day of reading and relaxing with my sister, I was feeling energized enough to attempt a crossing. Louisa had conked out hours earlier, she was far more exhausted than I was, and I decided that it would be nice to have some good news for her to wake up to.

I situated myself on my bed, lying down in as comfortable a position as I could manage, and closed my eyes. The crossing over was very similar to meditation or falling asleep. The only real difference being the level and focus of concentration. I felt the usual shift in my spirit and opened my eyes. I was in the back room off of Louisa's office; it

was my usual arrival place. I stretched out and checked my spirit for any signs of exhaustion, any signs that I should be delaying this visit another day, but there were none. I walked out into her office and stopped short. Curled up on the couch was Sam. Nothing would have felt off were it not for the redness under his eyes, and the fact that he was alone. I looked around the office, but saw no one.

“Sam” I whispered into his ear, “Hey Sam man. What are you doing bud?”

He woke up slowly, stretched widely, a smile spread lazily across his face, and he froze. He looked around the room wildly, as if searching for something... or someone, before finally turning his gaze back on me. His eyes looked dead, like the light had been torn from them.

“Zoe’s gone.”

That was all he said. Two small words were enough to render me completely speechless and grind my brain to halt. It couldn’t be possible, I took a step back. She had so much potential, my hand buried itself in my hair. I had trusted her, I pulled at my hair in an attempt to calm the bile rising in my stomach.

It wasn’t possible, it couldn’t be possible. I shook my head as I spoke, but Sam’s watering eyes confirmed it as fact. He stood up and hugged me. Neither of us really knew what to do with our arms, or how long a hug was supposed to last. None of that mattered though; we both desperately needed the comfort. I pounded his back as an awful calm replaced the panic in my mind. Two things were now clear. Firstly, I had lost one more person that I trusted in my life,

and secondly, I was going to have to break this to Louisa.

Chapter 21

Louisa

I woke up the second morning after the kidnapping feeling fantastic. Ok... that was a front. Inside I felt terrible. Not only had one of my mistakes come back to bite me in the butt, but it had affected the lives of my friends as well. The guilt from that one boy's death had haunted me for years, and it felt just... grand... to know that his mother had held onto that anger for just as long. I shuddered and tried to suppress the memory as much as I could.

Gareth had yet to wake up from his visit to the In Between, sneaky little jerk going without me, but I was certain that he'd come back with the news that - not only had that crazy woman been locked up, but Zoe had done an amazing job! Her rejection... the hatred in her voice when she had pushed me away had hurt more than I can say. As awful as it makes me feel to admit it, she was one of the only friends I had right now. I spent so much of my time either in the IB or thinking about it, that I hadn't really bothered to make friends here. Plus... I mean... not everyone can really appreciate my experiments. At least she seemed vaguely interested in them. I was just so proud of her, so proud of all her achievements, and I should really just go to the IB and give her a hug. She was probably exhausted after facing off against Tammy, talk about a battle of wits... or wills... whatever.

I wandered back over to the beds glancing at my

brother and mother; our mother was deep in a trance next to him. She was one of the witches on the council and we rarely saw her as she usually worked the graveyard shift. My heart swelled with affection for them, it had a tendency to do that, and I moved towards my bed. Before I could lie down, however, Gareth woke up and saw me. I expected a cheery “hey” or something, but his eyes looked so sad. My heart plummeted, it felt like it had fallen all the way into my toes.

“No... oh please no.” I said as he rose up from the bed, his arms coming out to wrap me in a brotherly hug. I wracked my brain for what it could be; I wanted it to be anything but what I knew it was in my heart.

“Zoe-“ I started crying the moment he said her name, “passed on.” And I was gone. My brain played those three words on loop as I sat on the edge of my bed. I hugged my knees to my chest and let myself rock back and forth as I tried to fight off the guilt. The only reason she had been forced to pass on was because I had messed up so many years ago. This was all my fault, again! How could I ever live this down? And her brother! Oh her poor baby brother. The guilt just piled up, an endless stream of guilt ridden thoughts weighing my spirit down. It had taken me more than a year to finally forgive myself for the death of the little boy, his name had been Timmy. Even though I had forgiven myself I still thought about him daily. I knew in that moment that I would never be able to forgive myself for the death of my friend. The death of the girl that I had so desperately wanted to be my best friend. I was not ok,

and I wasn't sure I ever would be.

Epilogue

Zoe

Contrary to popular belief there was no bright light when I finally passed on. No white light at the end of a dark tunnel, but hey... there was also no pain. To top it all off I was thinking, so that had to be a good thing. Consciousness equals existence right? I opened my eyes and found myself, yet again, in a brightly lit, pristinely white room. My eyes closed in frustration and I pinched the bridge of my nose. Seriously? Was this all just going to be a repeat of my arrival in the In Between?

I groaned and eased myself up off of the bed that had conformed itself to my body, leaving an imprint of it when I stood. For some reason the imprint made me laugh. Maybe it was the fact that it indicated some form of gravity? Had my mind seized on the idea of, “the gravity of the situation” and somehow equated that with laughter? Either way it was disconcerting to find oneself laughing for no real reason.

I examined the room again; it really did look similar to the room at the receiving area in the In Between. Even the tiny little details looked familiar. The doorknob stared up at me, as if daring me to open the door, so I did. I flung it open, deciding my fear had no place in me at this moment, and stared at the scene before me. It shocked me so severely I didn’t realize I had fallen to my knees until a few minutes later. I pulled myself back up using the door frame and

stared in awe at my surroundings.

It looked exactly like the receiving area back in the In Between. The glass ceiling was the same, as were the marble pillars and the desks with helpful looking people seated behind them. I swallowed my nerves in one hasty gulp and walked slowly over to the desk.

“Excuse me...” I began.

The woman behind the desk smiled up at me in what she believed was a reassuring manner, I found it creepy, and said, “Yes dear?” how I hated that word, “How may I help you today?”

“Um right. So I’m new here I guess, I was wondering if you could tell me where I am?”

“Of course, let me just get this-“ she reached over to a pile of papers, fliers I presumed, and began to shuffle through them. There was something about her voice that sounded odd to me, was it the tone? The word choice?

She handed me a paper and the pieces fell into place. It was her accent. On the front of the flier was a large british flag, the words “Welcome to the In Between” written across the top in bright white letters.

“This is the In Between... in England?” I asked, my voice trembling as the meaning of this pamphlet hit me.

“Yes it is. This is the In Between for London. You know, your accent sounds rather odd, are you from a different area of the In Between? We do get the occasional tourist-“ she continued on but I wasn’t listening.

I couldn’t be sure if you just weren’t able to pass on in the dreamscape, or if my manipulating our existence had

resulted in a mix-up, but apparently I wasn't dead. The main problem was that if I wasn't dead... neither was she.

“Well shit.”