

REAPER

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K. D. McENTIRE



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Cover design by Grace M. Conti-Zilsberger

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2119
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSE.COM

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Summary: After being forced to destroy the twisted and diseased soul of her mother, known in the Never as the White Lady, Wendy must guide the spirits of the dead into the afterlife all by herself, while across town her best friend Eddie lies in a coma, his soul mysteriously separated from his body.

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For my mother.

Thank you
for all those Sundays we spent
at the bookstore
and Taco Bell.

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PROLOGUE

When the slow, steady beeping turned shrill, every nurse on the floor rushed into the room. Wendy, dozing at her best friend's bedside, shoved back from the mattress and staggered to her feet. Beside her, Eddie's machines continued to beep steadily. His roommate wasn't so lucky.

Despite the bustle of the hospital staff and the long, intricate dance of defibrillator and medical personnel, the shrill tone stretched until a doctor pushed back from the body on the bed and said, "Call it."

"Seven-oh-two," a short, stocky nurse murmured, tugging the dangling pen at his neck free of its cord, clicking it open. As he passed Wendy the nurse patted her on the shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Wendy said, watching the spirit of Eddie's departed roommate step away from her cooling body and hesitate at the curtain separating their beds before reaching out a tentative hand and sliding through. "I've seen it before."

Biding her time, Wendy waited until the orderlies had carted the body away and stripped the bed before she waved to the ghost. Even dead, the girl was all bones and sallow skin, long lank hair and large, protruding eyes. She'd been admitted to the ward three days before but Wendy had known that she wouldn't last; the silver cord dangling from her navel that connected her soul to her body looked as if moths had been at it even then. Now, as she stood near the bed that had once been hers, her cord was barely more than a desiccated string.

"Am I dead?" The ghost approached and ran her hand over Wendy's plastic chair. Like with the curtain, her fingers passed smoothly through the back. "I don't feel dead."

“I know. Weird, right?” Wendy settled on the edge of Eddie’s bed and glanced around the room. It had been at least half an hour since the girl had died. The Light should have appeared for her by now. “But you’re not hurting anymore, so that’s good.”

Wendy hated this part; making polite conversation with the dead strangers that filled her world until their Light arrived. She wasn’t good at small talk with the living; why she felt compelled to keep the dead company right after their deaths was beyond her. Perhaps because it was the sort of thing Piotr did.

It didn’t help that the script rarely varied: they asked if they were dead, she confirmed, she pointed out that at least they weren’t in pain, they agreed. Sometimes there were protests or further questions, but the act of dying was enough to stun the average human soul into a slight fugue for a while, often long enough for their Light to appear.

“Yeah,” the girl agreed and shuffled her feet. The remnants of her cord dangled like shifting seaweed from her navel. She noticed it and gingerly plucked at the cord, lifting it up and tentatively poking her index finger into one of the holes like a toddler examining her belly button. She winced as if she expected the poke was going to hurt but then relaxed, pinching the thin, tattered end of the cord curiously. “So . . . what now?”

A talker, huh? Wendy took a deep breath, sighed, and stood. “Well, when your Light gets here you step into it. No more mortal coil. Boom. Done.” Wendy grimaced and pushed a frizzing red curl out of her eyes; getting a haircut and a fresh dye job was on the perpetual To Do list. “So if you’ve got any, err, final-final words, any secrets you feel compelled to spill to a friendly ear or a message you just have to get to someone, now would be the time to share.” She grimaced. “I don’t do revenge stuff, though. Just sayin’.”

Dropping her cord, the girl squatted down beside Wendy’s chair and prodded a chair leg, marveling at the way her hand slipped in and out of the metal. “Then what?”

“Then . . . I don’t know. You pass on.” Wendy shrugged, uneasy with the way the conversation was turning and uncomfortable with the way the girl was experimenting so easily with her environment. Normally the newly dead just wailed or wandered about in confusion; this girl seemed to be actively trying to figure out the physics of the Never. “I don’t know what happens after the Light. Not really my jurisdiction.”

Behind the spirit the room was beginning to lighten, a delicate whispering hum rose from nothing, and a tangy scent of ozone and hickory filled the air. Wendy grinned, thrilled to see the familiar sight though her nose itched at the aroma. “Looks like your ride’s here.”

A thin shaft of Light, no wider than a hair’s breadth, broke through the hospital ceiling and struck the tile floor. Then it began to widen, filling the room with heat and Light, and the hum became a high, plaintive siren song like tinkling bells—a pleasant, sweet sound.

Rising fluidly out of her squat, the girl glanced over her shoulder at the Light, at Wendy, and at the Light again. Her hands twisted together; all of a sudden she was on the edge of tears. “Are you an angel?” she whispered plaintively. “Because I never . . . is that Heaven? Was I wrong? Before? Or is there . . . I mean . . .” She wildly gestured at the Light. “Is it my fault that I didn’t know?”

“Not an angel,” Wendy hurried to say, glancing down at her inartfully shredded fishnets and mud-caked motorcycle boots. No corset today, just a faded black tee over her favorite plaid mini, but she’d borrowed Eddie’s ratty old motorcycle jacket and it was slung over the end of the bed, across his feet. No matter how goth her look got, they always wanted to know if Wendy’d been sent from some higher being. The angelic assumptions never ceased to amuse her.

“Not an angel, I promise. I don’t know if there even *is* a Heaven, okay? The Light . . . that’s . . .” Wendy paused, looking for the right way to explain the Light. Her fall-back description always seemed inadequate, but it was the closest thing to truth she could muster.

The Light was getting stronger and stronger, the music rising to

a lovely crescendo. Soon it would begin to fade, and Wendy didn't want to stall the girl; she settled, once again, on the pat reply. "It's like your elevator home, okay? Your one-way ticket to peace—call it Heaven, call it Nirvana, call it whatever you want—but it doesn't discriminate and it doesn't wait, so don't hang around here too long. Take my word for it. The Light goes away after a while. After that, well, you've got to find your own way home."

Wendy thought of the month before—how the White Lady, Wendy's own mother, driven insane by the sundering of her soul, had tricked Wendy and Piotr into a showdown in the basement of the Palace Hotel. There had been a dozen huddled Lost chained to the walls, drained and weak and crazed with hunger. In order to return to her body, the twisted thing Wendy's mother had decided to sacrifice Wendy. She'd almost succeeded, but Piotr had held Wendy's—even now, Wendy wasn't quite sure what to call it, but the easiest explanation was thinking of the orb of Light as her "power"—in the palm of his hand. He'd stubbornly refused to give the Light over and had instead allowed it to break.

Of those in the room, only Wendy and Piotr survived the blast of Light; Elle and Lily had escaped the basement and subsequent explosion by the skin of their teeth. James, Lily's love, had been one of the unlucky ones. Wendy still felt badly about his passing.

Wendy abruptly shook her head to clear the painful memory from her mind. "Believe me," she urged, "that when I say finding your Light a second time isn't easy, I mean it. It's not simple, it's nothing like this. Not at all."

"Oh. Okay." The girl, shivering, glanced between Wendy and the Light. Longingly, she looked at the chair another moment, marveling at the way her hand slid through the back and how her fingers wiggled out the other side. "I guess . . . I guess I'll go, then. Thanks for keeping me company."

Uncertain still, but her decision made, the girl started backing toward the Light. Worry for the girl niggled at the back of Wendy's

head. She looked so small and young. She couldn't be much older than Wendy or Eddie. "You never said if you wanted me to pass a message on," Wendy reminded her quickly, listening as the siren song reached its peak. "Last chance."

"Nah," the girl said, nearing the edge of the Light. She tilted her head back and smiled sweetly, inhaling the scent and shivering with joy. "It's better this way." Then she paused and examined Wendy closely. "What about you? You seem like a girl who's known a lot of dead people in your time. You want me to pass a message on to the great beyond?"

"For me?" Startled by the unexpected offer, Wendy struggled for a reply. "I . . ."

"Last chance," the girl said and grinned, showing a sudden flash of humor. Smiling, resting in the outer nimbus of Light, she was no longer pale and wan, but slim and subtle and lovely, her hair backlit with Light. "But if you want me to punch someone in Heaven, sorry, I don't do revenge."

Glancing down at Eddie, Wendy chuckled softly. "Tell you what, if you see this guy's dad out there—name of Matt Barry—let him know I'm keeping my promise." She touched Eddie's knee and smiled sadly. "I'm trying to, at least."

"Matt Barry," the girl repeated and nodded once. She held her hand up to her Light and sighed deeply, a slow, grateful smile curling across her face. In the warm wash of Light her face appeared fuller, her hair brighter. Wendy realized that this was how she must have looked before whatever illness she'd had had begun to eat away at her body, to chew the edges of her willpower apart.

"Got it. I'll pass it on."

"Thanks," Wendy said.

The Light winked out and with it went the girl. Only a faint, charred circle on the tile spoke of what had happened to the spirit. No normal living soul would be able to see it, but Wendy was used to simultaneously peering into the afterlife and the living world. To

her, the circle outlined in the Never was as clear in all its grim grayness as the bright orange chair she'd been sitting in.

Settling back in the bedside chair, Wendy took one of Eddie's cool hands in her own, rubbing small, soothing circles into the webbing between thumb and index finger.

"I'm trying, Eds," she said, turning her face away from the circle and trying not to picture Eddie vanishing into the Light, his teasing grin and crinkled smile gone forever.

Unbidden, an image of Piotr stepping into the Light came instead. Frowning and silently cursing her overactive imagination, Wendy pushed the unwelcome picture away and concentrated on her friend. Piotr was strong and he had Lily and Elle with him. He didn't need her. Eddie did.

"I promised your dad I'd take care of you," Wendy said, voice pitched low so the nurses wouldn't hear, her eyes stinging from weariness and unshed tears. She leaned forward and rested her forehead against Eddie's, noses touching, her fingers threaded through his.

"I'll find you," she whispered. "I promise."

CHAPTER ONE

Night in the Never fell slowly, a flag of silver-tinged darkness uncurling in a steadily rising dusk. Before meeting Wendy it had been centuries—no, more—since Piotr had seen real, living twilight. Most of his memories had been eaten by time and by death-workers like Wendy’s mother, but he could still remember the way the stars would emerge in the fading light one by one, mysterious pinpricks dotting the sky. All else had been swallowed by vast stretches of time where the years piled up like cobwebbed shadows in the corners of his mind.

Then he’d met Wendy.

Now? Now he could catch the light of hazy twilight between flickers, though it wasn’t nearly the same thing. Concentrating on the light did no good—he’d gaze out into the Never if he actively attempted to see the living lands—but when Piotr relaxed and went with the flow, sometimes the quality of the light would shift and change: brief, powerful flickers allowed him to see the world as Wendy must, in all its solid, living glory.

Though it had been only a little time since the White Lady’s demise, Piotr had already realized that he’d been permanently altered by the encounter. The changes in his vision were one thing, the urge to strike out and discover his own origins another. The real question had become what to do next, how to live his afterlife, or if he even wanted to do anything special at all. Before, he’d had the Lost to protect, his duty as a defunct Rider to keep, but now he had nothing but Lily and Elle and his own ambition to guide him.

It wasn’t enough.

Out of habit, Piotr wandered the familiar span of turf between

San Francisco and Mountain View, killing time by catching rides in the back of taxis and trucks and keeping a lookout for spirits in danger. Dark things wandered the city at night—Walkers and worse, who'd traded their humanity for the certainty of continued existence, even if it cost them their very souls—and Piotr had spent too many years as a protector, as a Rider, to willingly walk away from another ghost in trouble, be they Shade or Lost or anything else.

It was late though, past midnight, and rides were starting to grow scarce. He could have taken Caltrain, but by doing so he would have run the risk of being brushed by a passenger. Living heat burned fiercely and, after the explosion of Light that burned away most of the White Lady's army but left him intact, Piotr was finding himself far more susceptible to the touch of the living than he had been previously.

Without one of the Lost to help speed the healing process, it now took weeks to heal a burn from straying too near one of the living; for something as basic as an aimless train ride from point A to point B, Piotr was unwilling to risk the pain. Daring the unknown backseats of random cars, with the potential for infants in bucket seats or teenagers stretched out in the back, was risk enough.

Flashing red-blue-red stuttered through the darkness, and the SUV he'd hopped into at the last on-ramp slowed and changed lanes in deference to the sirens and light. Piotr, spotting the pile-up up ahead, rolled neatly out of the car through the side door and came to his feet in the breakdown lane. Glass was everywhere—some had even crossed over into the Never—and Piotr stepped over the glittering mess and made his way to the pile-up.

A child, no more than six, huddled on the side of the road. He was small and blond and sported a plain white tee over grass-stained jeans. He worried a baseball cap between his hands and rocked back and forth, forehead pressed to his knees. Piotr knelt beside him.

"I like that comic," he said gently, referencing the emblem emblazoned across the front of the cap, a large stylized A. "The hero

is very quick, *da?* What I would give for a shield like a Frisbee. You see a bad guy and *whoosh!*” He made a grand swooping gesture with one hand, miming taking off an enemy’s head with a flick of a wrist.

The kid snorted but didn’t look up. His fingers clutched the cap tighter.

Piotr was familiar with this give and take. “I am Piotr,” he said kindly, trying again. He waited.

Several minutes passed before the boy turned his face in Piotr’s direction and looked him up and down. “Jamie,” the boy said. “And you talk weird.”

“To me, Jamie,” Piotr said, grinning broadly now that he had the little boy’s attention, “perhaps it is you who talks weird, *da?*”

“What does *da* mean?” Jamie straightened.

“Ah. It means ‘yes,’ yes?”

“Yes?”

“*Da.*” Piotr flopped onto the ground beside the boy, stretching his legs so that his knees popped. “You know, Jamie, I think your name, it does not suit you. Heroes always have secret identities; I think we should pick out a hero name for you, hmm? Would you like that?”

Jamie’s answering smile was tentative but sweet. He crossed his legs underneath him; his frightened rocking ceased. “Yeah? Like what?”

“Oh, I do not know. Perhaps Cap?” Piotr nudged the cap in Jamie’s hand. “It is a good name. We could find you a matching star-spangled shield for your enemies.”

Jamie shook his head so that his hair drooped over his eyes. He’d needed a trim before he’d died. “I can’t do that, Cap’s already taken!”

“Ah, so, true enough.” Piotr positioned himself between the boy and the tiny twisted body the EMTs were now lifting out of the back of the car. A small, grimy hand, still clutching a Captain America baseball cap, flopped over the edge of the gurney before an EMT considerately tucked it and the cap back beneath the sheet.

“They took my mommy away,” Jamie informed Piotr, leaning past him to watch as the EMTs loaded his body into the back of the ambulance. “The airbag went *poof* and she bounced all around. She’s got a broken head and arm but I think the rest of her’s gonna be okay.”

“That happens,” Piotr said, nodding. He glanced around for Jamie’s Light but the telltale rays were nowhere to be seen. “You weren’t buckled in?”

“I was,” Jamie said and then blushed. “I dropped my cap,” he confessed. “Mommy turned to yell at me for unbuckling my belt and *crash! Bash! Boom!*” He made a series of drawn-out grinding and crinkling noises to outline exactly what had happened to the rusted Mustang he and his mother had been riding in. Then he frowned. “It was loud.”

“I see,” Piotr said, and he did. This wasn’t his first time sitting at the side of the road while the police cleaned up glass and oil. It wasn’t even his thousandth.

“Well,” Piotr said, realizing with quiet relief that he was on Rider duty once again, “I know a very nice place we can stay for a while until your Light appears. Will you come with me?” He rose to his feet and offered Jamie a hand. It was nice to be doing good work again, he mused as the first of the police cars drove away. It was wonderful to not feel so aimless and lost.

“My Light?” Jamie hopped to his feet and tucked the bill of his cap into the back pocket of his jeans before resting cool fingers in Piotr’s open palm.

“I’ll explain on the way,” Piotr promised. As he walked and talked he saw Jamie’s steps grow more confident, and his pace sped up. The after-death double vision must be fading, he realized. The living land was receding for Jamie, the Never pressing to the front. Soon Jamie would only see the grey and brooding Never as the bulk of the bright living world entirely faded away.

Piotr explained how sometimes, if you concentrated, you could

faintly hear the shrillest, loudest living noises through the bulk of years, but they were muted, hardly more than faint whispers in the Never. He spoke of phasing through walls, thin in the Never, that were solid in the living lands, or how if a building or object were witness to enough powerful emotion, even after it had been destroyed in the living world a solid wall could remain in the Never, blocking passage.

The trip toward the abandoned steel mill Piotr's old clan had dubbed "the Treehouse" was much shorter than he remembered. Underfoot the road shimmered and shifted between buckled concrete and warped bricks, the striation of the roads that had existed before being layered on top of one another like packed sand on the beach.

They were almost to the Treehouse when he heard the scrape of stone on stone, the tumbledown sound of gravel shifting nearby. Immediately on edge, Piotr grabbed Jamie's wrist and yanked the boy behind him. When Jamie began to protest Piotr shushed him sharply, shoving a finger against his lips so hard he knew he'd bruise the next day.

"Walker," Piotr whispered, realizing only then that while he'd explained what Jamie would have to expect from being dead in the Never, he hadn't had the time to explain about the bogeymen that were the Walkers. Now was an inopportune time to learn.

"Stay back," he murmured, and fumbled at his hip, unsheathing the old bone dagger one-handed. Jamie hissed in surprise but Piotr didn't turn around. Just ahead, a few feet past a copse of skeletal oaks, Piotr watched the shadows shift.

Moving forward in the sliding hunter stalk Lily had taught him ages ago, Piotr balanced on the balls of his feet and shifted his toes under the crackling debris of the street. This slow stride made no noise and the relaxed stance of the shadow at the edge of the alley left Piotr confident that his presence had not yet been noted; he would easily be able to sneak up on the unwelcome visitor.

Rounding the corner, Piotr found himself face to rotting face with a black-robed Walker. The beast was, like all Walkers, grotesquely tall, slim, and bone white. Sections of its face were beginning to stretch against its bones, the desiccated flesh pulling taut against the ridge of cheekbone and jaw. Yellowing teeth clicked in a rough staccato as Piotr leapt forward, knife thrust outward, and stabbed the Walker in the shoulder.

"It dares!" hissed the Walker, swatting Piotr aside as if he weighed nothing. "The useless Rider flesh tries to sneak up on me!"

Unable to catch his balance, Piotr slapped hard against the side of the building, and cursed as the jagged bricks of the corner cut his left cheek in an irregular swath from nose to ear. He swiped the back of his hand against the wet spill of essence that sluiced down his chin and soaked his collar. Luckily his short flight and abrupt landing hadn't jarred the knife out of his hand. The bone blade wasn't even nicked.

"*Ny ti i svoloch'*," Piotr ground out, tightening his grip on the dagger, feeling the well-worn heft of it shift perfectly in his palm. "Of course, you must excuse me, but I just have this thing about foul dogs dropping in uninvited."

"You left this territory, flesh." The Walker stretched to its full height and swayed above Piotr menacingly. The hem of its robe fluttered about the yellow-bone shins, dangling hunks of rotting flesh slapping against its calves as it swayed left and right, left and right. "Riders are all gone. This land belongs to Walkers now."

"Over my dead body," Piotr snapped and dove for the Walker again. This time the once-man didn't even bother flinging him off—it merely let out a sound like grinding glass over asphalt, the best its stripped vocal cords could make of a laugh, and stood there while Piotr stabbed and stabbed and stabbed. Then it lifted its arms to reveal the swiss cheese he'd made of its cloak . . . and the skeletal frame beneath. None of his swipes had broken the taut, stretched flesh.

Piotr fell back a step to analyze the situation. This Walker was

far tougher than he was accustomed to, and smarter. Usually a solitary Walker would run rather than risk its precious skin in a fight. So why was this one staying, mocking him? Since there were no Lost nearby, there was no reason to . . .

Stilling, Piotr went cold all over. It'd been weeks since he'd had a child, a Lost, to protect, and he'd forgotten all about Jamie in the heat of the fight! Spinning on his heel, Piotr rushed back around the corner to where he'd left the boy.

Jamie was gone. Only his cap, rapidly fading, remained.

Growling, Piotr scooped up the cap and scanned the area, hoping against hope that he'd hear a distant scream that would lead him in the right direction. The last of the cap, the tiny bit of Jamie's spiritual essence remaining, lost coherence. His fingers pressed together, and it was gone.

Jamie was gone.

Sick to his stomach with guilt, Piotr staggered a few steps away from the building, paying distant attention to the shadow at his back. The Walker was still laughing as it turned the corner and rested against the wall, the edges of its frayed hood trembling with glee.

"Rider loses something? So sad!" crooned the Walker. "Perhaps he is waylaid. It happens." The Walker was *too* nonchalant. It wasn't afraid of him in the least, which meant it had either recently fed well or it wasn't alone—or both.

"You are working in pairs," Piotr said, fingers clenching for the handle of his knife. Anger pulsed in a hard, steady beat behind his eyes, giving the clearing a stutter-flash look similar to what he saw when he let the visions of the living world sneak up on him. His fury felt like it was lighting up the night. "You haven't gone back to your old ways."

While the ghosts of adults and those of younger people, like the ones the Riders gathered in large, protective groups, tended to congregate where they'd had the most fun while alive, the Walkers had

shed their silver cords and their souls in order to ensure their own sort of hideous half-life. For centuries they had been solitary, mistrusting creatures that avoided not only the light and heat of the living but also the other dead.

Until the White Lady came.

“Hunting alone?” The Walker waved a negligent hand as if to say *that is so yesterday*. “Why should we do so when it is so easy to draw foolish Riders away from prey?”

“Not all Riders are like me.” Piotr put his back to the closest wall. “Most Riders go in packs. They’re strong in will. Much stronger than a *beast* like you.”

“Yes, we learn from the flesh!” The Walker cried, clapping its bony hands together. “She healed us, made us stronger, and taught us well! Many good lessons from the White Lady, yes! She says for us to work together, like flesh, like Riders do, like the other spirits do. It is hard at first but the White Lady had ways of making us follow her orders.”

It touched its face, where the taut skin beneath the hollow eyes was crisscrossed with twisted ropes of scars and crosshatched brands burned into the flesh.

Despite his hatred of the once-man before him, Piotr winced in sympathy. He’d been well acquainted with the White Lady’s persuasive methods. She’d been a master of healing the Walkers with a kiss or, if they angered her, stripping them to bare bones with a swipe.

It was no mystery why the Walkers had flocked to the White Lady, while they willingly subjected themselves to all sorts of agony in her employ. Living in the Never required a constant influx of willpower, the ability to keep slogging through the dim, gray days of eternity without looking too hard at the shadow of the world around you. The younger a person was when they died, the easier it was to keep going on in the Never. The young seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of willpower and hope.

Not so for souls who’d lived a longer life before passing into the

Never. It was often a struggle just to keep going, and adult spirits who found their will weakening had a limited number of choices—they could allow themselves to fade away, as the Shades did, or they could follow the path of the Walkers.

Being a Walker was to willingly become a monster; Walkers chose to cannibalize the essence, the unlived years, of other spirits. Those unlived years were most plentiful in the ghosts of children, the Lost. They could get nothing from the Riders, but the Lost were like ripe peaches, sweet and juicy and filled with life.

No one could remember when it had all begun, but it had been this way for eons. The Riders grouped together and protected the Lost from the Walkers, the Walkers did everything in their power to steal away the child-spirits every chance they got.

Then the White Lady—Wendy’s mother—had come into the Never and everything had grown further twisted and wrong. The Walkers, normally untrusting and near feral, began to work together. And the Riders, normally a tight-knit group dedicated to the Lost’s cause, had fallen apart.

Part of this, Piotr knew, was his fault.

“Jamie’s gone,” Piotr said, holding out his hand to show the Walker that the cap had vanished. “But you’re still here. Didn’t you want some of your prey?”

The Walker patted its midsection. “I eat when I eat. Tonight is not my night for prey. Tonight is my night for talking to the Rider. We knew you would come back if we waited long enough.” It licked its lips. “You stink of female flesh, Lightbringer flesh, still. We knew you would come.”

The anger drained away and Piotr was swept with sudden chills. *Lightbringer*. Wendy.

“We have parted,” Piotr said carefully, certain now that he could hear rustling in the deepest, darkest shadows. He counted the individual movements that he could make out and was dismayed. Piotr’s conversation with the Walker in front of him had allowed the others

to sneak rather close. He put the count at somewhere between two and five more, each taking turns shifting closer.

“Maybe you part from living flesh, maybe not.” The Walker leaned in from its ridiculous height, bringing with it a puff of air stinking of maggoty meat and pond scum roasting in the summer sun, and said, “The Walkers who are left think not. We talk about flesh, we talk about Lightbringer, and we say to ourselves, ‘Why would they part?’ It makes no sense, flesh. It is senseless.”

For a moment, just the briefest of seconds, Piotr was tempted to laugh. Senseless indeed. He’d struggled with the decision to leave Wendy the entire time she lay comatose; endless hell. She’d looked so small and fragile in her hospital bed, childlike with her black-tipped curls tangled damply against her cheeks.

Piotr had loathed himself in those long hours, watching her sink deeper and deeper into the twilight-world of her own mind with no way to reach her, no way to draw her into the waking, burning heat of the living world. He knew; he’d tried everything he could think of to reach her soul, even once going so far as to kiss her, hoping it would be like a fairy tale, that she would wake in his arms and love him. He’d failed.

“I left her,” he said to the Walker stiffly, “for her own good.” And it was the truth, so far as truth went, even if there was more to it. Wendy had found herself in the hospital because he’d been unwilling to step away from how he felt about her, because he wouldn’t allow her to become her mother’s pawn; he’d been unwilling to sacrifice the Lightbringer’s soul for his fellow Riders or even the Lost. He’d sworn to protect them and, when faced with a choice of losing Wendy or the Lost, had let an explosion of Light obliterate everyone in the room instead.

Somehow, out of them all, he alone came out unscathed. How he’d survived . . . well, that was still a mystery.

“The Lightbringer needs the likes of you?” The Walker chuckled again and its bones rattled in mirth. Piotr felt a wave of cold come off

the Walker, a chilly breeze that reminded him not to let the Walker get too close lest it freeze his very essence and trap him there to be shredded apart. "Rider flesh has a high opinion of itself."

"You said you were waiting for me," Piotr snapped, annoyed now and revving up for a fight, trying to stay out of the cold air pockets but feeling pressed upon on all sides. He glanced left and right, trying to pinpoint exactly where the others would come from, or how he might turn their numbers to his advantage. "So what is it that you want? Some sort of deal, like the White Lady had with you? You wish this territory?"

"Want? Flesh wants to bargain with us?" Rocking back on its heels, the Walker shook its head and laughed its gravelly laugh. "There is no bargain with Walkers, flesh. You have bothered others too long."

"Others?" Piotr asked. "What others?"

"Others matters to flesh? Now? How funny! We come for you now because it is time. We are paid, we take care of you. You are example. To other Riders. To Lost. To Lightbringer. I am bored. We are done here. Goodbye."

The rustles had grown very close now. He could feel the encroaching cold, the ice that clung to branch and rock wherever Walkers trod. Now his breath frosted the air. Piotr knelt down.

He was tensed, preparing for the attack, when a long, yodeling war cry cut the air. Twin blades flashed as a slim, dark-haired woman darted from behind a nearby bush and leapt at the Walker.

A second shape darted by and Piotr found himself thrust aside into the rough-hewn wall by a familiar blonde figure. Slowing only a split-second to make sure Piotr was unharmed, Elle flashed him a quicksilver grin and leapt into the fray.

Watching the girls fight was like watching a ballet. Elle, who'd died a rich society girl in the late 20s, had been an only child of two world-journing glitterati. Her parents had no time for their darling only child but spared no expense when it came to her education,

interests, or hobbies. Fencing, archery, horseback riding, dancing—Elle had tried it all and was good at most of it.

Lily, on the other hand, had lived the quiet life of a plains-dwelling tribeswoman, a girl so long dead she couldn't even reliably recall the various names of her tribe and only occasionally the names of her gods. Her range of talents wasn't quite so varied, but the lithe brunette unerringly wielded her twin bone daggers with lethal precision.

In moments the pair was flanked—five Walkers, all towering above the tiny girls, all armed with their claws sharpened to razor-fine points and stunning, slowing ice-breath.

The Walkers surrounded the girls and pressed forward on one side, attempting to nudge them into a less advantageous position so that they'd be overwhelmed, slowed by the cold. Piotr expected Lily to fall back—she was adept at strategizing, especially during close combat such as this—but instead she shrieked and flung herself forward, slashing high at the nearest Walker's face with one dagger and punching low with the other.

Hissing, the Walker fell back, clawing at his hood, which dropped to reveal the last few remaining wisps of sparse white hair across his crown. His features were a desiccated maw of teeth and rudely stitched-together twine frayed at the edges and seeping yellowing pus-like essence.

Elle, likewise, was aiming for the eyes or, at least, where the eyes used to be. The Walkers fought hard but the girls fought harder, recklessly ignoring the chill and dodging the sharpened hands. Within minutes all but one Walker had fled the scene, bleeding and cursing, leaving the pair facing the Walker who'd distracted Piotr earlier. They stalked around and around, moving toward him as the Walkers had circled Piotr, slowing only when Piotr stepped forward and cleared his throat.

Though intimidated by their strength and skill, Piotr was also pathetically glad of their support and his unexpected salvation. Trapped in a group like that, he never would have thought to go for

the eyes, much less been willing to take on such heavy odds, even with another Rider at his side. Lily and Elle had hardly blinked before wading in and saving his skin—again.

The first Walker, backed up against a wall at this point, held still and silent, a ruined rabbit in a terrible snare. Looking between the three of them, it chuckled, seeming to appreciate the irony of falling prey to the fate it'd initially intended for Piotr.

"You seem to be at a disadvantage," Piotr told the Walker before crossing his arms over his chest and smiling thankfully at the girls. "But Elle, Lily, I am grateful for your intervention. *Spasibo*. You have my great thanks."

Elle shrugged. "You think we'd let a poor little bunny like you duke it out all by your lonesome, Petey? Some friends we'd be." She crouched a little lower and her skirt rode up, exposing a length of strong, tan thigh. The Walker shifted, claws twitching, and Piotr knew it was imagining punching through Elle's exposed flesh with its fingers, tearing her leg from her body. "These dizzy palookas were taking you for a ride."

"Indeed," Piotr agreed gravely, interspersing himself slightly between the Walker and Elle. "I noted that myself."

"We were too late to save the boy," Lily said coolly, lifting her daggers shoulder-height and easing back on the ball of her left foot. Piotr had seen her relax into this stance before; it allowed for a fluid, viper-fast movement to the left or right with only a slight shift in weight. "But rest assured, he is avenged."

"This is good," Piotr said and looked to the Walker. "Did you arrive in time to hear our talk?"

Elle snorted, rising so that her skirt once again covered more of her thigh. "Yeah, but why are you bothered about beatin' your gums at this one, Petey? What's the point? He's all balled up."

Now that she wasn't as exposed and vulnerable, the Walker chuckled and turned its face away from Elle. Slightly between them, Piotr relaxed.

“The flesh speaks in riddles. Always the talky-talky.” The Walker flapped his fingers in a quacking motion. “Either do for me as you did before or let me walk, flesh. I live on short-time, the dawn comes.”

“Ol’ white and creepy here’s right. We oughta stop futzing around and bump off the hood already.” Elle rested one fist on her hip and leered darkly at the Walker. Then she glanced at Piotr and groaned, irritated. “Jeepers creepers! I know that look.”

Lily, peeking at Piotr, sighed and relaxed her pose. The entire set of her body radiated disapproval. “As do I. Piotr, you do not wish us to finish this beast off? Why? What use does this abomination hold for you?”

“Patience,” Piotr cautioned mildly, picking up the hilt of his shattered knife from the ground. “Something he said earlier struck me. He was asking about the Lightbringer. Then he suggested that he’d been sent by others. That he was, perhaps, taking the orders?”

Lily frowned. “Sent by others? Surely, I do not comprehend. The White Lady has been dispatched. Who is there to send such as these after you?”

“That’s what I’m wondering. What genius would send this dew-dropper to give ol’ Petey the bum’s rush?” Elle narrowed her eyes at the Walker and, shoving Piotr over, waved her knife beneath the Walker’s neck. “Come on, palooka. Talk and maybe we’ll just take your teeth instead of your whole head.”

“She speaks true. This is your last chance at salvation, beast,” Lily agreed coldly, striding up to the Walker and holding the point of her dagger to his left eye. “Speak what you know and by Piotr’s willing grace we shall allow you to continue with your poisonous ways. This time. Speak not and I promise the sting of my knives shall be but the first pain you feel tonight.”

The Walker seemed to take her seriously. It hesitated and then shrugged. “Flesh is . . . persuasive. Perhaps it is the poison it coats over this blade.”

Piotr glanced sharply at Lily. Poison? This was new. He made a mental note to ask her about it later.

The Walker, holding one bony hand outward in a gesture of peace, dug through its robe with the other until it found what it was looking for. He passed the object, a small sheet of tightly folded paper, to Lily and stepped back, putting plenty of space between her daggers and his face. Elle took the sheet from Lily's hand and unfolded it.

"Oh Petey," she whispered. "Have they got the goods on you." She held up the paper and Piotr was stunned silent when it turned out to be a sketch of his own face staring back at him. It was clumsily made, true, but he recognized the hand that'd done it. One of his Lost, Pandora, had been a budding artist and had been fond of drawing anyone who'd sit still long enough for her to capture the essence of their features. Piotr had often been a subject.

Piotr turned away, choked up. Dora was gone, obliterated in the same explosion that had put Wendy in the hospital and destroyed the White Lady. Seeing her art in such an unexpected way was like a punch to the throat . . . and heart.

"Those on Nob Hill send their greetings," the Walker said and, before Lily could react, slashed outward with sharpened fingertips. Yelling, Lily fell back. Elle, several feet away, spun on her heel to take the Walker on, but the creature fled through the closest thin wall, disappearing from sight with a flutter of grimy black fabric and a hollow, mocking laugh.

"They want ol' Pete delivered up to Nob Hill," Elle mused, plucking the drawing from Piotr's nerveless fingers and skimming it. "Hey Pocahontas, I'm having problems remembering, but ain't Nob Hill part of Council turf?"

"Last I recall the Council frequents the Mark Hopkins hotel, yes," Lily agreed. "I have hardly had dealings with them but it is wise to know the lay of the land when possible, especially regarding those more powerful than one's self. Yet then the question becomes

this: why would they seek Piotr? He has always kept to himself along the canal and has not aggravated them. Why seek him out? It makes no sense.”

“Petey? Hey, flyboy! Up’n at’em!” Elle snapped her fingers in front of Piotr’s face. “You got a clue why the daddies and debs up Nob Hill way would want you floating on the Styx side of the Never?” When Piotr, frowning, didn’t answer, she threw up her hands. “Useless.”

Piotr’s frown deepened into a scowl and he waved a hand in Elle’s direction, aggravated at the interruption. His vision was flickering wildly. One moment the Never was clear as a bell; in the next, the living world lay over it like a film of shining plastic. “I am thinking, Elle. Be patient.”

“Thinking like a glacier moves,” she grumbled, but dropped to the ground and stretched out, tucking hands behind her head and gazing up at the stars. “Ugh, you’d think with all these calluses that my feet wouldn’t hurt so badly after just a little hoofin’ it.”

“Wendy,” Piotr said finally. “They mentioned that I stank of her still.”

“Well you’re no sweet summer morning, but you don’t exactly stink either,” Elle quipped. “Lightbringer, huh? Should’ve figured we weren’t done with that dizzy dame.”

“Hush,” Lily said and was quiet for some time before approaching Piotr’s side. “If you are in danger, Piotr, there is a chance that the Lightbringer is as well.” She bit her lip and eased in front of him, making sure she had his full attention before continuing.

“It would be a great disservice to Wendy to ignore this warning. They sent a half-score of Walkers for you. How many would they send for one such as the Lightbringer? We are here, at your side, to fight with you, but the Lightbringer is alone. Is she even aware that some Walkers escaped the skirmish with the White Lady?”

Abruptly, Piotr shook his head. “*Net*. Such thoughts are a waste

of energy and time. Wendy is strong, capable. She can take care of herself, no matter who the enemy or the number sent. On this you have my word.”

He could see Lily struggling with the decision of whether to debate him further or not; after long moments her eyelashes drifted down and she nodded once, brusquely. “As you say, Piotr. You are familiar with the Lightbringer and her capabilities and I am not. For now, I shall follow your lead.” Frowning, she reached out and gripped his wrist until he winced. “For now.”

Lily stepped aside as Piotr, scowling and rubbing his wrist, moved to kneel beside Elle, still stretched out on the ground and flexing her tired feet. She raised one hand as if shielding her vision from the moonlight and winked at him.

“Hello Pete. Have a seat?”

He ignored her flirting and got straight to the point. “Elle, you are familiar with the Nob Hill, *da?*”

“I swung around the juice joints in that neck of the woods a time or two, sure.” She closed her eyes and grinned at the memories. “Alive *and* dead, mind you.”

“I believe I sense what Piotr may be contemplating,” Lily said, settling cross-legged next to Elle. “It only stands to reason that you are well known on Nob Hill, due to your familiarity with the Pier.”

“Pier’s my turf,” Elle grumbled, opening one eye with a scowl in Lily’s direction. “Was my turf. Whatever. Familiarity ain’t even close. Those lollygaggers tried sending a mulligan down my way a time or two early on, before they knew who they were futzing with. I made ’em get a wiggle on, *toute suite*. But I hadn’t heard hide nor hair of them in months, so I figured they’d skeedaddled when the White Lady started sniffing round. Apparently not.”

“Exactly,” Piotr said, encouragingly. “You are the perfect emissary for me, then.”

“Emissary?” Elle sat up. “You want me to crash a Nob Hill shindig? You’ve gone daffy!”

“Elle,” soothed Lily, “if anyone can discover why the Council is sending Walkers after Piotr, it is you. You were born to affluence, you speak their language.”

“Hell, guys,” Elle groaned, “it ain’t like you can drop a c-note on the ground and get that bunch of big cheeses to sing a pretty tune! There’s *rules* up Nob Hill way! They don’t just let any mook off the street up at the Mark Hopkins, and to them I’m just some wacky kid with arrows a’plenty!”

“All the better,” Lily interjected smoothly, “for they are wise to recognize your prowess in battle. Elle, you know as well as I that Piotr would be worse than useless in this scenario, especially if the Council truly does wish him harm. He needs you. *We* need you.”

“Thank you so very much,” Piotr snapped, not bothering to hide the bitterness in his tone.

She flapped a hand at him. “I speak only the truth, Piotr. There is no room for your false pride. It took you long enough to believe our words when your memories were lax. Believe me, as you are now you would be naught but meat for their dogs.”

“*Da*,” he agreed, sighing heavily. “You are right. But I do not appreciate being called useless.”

“Worse than useless,” Elle quoted with a dark grin. “Get it right, Petey, or I might not get all dolled up and rub elbows with the high hats up Nob Hill way.”

“You will do this, then?” Lily touched Elle lightly on the knee, her expression concerned but cool. “Despite the potential danger?”

“What’re a few goons to me?” Elle hopped to her feet and winked broadly. “Let’s get a wiggle on. I’ve gotta be off my nut to wanna crash a Council brawl, but . . . for you two? I’d do anything.”