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Xavier

It was the dripping hiss of water that woke me.

The wet chatter wouldn't cease, cold droplets slapping down as soft rumbles purred overhead in the blackness. I pushed up, groaning, my skin screaming with an orchestra of fresh scrapes.

My spine ached from lying on this stone surface, the rock sleek and slippery under my palms. Never mind where I was, what in Death was this water? A leak in the ceiling?

No, the surface doesn't have a ceiling, does it? What did my textbooks call this? 'Rain'?

A deafening crash exploded overhead, then a blinding light flooded the terrain. It died just as quickly as it'd come. *What is wrong with this place?*

I shivered on my rock, shrouded in darkness once more. Had that been 'lightning'? That thing the Sky realm supposedly dealt with?

I tried to stand, but winced when my leg splintered with agony. Another flash of light showed the limb was twisted and mangled, sticky blood draining with this blasted rain. *Death*. My teeth clamped, trying to remember how I got here.

I'd been running, I think... running for a long time, in the canyons. The last thing I remembered was feeling the cliff's edge crumble under my feet, the sickness of falling, and then...

My skull throbbed. Aside from breaking my shin, I must have hit my head on the way down to this... what was this? Some kind of platform jutting from the side of the canyon? I peeked over the ledge, a flash letting me see the quarreling ocean that waited below. The sloshing waves were nauseating, constantly rushing in and swelling back on a hectic loop.

Willow of Ashes

Feeling sick, I flopped to my back. *All right*, I thought, *I'm at least alive. Bruised and beaten, but alive.*

But what else was I forgetting? I could swear it was important. My head gave another vicious throb, thinking back, but nothing came to mind. Maybe I should ask Willow what I was forge—

DEATH!

“Willow?!” I screamed at the darkness.

Wind cut through the drizzle, but her voice didn't ride the breeze. “Willow!”

“Alive after all?” came a voice too deep to be hers. But the gnarling twang was familiar. *Damn!*

Before I could scuttle away, my windpipe was crushed by strong fingers, the voice rolling on in the darkness. “You're a slippery one, I'll give you that. But you're out of holes to slither into now.”

With a small grunt, he lifted me by the neck, and I snagged his wrist to keep from suffocating. Threads of light sparked from the clouds, illuminating the black haired man strangling me. I floundered to keep hold of his arm as he forced me past the ledge of the rock, my feet and broken leg dangling.

“I'll admit, I am a bit disappointed.” There was no amusement in his tone, only detached, hollow scrutiny. “With the way the legends spoke of you, I was expecting a great warrior. All the fuss was over a child?”

I wasn't a child, I was fourteen. But another glimpse at the sharp rocks underneath told me I wouldn't make it any farther, so what did it matter?

“Though, you are an interesting one.” He inspected me musingly. “Curious eyes... blue and white? They never said the Shadowblood would only be half of a whole.” He chuckled. “For Death's sake, only one of your hands bares the Crest.”

His eyes flicked to my left hand, where I had a birthmark of three black diamonds over my knuckles.

“An unfinished product?” He sounded disenchanted. “Did the Gods not have the strength to make you whole? Pity... Perhaps their time truly is coming to an end.”

Ellie Raine

Unfinished? He must not have known about my brother.
Thank the Gods you're not here, Alex...

As if in response to the thought, a feeling sparked in me, like a bulb blinking weak and distant from my chest. The connection was sending me frantic signals, all questioning and begging.

I knew it was Alex. He was calling out to me back home, underground. I shut my eyes and channeled that connection back to him. *I'm sorry, Alex.* His spark grew desperate with my thought. I knew he couldn't hear me outright, but my resolve would surely reach him. *I have to break our oath. Please, forgive me...*

A new light flashed suddenly, and I found a girl lying but feet away. Her hair was incredibly long and ashen in color, the strands stretching past her feet in a tangled mess over the rocky ground.

Willow! Thank Bloods. She must have fallen with me when the ledge gave way up top. Her azure eyes glazed as she laid unstirred, face caked with dirt and blood, the once beautiful white dress now shredded and stained crimson. She was still as stone, but her eyes were wrenched open.

Was I too late? Had he already poisoned her? I reached out, wanting to tell her to hold on...

The assassin's eyes followed my stretched fingers, and he grunted. "Ah. Nearly forgot that one." His nails grew to sharp points, the claws digging into my neck to draw warm blood. He sighed. "She'll have to wait, unfortunately. You, my young friend, take priority."

I spat in his face, wheezing. "The Goddess... will see you Cleansed..." I wanted to sound dignified in front of her, like a man would, but panic cracked the last word and made a boy of me again.

His lips teased a grin. "And I suppose you plan to tell the Goddess about me, eh? Go on, pray all you like—speak with Her yourself when your ghost greets Her. But what good will it do you? I don't plan to meet the Gods anytime soon and your afterlife won't expire for another few centuries."

Willow of Ashes

Despite everything, I laughed, body shaking. Afterlife? Lying bastard. I knew I wouldn't have one. In these circumstances, keeping a clean soul was impossible. *But I go with honor*, I reminded. *If I become a demon, it will not have been in vain*. I knew there was no way out of this for me. But I'd be damned if I let this lunatic touch her.

I tightened my grip on his arm, my claws digging deep as I kicked wildly, trying to either swing myself back on land, or pull this monster off of it. If I was going to die, then he would join me—

A new pain made me gasp, claws retracting in an instant.

From the hand around my neck sprouted some sort of web, the strings puncturing my throat and slithering against my bloodstream. I screamed when they crawled to my face. The veins thrust their way to my eyes, black splotches blocking my vision, pressure balling behind the sockets.

"I respect your valor, young pup." The gleam in his yellow eyes ensured my death. "But I can't afford to let either of you go. Though, I think... I will spare your soul from the torment I've been forced to endure. One so young should never have that pain, even in the afterlife."

My wails began to die, pathetic breaths crackling in gulps of air. The veins finally rooted into my skull.

"*Xavier*." My brother's face flickered behind my eyes in a sudden memory. This was just hours ago. Alex's mismatched glare bore into mine as his lips moved to speak, but the scene boiled black and...

And...

Where was I?

What was this dripping water?

I panicked when I couldn't breathe, then noticed my vision was spotted with black patches. Light suddenly burst from the clouds overhead, and I saw a man was strangling me, his yellow eyes glinting bright. I tried to scream, but there wasn't a clear path for it.

Ellie Raine

Then I heard a strained squeal nearby. My eyes darted to an ashen haired girl lying on the rock. Why did she look familiar?

“Such a shame.” The man crushed my throat tighter, making me gag. “I don’t enjoy this, with ones so young... but here, it’s necessary. Your sacrifice is for a greater cause, my half-finished champion. Perhaps you’ll see the good that comes of it, in your afterlife.”

I didn’t understand. Who was he? Who was she...?

She had a name, I was sure I knew it once. It was hanging on the edge of my memory, a tiny beacon in the blotted haze... but the black spots shrouded the last of my vision.

Then there was nothing. My world flooded into darkness. But lingering in the depths of my hollow mind echoed a single word that I finally remembered—and swore to never forget again.

Willow...

My hand thrust out, scrambling to snag the cliff.

Wait. The cliff was gone. Then... it was another dream?

I was floating in an empty abyss of... well, nothing, actually. It was just blackness. There were no walls, there was no floor, nor was there a ceiling... but there was, at least, a small window spilling light above me.

I smeared a tired hand over my face, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. *So, he woke up first.* I sighed and floated through this empty purgatory to reach the window, wanting to see what was happening in the physical world.

Outside this spying hole awaited the *inside* of a large room, decorated with silver chandeliers and ebony furniture. There was a grandfather clock ticking against the far corner and delicate, stringed music echoed from a phonograph. The walls were dressed with eloquent paper where oil paintings of achromatic flowers hung. *Ah, the dining room,* I noted. Then I watched the window’s view suddenly streak and shift to the right.

Sitting across a table was a pair of translucent ghosts, just pale and wispy specters floating over the chairs, chatting cordially. They couldn’t see me watching them from my window.

Willow of Ashes

“Just awful,” the first ghost said and fanned her translucent fingers over her collarbone. “They found no survivors?”

“None but two children.” The second ghost straightened over her seat. Neither soul physically touched the furniture, but they floated over the cushions as if they could. “I hear they were hidden in a cellar. It was a massacre, up on the surface. The valley was overrun with the Necrofera, even the Reapers who came to help were killed.”

“Nira below... I-I’ve never heard of so many demons at once. Do you think the demons down here could do the same?”

“I certainly hope not, Nira forbid, but I do think...”

The view blurred left when a butler came and brought a tray of steaming tea, which he poured into an ebony cup and held out to my window, as if offering it to me. Well, not *me*, obviously, I couldn’t take the cup from him. In a way, we were on different planes of reality. This window was my only link to the other side; my only link to my brother.

From below my window’s screen, a gloved hand reached out and took the cup. Then I heard my brother, Alexander, thank the servant. His voice bounced in the blackness from all angles, not coming from one particular direction.

The butler outside gave a small bow, picked up the empty plate in front of Alex—whom I couldn’t see, since I was viewing the world through his eyes—and took his leave.

With delicate fingers pinching the looped handle, Alexander raised the cup to my window. Or technically, raised it to his lips. I only saw the thing hurtling my way as it blocked my view. But the cup halted once the smooth liquid glinted in the pale light and reflected the drinker’s face. A mismatched pair of blue-and-clear eyes was staring up at me from the tea, belonging to a pale face framed in shadowy, grey hair.

“Xavier,” Alexander greeted me. I watched the reflection of his lips move in the tea, which had my fainter reflection as well. “Nice of you to join us. Keeping the morning Dreamcatcher hard at work, are we?”

“*Sorry.*” I rubbed my neck from the abyss I floated in, and the action was seen within the tea’s overlaying reflection. “*I was*

Ellie Raine

woken up early last night. It took me some time to fall back asleep."

He hummed quietly and sipped from the cup, erasing both of our reflections in the liquid. When he placed the cup back on its saucer, he kept his gaze on the grandfather clock against the wall, making it the only thing I could see through my window.

That's how it was, here in the psyche. I could see and hear anything my brother did, though it was second-handedly experienced. I supposed it could have been worse. At least I would have my 'turn' later. And at least I was here at all, not rotten and craving flesh. But that didn't make it any less Gods damned miserable.

"Oh!" One of the chatting ghosts chuckled across the table, getting my brother's attention as the view moved to her. "Is Xavier awake? Why, it's nearly half-past eight! That's quite late for him."

"Terribly late," the second agreed with a light gesture. "Is everything all right?"

The room spun full circle as Alexander rolled his eyes. "Fine, Ancestors. He only had a disturbed rest."

"Young Masters?" a new voice called.

Alex twisted back, seeing a new ghost had faded through the wall. It was one of our mother's servants. The translucent figure had feathered hair and large wings sprouting from his back, which fluttered as he approached.

"Aiden." Alex rose from his seat. "Good morning."

"Good morning as well, Young Masters." The spirit bowed respectfully, wings dipping behind him. "Mistress requested a meeting, once you're finished eating. She's waiting in her chambers."

"Thank you, Aiden. We'll be right up."

He bowed again, and floated through the wall in a quiet ripple—then quickly popped his head back in. "Oh, and you seem to have a visitor in the foyer." His white lips smiled. "He's waiting behind the fichus, with a rather *sharp* gift for you."

Alex massaged his eyes, making my window darken. "Another?"

Willow of Ashes

“Shall I call for the guards?”

“No, no... We’ll handle it.”

Aiden nodded and disappeared behind the wall.

“I dealt with the last one.” Alex flicked his gaze up. “I’d say it’s your turn.”

“*Grand.*” I floated into the window—then slipped out of the void.

The room brightened to a blinding, white glow, the gleam of silver-trimmed walls shining splendidly. Now that touch had returned, I could feel the subtle breeze from the air vents brush my cheeks, and the leather gloves fitted tightly to my hands hugged each finger perfectly. I inhaled the refreshing air, stretching my fingers to get a feel for controlling them again. Alexander had taken my place in the psyche, no doubt watching from that infuriating window.

Grinning, I reached for the chains wrapped round my neck, feeling two metal spheres dangling there. I plucked one sphere off, and pressed my thumb against the engraved symbol etched on the ball.

The orb gleamed with a gold light, and the metal melted in my hand, stretching into a flattened, curved blade with a short handle. It solidified, and I idly turned it by the handle back and forth. “Let’s welcome our guest, shall we?”

I strode into the foyer, yawning behind a fist. After finding the aforementioned fichus, I caught a glimpse of movement behind it. Then a loud *thunk* sounded, the pot wobbled, someone sucked in a panicked breath, and the pot was seized from the sides and forced to steady. A relieved sigh came, and all was still once more.

An amateur? Well, I supposed I needed a good stretch this morning.

I pretended not to notice him while passing the plant. Once my back faced him, the hidden man predictably lunged out and yelled behind me.

I crouched and spun round, dodging his striking knife. He swung again, but I caught his arm and glided a leg over the floor, sweeping under his feet and shoved him down while I brought

Ellie Raine

my curved blade to his throat, the edge barely kissing his adams-apple.

“If you’re trying to assassinate a lord,” I said with a smile. “We suggest not announcing yourself so readily.”

The intruder’s rage quelled, replaced with fright as round panther ears grew and twitched timidly from his head.

“Now...” I hummed, inspecting him. He was a weathered old man, his matted hair crusted with dirt and his face sagged with age. I squatted there, keeping my blade at his throat and hunched over in thought. “A peasant, eh? That’s new. Now you’ve got me curious: Could the commoner who hired you not afford a professional hitman? Or did you want to take matters into your own hands, for the ‘greater good’ of the nation?”

He fumbled for something to say and I pulled him up, first taking his knife and tossing it to the floor, then turned him towards the front doors. “In any case, I’m afraid you’ve made the mistake of bringing a knife to a scythe-fight, my friend. Best think twice before challenging a family of Reapers.”

I pushed him to the doors, where our butler promptly opened them for us. “If you wish to visit House Devouh again, you’re welcome at any time. Just be advised that weapons are prohibited, except to knights. Also bear in mind that this is a friendly warning.” I leaned closer to whisper in his ear. “Most assassins are greeted with the guillotine, should Father find them. We’ll avoid that if we can, so best keep this between ourselves.”

I patted the man’s shoulder, then slipped him two gold coins. “Be a good man and find yourself some shelter, else Father tracks you down.” I turned to the butler holding the doors. “Thateus?”

The butler bowed. The ram horns curling from his head looked recently buffed, judging from their glossed sheen. “Yes, High Howllords?” he asked.

“Please see that our guest finds his way off the premises,” I said. “And do be discreet. We want to keep his head in one place.”

“Yes, Howllords.”

I shut the tall doors after them, then pressed the engraved mark on my scythe’s handle. The weapon gleamed gold, and

Willow of Ashes

melted backwards into its spherical form. I put the metal ball back on its magnetic holder from the layered chains around my neck.

“Must you be so generous?” Alexander voiced in my thoughts. *“Just kick them out and be done with it. Do you want more of them crawling through the windows, thinking they’ll get handouts when they try to kill us?”*

I started up the curling stairway. “You asked me to handle it. Your critique isn’t needed, thank you... Do you know what Mistress wants, so early in the morning? It’s not even Bright Light hours.”

“Perhaps she’s found a solution for us?”

“It might be too late for a solution. How long has it been now? Five years?”

“Six, after next month.”

I groaned. Six! I’d barely grown three whiskers before I was flung off that cliff—and had my soul trapped in my brother. If I could just remember how it happened...

Pain splintered my temples, making me stagger. I gripped the railing when the manor wobbled slightly, the memory only met with blackness and pain...

I clasped a hand to my head, breathing slowly. *Dammit...* I collected myself and continued up the stairs. Thanks to that yellow-eyed lunatic, most of my past had been wiped clean. Though, now that I was almost twenty, I’d regained a fair amount of memories. But when it came to how I ended up like this, and Her...

There was nothing.

I strode up to the third floor and headed for Mother and Father’s room. Once reaching the elegantly carved doors, I knocked. A muffled ‘enter’ was called from within, and when I opened the doors, I found Mother waiting.

“Xavier,” she said and glanced my way briefly before gliding her eyes back over the stack of papers on her desk. She held up a finger to tell me to wait, one of her wolf ears folding down in concentration. She had on her reading glasses, peering through the lenses with strict scrutiny.

Ellie Raine

I closed the doors and stood at attention with hands wrapped behind my back, as usual.

The ever nostalgic sounds of shuffling papers and the *tick-tick-tick* of her desk clock filled the lavish room, and I noted the bed looked recently fluffed. The servants must have come through a few moments ago. They also seemed to have set the fire in the hearth along the wall, the scent of charred pinewood perfuming the chamber as embers snapped behind the iron bars.

After scanning the room and finding it empty of anyone else, I cleared my throat. “Will Father be joining us today?”

Mother hummed absently, eyes still focused on the papers. “He’s arranging a few things for our trip to the surface. Guards must be placed accordingly, tickets and schedules must be made, a stand-in must watch over the manor...”

I nodded, offering a grunt. Then I decided to ask. “Will a stand-in be necessary? Alexander and I will be here.”

Her eyes flicked at me for only a second, but it was enough to shut me up. A soldier didn’t argue with his general. That was her most emphasized lesson, one that she enforced by stringing up whoever breached it to a tree for five hours, hogtied and dangling by their feet. Bloods, just remembering the headaches and muscle cramps... I shuddered, keeping my tongue promptly bitten.

She didn’t have to answer me, anyway. I already knew what that look meant. Alex and I weren’t even considered a viable stand-in, not in Father’s eyes. Even if we were his heirs.

After several more minutes of standing at attention, Mother set down her papers and folded her glasses, leaning back in her chair with a tired sigh. “At ease, boys.”

I allowed my posture to slack and let my arms fall to my sides. “You wanted to speak with us, Mistress?”

Now that she was facing us fully, I noticed she wore her finer silks today, something only brought out for special occasions. Her shadow-grey hair was also tied differently, weaving over one shoulder with specks of ruby gems, her wolf ears perking while her tail waved around the skirt of her black dress.

Willow of Ashes

I didn't have primary wolf ears, nor a tail, like Mother. My traits only appeared when I was angry or frightened, like most of us mammals.

"I did," she said, circling a finger over her brow with pointed delicacy so as not to smear her makeup. Her crow's feet were sagging more than usual this morning, tribute to her exhaustion, I guessed.

She took a sip of tea from the cup at her desk, clearing her throat. "I have some news for you both. You're already aware that your father and I have been asked to oversee this 'massacre' on the surface. I fear it's too dangerous to bring you both, namely because I'm unsure of what we're dealing with. The reports don't offer much detail."

"So," I began, trying to stifle my annoyance while sliding my hands in my trousers' pockets. "We're to stay here while you're gone, the usual protocol, hide our situation from whatever stand-in comes, and wait around until we hear back about Bianca's news. Is that about right?"

One corner of her lips lifted a fracture. "I never said you were staying here, Xavier."

I paused. "But you just said..."

"Oh, you're not coming with us, either. If I don't know what to expect, then I'm not comfortable bringing my apprentices. Especially when one of them, who isn't supposed to exist right now, has a chance of being exposed in the most Reaper-populated city above the caves. Far too much of a risk, far too much."

She turned to her desk and rifled through the stack of papers again, pulling out only a few carefully selected pages. "You, my beloved students, are going on your own journey. Although, I suggest you fetch Jaq to accompany you. The Gods only know what trouble he'd cause with the stand-in, if left alone here..."

"But, Mistress." My brow knitted. "Where are we going?"

Her lips relented and displayed a rare, genuine smile. "To your missing vessel, Xavier."

Ellie Raine

I raced out the manor and rushed through the front gardens. My breath fogged in the chilled air, burgundy hood falling to my shoulders in the freezing gust.

Grey clouds loomed overhead in their usual overcast, numerous balls of glowing light swirling within the ceiling-mist like floating glitter.

I saw one of those pale, blue lights was falling from the ceiling now, just ahead. It was a gentle descent, like a glowing bubble floating gracefully to the cavern's floor.

A laugh escaped me and I sprinted faster. Just as the ball of light neared the ground, I snagged it out of the air. The ball was cold against my palm and a frozen fog hazed around it. Smiling, I gripped the cold, glowing ball and dashed out of the gardens.

In the distance, I began to see many ghosts floating around my family's graveyard. One specter waved to me as I sped towards him.

"Alexander," he greeted cheerfully. "Or... perhaps Xavier?"

"It's Xavier, Great Grandfather." I tossed the ball of light to him when I hurried by. "Here—for you, if you like. Newly fallen. *Thala ul wuw shefta.*"

The light left a trail of chilled fog as it sparkled beautifully away from me, and the ghost caught the ball in his translucent hands, fumbling to keep it from dropping onto the pale grass at his misting feet.

The fallen lights were one of the only objects ghosts could touch, and many were happy to receive them from their decedents here in the caves of Grim. I saw my great grandfather's white lips stretch into a smile, and he thanked me for the gift.

I left through the gates of our estate, catching sight of a horse-drawn, hovering coach leaving with a few servants. *Ah, perfect.*

I sprinted after it and leapt onto the stepping platform. The floating buggy leaned in midair at my added weight, and I quickly opened the door and entered the coach where the female servants waited.

They were all startled, but began chuckling when I latched the door behind me and took a seat. "Good morning, ladies," I

Willow of Ashes

greeted in a cheerful pant, hoping to mask my exhaustion with a smile.

“Good morning, Young Masters,” the servants giggled in unison, all giving polite nods.

The woman closest to me spoke separately. “You seem awfully eager to run errands with us in town, Young Masters. You very nearly tipped the coach.”

“Sorry for the start,” I said. “I’m afraid we can’t join you today, we’re off to see Jaq. We’ve just gotten news regarding our, er, dilemma.”

The servant across from me gasped. “Then you’ll be back to your old selves again soon?”

“With some luck.” My grin stretched until the muscles were sore. I hadn’t been this exhilarated in years.

A large raven suddenly croaked from out the window, and I saw the black bird had alighted onto the door’s lamp fixture outside to follow me. I winked at it. “Not long now, Mal,” I said. “Your master will be rid of this parasite before your mangy tail feathers can molt next summer.”

The bird’s response was to turn up his diamond tail and give me a scoffing caw.

Through the window, I watched us pass by all the large, masterfully decorated cemeteries with black-stone buildings and spiked, iron structures wedged in between. It was still within the hours of Growing Light, the floating balls twinkling overhead were just a bright blue hue; almost their usual, pure white gleam as they swirled in graceful wisps within the billowing clouds of the caves’ ceiling.

If it was still this early, would Jaq even be awake? He had a terrible reputation for sleeping in if we didn’t have training... Dammit, Jaq, why did you have to be on break this week?

After the coach came to a stop, I hopped out and dashed toward Jaq’s home. It took nearly ten minutes to arrive at the small cobbler shop on foot.

My pace slowed when I was outside the door, and I waved at the crow that was perched on the dangling sign above it.

“Good morning, Bridge,” I panted in greeting to the crow.

Ellie Raine

She watched me curiously, her head cocking. The raven following me, Mal, soared down to greet her next, and I jerked the shop's door open. A bell jingled when I entered, and the customers' eyes snapped to me in horror.

Everyone suddenly jumped against the wall, knocking over boxes of shoes as they all dropped to the floor in a very, *very* low bow. "G-g-good morning, High Howllord!" they squeaked, too afraid to pick their heads up from the floor.

As they shivered over the ground, all the mammals' ears sprouted from their heads. Those who had tails kept them firmly tucked, and the winged couple in the back made sure to glue their feathers to the floor in a dramatic bow.

The only person left standing was a scaled young man in the center of the shop. His hair was a sandy shade of blonde and he wore rectangular, black-rimmed eyeglasses. He was holding several boxes of shoes that, I assumed, he was preparing to display near the front window.

The reptile boy noticed the bowing customers first, glancing around with a knitted brow. Then he spotted me.

"Guys?" Jaq began, then quickly amended. "Uh—I mean... High Howllord." Jaq glanced at the lingering customers, who were now scurrying out the door.

He held his tongue, bowing to keep up the pretense until they were all gone. Once alone, he *thwacked* me sharp upside the head. "The Death is wrong with you? Comin' down here in that getup, it's like you're tryin' to scare off our customers."

"We have a new assignment," I puffed, still out of breath from the run over. "It's urgent."

He groaned. "Ah, Death no! Ya ain't cuttin' my break short. Mistress said I got a whole week off, ten days straight, full leave without exception—"

"You'll want to make this an exception." I said.

"There'd better be a Gods damned invasion in the manor."

"We heard back from Bianca."

He backpedaled, our old friend's name perking his scaled ears. "Oh. W-well, what'd she say? Good news?"

Willow of Ashes

“In a way.” A smirk tugged my lips. “While you’ve been twiddling your thumbs with shoelaces all week, she’s found the soul that may very well know where I am.”

His face finally sunk with gravity. “You serious?”

“Deathly serious.”

He gave a thrilled laugh, patting my shoulder with solid thumps. “Great! That’s *great!* Then you’ll be back to normal in no time, right? Let’s hurry up ‘n go talk to the guy.”

“It’s a woman, actually. And we can’t. Well... not yet.”

His expression soured. “Why not?”

“Her soul is apparently missing. The other ghosts say she went back to the surface without a Reaper to escort her.”

“Well, ain’t that just a Bloody convenience... what do we do, then?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Jaq. We have our final assignment as apprentices.” My grin was downright devilish now. “We’re all going to the surface to *be* those escorting Reapers.”